Eby's: Still Innovative
After All These Years

By Ellen Gragg

Thirty years ago, David Eby was profiled in this magazine, as Co-Operator of the Month. That article focused on Eby's use of advertising and public relations to launch his operation with the farmers in his area and to reassure the non-farm community about what he was up to.

In closing, it briefly mentioned his wife Denise, three-year-old son Ryan, and nine-month-old daughter Alicia.

Today, Eby is still in business in Northern Indiana and still has an innovative approach to the business. Denise is still active in the office at AgriFlite Services. But they now have three children, all of whom fly.

Ryan, now 31, just recently left a position as a project engineer at Case International to fly with AgriFlite, in addition to working as a contract software tester and manual author for Trimble's auto steer systems. At the time Ryan finished college, ag aviation was in a downswing, so he turned his agricultural expertise to crop consulting, and later, to developing GPS software at Case. Today AgriFlite can support three full-time pilots, so Ryan works for the family business, and his wife Kristin helps Denise in the office. Daughters Kaitlin (5) and Courtney (3) like to "help" as well.

Baby Alicia is starting a family of her own, now that she's on furlough from Midwest Airlines, for whom she piloted MD-80s. She also flew a chartered Gulfstream 2 for George W. Bush during the primary campaign. Alicia and her husband, Adrian Dodd (a pilot with Southwest Airlines), have a two-year-old daughter named Reyna.

And Garrett, 28, flies the AT-502 and is the A&P mechanic for AgriFlite. He started flying as a junior in college, at Purdue University, where all three of the Eby offspring earned their degrees. Garrett and his wife Keri, a veterinary technician, have an assortment of pets.

"Both boys wanted to fly," reports Eby. "They went to school to get their A&P and get their flight training. My daughter was a little different. She originally wanted to be a vet, but she came home one day and said 'Dad, I want to fly.'"

When the kids were teenagers, we bought a Champ—a little two-seater. We had that around here, so I taught her." Then she "enrolled at Purdue in their flight program and graduated at the top of her class."

"She's also an equestrian. She was the national champion in hunter over fences and second in intercollegiate."

Keeping Pace with the Times

David Eby's tendency toward innovation—as well as his aeronautical engineering degree (from LeTourneau University in Longview, TX)—was put to good use in 1995, when he and Denise started another company, Aeroflow Systems, to solve the frustrating problem of drips from leaking check valves. Designed specifically for ag aircraft, the AFS check valve has solved the leaking and dripping problem.

"Back in 95, we were getting tired of the leaky valve problem, so we formed another sub-s for the aeroflow," recalls Eby. "I designed it, we purchased a plastic injection mold and we have another company manufacture it." Aeroflow Systems mostly stocks and ships, though they have made revisions to the original part over the past 10 years. If you look at the company's home page (www.Aeroflow.com), you can see that the part is now available with a section made out of stainless steel, machine-cut. "I think it's pretty much complete now," muses Eby. David and Denise price upgrades at just a little above cost, so if someone has their original part and wants to upgrade, they can get it. "I look at it as not so much a money-making venture as a contribution to the industry."

The senior Ebys fit in the additional business with ease—the boys work for AgriFlite, and will eventually buy it out, but Aeroflow is entirely separate. The spray season for 150-mile radius that they work is May till mid-September. "We farm, too, and that takes about a month in the spring and a month in the fall, so we're done by about mid-November. So we've got three to four months to take it easy."

Though David and Denise live on his grandfather's dairy and hog farm, they farm only grain on the 300 acres they bought 20 years ago. "Our only animal is a dog," laughs Eby.

Now that Ryan has joined the business, David has a little more time in season as well, so he's hard at work on a project to provide farmers with aerial photos of their fields. The process will be similar in some ways to, to a Web site that Eby uses this for the application business. At www.terraserver.microsoft.com, a user can enter an address and see a satellite photo of it. Eby uses it to look up a client's fields while he's on the phone with the client.

So why not just use terraserver? Well, the photos are several years old, and quite small scale—after all, they were taken from a satellite. With an ag plane, Eby can provide much more useful field imagery.

"The biggest thing on the photos is to get the cost down to where farmers can afford it," he says. "The plan is that any farmer growing his crops can order photos of his land. The system is orthorectified and georeferenced, so it can be in the farmer's hands within six hours after landing. The flight plan is already loaded and programmed into the computer before you take off. The camera automatically takes the photos when the computer tells it to. One pilot can do it—no photographer is required.

"We've got one plane fitted with a camera right now. When this takes off, we'll be pretty busy," he asserts with confidence.

Changes – Good and Bad

As you can imagine, the Ebys have seen a lot of changes in their years in agricultural aviation. Surprisingly, one of the changes they've seen is an increase in the comfort level non-ag people have about the industry. In that 1975 article, Eby explained the public awareness campaign that he developed to counter the fact that the locals were "scared to death" of what he was doing in the air.

Today, he doesn't hear of much concern from the general public. "We didn't know what to think after 9-11, because there was so much bad publicity about ag planes. However, I think the ag operators' image has actually improved. I've had people say 'It's nice to see you in the air again.' I think all the positive publicity about our industry has helped. Now people understand what we're doing up there, and they're not as concerned."

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A change for the worse is that the aerial application industry seems to be in decline. Eby says that when he began spraying (in 1973), there were about 35 operators in Indiana, and today there are fewer than 10.

"The bad thing about it is, the agriculture industry thinks of this as a dying industry, so growers are now making plans to operate without aerial service." Citing a study he read a few years ago, Eby asserts that most operators are over 50 today. "Farmers are already taking a look around and asking themselves 'What am I gonna do when the local applicator retires?' They start looking for another approach… and often begin implementing" that new approach.

Ideas for the Future

So, how can the ag aviation remain a viable industry? For one thing, it must train more young people, so there is a new generation of aerial applicators, and so the farmers and the chemical companies see that there is a new generation. The easiest, and traditional, way to build the next generation is to do it the way David and Denise Eby have: raise a couple of children who want to join the business.

But their own story shows that isn't the only way people get into it. David grew up on the farm, but no one in his family flew. He just always knew he wanted to fly; he paid for his own flying lessons, and started his applications business as a young adult. Denise, though she had relatives who farmed, wasn't really around ag at all until she met David in college. So it can be done—new people can join the industry from the outside.

Eby believes it is important that aerial applicators be willing to train the next generation. "Many operators are leery of training young people; for fear that the trainee may become a competitor."

Additionally, he thinks it's important that the industry keep reminding farmers and the chemical companies of the special benefits that aerial application brings.

"With the Asian (soybean) rust program, our industry has a pivotal opportunity to become a preferred service in agriculture. The problem just can't be handled with ground rigs, with the weather and the limited window of application. The chemical companies, based on the recent test data in Brazil, are concluding that agricultural aviation can be an optimal part of the solution.

"Last year, pesticide manufacturers were reluctant to recommend aerial application in regard to adequate coverage. Data has shown the airplane can be an effective tool, if applied properly. The burden now is on the ag aviation industry to apply product as recommended by the label in a professional and competent manner.

"Two advantages of the airplane over ground application equipment are that 1) Asian rust spreads by tiny spores. Ground rigs driving through will contact the spores and transfer them to the next field treated. That's not the case with airplanes. And 2) Airplanes do not leave wheel tracks in the field, that can calculate up to a yield loss of about $10 per acre.

"It's a no-brainer. The farmer's first choice should be the airplane. However, that news has not been promoted. It would be advantageous for the NAAA to sponsor an ad in other ag magazines promoting the benefits of aerial application.

"As a member, I'd like to see some ag aviation advertising in other agricultural markets."

Thoughts on the NAAA

Eby has been active with the NAAA, having served on the NAAA board for several years and gone through the leadership program. He is also active in his state association and has served as a state officer. Recently, he has taken a voluntary hiatus to enable others to participate in leadership positions. Seeing the NAAA as a vital organization for the industry, "I have some suggestions for possible changes to keep the organization in step with the needs and interest of the members."

"The NAAA has done an admirable job of keeping us in business and dealing with regulations, and I commend them for that accomplishment; however, the majority of members feel disconnected from the association and the percentage of aerial applicators that belong to NAAA is actually quite low.

"In this age of e-mail, I would like to see the NAAA involve the members in more of the decision making process. Why not circulate the agenda and topics discussed in board meeting to the members via e-mail/fax and solicit their opinions? Maybe get some new ideas.

"NAAA is a member driven organization. If this is what the member-elected Board sees as the future of the organization it is sure to happen."

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