



It's not clear how many people actually built airplanes from Heath's directions and kits, but the trophy for determination likely belongs to Stanley Rowan, who built a Parasol in his bedroom at a Chicago boardinghouse. The Pennsylvania native had come to Chicago in 1929 to learn to fly, but after the school he attended went bankrupt, he found a job paying \$20 per week and decided the cheapest way to finish the 200 hours for his commercial pilot license was to build an airplane. After visiting the Heath factory, he bought the rib kit and built the required 26 ribs in 26 days. He worried about disturbing his fellow roomers, but before long, other boarders were stopping by to see the plane-in-progress or borrow tools. Rowan's only regret was that the tools weren't always returned, adding to his expenses.

Those who completed their Heath Parasols and flew them reported that the airplane, although a bit slow, was easy to fly and nimble, even at very slow speeds, where many airplanes have sluggish responses to pilot inputs. The only real complaint was that no one seemed to achieve the 85 mph that Heath advertised (60 was more like it). But given the variety of engines used and the uneven quality of construction, it would be hard to say if Heath exaggerated the performance of his designs.

Heath sold both land and seaplane versions of the Parasol, which he touted as having, in addition to the purported top speed, a landing speed of only 28 mph. Aviators could purchase a fully assembled airplane for \$975, but most Parasol owners opted for the \$199 kits. The kit came without

an engine and propeller, which would add at least another \$300, and Heath was happy to sell both to his builders. Still, many cost-conscious builders instead recycled engines from old motorcycles or cars.

It's doubtful that thousands of Parasols ever existed, but the Aeronautical Chamber of Commerce of America listed more than 160 Heath aircraft in the section on unlicensed planes in its July 31, 1931, report *Licensed and Identified Aircraft*. Since Heath plans and kits had been around for some time by then, many of these were likely built before the *Popular Aviation* series of articles that Heath wrote, but at least some builders were succeeding.

As more Parasols flew, builders and pilots demanded more speed and better climb performance, which led to Heath's death in 1931 as he piloted his first low-wing design. Donning his helmet and goggles, Heath took off and climbed to about 1,500 feet, where he began maneuvers that put higher stresses on the airplane than the previous two pilots had. After several turns, the right wing suddenly collapsed and slammed against the tail, sending the airplane into an uncontrollable spin.

Heath's mother continued to run the company for several years after his death, until a combination of regulations and the dwindling private aviation market drove it to bankruptcy in 1935. Sold at auction, the company continued manufacturing airplanes, kits, and parts, but after World War II, it abandoned aviation for Heathkit electronics and, eventually, computer kits that became wildly popular among hobbyists. *EAA*

Eileen Bjorkman, EAA Lifetime 435061, is a freelance writer and retired Air Force officer. She holds ATP, CFI, CFII, and MEI certificates and has 2,000 hours of flying time, about half in tailwheel aircraft. She owns a Decathlon and is also slowly building an RV-8. Her first book, *The Propeller under the Bed: A Personal History of Homebuilt Aircraft*, was published by University of Washington Press in 2017.

Heath Parasol from the 1930s.



Completed rib.