

Air Marshal Briley restores memories of dad with plane project

Chris Engle Special to the Herald Times

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Victor "Vic" Briley is the 2018 Air Marshal for the Wings Over Northern Michigan air show. Photo by Chris Engle



Briley is rebuilding his dad's plane from the ground up. The structure of one wing is finished, and Vic and his friends get together once a week to work on the rest. Vic expects it'll be flying in a year or so. Photo by Chris Engle.

GAYLORD — The brittle wooden skeleton scattered in pieces throughout a hangar at Gaylord Regional Airport used to be an airplane. The 1940 Porterfield Collegiate, a tandem two-seater built of spruce and cloth, was once the pride and joy of Gordon Briley, a hobby pilot whose home base was an airstrip near his dairy farm in Vienna Corners. That was before Gordon had nine kids. “All I ever saw my dad do was work,” said Victor ‘Vic’ Briley, the middle child of the family. “That’s what farmers do.” As kids and farm work added up, the airplane collected dust in a barn. There was only one wing left on it when little Victor climbed inside with his brother and daydreamed about buzzing the family dairy cows in his father’s plane. When he was 8, someone bought the old plane and hauled it away. Decades passed. Vic served 27 years in the National Guard and ran Vienna Auto Repair for the last 38 years. He got married and raised six kids. In 1998, he got his pilot’s license.

In 2015, he thought about his dad’s Porterfield. A friend at a party suggested Vic look up the plane’s tail number on the Federal Aviation Administration’s online database. He did, and the Porterfield popped up with an owner in Port St. Lucie, Florida, who was ready to part ways. The following year, Vic and a group of pilot buddies loaded up for Florida to bring the plane home. “It was a basket case when we found it,” Vic said. “The whole thing was completely disassembled and the wings were rotten.” Those rotten pieces are now the template from which Vic is rebuilding his dad’s plane from the ground up. The structure of one wing is finished, and Vic and his friends get together once a week to work on the rest. Vic expects it’ll be flying in a year or so. “I’m anxious to get it into the air so I can imagine what it was like for my dad to fly it,” Vic said.

Porterfield Aircraft Corp. began as a pilot-training center in Kansas City, Missouri. It built 700 airplanes between 1939 and 1942, when the plant switched over to building gliders for the war effort, according to Tom Porterfield of Abernathy, Texas, who heads a national club of Porterfield enthusiasts and has an unverified family relation to the company. He said the airplane design initially started as a Kansas City high school project and was built unusually narrow so its wingless body could fit through the school’s shop door, earning it the nickname, “Skinny Bird.” Fewer than 40 remain airworthy. Like many other members of the local EAA chapter, Vic’s involvement with

Gaylord Regional Airport extends well beyond his time spent in the hangar — and it's that time which has earned him the honorary title of air marshal for 2018's Wings over Northern Michigan air show. "Vic is one of those behind-the-scenes guys who is always helping but seldom recognized," said Matt Barresi, airport manager and air show organizer, noting Vic often volunteered for fly-in breakfasts and took local kids for rides during Young Eagles events at the Gaylord airport. Barresi recommended Briley for the honor to the county board of commissioners and transportation committee. During the air show, Barresi regularly walks or drives a golf cart along a 1-mile circuit between the entrance and terminal. It's there he sees Vic constantly hard at work. "I see him parking planes, lifting ropes and interacting with the public telling them about aircraft," Barresi said. "He has a gentleman-like care for the air show."

Tom Marker was last year's air marshal and is a longtime friend of Vic's. They bought into a Cessna Cardinal together 20 years ago and often took flights to Charlevoix, Cadillac or Mackinac Island for lunch. "We used to fly all over Northern Michigan once a week for a '\$100 hamburger,'" Marker joked about the fuel expense for a cheap lunch. "Around our chapter he's the go-to guy for anybody — not only for his automotive expertise but just to lend a hand. If he doesn't know how to fix something, he'll figure it out. He puts forth his best effort and I see that in all his work." The honorary title of air marshal originates with Britain's Royal Air Force and is bestowed upon an officer in command of a large formation. The American equivalent is a three-star lieutenant general. There's only a month to go before the skies above Gaylord open up with the roar of vintage bombers, military jets and stunt aircraft during the ninth annual Wings over Northern Michigan air show. The event runs Father's Day weekend, Saturday-Sunday, June 16-17, at Gaylord Regional Airport. Headlining this year's show are the Phillips 66 Aerostars flying formation in their four Romanian-built Yak 52s, an A-10 demonstration team, flame-belching Flash Fire jet truck, aerobatics by Mike Vaknin in his Extra 300 stunt plane, the Canadian SkyHawks parachute team and more.

Additionally, the historic B-17 Flying Fortress and B-25 Mitchell, of Michigan's Yankee Air Force, will return and offer rides for a fee. Festivities begin Friday, June 15, with Big Band Night — a 1940s-themed hangar dance with the B-17 serving as a backdrop to

the live orchestra. Tickets are available at www.wingsovernorthernmichigan.org. Adult passes are \$12 a day and \$20 for the weekend; kids (6 to 17) are \$10 a day and \$15 for the weekend. Prices are higher at the gate. The gate opens at 9 a.m. each day, with performances starting at noon. Other activities include helicopter rides, kids' bounce houses, ground displays of vehicles and aircraft, and numerous vendor and food booths.

2018 – Vic Briley

2017 – Tom Marker

2016 – Mike Deerfield

2015 – Shari Rivest

2014 – Wally McCoy

2013 – Carter Moore

2012 – Ken Schlemmer

2011 – John Burt