

The Man Who Could Fly

Lt. Col. Joe Zinno USAF (Ret.)

Designed, Built and Flew His Man-Powered Aircraft
The N1ZB Olympian from Quonset Point Rhode Island

This is the November 18, 2006 Providence Journal's
commemoration of that lift-off on April 21, 1976

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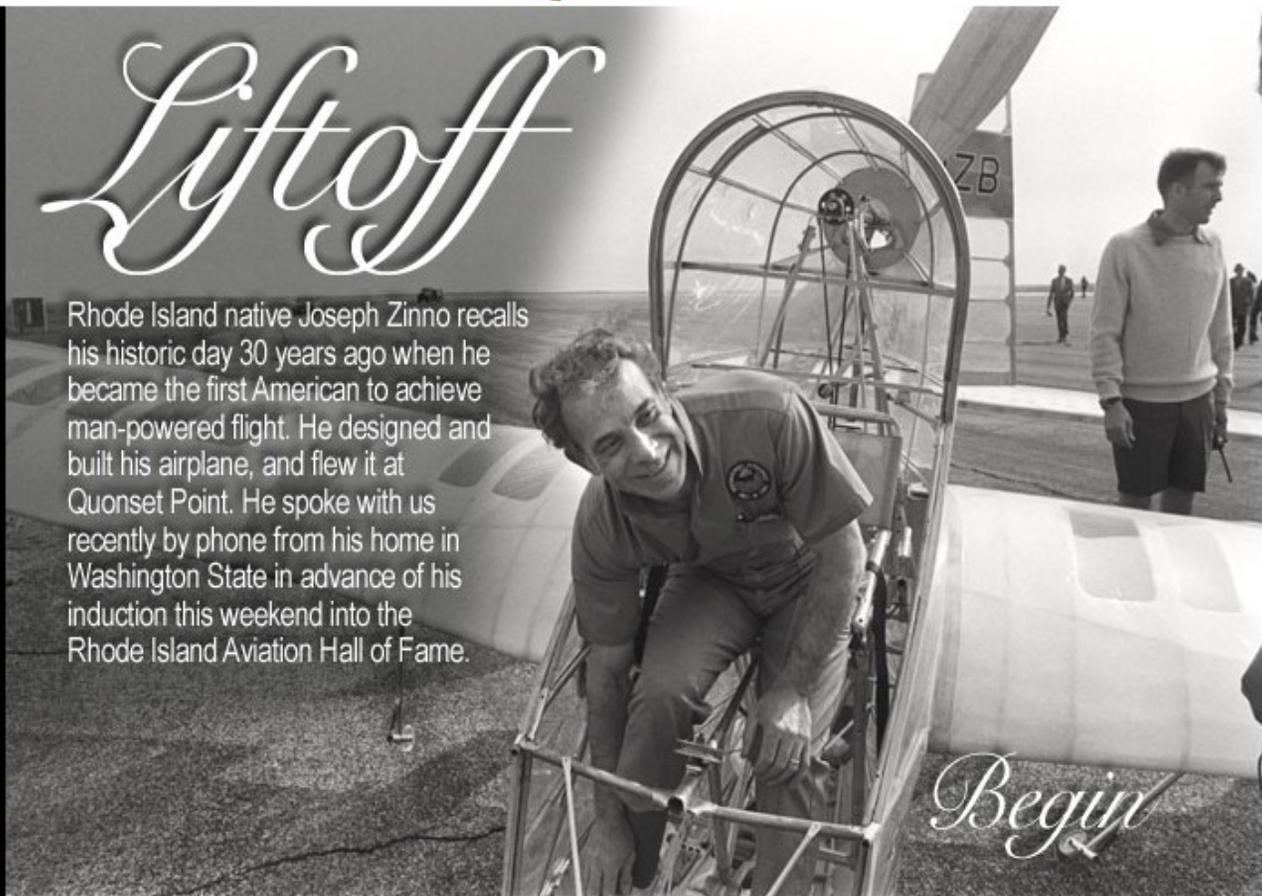
Journal file photo/ Thomas D. Stevens
Joseph Zinno barely got off the ground at Quonset Point in his hand-built aircraft "Olympian" in 1976 to become the first American to achieve human-powered flight.

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Liftoff

Rhode Island native Joseph Zinno recalls his historic day 30 years ago when he became the first American to achieve man-powered flight. He designed and built his airplane, and flew it at Quonset Point. He spoke with us recently by phone from his home in Washington State in advance of his induction this weekend into the Rhode Island Aviation Hall of Fame.

Begin





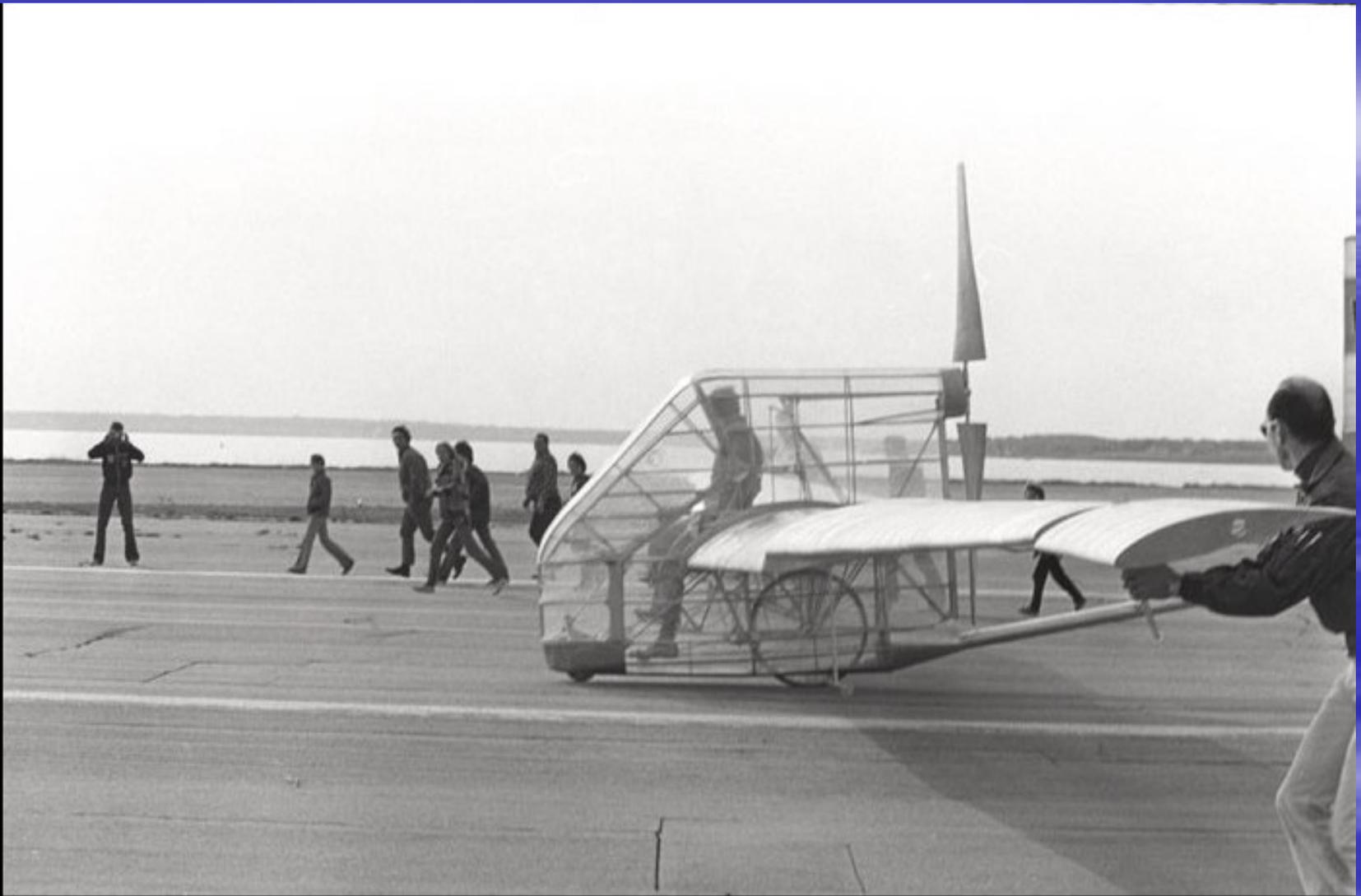
I was ready to quit actually



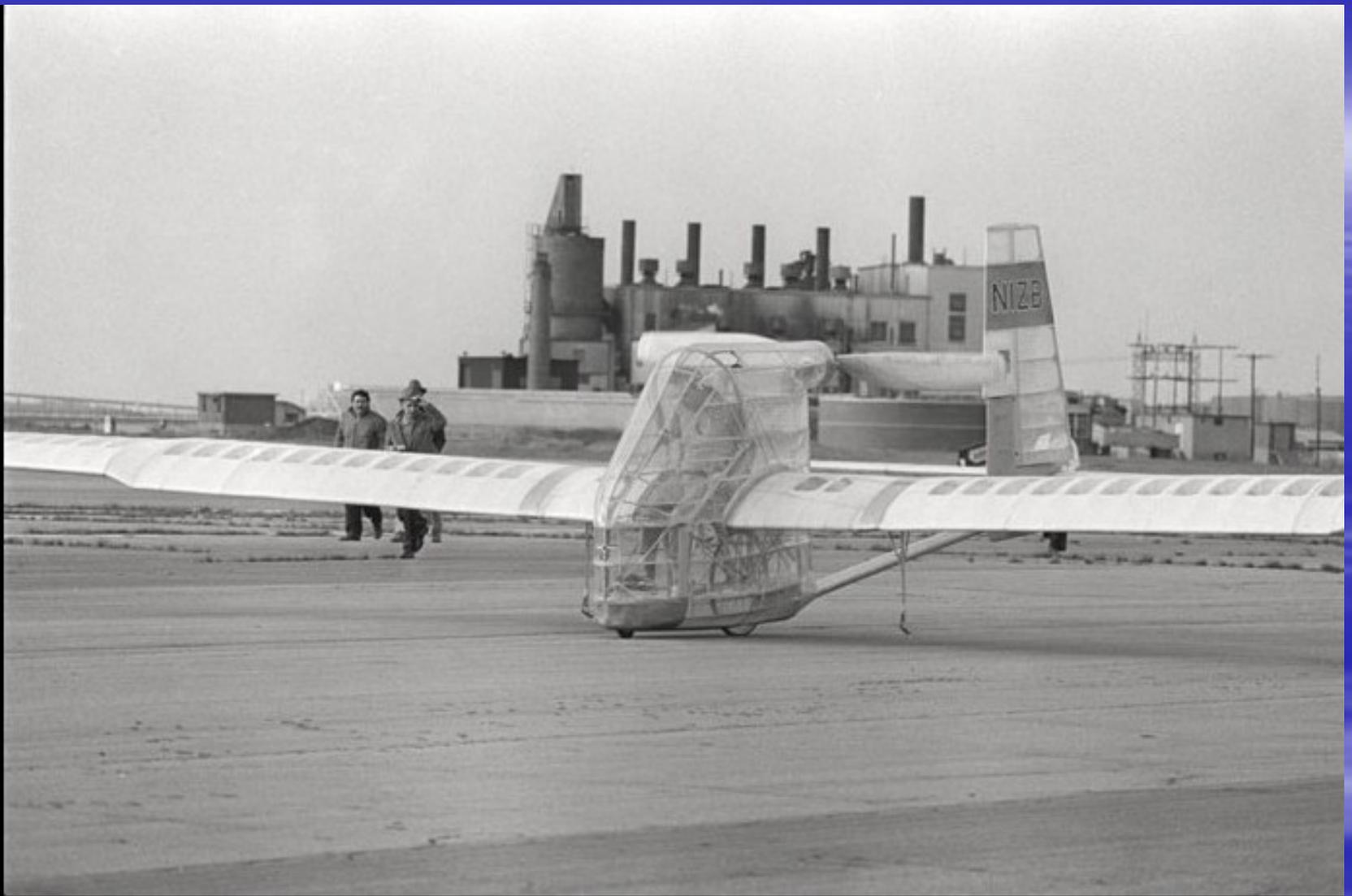
...then I said, "Well all right, let's give it one more shot."



So I got some duct tape and we just taped the ailerons down solid...



That way they would just be part of the wing to give me a little more lift.



So on the fourth run, I could feel the wing tips flip up...



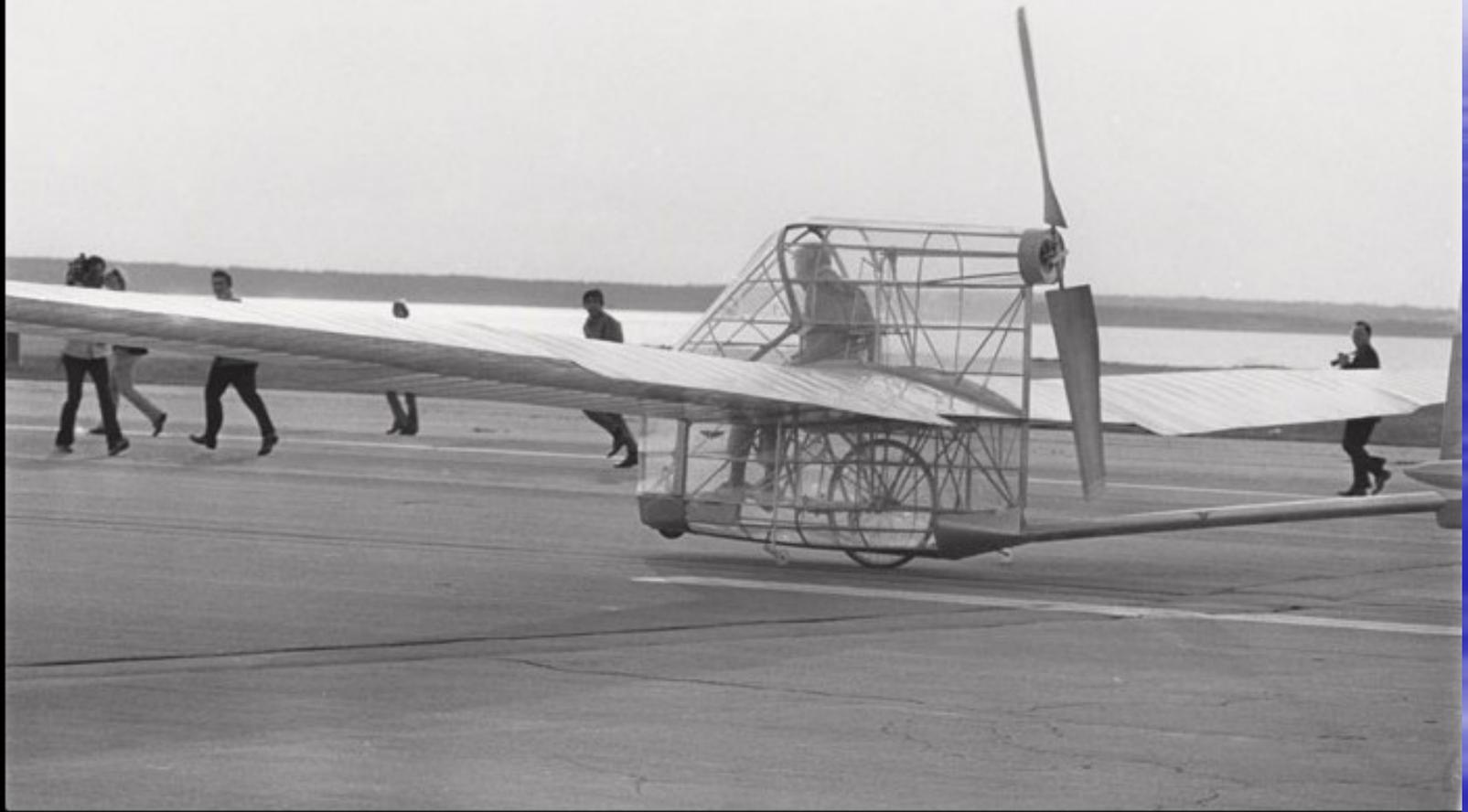
...as if they just caught some air.



Well, I brought the rest of the airplane with it and the whole thing began to lift



...and I felt myself turning on ice...that's the way it felt....



...though I was actually in the air...but I was caught by surprise when it lifted off...



...and I almost stopped pedaling because I was surprised.



...but anyway, I kept on. All I wanted to do in these first tests was to get off the ground. I just wanted see daylight under that wheel



And I was absolutely elated



And I guess everyone involved in it felt just as good about it.



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Journal file photo/ Thomas D. Stevens

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The man who could fly

11/18/2006 01:00 AM EST
By Bryan Rourke

Journal Staff Writer

Cut the engines. Better yet, discard them. Fly under your own power. For years Joseph Zinno had heard of Americans making the attempt. After a while, he got tired of what he was hearing. So he did something about it. On April 21, 1976, at Quonset Point, Zinno, a Rhode Island native now living in Washington State, became the first American to design, build and fly a human-powered plane.

“I didn’t think it was that big a problem,” Zinno says. “I just had to build the airplane.”

For that, Zinno’s being honored. This weekend he’ll be inducted into the Rhode Island Aviation Hall of Fame.

“Rhode Island has an incredible untapped resource of people who have contributed to aviation history,” says Frank Lennon, president of the hall. Zinno, who turns 83 this week, made his mark in aviation after he officially retired from the field. The former lieutenant colonel in the Air Force served as a transport pilot in three wars: World War II, Korea and Vietnam.

“I had 145 hours of combat time,” Zinno says. “Figure that.”

For those who can’t, Vietnam provides most of the answer.

“There weren’t any frontlines,” Zinno says. “Every time you went in and out of an airport there were people firing at you.”

After his retirement in 1969, Zinno and his late wife Fran moved back to Rhode Island. They settled in North Providence, where Zinno opened up an industrial design studio, and maintained an interest in aviation, subscribing to a magazine by the Experimental Aircraft Association.

“I’d read articles about people working on one of these man-powered aircraft,” Zinno says. “I’d wait for something to happen.”

Weeks and months passed.

“I kept wondering why they couldn’t get this damn airplane off the ground,” Zinno says.

In the late '60s and early '70s, the engineering departments of many universities challenged their students to design an aircraft that could fly using only the power of a human.

“I knew it could work,” Zinno says. “I was just waiting for someone to do it.”

Zinno’s friends suggested he build one.

“I said, ‘I don’t know. Let me make a few calculations here.’ I thought I’d build a component or two, just to get the feel of it.”

After completing the tail section, Zinno decided he might as well do the wings and cockpit, too. Friends let him use the basement of a building for construction. Another friend gave him use of a hangar at Quonset Point. After four years and nearly 6,000 hours, Zinno had a plane that was basically an encapsulated bicycle with wings.

“The work was no work for me,” he says. “I was enjoying it.”

Zinno attracted supporters and detractors.

“I didn’t like the ridicule, but some of it was funny,” he says. “It’s hard to invite serious attention when you’re working on something like this. I got letters from around the world from people who said they were working on projects and they said other people said they were crazy.”

Consider the old film footage of pilots pumping the pedals of winged bicycles that would invariably go off ramps and promptly plummet to the ground.

That, essentially, is what Zinno was doing, but without a ramp, and with modern technology. Zinno’s plane, the Olympian, made of balsa wood, aluminum and plastic, weighed 150 pounds, had a wingspan of 78 feet and a propeller powered by bicycle pedals.

Zinno calculated the plane would reach liftoff at 17 mph using a 130-pound bicyclist as the pilot, whom he brought to Quonset Point on the morning of April 21, 1976.

However, Zinno’s friends made different calculations, which they forcefully expressed to him: Get in the plane.

” Zinno “They said, ‘Who the hell is going to remember the designer?’. So the 52-year-old, 152-pound Zinno got in the plane, watched by dozens of supporters and reporters. His first three attempts failed to yield liftoff.

“I found out what the problem was,” Zinno says.

The extension flaps on his wings, which would help maneuver the plane in flight, Zinno says, were thwarting his takeoffs. They were catching wind, causing drag, and slowing down the plane. “I decided to tape those wings down,” Zinno says. “I used duct tape. You can do a lot with duct tape.”

Zinno's fourth attempt at human-powered flight made history — not spectacular history, but history nonetheless. “All I wanted to do was see daylight under that wheel,” Zinno says. “I just wanted a liftoff under my own power, and I was happy about that.”

Zinno said his plane was hanging in a hangar at Quonset when a gust of wind dislodged it. It fell and was destroyed, except for a portion of the tail.

The Smithsonian Museum included Zinno in its exhibit about experimental aircraft. While 16 people elsewhere in the world had previously achieved human-powered flight, Zinno was the first American to do so.

What was once considered impossible was no longer so. However, Zinno, who still has a pilot's license and flew earlier this year, says human-powered flight obviously isn't practical. “The best you're going to get out of a human is one-third horsepower for any sustained period,” Zinno says. “Are you going to get off the ground with one-third horsepower? Try it.”

Still, in America, Zinno proved a point. Humans can fly.

“I felt better about the people who would say, ‘there's Joe the kook’,” Zinno says.

“I had credibility. You never want to say it can't be done. You've got to try.”