

Impossible to acquire. So just build it.



Photo by Michael Maniatis

Have you noticed, vintage aircraft you want are usually unaffordable but some are just plain not available? Michael Maniatis began a unique quest eight years ago when he decided he wanted to build and fly a Moth Major. He owns a vintage Tiger Moth but the Moth Major is extremely unique in having a lightweight wooden Gipsy Moth airframe. It is faster, has folding wings and was a favorite mount for racing in England during the 30's. If you are not familiar with the series of de Havilland aircraft, they were the first practical light aircraft designed for recreational use. The Moth Series are represented by a number of different light aircraft, sports planes and military trainers. In the 1930s they were the most common civil aircraft flying in Britain, representing about 85% of the market. During their heyday, a light aircraft flying in the UK was referred to simply as a Moth, regardless if it was or not.

Maniatis' preference to fly the Moth Major wasn't by chance; he was the chairman of the U.S Tiger Moth Club for six years. His experience and knowledge about this rare bird drew him into wanting to fly the unique design. The aircraft is large, almost 22 feet long but lightweight with a 29 foot wingspan. It features a powerful Gipsy III inverted engine, a wood and fabric assembly and embraces nine foot long ailerons. Now the problem, there were only 154 produced and ten fuselages were target drones. WWII was around the corner and the Moth Major model gave way to the more rugged, war oriented, Tiger Moth metal fuselage design.

There are three known Moth Major survivors flying and none of their owners were ready to part with their unique piece of history. Michael made the decision to build one. I don't say that lightly, over the course of eight years and thousands of hours he created an exact replica. From de Havilland drawings he recreated parts and fittings. Searching the world for used Moth Major civilian parts, he was able to locate all original instrumentation, wing ribs and ailerons. He was able to source about 15% of the aircraft from spare or used parts. Somehow, he was able to convince his wife to help stitch fabric and together they produced a Moth Major.

INSERT Michael's photo

I didn't mention that Michael lives in New York City and constructed the aircraft in his second floor studio. The aircraft had to be lifted out the window and moved to its grass field hanger to be fully assembled. Once there it was tested and retested and on May 4, 2007 the aircraft made its maiden flight.

I saw Maniatis and his Moth Major before I met him. He was completing his longest flight to date; flying to Geneseo, NY in June 2008. Leaving from Old Orchard Airpark in the Hudson Valley, the flight took over three hours not including a stop at Tri Cities Binghamton for fuel. On the Friday fly-in before the air show a terrible midday storm erupted. The crowds moved under tents while rain and wind pelted the grass field. Some tents

collapsed under the deluge and suddenly, the crowd faintly heard the drone of a vintage aircraft. Searching the limited horizon, a vague grey figure of a biplane could barely be seen approaching the field. The headwinds were strong; it looked as if the aircraft was standing still at times. The determined pilot needed to find a way to bring the aircraft to the runway but hardly able to see, he had to level off keeping engine speed up while trying to keep the nose down. The crowd thought the aircraft might become inverted and except for the wind and rain, it was silent as everyone anxiously awaited the outcome.



Talking with Maniatis later, "Open cockpit flyers expect to get wet flying a long distance, but this storm was a surprise." He pointed out that he was glad he knew there was a long runway. The next day Michael and the Moth Major joined the cavalcade of other Moths as they flew low and slow, entertaining the crowds.

Maniatis loves flying his unique replica aircraft and knows building it without the connections of the worldwide Moth Club contacts would have been next to impossible. The expertise of his friends and colleagues made access to parts and drawings just a little easier. It took eight years and thousands of hours but when I asked him if he would build another replica he said, "Yes, but maybe on a little smaller scale the next time." Check out YouTube and Moth Major to see his first flight and trust me, these landing photographs make the weather appear calm.

By John Cilio Contact him at: questions@vintageflyer.com