



# Happy Birthday Piet!

Alan James explains how the homebuilt phenomenon grew in stature – thanks to **Bernard Pietenpol**...

**T**he Pietenpol Air Camper is 90 years old this year, surely a significant landmark in aviation history as it defines the moment when aircraft homebuilding became successful and acceptable – at least in the US!

It was on the 20 May 1929 that Bernard Pietenpol opened the throttle on his latest homebuilt aeroplane and took to the skies in his Ford Model A-powered 'Two Place' machine, later to be christened the Air Camper, but success didn't come overnight.

Bernard had built at least half-a-dozen different airframe and engine combinations through the 1920s, leading up to this historic occasion.

As a mechanical engineer and self-taught aircraft builder with just a few scant hours of flying tuition under his belt, Bernard had confounded the experts by proving that you could fly safely two-up in an aircraft powered by a converted car engine.

When *Modern Mechanics* published details of the Air Camper it proved hugely successful and helped kick-start the homebuilt movement in the US. Bernard estimated that by 1939 he had sold no fewer than 5,000 sets of plans! I believe that if we'd known more about this machine in Europe at the time, aircraft homebuilding on this side of the pond might have got off to a more positive start than it did with the ill-fated Flying Flea.

## Modified drawings

We have to jump forward 50 years before we find anyone in the UK building an Air Camper. Three of them appeared on the scene in around 1989 and then, with modified drawings by Jim Wills becoming available, detailing a more convenient three-piece wing and an increase in AUW, the interest became more intense.

The UK Pietenpol Club was formally created in January 2003 when interest peaked along with the list of questions from builders. With the co-operation of LAA Chief Engineer Francis Donaldson and information gathering by the club's Technical Officer Peter Wright, the club collated all approved modifications for UK Pietenpol builders and published them on its website, with the aim of sharing building and flying knowledge and to encourage everyone across the 'finishing line'. It's fair to say that the success of the club is due to the enthusiastic efforts of the committee and the club members.

**Overleaf second from bottom**  
Sheffield University has a Pietenpol Air Camper project on the go. Students are seen here inspecting Phil Humphrey's Air Camper at RAF Halton's museum of aviation.

**Overleaf bottom**  
The Pietenpol grin! Tracy Collins celebrates her first open-cockpit ride as the 400th passenger in G-BUCO. This aircraft has flown nearly 1,300 hours in the past 27 years, crossing the English Channel 24 times.

**Below** It's difficult to find two Air Campers that look the same. No fewer than six different powerplants have been used in UK Air Campers. Part of its appeal is the ability to create your individual machine.

The UK Pietenpol club continues to gather a wealth of builders and pilots with practical experience who are willing to share their knowledge.

The club now has more than 100 active members worldwide, and to date 27 Air Campers have been completed and successfully flown in the UK – possibly a UK record for a wooden, plans-built aircraft.

As the builder and pilot of G-BUCO, I can vouch for the ease of build and wonderful flying characteristics of the Pietenpol Air Camper. It really is a delight to fly and a wonderful way to introduce the pleasure of open cockpit flying to the uninitiated. Performance is similar to a Piper Cub and the range depends on your imagination, the size of tank you install and the strength of your bladder!

The bonus is that it's a genuine vintage aeroplane that re-creates the romantic age of aviation many modern aviators and passengers will never experience. Cruising low and slow – about 1,500ft and 70kt over the countryside – the aircraft is more like a time-machine taking you back to a less frantic age – and who doesn't want that?

For more information visit [www.pietenpolclub.uk](http://www.pietenpolclub.uk) or find us on Facebook. There is usually a Pietenpol under construction nearby if you want to see how its done, or you can turn up at one of the Air Camper events planned for this year.

On Sunday 9 June there is a Pietenpol Fly-in and BBQ at Popham Airfield, Hants. On Saturday 27 July is the Pietenpol Fly-in and Buffet at Old Warden. Free landing fees if you PPR!

And on Saturday 31 August there is a Pietenpol Fly-in at The LAA Rally, Sywell (Rally runs 30 and 31 August-1 September. Pre-booked slot and compliance with AIC required). ■





**Left** G-VALS resides in a hangar at Easterton airfield, home of the Highland Gliding Club. The group of six members have flown more than 300 hours in it over the past two years. Basically, if the weather is fit, they go flying, regardless of the temperature and as long as the snow is not too deep!



**Above** UK Pietenpol Club member Douwe van der Werf's Walter Mikron powered Air Camper. This is the first to be completed and flown in The Netherlands. Douwe has started to build another with an original Model 'A' engine up front.

**Below left** Cockpit detail of Douwe's Air Camper.

**Left** Keith Hodge and Kilo Golf, the latest Air Camper to be completed and flown in the UK.

