

MEET THE MEMBERS



THE ENGLISHMAN WHO FELL FROM THE SKY

We talk to Alan James, founder member of the Pietenpol Club, builder of exquisite Air Camper G-BUCO, propeller maker and recent builder of a superb Isaacs Spitfire

Hello Alan and welcome. What has been your career to date?

My first real job was as a negotiator for a local estate agent, then I moved onto marketing and I'm now a driving instructor.

Tell us what started your interest in aviation

I see myself as an overgrown modeller. I was brought up in Tilehurst near Reading, not far from RAF Benson, and from a young age built models which I flew from our local park. I was aeroplane mad and often designed my own models, as well as buying proprietary kits. In fact I worked at Reading Model Supplies as a weekend and school holidays job. You can guess what I spent my money on - more models!

In what, where and when was your first flight?

When I was a teenager a group of us went to Sutton Bank to learn to fly gliders. In the two weeks we were away, I was the only one to solo and pass. I seemed to take to it very well. I learnt to fly powered aircraft at Wycombe in 1982 on Cessna 150s and 172s. I soloed after 6.5 hours.

How did you hear about the LAA?

Roy Mills, an ex-chairman of the PFA, was based at Booker (Wycombe) and was looking for a sixth member in the Auster group he was involved with. I joined the group and got to know of the PFA that way. After about a year the aeroplane had an engine failure (not me flying luckily) and was put down in a field. I helped recover it from the field and also rebuild her.

While doing all this, it occurred to me that in many ways, this type of aeroplane is really only a scaled-up model. This all happened in 1989 and the same year I went to the PFA Cranfield Rally and saw Dave Silsbury in his Pietenpol Air Camper and thought that I would also love to build one. It had all the right ingredients, it is made of wood, covered in fabric, looked a vintage type and had two seats. I bought the plans there and then and built G-BUCO in two years in my garage at home, with the help of Tony Morris who also was building one.

I also used to visit Arthur Mason, who was also making one, to get ideas and help but I ended up finishing mine first, and it was assembled at Popham with the help of some friends. This then led to me starting a newsletter called 'Airborne' as the internet was not born then, and it was a good way for people to exchange ideas. This in turn developed into the Pietenpol Club of which I was one of the founding members. I have found the LAA to be helpful in my builds and also making the propellers.

Do you have other non-aviation hobbies and interests?

Yes I am keen on motorcycles and I have a Triumph Bonneville. I also enjoy photography, and have joined a local ukulele group. We meet up in a local pub and strum away. It really is good fun - we play in one bar, and those who 'have to listen' are in another. Afterwards they either clap or jeer, we always get a response from them, even if we don't want one! I'm also still involved with aeromodelling of course.

How has the LAA helped you?

Greatly, as without them many of my projects, building and producing propellers, would not have happened. My first real involvement was with BUCO when I worked with Francis Donaldson on the undercarriage, as he suggested we check the stress tolerances etc. You should never be afraid to ask the Engineering department for help, I have always found them to be positive and enthusiastic.

How many hours have you flown and in what aircraft?

I've flown 22 different types including Auster, Chipmunk, Tiger Moth, SE.5 and a Vari-eze, and have 1,500 hours, mostly on tailwheel with 1,100 on Pietenpols.

My favourite is undoubtedly the Pietenpol Air Camper as it is such a lovely aircraft to build and fly. I've flown 421 different people in G-BUCO, some of which have gone on to build



(Above) Alan was a keen aeromodeller as a lad and is still so today.

(Main) Alan makes props in his spare time, some of them pretty big ones!

their own example, and many of whom come up to me at different events to remind me of their flight. Of the UK based examples I have been lucky enough to fly most of them.

What aircraft do you currently own?

I have Pietenpol G-BUCO of course, and my recently completed Isaacs Spitfire, G-ISAC. I also got to have a go in a locally based Tiger Moth.

What made you decide to build the Isaacs Spitfire?

I had the urge to build something again, the homebuilder's itch, and am an admirer of John Isaacs' work (Fury + Spitfire). I also believed I had earned enough brownie points from the wife to be allowed to, although I didn't ask just in case I hadn't!

I wanted something a bit different and

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a machine that could handle a local bumpy strip, so it needed to be strong with a good, sensible engine. I had a go at light aerobatics about five years ago and loved it, so thought this would be good to try again in future. Also I wanted something that would give me a building challenge - I very much enjoyed working out how to build the multi-laminated main spar.

And the wing shape of course, it was very exciting to see that take shape. It also comes with 'gear down and welded' so I won't forget to lower the wheels or have them get them stuck up! It is stressed to +9g and takes a Continental O-200, which gives it plenty of strength and power for those gentle aerobatics. As you can see, the Isaacs Spitfire ticked all the boxes, and all for about £16K, what a result!

(You can read Alan's story of building his Isaacs Spitfire in the October 2015 issue of *Light Aviation*. PDF copies available from the office. Ed.)

How did you start building wooden propellers?

I obviously needed a prop for G-BUCO when building her, and got talking to long time Pietenpol aficionado Jim Wills, who had one for his aircraft. Then, while at an Andover Strut meeting, a chap turned up with two and I asked how did he get them. He said, "I made them myself" which I must say amazed me. He loaned me books by Eric Clutton and Ken Fern, and I used these as the basis for making my own prop for BUCO. 24 years later it is still the same prop on her.

Arthur Mason, on seeing this, asked if I would make him one, which I did, and then he needed another as he 'bent' the first, so a replacement was made. Word spread amongst the Pietenpol owners and so over time it grew into a small business - all by accident! I have now made about 100 propellers for various types of aeroplanes.



(Above) Alan won two Trophies at the RSA Rally at Epinal in 1994. He enjoys flying in France and has been over the Channel 17 times - and under it once!

(Below) Alan's beautiful Isaacs Spitfire which flew for the first time on the Friday of last year's LAA Rally. It will certainly be a prime candidate for an award at this year's event.

You clearly have a preference for wood over metal.

Yes, I think because it lives and breathes. You can shape it and make it into a thing of character. I did make most of the metal parts for my aeroplanes but somehow hacksaws and files are not the same as chisels and planes. That said, working on the metal parts of the Spit has made me like steel and aluminium a little better.

What is your best aviation moment and flight?

Some of my best flying adventures have been in France. I've crossed the Channel in the Pietenpol 17 times so far. In 1994 at the French RSA rally at Epinal, I was awarded the

Concours d'Elegance and Most Meritorious Flight trophies. A very good weekend and lovely memories of flying across France.

In 1999, I won the Dawn to Dusk trophy and Pooleys Sword for a flight to the Somme, photographing the 1916 Front Line and getting back before dark. On another occasion I had to make a precautionary landing in bad weather and spent the night in a remote farmhouse. My host insisted on taking me around the village and introducing me as 'The Englishman who fell from the sky'.

My shortest flight was when I entered the well-known Birdman of Bognor competition on the end of the pier. I threw myself off and actually won 'longest flight of the day' which is pretty ironic when you measure how 'long' it was - 13m. I even won £100!

My furthest flight was to Munich and the Black Forest in the Pietenpol. On my way back from Tannkosh, I suffered an engine failure and came down into a ploughed field near Royan, breaking the undercarriage. Amongst the many motorists who witnessed the arrival was a retired Air France stewardess who had just booked her first flying lesson. She came to my aid, becoming my interpreter with the gendarmes, and insisted I stay the night at her house nearby with her sister - that took some explaining!

The following week I returned with a trailer and towed the aircraft home through the tunnel. I believe G-BUCO is the only Pietenpol to have been over and under the Channel.

In 2009 I was one of the few pilots to land on the cricket pitch of the Royal Naval College behind Dover Castle to witness the re-enacting of the first Channel crossing. There I met Louis Bleriot (grandson of the Louis Bleriot) and Edmond Salis who made the crossing in a genuine Bleriot monoplane. It was an extraordinary event and a privilege to attend; to be one of very few people to witness, at





6.00 in the morning, this amazing aircraft being flown across the Channel, with camera crews filming it, was superb. The French tricolour was flown and handshakes extended all round. I managed to get Louis Bleriot to sign my book too. None of the above would have been possible without having built a Pietenpol.

Who are your aviation heroes?

Eric 'Winkle' Brown for his bravery and tremendous dedication to flight and flight safety. And living near Reading and Woodley, anything to do with Miles Aircraft means a lot to me because I so much admire their work and craftsmanship.



What advice would you offer to pilots?

Be well prepared and don't always rely solely on a satnav. Don't forget the basic skills of chart, stopwatch and compass. It is still very rewarding being able to navigate via roads, railway lines and towns. Also keep your aircraft clean as it helps when walking around checking it. I really think it is very important to always

(Top) How most people know Alan, flying his Pietenpol Air Camper.

(Left) The Birdman of Bognor competition saw Alan attain a 13 metre distance award. As the *Yellow Sparrows* he and his brother once appeared on *The Late Late Breakfast Show*.

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