

## Gardner Or Bust

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When I began building my Voisin, I had a few goals in mind as to what I was going to do with it when it was finished and deemed airworthy. A Voisin bucket list if you will. Not a long list, but a list of items that would prove my proof-of-concept prototype. There were many things I had to take into consideration, knowing it was not going to be fast, was not conveniently trailered, as I found out hauling the static display to Gardner and Oshkosh, and was open cockpit.



Bob Punch photo

One, I knew I had to fly to Gardner, Kansas for the Gathering of Eagles. Two, everyone has to try and make it to Oshkosh. Three, I wanted to make the short hop, for me, to Blakesburg over a Labor Day weekend during the AAA gathering. And four, put over 100 hours on the airplane.

In 2008, I was able to fly to Oshkosh. What a great trip! You can read about that in the December 2008 issue of this magazine. Also in 2008, I made it to one of the biggest gatherings in Blakesburg's recent history. These two near perfect trips were just one year after receiving my airworthiness certificate. The Voisin was proving itself quite well.

But the trip to Gardner was elusive.

It was originally my intention to fly to Gardner in 2007, but I just couldn't get the bugs out and the Voisin up on its first flight until the middle of July. I would end up spending the rest of 2007 working on just a few items as I pushed to get the 40 hours flown off. I had 38.5 hours on it when, in May 2008, the starter ring departed the flexplate. That was a major disappointment, but I worked like mad trying to get it ready for the Gardner trip which would be the middle of June. It was not to be. The parts didn't show until the week before Gardner and I still had to fly the 1.5 hours off. So all my energy went into planning and prepping the airplane for Oshkosh. As I mentioned, that trip went off without a hitch.

In 2009, I needed to get my BFR in May, and while at the airport saw a gentleman working on his Nieuport 17. Naturally I struck up a conversation and after talking about our WWI airplanes a while, I mentioned I was planning on flying to Gardner in June. We ended up making plans to join up in southern Iowa and fly together. On the morning we intended to leave, there were storms going through the area, so we decided to try for the next day. The storms had subsided somewhat, but it was windy. My optimism made me get the airplane out of the hangar anyway and I figured if we could get off the ground by noon, we could still make it. But alas, it still was not to be.

2010 proved that June has more rain storms than any other month in Iowa, and the forecast for the weekend looked really iffy.



Ralph Briggs photo

The take off morning arrived and a magnificent squall line was set up just to the southwest. I was NOT going to be denied Gardner again... so we drove the car. It was a good trip and we had a blast. We drove down in rain, but once there, the rain was gone and the rest of the weekend was nice just until the Gathering of Eagles was over around noon. And then all hell broke loose. We drove the 275 miles home in torrential rain, and we heard later that a lot of people got wet trying to secure or put the

airplanes away.

Now, it's 2011 and I still had not fulfilled my goal of flying to Gardner. This would be the fifth year of trying so I just knew it had to be the year I would make it. Again, I made all the arrangements to fly, and, even had a flying partner lined up again. Lorin Miller had purchased, within the past year, a really nice Pietyenpol with a pseudo navy trainer paint scheme. We were able to round up fellow EAA chapter members Ralph and Ed whom each would drive a ground support vehicle with tools, fuel, and a pop-up camper. Plus, my twelve year old grandson Nick, and Lorin's ten year old son Scott would ride along, including taking turns riding in the front seat of the Piet.

The Thursday morning we were to leave was absolutely perfect! Lorin took off from Marshalltown, Iowa at 5:35 and at the same time, I took off from my airstrip about 23 miles to the southwest of him. There was little to no wind and the air was calm. It was probably the best part of the whole trip. We made our first stop in Corydon at the same time. He landed first and I was just a couple minutes behind him. Unfortunately, Scott got airsick in the airplane, so he switched places with Nick after Lorin sponged out the front cockpit.

The next leg to Chillicothe was probably the longest of the trip. It's only 66 miles, but took us a full two hours to fly it. The wind really picked up and there were thunderstorms rumbling over the Kansas City area. We held tight for the afternoon and waited for the calmer air in the evening. Storms were being persistent along our route on the east side of the KC area, so we changed plans and decided to fly the western route skimming the Mode C veil which was okay for Lorin, but I'm not supposed to be in without a transponder. The flight over to Cameron, then to Atchison, Kansas were short hops, but the air was smooth and visibility was 10 miles. The sun was getting close to the horizon and we really wanted to get to Gardner. We decided to shoot for Lawrence, Kansas, and if there was time, we would go the last 20 miles to Gardner. Since the Piet is about 20 mph faster, Lorin wasted no time getting to the airport and was able to land just after sunset. I have flown to the edge of Civil Twilight before, but by the time I saw the lights of Lawrence, it was dark! The runway was lighted but I do not have landing lights. I flew a direct in approach and landed with no problem and as I rolled up next to Lorin and shut off the ignition, I looked at the clock and had ONE minute left before I was illegal. That was close!

We tied down, jumped in the cars and headed for Gardner. Ralph, Nick and I set up the camper while Lorin, Scott and Ed drove into town to get a motel. The next morning Ed drove Lorin and I back to Lawrence. There were light showers in the area and when we got to the planes, they were drenched. The FBO there allowed us to use a hangar to move the airplanes to where we dried them off while waiting for the rain to pass. It was almost noon when it cleared enough to fly, but we had to hurry because

there was suppose to be wind coming up behind it.

This was it. In 20 miles we would be landing and my goal of flying to Gardner would be complete. The flight got bumpy in the half hour it took me to fly it, but I was finally there. I landed on the turf of 18 and back taxied to the hard surface, but as soon as I turned, I seem to lose left brake authority. So in front of all my Dawn Patrol idols, I struggled to get the Voisin pointed straight. My right gear dropped off the edge and I was headed for a runway light so I hit the right brake hard and came to a stop in the tall grass just beyond. I jumped out and pulled the airplane back to the asphalt and walked the airplane, with Dick Starks escorting me on his WWI scooter, over to where Lorin had parked about 200 feet



away. On inspection, I and others did not find anything unusual, so I figured it was just a bit more crosswind than my Voisin's tail could handle.

Ralph got pictures of us landing, and after an

hour or so of talking to the other participants, we spent the day helping others assemble their airplanes and just having a great time. The wind seem to die down about 4 p.m. so I decided to take a flight around the patch to see if I still had the braking problem. As I taxied out, nothing seemed to be out of the ordinary, so I took off on 18 and started making circles showing off in front of all the spectators. It wasn't long before there were a bunch of airplanes in air. In fact a WHOLE bunch. I got nervous and decided to land. Considering what happened that night, I keep kicking myself for landing. But, there was a meal planned for the evening at Marvin Story's hangar, with the Combat Planks (U-line controlled fighters) taking place about the same time.

I taxied over to the display area for the big show the next day and tied down between Marvin's Seimans Shuckert and Tom Glasers Nieuport 11. Mark Hymers newly built Fokker D.VII was parked just behind me. There were thunderstorms forecast for the night, but it didn't sound like they would be too bad. I covered the cockpit and secured the wings and front gear with my homemade claw type tie-downs. They have served me well since the Oshkosh trip in 2008. There were over 20 WWI type aircraft replica's all in a line and it really looked good. Time to call it a night.

The wind started shaking the camper around 1 a.m. with the lightning, thunder and pelting rain shortly thereafter and lasting almost 45 minutes. Ralph and I decided we had better stay in the camper just to keep it from taking off! It was a wild and rocky ride. The wind kept up for another 45 minutes, but finally died down. I could only imagine what the line of airplanes looked like, but figured it wouldn't do much good to go check in the middle of the night when you couldn't see anything anyway. I didn't sleep very well and got up just before dawn. I figured it was time to

see what damage had been done. There was no one else up and around except for a father and his adult son who had flown in the evening before and set up a small tent beside their Cessna 150. The tent was gone from the original set up spot and as I looked toward the terminal, saw the two of them climbing out of the tent. They had moved it in the night to the covered porch. Amazingly, the airplane hadn't budged and they had not tied it down!

So I gathered up the nerve and started walking toward the flight line. The big tent that displays were going to be in was on the ground, so much to my surprise, it was easy to see all the airplanes neatly lined up in place and still upright just as they were the previous night. All that is, except one. It's amazing what your mind is capable of conceiving when you don't believe what your eyes are telling you, but it was true, the Voisin was gone! I had assumed the storm came from the northwest, so I started walking to the southeast where there was a cornfield. I figured the Voisin was balled up out there somewhere. As I'm walking that way, having just walked through the hole in the flight line where the Voisin was parked, I look around to the northwest where the hangars are, and lo and behold, there is the Voisin parked on the

west end of the eastern most hangar row. My heart leaped to my throat. It wasn't upside down, the wings were still attached, and from where I stood 500 feet away, it appeared as though someone had intentionally moved it over there. Remember, the sun isn't up yet and still kind of hazy because of the moisture in the air. As I quickly walked over to it, nearly convinced everything is going to be okay, I took a quick glance and thought I saw the tiedowns in place. The straps were still tied to the wings, albeit on it's tail. I looked no harder at it because I wanted to believe that 1) it had come loose and someone caught it and tied it down where it sat, and 2) there was no damage to the airplane.



I nearly ran back to the camper where Ralph and Nick (who, by the way, slept through the storm) were just getting around. We had the camper set up right beside the shelter where the breakfast was going to be. As I approached the camper, it was then I noticed the coffee maker, dishes, paper plates, forks, foam cups, were strewn all over the place, including under and around the car and camper. I related what I had found as we picked up all the breakfast ware.

**The Voisin traveled 425' powered by 70 mph winds and without a pilot**

Ralph Briggs photo







**Marvin's Rudder after the Voisin aileron grabbed it.**

different than what I thought I had seen before. It was sitting in a drainage ditch. It had NOT been re-tied down. What I had seen earlier were the straps with the claws ripped out of the ground still attached! On further inspection, the damage was obvious. The rudder was crumpled in half, the left aileron was broke, and there was a tear in the elevator caused by a piece of rebar used as a tape post to keep spectators away from getting too close to the flight line. With a little detective work, the path of destruction was determined. The storm and wind actually came from the southwest, not the northwest. The airplanes were facing south. The front gear tiedown had pulled up from the wet ground allowing the tail to fall to the ground. When the tail fell, it pulled the two wing tie downs out. The wind took from there and as the airplane's tail vaned to the northeast, it caused the left lower wing to come in contact with the Siemens Shuckert rudder breaking the trailing edge of the aileron on the Voisin and bending the leading edge of the rudder 90°. That caused the Voisin to pivot even more where it put the nose directly into the wind. If it had not pivoted, it would have run right into the D.VII just 20 feet to the rear. We figure the right wing missed the D.VII by less than five feet going by the line in the grass the tail made as it was driven backward. Following the rudder trail in the grass, you could see where it went through the tape post, which was still standing, and finally came to rest in the water filled ditch. I stitched some photos together to



**Left Aileron - Before and After**

give you some idea how far it went.

Well, so what to do? More than anything, I felt really bad about Marvin Story's Siemens-Schuckert. He had just rebuilt it from an accident he had the previous November and was really close to getting it back in the air. Now, he had to redo the rudder. I waited for him at his hangar and gave him the bad news. He opened his hangar not saying much, and when he was finished, we walked over to his airplane and he let out a little gasp. I assured him I would pay for repairs, but his gasp was one of relief. He exclaimed it was nothing, no big deal. In fact, he had an extra one and it would take not much at all to fix it all up. We then walked over to

Lorin called and inquired about the situation with the airplanes and gave him the rundown. He was obviously relieved to know the Pietenpol was ok.

We then went over to the Voisin to walk it back to it's place on the flight line. When we got there, it looked entirely



**TLAR (above) - Repaired Rudder made it home (below)**

my airplane and looked over the damage. I had to make a decision whether to try and fix it there at the airport, with borrowed tools, or go home, get the trailer, come back, dismantle it, load it up and truck it home. Airparts is located right there in Kansas City, and B&B, an aviation hardware supplier is located right there in Gardner. Marvin offered his hangar and tools. Dick Starks called Chris, the owner of Airparts at home knowing they would not be open on Saturday and arranged for her to be on call in case I needed any tubing, and there were many other offers of help from nearly everyone who saw the situation. If there was anywhere on earth to have this happen, this was the place! It was decided. It would be less hassle to fix the airplane than to truck it home. Everything I needed was right here.



The first thing I had to do was assess the damage and make an inventory of the parts I would need. I had considered building a new rudder and aileron, but with all the airplane designers there, it was determined I could more easily sleeve the broken tubes, add a few additional rivets, re-skin and be done with it. As soon as the inventory was finished, it was time to round up the parts needed. Marvin had the rivets and AN hardware and some tubing. Rick Bennett had some tubing, but I was still missing a couple of short pieces. Dick Starks thought he had them in his hangar and knew Mark Pearson was there getting ready fly his Nieuport to the show. When he called, Mark was already taxiing. He turned around and grabbed a handful of tubes and brought them with him. That handful completed the inventory. I had everything I needed except one thing. No one had any fabric, and it would take a little to recover the damage on the rudder and aileron. More heads got into the design phase and someone remembered the Super Cub in Alaska that was attacked by a bear. A case of duct tape became the temporary skin to get it home. It was decided (mostly by me) that I could just pull the existing fabric tight, wrap duct tape from leading to trailing edges and it would get me home. So that is exactly what I did.

It was fantastic that I had all the help and offer of parts to help me get back in the air, but the most disappointing part of the day was missing all the action going on with the public and flying in formation with all the WWI airplanes flying around. I had it all finished by 5 p.m. and was ready for a test flight. I did a thorough preflight started the engine. Fortunately, it was good

that so many were watching. I was doing a preliminary control surfaces check and it seemed to be a little tight. Before I knew it, someone was giving me the knife to the throat sign so I cut the engine. He walked over and removed the right upper aileron gust lock. Dang, how did I miss that? I double checked the movements of all controls and started up again. The test flight went without a hitch. When I landed, I taxied right over to the Mogas fuel pump and topped off the tank. Took about three gallons.

My first stop was going to be Robert Baslee's place so I coordinated Ralph, my ground support, with Robert who was just leaving to go home. Ralph could follow him and we could assess the repairs there and determine if I was indeed airworthy. I took off and headed south. I wanted to be sure I did not fly into the class D area just to the east of Gardner. On my climb out I looked off to the west and saw a Champ coming up on my right. The person in the front had a big camera and they were slow flying trying to not get too far ahead of me. He took pictures for about two minutes, gave me a thumbs up and veered off. No sooner was he gone than Rick Bennett in his fantastic Nieuport 23 came up on my left side, and flew with me for another couple of minutes. That made my day. I almost teared up, but decided I better hold it in because, you know, it's an open cockpit airplane.

Robert and Ralph turned into the driveway at Airdrome Aeroplanes just as I was one mile out. Good timing! They were standing at the edge as I taxied up. The duct tape was holding very well, and the air was nice and smooth, so I wasted no time topping off the fuel and Ralph and I headed for Chillicothe. I landed there about 8 p.m. There was no one around, but there was an open hangar, so I pushed the airplane in and waited for Ralph. He had the camper, but I decided I wanted to take a shower, so we drove into town and got a motel for the evening.



Voisin were to fly to Oshkosh, Blakesburg, Gardner and to put over 100 hours on the airplane. The trip to Gardner accomplished the last two items. In fact, the 100 hours flipped as I was on my way to Roberts from Gardner.

I don't know if I am going to repair the Voisin or put the time, energy and money into a different project (Yes, I have other designs in mind to build). If I do work on the Voisin, I will probably rebuild it and incorporate a lot of the improvements I've been thinking about for the past 5 years. Right now I have to complete my current project which is building a house, so I do have some time to think about future airplane plans.



**Over 20 WWI aircraft and projects were at the Gathering of Eagles in Gardner, Kansas. Above-Spad XIII. Left-Rick Bennett's 7/8's scale DH-2 project. Below-Harvey Cleveland and his Curtiss Seaplane .**

The rest of the trip was pretty much uneventful and I landed at home 2:30 p.m. on Sunday afternoon. I put the Voisin in the hangar, and it's been there since except for an attempted flight on July 4th. The grandkids were over and wanted to see Papa fly the airplane. So I pulled it out, did a quick preflight and decided I would just do a couple circles each way and they could wave as I buzzed the runway. Well, I took off and when I turned left, I didn't. I immediately looked over at the ailerons and they were working fine, but the aircraft was not wanting to bank left. Banking right was no problem, so I simply did a wide flat turn to the right around the airstrip and landed. The kids were thrilled, but I was shaking. I pulled up to the hangar, pushed it inside, and there it's been ever since. I don't know what was wrong.



*Bob Punch photo*

The primary items on my bucket list of things to do with the



**Left photo taken in 1915 compared to test flight photo of replica Voisin taken by Ralph Briggs in June 2011 at Gardner, Ks. Wonder if the 1915 Voisin was on a test flight?**