

EAA's AirVenture 2025: An interview with Dave McFarlane

By Cynthia Wheatley Glenn

Oshkosh! The overwhelming sight of literally thousands of airplanes, helicopters, and drones lined up in neat rows with their camper-owners and operators beneath the wings, or streaking across the sky showing off the high caliber skill levels of the pilots who operate them.

Celebrating history en masse as we all took turns marveling at the Goodyear blimp's 100-hundredth anniversary pair of working airships gracing the skies. Their tie-down spots were pretty much at the entrance into the campus, and it was fascinating watching how they were maneuvered to ensure safe take-offs, en route flight, and landings.

Oshkosh! The crowds exceeded 700,000 and were kind and patient as we all occasionally waited to get from here to there, to make purchases, or to buy food. Personally, I totally leaned in to the midwestern cuisine of deep-fried cheese curds (delicious!), as well as typical fair food: hot dogs, tacos, ice cream bars, and frozen lemonade. The weather was pleas-

ant (for the most part; not a lot of rain this year) and not quite as humid as it has been in the past.

Oshkosh! Looking for old friends we only see at the show, and making new friends who will be added to the "find" list next year and after. I saw FAA employees in their building, as well as vendors who manage to stay in the same spot year after year in the four huge hangars that serve as giant aviation superstores. I always take a laundry list of items I need to pick up for my two C182Ps, and I always appreciate the show discounts that are given.

Oshkosh! Having the privilege of writing for *In Flight USA*, there are many, many people who are willing to share with me their story. This year was no exception. I was leaving the McFarlane Aviation Products booth and came across four gentlemen sitting off to the side and we struck up a conversation; they were very engaging and probably had close to 100 years of piloting and maintenance experience between them, something incredibly helpful to a relative newbie

such as myself who only has five years of flight training and flying under my belt.

It turns out one of the men was Dave McFarlane, the founder of McFarlane Aviation Products. He was very generous in that he allowed me to interview him. Enjoy!

In Flight USA: I'm very interested in learning your story, and not just how you started McFarlane Aviation Products. What can you share?

Dave McFarlane: My brother and I built model airplanes when we were boys. Dad flew; he was a Private Pilot and kept a T-Craft in a field outside of town in NE Iowa. He owned a service station back then.

IFUSA: When did the aviation bug bite you?

DMcF: I started flying at age 16, and soloed that same year, in 1968. I worked the service station and painted cars at night to earn money for lessons. I earned my private pilot certificate at age 17, when it was still easy to get a DPE – we only had to call a week in advance back then to book a checkride. I remember I had to do a short-soft field landing. I'd never done a combined short and soft field. I had done short field and soft field but not together and the DPE showed me how, then I just did it.

IFUSA: What else can you tell me about your teenage years?

DMcF: When I was in high school, Dad sold the service station and became an excavator. The new owner didn't pay his mortgage, so my dad repossessed the service station and pretty much gave it to me and my brother to run. He taught me at age 16! – and my brother how to run the business. This was in NE Iowa in a small farm town called Arlington. We would run the shop early before school, then we hired a retired mechanic to come into work while we were at school. After school, my brother and I would go back to the service station, taking turns deciding who would go home for dinner each night during the week. I used many of those business skills that I learned to create McFarlane Aviation.

IFUSA: That is incredible! Did you continue flying?

DMcF: Yes, I painted airplanes at night and went to college during the day. I was offered a job in Mississippi to run an aircraft repaint shop and I learned how to be an ag pilot. The problem was, I needed my commercial pilot certificate. My boss told the DPE I had a government contract job beginning the following Monday and asked that he please take me up for my checkride over the weekend. I was not fully prepared but barely passed, then moved to South Mississippi and worked for the USDA spraying for fire control. Eventually, I worked as a CFI in Arkansas during the winter, and worked in the Mississippi and Arkansas Delta spraying during the summer.



Dave McFarlane, founder of McFarlane Aviation. (Photo courtesy McFarlane Aviation)

IFUSA: How long did you do this?

DMcF: For about six or seven years.

After that, I bought the spray service company. I was married by now and my wife and I were building our family, a son and a daughter. I flew and maintained airplanes in Des Moines, Iowa, focusing more on aviation maintenance where I leased a shop. In 1979 my wife and I bought Vinland Aerodrome (K64), a private grass strip with 25 hangars, an aerial spray business, and a repair and rebuilding shop. Phyllis, my wife, helped run the airport. I remember she would mow the grass runways and keep the books.

IFUSA: I love how varied and interesting your story is. How did you become McFarlane Aviation Products? Why parts manufacturing?

DMcF: I have been very involved in aviation in some capacity for most of my life. We kept getting complaints from clients that parts they ordered from other companies broke and were expensive. Our solution was to provide better products at a cheaper price.

IFUSA: What about your kids? Are either of them pilots?

DMcF: My son learned to fly after high school and was a member of the Boeing Flying Club, but his passion is designing software code. He earned his Master's degree in aerospace engineering and works at McFarlane. My daughter earned her MBA and also works for the company; she is not a pilot. We still own K64, but the spray business closed in 1994. We added a 40-acre industrial park and a 120,000 square-foot office/industrial space for McFarlane Aviation Products that employs 150 people. The kids didn't want to run the company, so I sold the majority four years ago to a private equity firm. I'm still very involved in the company, though, with the major goal being (to) keep moving forward making better airplane parts. I want to help where I can to make the business grow and continue helping people.

IFUSA: Do you have retirement plans?

DMcF: I have no retirement plans. I'll probably do this until I die. It's been a good life.

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