

E. Iowa company builds experimental aircraft to order

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FYI

Company: Alpha Omega Aircrafters,

137 30th Street Dr. SE, Cedar Rapids

Business: Builder-assistant for owners of experimental aircraft, providing up to 49 percent of a plane's assembly

Owner/president: Randy Hartman Jr.

Founded: Aug. 1, 2003

Employment: 5

Maximum capacity: 5 aircraft

CEDAR RAPIDS - The idea of building your own airplane and then flying it for the first time appeals to many pilots.

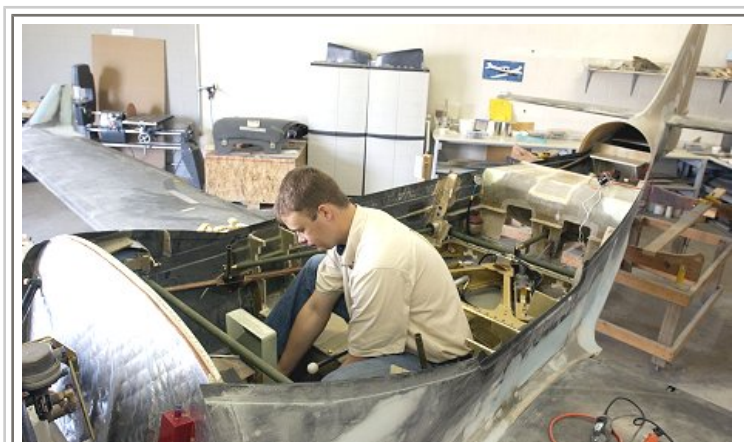
Unfortunately, reality sets in when aircraft owners see how many hours are required to assemble a typical custom-built experimental aircraft — 3,500 to 4,000. That's when Randy Hartman and his company, Alpha Omega Aircrafters, usually get a call.

Alpha Omega Aircrafters, 137 30th Street Dr. SE, offers assistance to airplane builders. The company will complete

a portion of an airplane — such as the wings or tail assembly - or build up to 49 percent of the entire aircraft.

"The Federal Aviation Administration has a '51 percent rule' for home-built aircraft," Hartman said. "If you build your own aircraft, the FAA will issue you a certificate for maintenance on that airplane. To get it, you must build at least 51 percent of the aircraft. "The 51 percent is not measured in hours. It's measured in check boxes. "When you get your kit, there's a list of steps that must be done and checked off. If there's 129 check boxes and you were involved with 66, you have fulfilled the 51 percent requirement."

Hartman, president and founder of Alpha Omega, said the company also will build a complete airplane kit, but the owner must hire someone to perform maintenance on the aircraft.



Builder's assistant Isaac Nelson works in what will become the cabin of a Lancair IV-P experimental aircraft at Alpha Omega Aircrafters in SE Cedar Rapids on Tuesday August 17, 2004. The Lancair IV-P is a four seat pressurized carbon fiber high performance aircraft. (The Gazette/Cliff Jette)

Alpha Omega charges by the hour for its work, requiring aircraft owners to pay as work is completed.

"We work on time and materials," Hartman said. "At the beginning of a project, we try to provide a

fairly accurate estimate of the time required." Alpha Omega has space to accommodate five experimental aircraft at its current location. Hartman is assisted by Tom Meeker, a pilot who has built his own aircraft, and Isaac Nelson, a certified airframe and power plant (A&P) mechanic.



Builder's assistant Tom Meeker works on an RV-7 kit aircraft in the foreground as builder's assistant Isaac Nelson works on a Lancair IV-P kit in the background at Alpha Omega Aircrafters in SE Cedar Rapids on Tuesday August 17, 2004. The RV-7 is two-seater made from aluminum while the Lancair IV-P is a four seat pressurized carbon fiber aircraft. (The Gazette/Cliff Jette)

Hartman, a former project manager for Rockwell Collins in Cedar Rapids, formed Alpha Omega after being asked to help build an experimental aircraft.

"A friend and partner, Bernie Hayes, and I built a Long EZ (airplane) that won the grand champion trophy at the Experimental Aircraft Association AirVenture in Oshkosh, Wis., in its first year of competition," Hartman said. "After Sept. 11 (2001), the commercial avionics business fell off, and I was laid off after 24 years at Rockwell Collins.

"When someone found out that I had been laid off, I was approached to finish their airplane. I was getting a severance package, so I agreed to help him.

"Shortly after that, I was approached by another guy who was building a plane. He asked if I would do the same thing for him."

Hartman realized he needed a place large enough to build airplanes. He also had to decide whether to just finish the first plane and get a regular job, or start a business.

Hartman, a certified A&P mechanic, felt his training over the years at Rockwell Collins had prepared him for such a venture. After receiving three more unsolicited requests to help build airplanes, he decided to take the plunge.

While some businesses require hundreds of customers a day to be successful, Alpha Omega needs five customers a year or less due to the time required to build an aircraft.

"We started the business on Aug. 1, 2003, with 18 months of work scheduled," Hartman said.

Working with the Entrepreneurial Development Center in Cedar Rapids, Hartman developed a five-year business plan. It calls for leasing a 6,000-square-foot building at The Eastern Iowa Airport in three years to provide a larger assembly area and runway access.

While he will likely add a couple of assistants, Hartman has no plans for a large work force.

"To work here, you really have to be a craftsman," he said. "We have to create things.

"You need a knowledge of aviation and an A&P mechanic's license is preferable. It's not easy to find someone like that."

Hartman recruited Nelson after he graduated from LeTourneau University in Longview, Texas. Nelson, like Hartman, was a member of Alpha Omega, a Christian fraternity on the LeTourneau campus.

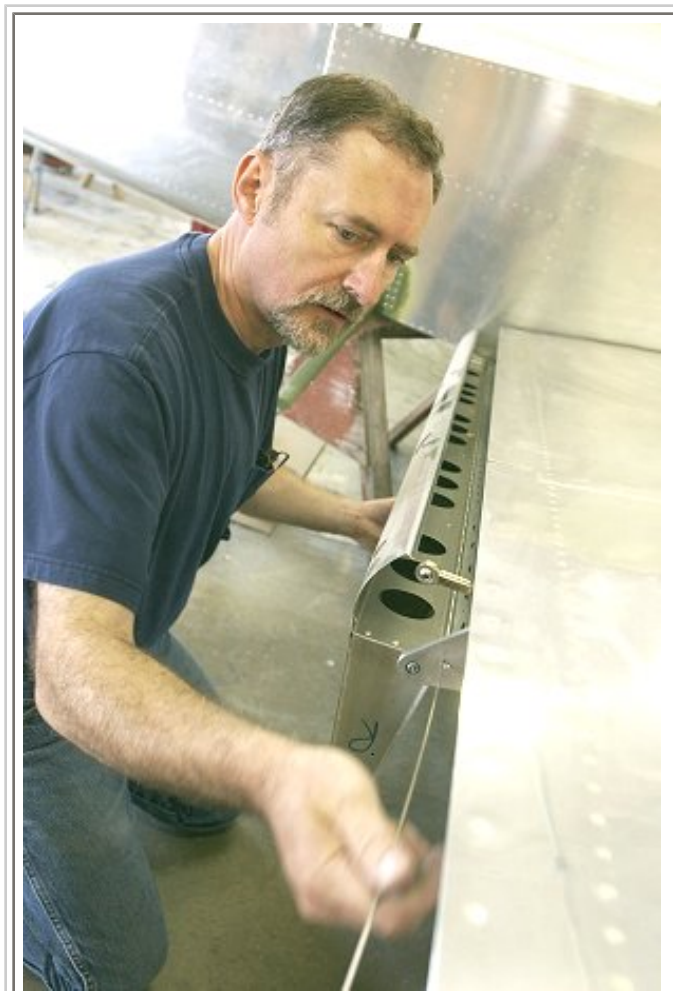
"I went back to LeTourneau to do some mentoring about the time that I was trying to decide whether to start the business," Hartman said. "I was sitting in a restaurant with some Alpha Omega alumni, and a number of them said they'd come to work for me if I started the business.

"Isaac kind of jokingly said 'Why don't you call it Alpha Omega Aircrafters since all these guys want to work for you?' Little did I know that I would wind up bringing him to Iowa to work for me."

Alpha Omega is one of about six companies in the nation providing building assistance for custom home-built aircraft. It's the only company of its kind in the Midwest.

"With the anticipated growth in the home-built aircraft industry, we think there's a bright future for this company," Hartman said.

Article courtesy of *The Gazette* and [GazetteOnline.com](http://www.gazetteonline.com)



Builder's assistant Tom Meeker attaches a flap to the wing of an RV-7 kit aircraft at Alpha Omega Aircrafters in SE Cedar Rapids on Tuesday August 17, 2004. Builder's assistants can work on the portions of the kit assembly that the owner lacks the expertise, tools or time to do himself. (The Gazette/Cliff Jette)