

Uncontrolled Airspace

EAAers' weekly hangar flying podcast takes off

RIC REYNOLDS

Over the years, EAA AirVenture Oshkosh has produced more than its share of creative collaborations, not to mention lifelong friendships. In 2006, the latter led to the former as three veterans of the convention's daily newspaper, *EAA AirVenture Today*, created a fun and informative weekly gathering in cyberspace: the Uncontrolled Airspace Podcast (UCAP). It's an hour of recorded "hangar flying" that anyone with a computer and an Internet connection can access.

In previous years, pilot/journalists Jack Hodgson (EAA 370823), Joseph E. "Jeb" Burnside (EAA 780810), and Dave Higdon (EAA 465009) would reunite annually at Oshkosh, putting in long days at the newspaper. Now they meet weekly via a recorded teleconference to discuss the general aviation news and issues of the day, flying experiences, events, or whatever is on their minds relating to aviation.

And after more than 30 episodes, the UCAP gang appears to be hitting its stride: With more than 1,000 weekly downloads, the Apple iTunes directory consistently ranks UCAP in the top 5 for aviation-themed podcasts, often in the top 3. As for so-called "hangar flying" podcasts, UCAP is usually No. 1, and listener feedback to the program has been extremely favorable.

"I first noticed podcasting when they first began appearing, two to three years ago," said Hodgson, who lives in Boston and handles all the technical aspects of the podcast. "At AirVenture 2005, I realized that the ongoing airplane banter in the newsroom just might form the basis of

an interesting podcast." Hodgson, who has largely made his living on the cutting edge of technology, was also itching to join the "new media" movement being driven by podcasting.

He first bounced the idea off Burnside and Higdon that year, and both seemed mildly interested and made loose plans to pursue the idea after Oshkosh. Alas, life intervened and it didn't happen that year. By the time AirVenture 2006 rolled around, podcasting had literally exploded, and Hodgson was as determined as ever to get this hangar-flying idea off the ground.



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How it Started

Several of the *EAA AirVenture Today* staffers, including the UCAP guys, traditionally mark the completion of the paper's first issue with a dinner in Appleton. It was during the drive there in 2006 when all their "light bulbs" went on simultaneously.

"Jeb and I were shooting the breeze about some things we'd seen at the show, talking about industry stuff," recalled Higdon, who lives in Wichita, Kansas, and is a photographer for the paper. "Jack was sitting in the back seat, just listening, taking it all in. All of a sudden, he blurts out, 'Man, this conversation would make a great podcast!'"



Dave Higdon (left), Jack Hodgson (center) and Jeb Burnside at Sun n' Fun 2007

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They all looked at each other and had one of those "Eureka!" moments. Between deadlines the rest of that week, they talked more about it and made a firm commitment to pursue the idea immediately after the convention.

Within the month—on August 22, 2006—they set up a Skype group connection (an Internet telephone service) and recorded their maiden episode, appropriately titled "First Flight." In the beginning, it was called the No-Name General Aviation Podcast, with Hodgson manning the controls from Boston, Higdon logging in from Wichita, and Burnside joining in from his home in Springfield, Virginia.

That first show ran just under 40 minutes and included a loose discussion about several subjects such as the recently concluded EAA AirVenture Oshkosh 2006 and rising aviation fuel prices. There were a few glitches, which was to be expected, but they pulled it off, and two weeks later they did another one.

"At first we were concerned, 'Are we going to have enough to talk about?' or 'How can we possibly fill an hour?'" Hodgson said. "Thankfully it hasn't worked out that way, and we've been able to carve out a little niche."

As the episodes mounted, so did word-of-mouth awareness about them. In the age of e-mail and the Internet, people began telling others about this sometimes funny, occasionally serious, but always-entertaining podcast. UCAP began to develop a loyal following in the ensuing nine months, both in the United States and internationally. It received feedback from listeners in Australia, New Zealand, and Germany, and website (www.UncontrolledAirspace.com) stats show visits from all over Europe, Asia, and other areas.

Frequency was initially every two weeks and then about every 10 days before UCAP settled into the weekly format at about episode No. 13.

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Format? What Format?

Hodgson's idea from the start was to not create strictly an interview show or a news-driven show. "This is just three pilots getting together to shoot the bull, like any afternoon hangar-flying session," he said. They have occasional guest contributors, including fellow *EAA AirVenture Today* staffer James Wynbrandt and *Aviation for Women* editor and *Sport Aviation* contributing writer Amy Laboda. They've also done the podcast in conjunction with special events such as last year's National Business Aviation Association convention and, more recently, the Sun 'n Fun Fly-In at Lakeland, Florida (which included a Sun 'n Fun radio simulcast). That was the first time all three members were together during any episode, an occurrence they plan to repeat in Oshkosh this year.

Usually, though, UCAP tries to stick to the format, which is to say, there is no format.

"Clearly when there is something new or breaking, like Eclipse delivering their first jet or the ongoing user fees debate, we'll talk about that, but for the most part we like to make it unscripted," Hodgson said.

Burnside added, "We feel passionately about this community and this industry, and when we see what some might term 'getting off the airway,' we'll call BS on that and point it out to our listeners. We just want what's best for the GA community. We may sound angry or agitated at times, but it's really just us wearing our passion on our sleeves."

EAA, the Binding Tie

All three agree that Uncontrolled Airspace is an extension of the camaraderie that's evolved over the years of working together at *EAA AirVenture Today*. Higdon's been on staff for 14 years, Hodgson for 10 years, and Burnside for four.

"This would never have happened without *AirVenture Today*," Burnside said.

"We came together to do that job, and a podcast broke out," Higdon chuckled.

Burnside was more philosophical about the EAA-UCAP connection. "The way UCAP came together is just a microcosm of AirVenture Oshkosh," he said. "At Oshkosh, you have people who come together for one week for the same purpose. They interact, and become fast friends. It's just part of that Oshkosh mystique."

But are they trying to change the world, or are they just having fun? Hodgson has an interesting take.

"While we're doing the podcast, we're just trying to protect the aviation world from what we perceive as threats. Change the world? Not really. I just want to introduce more people to aviation. As much as I hope we can encourage people to speak up about user fees or whatever, the feedback that thrills me the most is from folks who start taking flight lessons in part from the pas-

sion for aviation they heard on the podcast."

Ultimately, the UCAP provides yet another aviation outlet for Hodgson, Higdon, and Burnside, who summed things up pretty well: "There is a unique convergence going on here, of our experience, the technology, the camaraderie experienced at *AirVenture Today*, and just the overwhelming like-mindedness that we all share for this community and what it's done for us. If we can return some of that to the listeners, so much the better." *EAA*

Ric Reynolds is the news editor for EAA Publications.

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EAA Online

At www.EAA.org we embrace several new media formats, including podcasting, streaming video, QuickTime VR, webcams, and of course, e-newsletters. A website makeover is in the works, one that will further integrate these and other new media features and capabilities for our current and future members:

- Twice a month, a new EAA AvCast (podcast) appears at www.EAA.org/podcast. These brief, informational sound bites focus on EAA AirVenture and other significant EAA activities throughout the rest of the year. An archive of past EAA AvCasts is also available.
- The EAA Young Eagles website underwent a transformation in 2006, integrating widespread use of Flash video, webcams, user polls, games, and other interactive features. See it all at www.YoungEagles.org.
- Multimedia comes alive at the EAA AirVenture Museum website (www.AirVentureMuseum.org). At the Virtual Museum, visitors can get 360-degree views of nearly all areas of the facility through QuickTime VR imagery. The website's Virtual Exhibit area is a multimedia collection of featured aircraft with video, audio, photos, and more. Webcams give peeks of what's happening outside at Pioneer Airport and at several locations throughout the building.
- This year the EAA AirVenture website launched a new video player form Brightcove, providing previews and daily updates and highlights from this year's convention along with an ability for users to post their own videos to the service. The new player will soon be available on other EAA websites. Read more about it in the Hotline section on page 9.