

A lifelong passion: Reid Dennis lives out childhood dreams at the controls of a seaplane

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When Reid Dennis was a boy, he used to watch Pan American "Clipper" planes fly out over the Golden Gate Bridge from his home. They were traveling to such distant locales as Manila, Hong Kong and Macao.

It was the 1930s, and the Clipper planes, which landed on water, were the country's single means of overseas air transport.

"I've always had a love affair with seaplanes," says Mr. Dennis, a resident of Woodside.

Decades later, Mr. Dennis, 74, is renowned as one of Silicon Valley's first venture capitalists and the founder of Institutional Venture Partners. For almost 50 years, he's been investing in private companies, then waiting for the stock to go on the public market and appreciate. Among other firms, he's invested in Ampex, Collagen, Seagate and Excite.

His success in the market has allowed him to indulge his passion for aviation. A veteran pilot, he owns five planes, including two seaplanes.

Mr. Dennis recently displayed one of his seaplanes, a rebuilt 1955 Grumman G-64 Albatross, during a tribute to Clipper planes that was held at the Hiller Aviation Museum in San Carlos.

He and his Albatross, which can land on water and ground, garnered a measure of global fame in 1997 when he circled the world accompanying Texas aviator Linda Finch on her re-creation of 1930s aviator Amelia Earhart's last flight. Ms. Finch's journey was filmed from Mr. Dennis' two-engine plane, which also escorted Ms. Finch in case she needed help.

The Albatross began life as a military aircraft with few, if any, luxuries, but Mr. Dennis says that the rebuilt Albatross is far from uncomfortable.

"Instead of a Spartan, utilitarian Navy plane, we turned it into a flying Winnebago," he says.

Mr. Dennis notes that the Albatross, used by the U.S. Navy, Air Force and Coast Guard for air-sea rescues and other duties, came into being in the 1950s, long after the Clipper's heyday had ended when the seaplanes were coopted into military service at the start of World War II. After the war, airfields became a common feature of the global landscape, and seaplanes fast became obsolete for commercial use.

Resurrecting the Albatross

But while their uses have dwindled, the flying boats' glamour has never faded for Mr. Dennis.

"It was a very romantic era in the history of aviation," he says.

Mr. Dennis bought his first seaplane, a 1946 Grumman G-73 Mallard, 26 years ago. The Mallard has only half the Albatross' flying range, and Mr. Dennis was considering flying across the Pacific Ocean and filming a documentary on the Pan Am Clippers. In preparation for the flight, he bought the Albatross in 1989.

It would take over seven more years for mechanics to rebuild the Albatross, a former U.S. Navy plane, which was languishing in the Arizona desert.

"It was a derelict, sitting in the desert with no wheels, no instruments and no motors," says Mr. Dennis, who would not reveal the exact price he paid to rebuild the plane, but said it was more than \$2 million. Despite the Albatross' generally poor condition, Mr. Dennis says, the desert heat had helped preserve its body from corrosion.

By the time the mechanics had completed their work, the plane was transformed into what author Wayne Mutza called "a virtual winged yacht" in his book, "The Grumman Albatross."

The plane, which bears on its exterior the phrase, "First Albatross to Circumnavigate the World," now features such amenities as a shower-equipped bathroom, a galley and a television. A framed 1937 issue of Life magazine, with a cover story on air travel, hangs on the wall. There's also a glass-fronted bookshelf, which bears such works as pioneer aviator Beryl Markham's memoirs and Admiral Samuel Eliot Morison's 14-volume history of the U.S. Navy in World War II. Mr. Dennis notes that his wife, Peggy, hates noise, and he had the plane lined with 500 pounds of sound insulation.

Bill Kozlovsky, a retired Coast Guard rear admiral, flew in Mr. Dennis' Albatross when it was being brought to the Hiller Aviation Museum. During his career, Mr. Kozlovsky logged scores of hours flying in Albatrosses.

Speaking of Mr. Dennis' plane, he says, "It's the quietest Albatross that's ever been built," adding that he had to shout to have a conversation in most areas of other Albatrosses.

The cockpit is also equipped with modern flight controls and navigational equipment. Unlike the planes of the 1930s, modern aircraft have instruments to gauge wind direction and wind speed. Mr. Dennis says this keeps pilots from being blown off course. Early aviators often dropped sacks of flour and, once the sack burst open after hitting the water, watched which way the flour drifted to judge the wind's direction and speed, he says.

"We certainly have a lot of advantages in terms of high tech," he says.

Following Amelia Earhart

By mid-1996, the Albatross was rebuilt. Mr. Dennis, however, abandoned his idea of following the Clipper routes across the Pacific when he heard that Linda Finch needed a second plane to film her re-creation and completion of Earhart's ill-fated 1937 journey around the equator. Ms. Finch flew a Lockheed "Electra" 10E Special on the trip, the same kind of plane Earhart had flown.

The most famous female aviator of her day, Earhart vanished while heading toward tiny Howland Island in the Pacific near the end of her flight. Her disappearance has fueled speculation for decades.

Most of the re-creation flight, which lasted from March 17 to May 21, 1997, followed Earhart's planned route, which began in Oakland, headed east across the United States, and eventually ended at its starting point. The planes, however, had to deviate north from Earhart's equatorial African route, where there was a chance modern rebels might shoot them down.

Instead of encountering missile fire on the trip, the planes were often greeted by cheering crowds, much as Earhart had been. Mr. Dennis says one of the most memorable landings took place in Darwin, Australia. As the planes taxied onto the runway, they traveled beneath an arch of water made by fire trucks.

Because Ms. Finch was the main focus of attention, Mr. Dennis says he tried to stay in the background during such elaborate greetings.

"It was a little embarrassing," he says.

Mr. Dennis flew his plane for most of the journey, but he was accompanied throughout the trip by two crew members who are also qualified pilots.

Peggy Dennis was also along for most of the trip, as was a camera operator, a newspaper reporter and a newspaper photographer. During some long legs of the journey, however, they left the plane to lighten it and save fuel and caught up with it later. A film director also flew with the group at times.

The trip received global media attention, with the newspaper photographer sending pictures to his paper, the Hartford Courant, through a satellite telephone after cropping and sorting them on an Apple laptop computer.

Mr. Dennis says the flight allowed him to come close to living out one of his childhood dreams -- traveling on a Pan Am Clipper.

"I was always sorry I never got to fly on a Clipper so, in a way, I built my own Clipper," he says.

After the flight's conclusion, Mr. Dennis used footage from the journey to produce a documentary, entitled "The Final Hours: Amelia Earhart's Last Flight," which has aired on local PBS stations. The film offers the theory that Earhart died after missing Howland Island through a navigational misjudgment.

With the Earhart re-creation long over, Mr. Dennis says he is thinking of taking his Albatross on another adventure, flying over the Amazon River. He says the Amazon would be like a 2,000-mile landing strip for his flying boat.

"That would be fun to do," he says.