HFI Heritage Series

Dick Eimert

By Martin J. Pociask

Clockwise from top left: Dick Eimert, Barbara and friends in front of one of the Grumman Widgeons that Eimert maintained while working for the Lambros Seaplane Base in NJ; Dick Eimert during his interview for ROTOR magazine; Dick Eimert with his wife, Barbara; HFI Vice President and Curator Marty Pociask with Dick Eimert.
On June 22, 2011, Martin J. Pociask, vice president and curator for Helicopter Foundation International (HFI), interviewed Dick Eimert at his Airmont, N.Y. home for Rotor® magazine and as part of HFI's Heritage Series of profiles of vertical-lift pioneers. This is the first of two parts based on that interview.

HFI: Dick, you were born on Jan. 22, 1928, in Englewood, N.J. Your father passed away at the age of 41 when you were only two years old, leaving just your mother, sister and yourself to face the depression together.

Eimert: Yes, the depression years were tough on everybody, but losing my father just made it worse for the family.

HFI: Your sister, who is 11 years older than you, was the primary breadwinner, although even as young as you were you held some jobs and contributed to the meager family income. Did your mother work, and what type of work was it that you and your sister performed?

Eimert: Well my mother came from the era of women who were trained to sew and cook and be good housekeepers. My sister though was a very, very aggressive young woman. She finished high school and ended up as the head secretary for the big boss at Lever Brothers in Edgewater, started the Ski Club of New Jersey and was a reporter for the Ridgewood Times newspaper. She really acted like a ‘father’ figure in getting me going in the right direction as far as being able to add some money to the income. I delivered clothes for a local tailor, worked at an ice cream shop as a soda jerk and delivered papers.

HFI: You grew up in North Bergen, N.J., in a house that had been built around 1890 by your grandmother. You learned at an early age to make home repairs.

Eimert: I was mechanically inclined and got involved with a lot of things. That was unusual for my age, I guess. Things like plumbing, heating and electrical work. I was able to do a lot of the work around the house and saved money that would have been spent on outside contractors.

HFI: I understand that when you were a child, you converted an old coal bin into a workshop for your modeling activities. What kind of models did you build?

Eimert: Initially I built balsa wood, rubber powered, free-flight airplanes, but as time went by I got gasoline engines and got into free-flight gas and U-control airplanes. That was before the days of the radio controlled aircraft. I flew them at two large fields in the Hudson County Park near where I lived. An older boy on my block got me going on building these little ten cent kits. That was the beginning for me in the aviation business, at six years old. All my thoughts and school book reports were about aviation.

HFI: In your last year of grammar school you were sent to a special school for evaluation and continuing schooling. Who was responsible for that decision?

Eimert: The town I lived in, North Bergen, didn’t have a high school, so they had to send the kids to high schools in other towns. They sent us to be evaluated with oral tests and written tests, and through that they determined the direction that we should be going in. They picked me for the right direction, technology.

HFI: You were sent to Dickinson High School in Jersey City, N.J., a very large industrial school with drafting rooms, physics labs, pattern making shops and machine shops, and some very qualified teachers. What was the major concentration of study for you?

Eimert: I had some grandiose plans of designing fighter planes and bombers, so I majored in mechanical drafting. I got exposure to machine shop and the physics laboratory. It was an excellent school for me.

HFI: The school had two sessions for students, and except for closing one hour each day for cleaning, the rest of the days it provided training to workers needed for the war effort. Were you involved in that training as well, and can you talk about what that training entailed?

Eimert: It was different for the adults. For the regular young students, we had two periods that we were using the school for. Later on in the day they started bringing in people going to work in the war industries to learn machine shop, pattern making and drafting.
HFI: Upon graduating in June of 1945, you got a job in the drafting room of the Bendex Eclipse Pioneer plant at the Teterboro airport in New Jersey. That move was another early connection to aviation. However, the war ended a few months later, and just like that you were out of your first full time job. What did this turn of events do to your focus on aviation?

Eimert: There were a number of things that came across in my life at the right time, and that was one of them. I had been learning to fly at Lambros Seaplane Base in Ridgefield Park earlier that year, so I already knew George Lambros. I asked him for a job and he said that what I really should do is get a real good job somewhere else and rent airplanes from him. But I wouldn't listen to him. I had to be around airplanes. So he hired me. He had just received approval to provide flying lessons to returning servicemen under the GI Bill and was in need of additional people. I started out as a lowly "dock boy," fueling and moving aircraft around, but very quickly got involved in maintenance.

HFI: Do you think your early childhood experiences in electrical, plumbing and carpentry work fueled your interest in working on aircraft?

Eimert: Oh, no question about it. To be a good airplane mechanic you had to do all those things.

HFI: You found yourself working and flying at Lambros where all the instructors and pilot ratings for primarily commercial instruments were available. They had many light aircraft, such as the Cubs, T-craft, Seabees and Grumman Wigeons at the base, and many single engine Ryan’s, the PT-26, BT-13 and Cessna UC-78 twins. Did you learn to fly all those aircraft?

Eimert: Lambros had an edict that if you did serious maintenance on an aircraft, you had to fly it. So I got to fly all the single engine aircraft solo, and the twins with a senior pilot.

HFI: You noticed that the older mechanics were hesitant to get involved in Magneto-repair, so you decided to send for the overhaul manuals and designed your own test equipment, and in the process became a Magneto expert. At this point you were still a very young man; when did you have time to study?

Eimert: My study was hands-on maintenance, on-the-job training. As I mentioned before, I started off as a dock boy and worked my way up, so I got experience in wood work, metal work and engine overhaul—everything that went along with maintaining the aircraft that we had. I took the aircraft maintenance manuals home with me. I also was studying for my A&P at night.

HFI: In 1950, you took your written and practical tests for your A&E; now it is called A&P mechanic rating, and you passed with probably more on-the-job experience than most mechanics coming out of school. You also added the DAMI (designated aircraft maintenance inspection) rating, which became the IA inspection authorization rating under the new FAA. The unwritten rule at the base was that the mechanics either had to test fly the aircraft that they worked on, or at least be a crew member aboard. This rule provided you with an opportunity to build up additional flying time in a number of interesting aircraft.

Eimert: Some of the aircraft that they had, you don’t see very often today. To be able to fly those aircraft was really a wonderful opportunity to build flight time in many different aircraft without cost to me.

HFI: You said that you particularly enjoyed the Ryan PT-22 low wing open cockpit airplane in which you taught yourself aerobatics. You managed to survive these aerobatic flights without killing yourself or damaging the aircraft! In your opinion, do you think participation in this kind of flying helped to make you a better mechanic, and that your maintenance background in turn helped to make you a better pilot?

Eimert: There’s no question about that. Some of the best pilots I knew had a maintenance background. I think one of the best known was Chuck Yeager, who flew the Bell
X-1. I mean, his extensive mechanical background being on a farm and working with farm machinery made him very qualified to fly that aircraft.

**HFI:** You married your wife, Barbara, in June of 1950; you originally planned to be married on June 10, but while you were making plans you found out that the air model flying fair was to be held at Grumman field that day. So you and Barbara changed the date to June 17 instead. Your bride was very flexible and supportive, and still is. Tell us about the Mirror model flying fair.

**Eimert:** Well, I brought a free-flight gas model airplane and flew it, but I didn't set any records or win any contests. It was interesting for us guys that were building models to see what the latest trends were in the model building business. In the afternoon, they had one of the best air shows I've ever seen, with the Blue Angels and Al Williams and his Gulfhawk.

**HFI:** In addition to being supportive over the years, your wife often flew with you in seaplanes, biplanes, other airplanes and helicopters. During your career, you owned many airplanes such as the Meyers OTW Biplane, two T-crafts, a Cub on floats, a Piper Cherokee, a Navion and a Mooney MK 20, among others. I understand your children also accompanied you on many flights. Did any of them develop an interest in flying?

**Eimert:** We used to go down to the Jersey Shore and drop in at the airport on the way to have breakfast. The kids had an interest in it, but the two younger kids were difficult to get out of bed in the morning! With Diane, my oldest daughter, all I had to do was rattle the doorknob and she was up, out, and ready to go. So she spent most of the time flying with me. I tried to teach her to fly but she was shy, and now she kicks herself. She's currently talking about maybe getting some dual instruction. My wife, Barbara, used to help me out with aircraft repairs. The neighbors probably wondered why she sometimes staggered out of the garage. They didn't know that she was doping wings while the kids were in school!

**HFI:** With the ratings you had, you were able to purchase a run-down airplane, repair it, fly it for a couple of years and then sell it for a profit. During your career, how many aircraft did you rebuild and re-sell?

**Eimert:** Maybe eight or ten airplanes, something in that area. There was always something in the garage being worked on.

**HFI:** You stayed at Lambros Seaplane Base for 14 years, and in April of 1959, Dick Futner, a pilot who worked at Teterboro, approached you with a very interesting proposition. He was involved with the Tomasso Construction Company in New Britain, Conn. Tell us about that.

**Eimert:** Well, Tomasso was one of the biggest construction companies in Connecticut, even on the east coast. They did all the roadwork and airport work...
for the state. They had a large quarry and supplied crushed rock, sand and blacktop, and they had a fully automatic concrete plant.

**HFI:** Tomasso planned to add a helicopter to their operations. The plan was that Futner was to be the pilot/manager, and you would provide the maintenance. You and Barbara had three children at that time, and to move to Connecticut was a serious decision. Fortunately, your wife was in favor of making the change, and you turned in your resignation at Lambros. Why after 14 years with Lambros did you view this as a good career move?

**Eimert:** The GI Bill had ended and the amount of flying activity had fallen off greatly, with seaplanes especially. I could see the end coming. Helicopters were just beginning to be commercially practical and had always interested me.

**HFI:** Tomasso sent you to California to purchase a Sikorsky S-51 from Los Angeles Airways, but the deal fell through. You were then instructed to go to the Bell plant in Fort Worth, Texas, and purchase a new Bell 47 G2. Futner went to flight training, and you attended maintenance training. Tell us about your time in the maintenance facility.

**Eimert:** The maintenance school was in a small hangar at the local Globe Airport, and I attended in 1959 along with two mechanics from Canada. Fortunately, one of them had some background in helicopter maintenance; he attended the Bell school to get his formal training.

**HFI:** Your instructor, Christian Rippe, was a real character and an excellent teacher. And as a requirement of the course, you all were to completely disassemble a 47 D1 school machine, which you did. Carefully laying out all the parts in what was like an exploded view seen in some manuals, how long did it take you to disassemble and reassemble it?

**Eimert:** Well it was over a period of possibly three weeks of disassembly and reassembly. These machines were for the maintenance course only and were not flown.

During the interview, Eimert shows a model of the Bell 47-G2, the first helicopter he maintained during his work for the Tomasso Construction Company in 1959–1964 in New Britain, Conn.

**Eimert:** He certainly did. When we got back from that luncheon, we found that he had mixed up all the parts of the machine—transmission parts with the HFI head, etc.—just mixed everything up. And then he added a bunch of parts that didn’t even come from that helicopter. We ended up with indigestion after that lunch!

**HFI:** Rippe had developed a way of teaching that included an exercise called “What touches what?” He would call out a part of the machine and ask “what touches this part?” when assembled in the aircraft. Can you explain the benefits of this exercise?

**Eimert:** It was a very innovative way to teach because you really had to have a very good idea of how that machine was put together. We disassembled the machine and put it back together, so we were much more intimate with these parts; but to take a gear in the transmission and know what it touched required some thinking because it might be another gear, it might be a bolt or the bearings, so it was an interesting way to teach.

**HFI:** You and Dick Futner flew the new machine back from Fort Worth to New Britain at about 500–1,000 feet. It must have been a wonderful way to see the country. You both arrived at the plant for inspection by the four Tomasso brothers. Tomasso’s heliport was not yet completed, so you moved the machine to Pratt & Whitney’s hanger at Rentchler Field in East Hartford,
Conn. for about three months. What was the first assignment for the 47G-2?

**Eimert:** I was doing the daily inspection at night, and Futner would come in in the morning and roll the machine out and fly it down to the plant. Then they would go off. Each of the Tomasso brothers had an interest in jobs that could be anywhere in the state of Connecticut. So, often the machine went off with one or a couple of the brothers. For about three months I worked weekdays in Connecticut and the weekend closing up my Grumman project at Lambros in N.J.

**HFI:** I understand that the Tomasso brothers amassed about 500 hours in the first six months. That must have given them a view and control of their operation that they never had before.

**Eimert:** The machine provided a good overall view of large projects. It gave them a bird’s eye view of some of the open road repairs and the extension on the airports, various things like that. Some of their people on the ground did not like the helicopter, but it worked very well for the Tomassos.

**HFI:** You moved into a very nice new heliport and hangar adjacent to the main plant, and you worked on and got approvals from Bell and the FAA as a Bell 47 repair station. In addition to your machine, you added maintenance for a number of Bells in the area, such as Fitchburgh Paper Company, Dadario Construction Company and others. This kept you busy, I’m sure. Can you remember the models and how long you provided maintenance repair service to these companies?

**Eimert:** They were all Bell 47 type series machines at that time. The first year all maintenance was on the company G2, and the remaining three years included outside maintenance on Bell G, G2, J and J2s, and for a few National Guard H-13s for maintenance and weight and balance checks.

**HFI:** During this time, you gained experience on the new machines coming out of Bell, such as the 47-J2 series and the 47-G4A, and then in May of 1964, one of your early model builder friends, Ted Dubolsky, flew up to see you and he proposed a combination of both of your skills at the Rampo Valley Airport in Spring Valley, N.Y. What attracted you to consider this proposition?

**Eimert:** At that point, I had been working for Tomasso for five years and their business had changed. Tomasso had lost interest in using the machines in their business. We were forced to find other uses for them, but the G2 did not lend itself to charter operations. We ended up flying people at the fairs, and I ended up people packing, which was not my idea of what I wanted to do. So I decided that Ted Dubolsky’s idea would be a good change for me. Shortly after I left, the company sold the helicopter and closed the heliport.

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