



TONY BINGELIS RETIRES

BY JACK COX

This month marks the end of an era. After nearly 25 years of service to EAA and the worldwide homebuilding community, Tony Bingelis is retiring as the author/artist of the monthly *Sport Aviation* column, *The Sportplane Builder*. This month's column is the last in a series that began in February of 1972 . . . after 299 consecutive how-to articles that have been the "bible" for homebuilders in every country of the world where individuals are allowed to build and fly their own aircraft.

Tony, who was 76 on September 17, developed some cardiac problems recently and has had a pacemaker implanted. On the advice of his cardiologist he did not attend Sun 'n Fun last April, but since no such prohibition was placed on Oshkosh, he did attend the 1996 EAA Convention. Apparently, the good doctor either was not aware of the event or assumed Tony would not attend on his own volition. For Mr. Sportplane Builder, however, it was a case of the doctor not asking and his not telling, so he was off to Wisconsin! With the pacemaker and his doctor's care, Tony is presently doing fine and he and his wife, Morine, were at Oshkosh the first weekend in November to be honored by the officers and directors of EAA and its various divisions for his quarter of a century of exemplary service to the organization and its international membership. As he joked in his acknowledging remarks, this was his third career retirement, but after two

previous unsuccessful attempts, he was committed to making this one stick! He has recently completed the building of a scaled-down tug boat, so much of his time is now going to be spent as captain of his own vessel. Texas has an extensive system of man-made lakes and reservoirs, and the nearest launching ramp is only a few miles from his

the son of Lithuanian parents who had migrated separately to the U.S. while still teenagers. By the time they met, married and produced a son, the process of Americanization was complete and Tony grew up like every other kid in his neighborhood. The 1920s were his impressionable years and after Lindbergh cast the die for his generation of kids, Tony would forevermore be enamored with airplanes and flying. He built models and read everything he could find on aviation, but was not content to wait until he was an adult to get into the air. His family had subsequently moved to Lewiston, Maine, and while in high school there, he built a primary glider and was towed aloft in it behind a Model A Ford.

Tony graduated from Lewiston High in 1938, but did not have the opportunity to settle into any civilian

career path before World War II began looming on the horizon. He joined the U.S. Army in 1940 and was able to finally get transferred to the Aviation Cadet program in 1943. He went on to win his wings and be commissioned as a Second Lieutenant in the Army Air Force . . . and, later, the U.S. Air Force after that branch of the service became independent in 1947. His military piloting experience included time in the PT-19, BT-9, BT-13, BT-15, T-6, L-4, L-5, C-64A glider, C-45, C-47, B-25 and B-26. Having decided to make the Air Force a career, Tony would spend the next 23 years bouncing from one end of the world to the other as he progressed



EAA President Tom Poberezny presents Tony with a special plaque commemorating his nearly 25 years of service to the EAA membership.

home in Austin.

Tony won't be getting completely away from sport aviation, however. He will continue to serve as a Technical Counselor for EAA Chapter 187 and has promised to help a friend build the main spar for his GP-4. But, what he is looking forward to most, he says, is that four or five pages of *Sport Aviation* he has been "cheated" out of every month for the past 25 years. Now, he can sit back and critique the efforts of others who will have to fill that space . . . and worry over monthly deadlines.

It has been a long and often exciting ride for Tony. He was born in Lowell, Massachusetts on September 17, 1920,

up through the ranks and was transferred from base to base and from one responsibility to another.

In 1949 he took on life's greatest responsibility: he married Morine Shackley of Dallas and would eventually become the father of two daughters. He and Morine have now been married 47 years and have four grandchildren.

Although he likely did not realize it at the time, Tony took another very important step in 1956 when he became the 2,643rd member to join the Experimental Aircraft Association. Just a tiny group of homebuilders then, EAA would nevertheless become an important part of Tony's life . . . and, in turn, he would become an important part of the organization's future success.

In 1958 Tony attended the Foreign Service Institute's Japanese Language School in Washington, then pulled a two year tour of duty in Japan where he tutored Japanese Air Self Defense Air Force Officers in the English language, and U.S. Air Force wives in Japanese. It was also during this tour (in 1960) that Tony began working on his first homebuilt, a Piel Emeraude, which he whittled away at in the base hobby shop.

1963 was a pivotal year in Tony and Morine's lives. In May Tony retired from the Air Force with the rank of Major and he and his family took up permanent residence in Austin, TX. He immediately began a second career by accepting the position of Assistant Director of the Texas Aeronautics Commission . . . and finally having firm roots, he jumped headlong into local EAA activities by organizing Austin's Chapter 187. Two years later, in 1965, he also organized the Southwest Regional EAA Fly-In and became its first president. The event was held in Georgetown, TX for the first 10 years, then was moved to its present site in Kerrville.

In 1967, after seven years of hauling the project halfway around the world and working on it in some pretty unusual places, Tony finally completed his Emeraude, N6734A, and flew it for the first time on his 47th birthday. The following summer, in 1968, he flew it to the EAA Convention at Rockford, IL. Sometime later Tony wrote a two-part article on the building of the airplane that was published in the August and



Tony and Morine Bingelis

September 1969 issues of *Sport Aviation*. In them he detailed the total building time and cost involved — 2,732 hours and 20 minutes and \$2,362.12!

In 1970 Tony volunteered to become a designee (now called technical counselor) for his local EAA Chapter 187 . . . and by chance I was the one who processed his application when it arrived at Hales Corners. Golda and I had come to work for EAA in January of 1970 and one of my duties was to get the designee program back on line. It had initially been administered by Clayton King, but had languished somewhat since his death in an aircraft accident in 1968. Among other things, I resumed publication of the Designee Newsletter, which turned out to be quite a demanding task. I was also writing the Chapter Newsletter at the time so I decided it would be worthwhile to make the two of them mutually supportive. Each month I would scour all the Chapter Newsletters, searching for building tips of various sorts which I would compile and print in the Designee Newsletter. The idea was that the Designees could use the material for presentations at Chapter meetings, and it could also be reprinted in the Chapter newsletters that had not originally published the material. The scheme worked beautifully for a year or so, but slowly I began to realize that I was painting myself into a corner. All the Chapter newsletters were beginning to print just the technical material from the De-

signee newsletters . . . which was choking off my source of original material to feed into the system! "Hoisted on your own petard" is, I believe, the classical phrase to describe my situation at the time. It was, therefore, with something approximating the gratitude and relief of a person dying of thirst stumbling upon a desert oasis that I began receiving a newsletter named the **Sportplane Builder**, written, printed and distributed on his own nickel by one of our new designees, Antoni "Tony" Bingelis of Chapter 187 in Austin, TX. The significant thing about the **Sportplane Builder** was that all the material was original, it was written in a breezy, readable style that was understandable for first time builders and it was illustrated by very competent hand-drawn il-

lustrations. What a find! I immediately sought and was granted permission to reprint some of Tony's material in the Designee Newsletter, and in a very short time his stuff was dominating its pages. Predictably, of course, the Chapter newsletters began picking up Tony's material from the Designee Newsletter, so by the fall of 1971 he was already making a significant contribution to the homebuilt movement on both the national and international level.

On July 2, 1971 another death in the EAA family was responsible for a major change in the organization's operations. Bill Alston of Cleveland, who had been a key figure in the creation of the Designee program, died of a heart attack in Fargo, ND while he and his wife were on the way home from a vacation in the Black Hills. For a number of years, Bill had been writing an excellent monthly column in *Sport Aviation* entitled **The Designee Corner**, which consisted of building tips of various types and information about the Designee program. A working designee in his own local EAA Chapter 127 and the writer of a builder's column in the Chapter's newsletter, his loss was sorely felt throughout the homebuilding world.

Our immediate task at EAA Headquarters was to find a replacement for Bill, but with the 1971 Convention coming up and all the additional work that entailed for our then small staff, it would be that fall before action was taken. As Designee Chairman, how-

ever, there was never any doubt as to whom my candidate would be. That fall I proposed to EAA President Paul Poberezny that we invite Tony Bingelis to become Designee Co-Chairman and the author of *The Designee Corner* column in *Sport Aviation*. Paul readily agreed, and on November 16, 1971 I wrote Tony and outlined our proposition. It was one of the best decisions I've ever made.

Fortunately for all the aviation world, Tony accepted our invitation and his first column appeared in the February 1972 issue of *Sport Aviation* . . . and fortunately for me, Tony turned out to be an editor's dream. From the day I received his first article until the last one arrived — the one that appears in this issue — I never had to have a moment of concern about his work. For one month short of 25 years, for 299 consecutive months, his articles arrived as regularly as the tides. Every month his pictures were neatly captioned and his beautiful drawings were numbered and keyed to the text. Best of all, of course, every article was a treasure trove of information for the homebuilder and restorer. Over the past quarter of a century I've had the pleasure of interviewing hundreds of you for articles in *Sport Aviation* and invariably you've made mention of some benefit you've derived from Tony's articles. Someone once told me he had virtually built his airplane with one of Tony's articles or books in one hand and a tool in the other! Many of you have told me that the greatest barrier you had to broach before beginning to build an airplane was a lack of confidence that you could actually accomplish such a demanding task, and that it was Tony's articles and illustrations that gave you that confidence. There is absolutely no question in my mind that Tony's work has significantly raised the level of safety in homebuilts, and thus has saved lives. System failures have always been the most prevalent of the mechanical causes of homebuilt accidents, and when one considers the number of articles he has written over the years on the proper methods of installing fuel, electrical, engine cooling, brake and control systems, there can be



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no doubt that as a result of them, accidents have been averted and injury and death have been avoided. That fact, in turn, has helped stay the hand of over-regulation. Nothing would bring the FAA down on homebuilding quicker than a sustained high level of homebuilt accidents caused by poor and/or improper workmanship, and Tony must be given a lion's share of the credit for keeping that from ever happening.

Of course Tony never allowed his writing career to stop his building. No sooner had he completed his Emeraude than he was back in his garage, this time building a VP-1. He finished that one in just seven months — then immediately began work on a Flaglor Scooter! Taking on *The Designee Corner* in *Sport Aviation* slowed Tony down a bit on the Scooter so it did not fly until 1973, but as soon as it was on the way to the airport, he jumped right into the building of a Turner T-40. That airplane flew in 1976, and was followed by a second Emeraude, which took to the air for the first time in 1978. Tony began building a Falco in 1981 and flew it in 1986, then started an RV-4. This time, however, someone came along in the middle of the project, made Tony an offer he couldn't refuse . . . and carted off his airplane before he could change his mind! Next came an RV-6A and, most recently, an RV-3. An habitual builder since childhood when he constructed boats, model airplanes, archery bows and gadgets of various sorts, the aircraft building Tony took up in his late 40s was sim-

ply a continuing pattern of behavior. After taking on *The Designee Corner* (which was changed to the *Sportplane Builder* in September of 1975), Tony's airplane building took on a new importance: it became a major source of ideas for his column. Foremost, however, it was simply a lot of fun.

In 1979 Tony began writing his first book, the *Sportplane Builder*. Subtitled "Aircraft Construction Methods," it used material from his previous *Sport Aviation* columns, as well as new material, photos and drawings. Beginning with choosing a design to build and organizing one's workshop, it took the

builder through all the various steps necessary to build an airframe. That book was followed by *Firewall Forward*, which, as the name implied, covered the engine and propeller installation. Together these two books quickly became the homebuilder's bible and were closely adhered to by builders everywhere. Subsequently, Tony would publish *Sportplane Construction Techniques* and *Tony Bingelis On Engines*, which contained new material on the subjects covered in the first two books. In 1987 Tony and Morine donated the rights to the first three books (*Tony Bingelis On Engines* was published in 1995) to the EAA Aviation Foundation, which markets them today. As indicated earlier, these books, along with Tony's columns in *Sport Aviation* have had and continue to have a profound effect on aviation. Tony's great gift has always been the ability to present technical subject matter in terms the ordinary person could understand, and we're fortunate that, like us, he was attracted to aviation and used that gift to benefit our field of endeavor.

We're going to miss Tony's columns here in *Sport Aviation*, but if anyone ever deserved a respite from his labors, he's the man. We wish him the very best in his first real retirement and want to thank him for sharing his vast knowledge, experience, wit and artistic talent with us for so long.

You've made the world a better place for all of us, Tony, and we're deeply grateful. ♦