
Challenging the Skies!

by Mary Jones

1988 was a banner year for Don Zank (EAA 229152) Route 2, Box 56, Black River Falls, Wisconsin 54615. In February of 1988, Don finished building a clipped wing version of the Quad Cities Ultralight Aircraft Corporation's Challenger just in time to fly the required 40 hours off before heading south in it to attend Sun 'n Fun '88. (Don registered the aircraft in the experimental amateur-built category.) At that fly-in, his airplane was awarded the Craftmanship Award in the Light Plane Category and he and his trip mates, Dave Goulet and Ian Coristine flying two more Challengers, were given Flight Of Distinction Awards for their cross country flight. And that was just icing on top of the cake of getting to make the flight down and back in the first place!

Then, Don brought his airplane to EAA Oshkosh '88 and was awarded Reserve Grand Champion honors in the Light Plane Category. Now, life can hardly get much better than that, can it? There's no doubt that Don was pleased, his smiling face at the award ceremonies attested to that. And, the people from the Quad Cities Ultralight Aircraft Corporation factory in Moline were pretty pleased as well. As one of their dealers, Don has brought some favorable publicity their way.

Getting Started

Don's not exactly a newcomer on the ultralight scene. He's been flying ultralights for six years, starting out in a Teratorn TA. "I was self-taught, foolishly. There were no two seaters at the time and I had no choice. I put a couple hundred miles on the runway before I flew it."

Then about three years ago he decided to go after his private pilot's license. "Because I decided to go into business as an ultralight dealer, I had to give rides in two seaters. With the rules the way they are, it's just as easy to get a private pilot's license as it is



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(Above) — Don Zank's Clipped Wing Challenger in the background and a Challenger II in the foreground. This picture was taken from a third Challenger while the trio was enroute to Sun 'n Fun '88.

(Below) — A smiling Don Zank displays his Reserve Grand Champion trophy at EAA Oshkosh '88.



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to become an ultralight instructor. If you really follow the rules, the ultralight instructor ticket really isn't worth anything except it allows you to charge students. You can't use your airplane for the toy it really is." Don's decision to go into business full-time as an ultralight dealer was almost a necessity . . . "After a year of flying I found that I couldn't work at my regular job. I kept looking out the window and saying, 'Oh, there's no wind, I can fly my TA,' and I'd just leave. So finally in plain self-defense so I could eat I had to go into the ultralight business because I am truly addicted to flying. If I can't fly at least every third day, I get real cranky."

Building the Plane

Don started work on his award-winning Challenger in September of '87 and, as we said, finished it up in early February of 1988. At EAA Oshkosh '88, the Hobbs meter registered 178.3 hours. "When I took off for Sun 'n Fun '88, I had 43 hours on my machine."

Don's Challenger is a pretty basic machine, except it has a more streamlined structure. "Basically, this machine just has some cosmetic changes from the standard Challenger, but these changes do add about 10 mph to the cruise speed. Using standard aircraft covering — I used the Stits process on my machine — helps, too. I recommend the Stits process because it is so easy to work with. The manual is written just right. If you do what the manual says, everything comes out good."

(Above) — This side profile shot of Zank's Challenger gives us a good look at detailing on the drooped wing tips.

(Below) — Zank's aircraft is nicely outfitted for cross country flying. Note the horizontal placement of his Terra 720 handheld radio on the right side. As Zank says, "We fly the out of our machines. Airplanes were meant to be flown and we fly ours wherever we go."



Don's Challenger is his own clipped wing version of the standard machine — "This is my own clipped wing. I took four feet off the wing span, so instead of being 31 ft. 6 inches, it's about 27 feet. That gives me a quicker roll rate and a little better cruise speed. The drooped wing tips help too, but I've got about 50-60 hours on those fiberglass tips. Mark Lisitza (EAA 153729) of Milwaukee helped me with some of the fiberglass work 'cause I really had no idea what I was doing when I started. The drooped tips help me maintain the lift even though I shortened the wing, especially at low speeds. Under ground effect, it will really slow down."

Don's pretty happy with the performance of his Challenger, and with a trip to Sun 'n Fun '88 and to EAA Oshkosh '88 from his home in Black River Falls, Wisconsin, he's certainly had enough cross country time to evaluate performance. Powered with a Rotax 503 engine with dual carburetors, N249DZ cruises at 80 mph and has a top speed of just over 100 — "wound tight and screaming," Don says. "It flies very nicely with two people in it at 37 mph and still touches down under 30 mph with two on board. The speed range of the Challenger line is one of the best in the industry, I think. And, I'm climbing at over 1,000 feet per minute solo on 52 hp at an empty weight of 378 lbs. I rate my

machine at 950 lbs. gross."

Don's machine is nicely equipped for cross country flying. He's outfitted the airplane with a King marine loran and a Terra 720 radio. "It's just a hand held radio so I built a little aluminum box around it and mounted it in the panel — it just slides in and out horizontally — and it really works nicely." And, Don does a lot of cross country flying. In five years of flying, he's added up over 4,000 ultralight hours, plus he has about 600 hours in his private license logbook. "I fly a lot, but it's almost all in ultralights. I got my license in a Cherokee, but I hate those

airplanes. I just don't enjoy flying them a bit. They're okay for going from point A to point B, but I just don't think the fun is there. You've really got to make believe that you're really into the navigation or the avionics or something to occupy yourself. Now, I'm taking some aerobic instruction in a 1946 Aeronca Chief and that's great fun."

Fun seems to be the operative word in Don Zank's vocabulary, and after you talk to him for a while, it's obvious that his work is his fun, too, so it's no wonder he always has a smile on his face!

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