

## Pilot Profile: Viktor Zernikel

by Russell Knetzger

What would make a young, happily married man with two young sons, and doing well with one of Germany's largest firms in the 1950s (and still large – Siemens) give it all up and emigrate to the United States? The answer for Viktor Zernikel, 74, was his love of family. Siemens was placing him on job sites away from home for months at a time, including foreign countries. He had worked in Ukraine, Argentina briefly, and other places far from his family in Staffel, the small town near Frankfurt where he grew up. The last job, where he was virtually rebuilding an entire steel mill in Spain, activated him to get serious about the emigration idea he had been nurturing, even though he had no English language skills.

An aunt and a cousin were already here, and his mother was on a long visit to Milwaukee, and liked it so much she encouraged Viktor to apply in Frankfurt for emigration. By 1962, with his resume of a 4-1/2 year apprenticeship in machinery building, begun at age 13-1/2, and his 3-1/2 years in industrial electricity, plus 7 years with Siemens, (rising to foreman for crews as large as 30 men), his application was speedily approved. In a week he and his family were on a boat to America.

In Staffel, Viktor's 1945 interest in crystal radios and audio gear had helped him attain early status in 2 channel escapement radio control of model airplanes. He had enough success with his Cub-like Electra, that people from Staffel would come out to watch on weekends. Word of his leaving brought many buyers for his equipment.

In Milwaukee, Viktor went with Harnischfeger, who put him into their overhead crane factory on 44<sup>th</sup> and National Av. He stayed 8 years before going with GE X-Ray at 43<sup>rd</sup> & Lincoln to care for their 700 production machines. He stayed 23 years to retirement, overseeing the transition to far fewer, more versatile machines.

In his arrival year of 1962, Viktor quickly fell in with the early RC pilots at Karl & Sophie's Aero Park in Menomonee Falls – John Faestel in particular. One of the things which made Aero Park a model airplane paradise were the picnic suppers Viktor's wife Gertrude would bring with Viktor and the boys several days per week. Beverly Brisighella, who died recently, was among the other wives who came out to make after-work, early evening flying a family event.

The early 1960s saw revolutionary advances in



*Viktor Zernikel with his favorite plane, an F-86 Sabre Jet. Background: a German Fiesler Storch tail end.*

proportional radio control. At one point, before they could afford furniture, Viktor had 5 planes stacked in his living room. Unlike Germany, balsa wood was in ample supply here. The 27MHz band was used. Unable, as a non-citizen, to get an FCC license, Viktor operated under an FCC rule of sharing other pilot's licenses at the field.

After his five year wait for US citizenship, Viktor was able to earn his FCC Ham radio license, making him among the few modelers able to operate on the 54 MHz band. His blue mini-van proudly sports a second antenna to support his mobile Ham citizens-band radio system.

By 1969 Viktor was able to build his present home in New Berlin, with a proper shop. Living that far southwest, he shifted his club membership to the MARKS Club. With opening of the Milwaukee Co. Field in Franklin in 1979, Viktor also supported that field and the RAMS Club, formed in 1980.

In Milwaukee the Zernikels had a third son, Michael, joining Reiner and Dieter, born in Germany. Reiner went on to become a dentist in private practice for five years. He then died of a heart ailment, leaving behind two sons, which Viktor and Gertrude are helping their mother to rear. They also have a third grandson.

In recent years Viktor has curtailed his flying as his eye sight became dimmed by cataracts. But lens replacement surgery this spring was very successful. "I can now see like an eagle," says Viktor, who is back at the field flying.

Viktor served the RAMS as its Club Secretary during the years 2004 and 2005.

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