Several years ago an American rotor head by the name of Russ MacFarlane living in Newcastle Australia decided to build a Mazda rotary powered world record attempt time to climb aircraft. Russ was a long time subscriber to the Rotary Engine News Letter.



A used flying Harmon Rocket home built aircraft was purchased and the Lycoming engine and instruments were removed and sold. The aircraft is very similar to a Van's RV4 with longer landing gear and shorter wings..

Russ choose Dan Gray from Santa Paula California to help complete the installation and fly the record attempt. Dan is a 787 captain for UAL.

Dan Grey, owner of Aviation FX in Santa Paula California was chosen to finish the project and get it flying. I was the project engineer.



The Wankel rotary has a much better power to weight ratio and power to size ratio than any automotive piston engine. It is also far more robust and will with stand ungodly amounts of turbo boost with out structural failure. Up to 100 inches of Mercury manifold pressure is possible. That translates to almost 1000 HP for an all aluminum turbo two rotor weighing less than 200 pounds. That is about four HP per pound of engine weight. Most aircraft engines are about one HP per pound of weight or worse.

Any piston engine operating at aircraft power levels has a limited life. That is the reason for a TBO. The moving parts are magnafluxed for cracks at TBO. The cracks are caused by reversing stress on the crankshaft, connecting rods, pistons and valve parts. Bend metal back and fourth long enough and it will crack or fail. Nobody has ever cracked an eccentric shaft let alone broken one. The stresses are only in one direction.

The rotary has no reversing stress in the 3 moving parts. They are eccentric shaft and two rotors. It is similar to an electric motor and there are many 100 year old electric motors still working.

These engines are extremely robust and durable. Nobody has ever cracked or broken an eccentric shaft regardless of the amount of power they were able to extract. Cracked crankshaft are a very common problem with aircraft piston engines and that is the main reason they have a max TBO of 2000 hours.



There is a certified version of the Wankel used in motor gliders built by Austro engines that have no TBO. Indefinite life. Over 500 have been sold.

Automotive piston engines are not designed for aircraft power levels and should not be used. The average power required for a car engine is 30 to 40 HP! In other words car piston engines are low duty cycle engines. Aircraft engines are high duty cycle. The Wankel rotary is an inadvertent high duty cycle exception for a car engine due to the unique mechanical geometry.

The Mazda rotary car engine has a reputation for using a more gas around town. That is true but the difference at aircraft power levels is only 3% or 5%. The RX8 is very powerful and quiet for its size and it is tempting to use the power around town. If you use the power it will burn the gas. In an aircraft this pails into insignificance as the big savings come from burning low cost car gas. Car gas is half the cost of aviation fuel 100LL in some states and up to $1 cheaper than diesel fuel in some states.

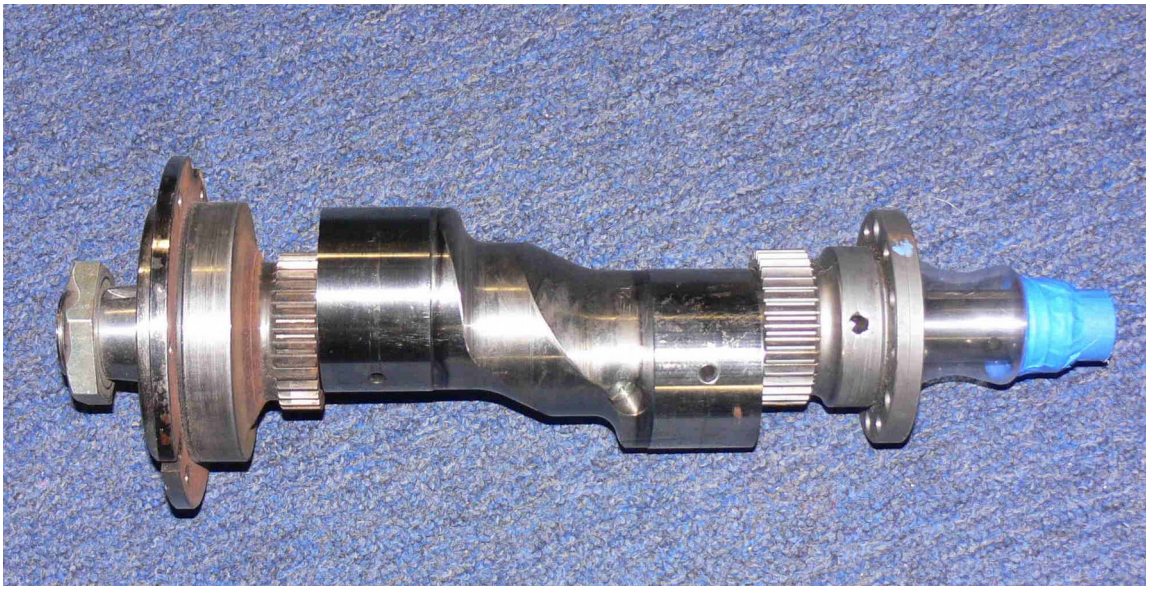
The other delicate part in an aircraft engine is the exhaust valve. The rotary has no valves.

The lead in 100LL is required by most aircraft engines to lubricate the exhaust valves. The rotor exhaust ported Wankel has no exhaust valves and therefore no need of lead.
The exhaust valves are a serious problem with piston engine aircraft engines. The FAA requires you to measure the leakage of your exhaust valve (and other things) every year. If you have a leaking exhaust valve you must repair it. Usually the cost is around $1000. I average about 500 hours per exhaust valve on my C182 Continental O-470.

The latest silicon nitrite apex seals have a projected life of an extraordinary 20,000 hours. Not 2000 hours but 20,000 hours.

For these reasons and others the Wankel rotary will eventually replace all piston engine aircraft engines and some turbo prop engines.

Here is a picture of the very robust eccentric shaft on a Mazda Wankel rotary.

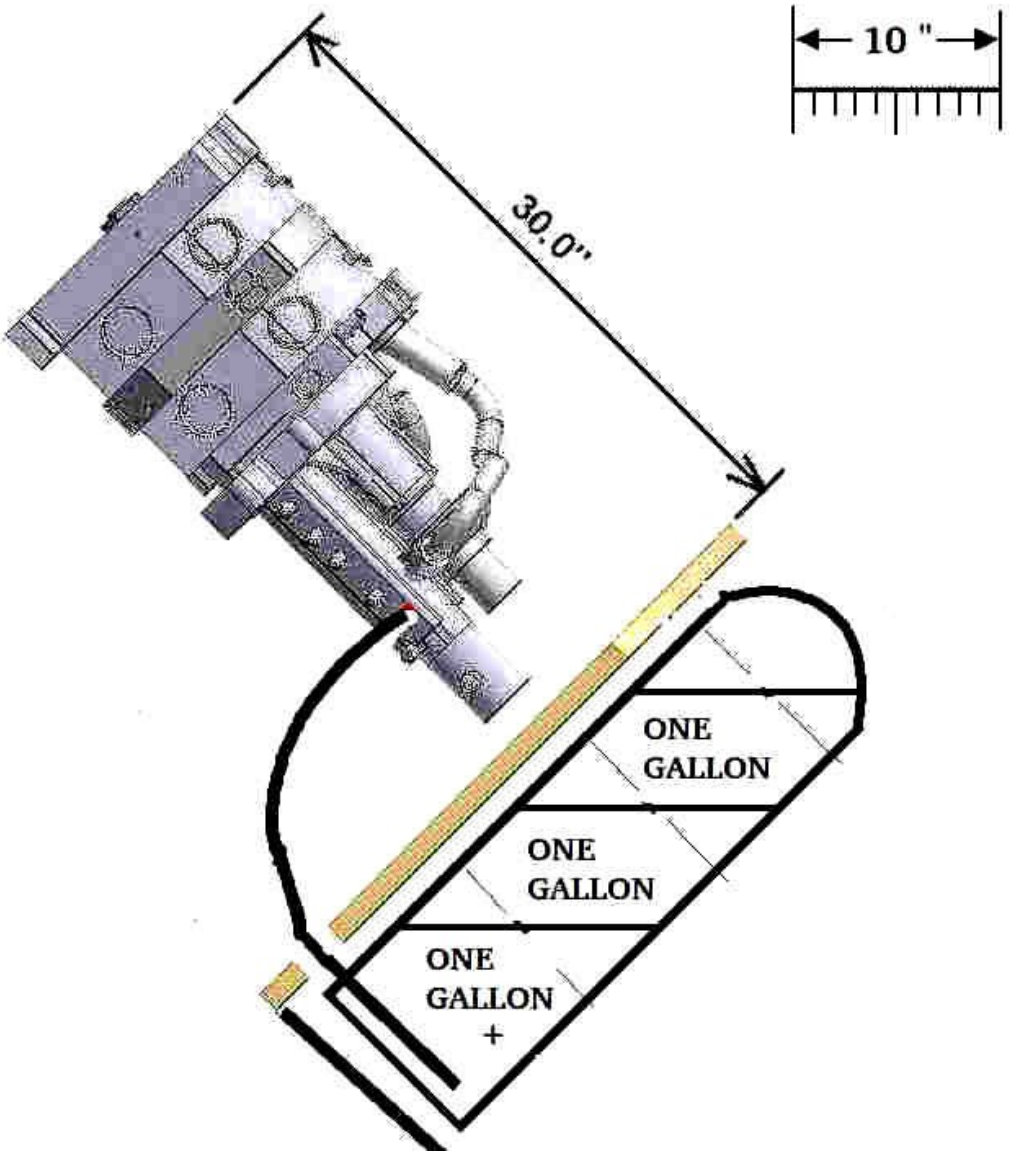


Russ contacted Jim Mederer owner of Racing Beat. Jim holds the stock car body land speed record at Bonneville at 238 MPH in a Mazda RX7.

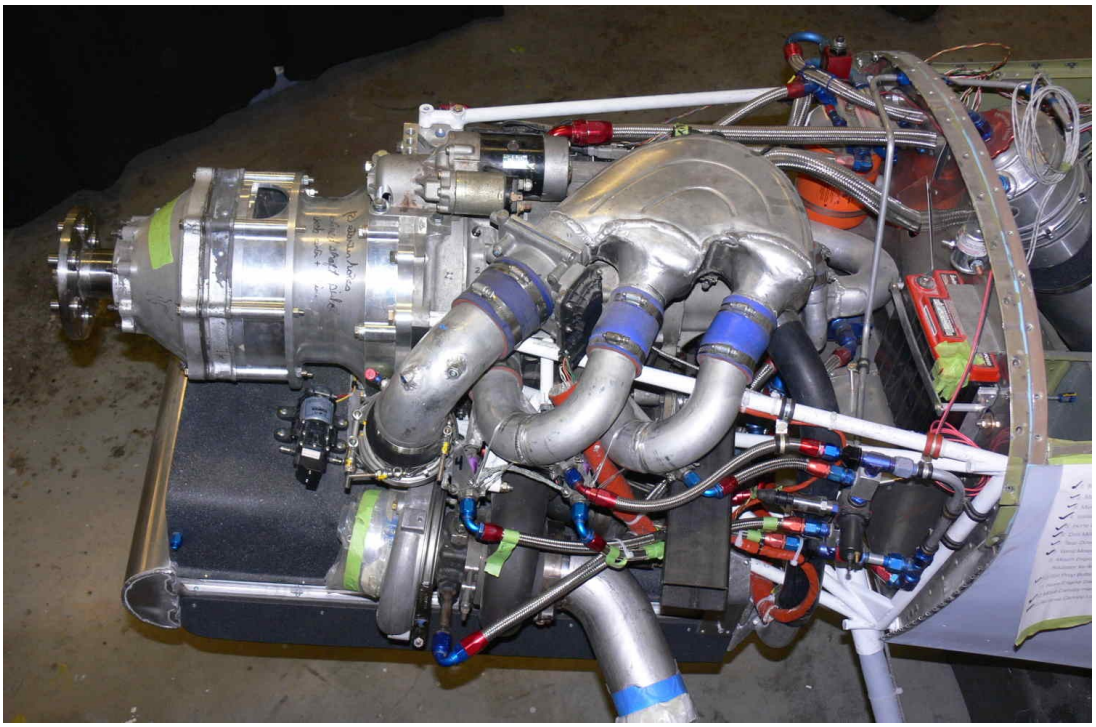
Russ was counting on the high power to weight ratio of the Wankel and it's exceptionable robust nature.

Jim was able to extract 650 HP running on methanol from a two rotor. Jim also developed aluminum end housings that dropped the engine weight from about 300 pounds to less than 200 pounds less the gear box and including a huge turbo.

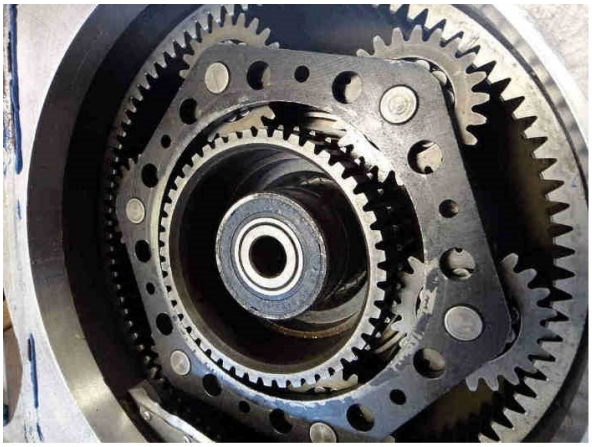
Lots of other engine changes were made. A dry sump oil system was needed so the oil pan was done away with and replaced with AN pluming that extracted oil directly from the center and end housings and sent it to the oil reservoir.



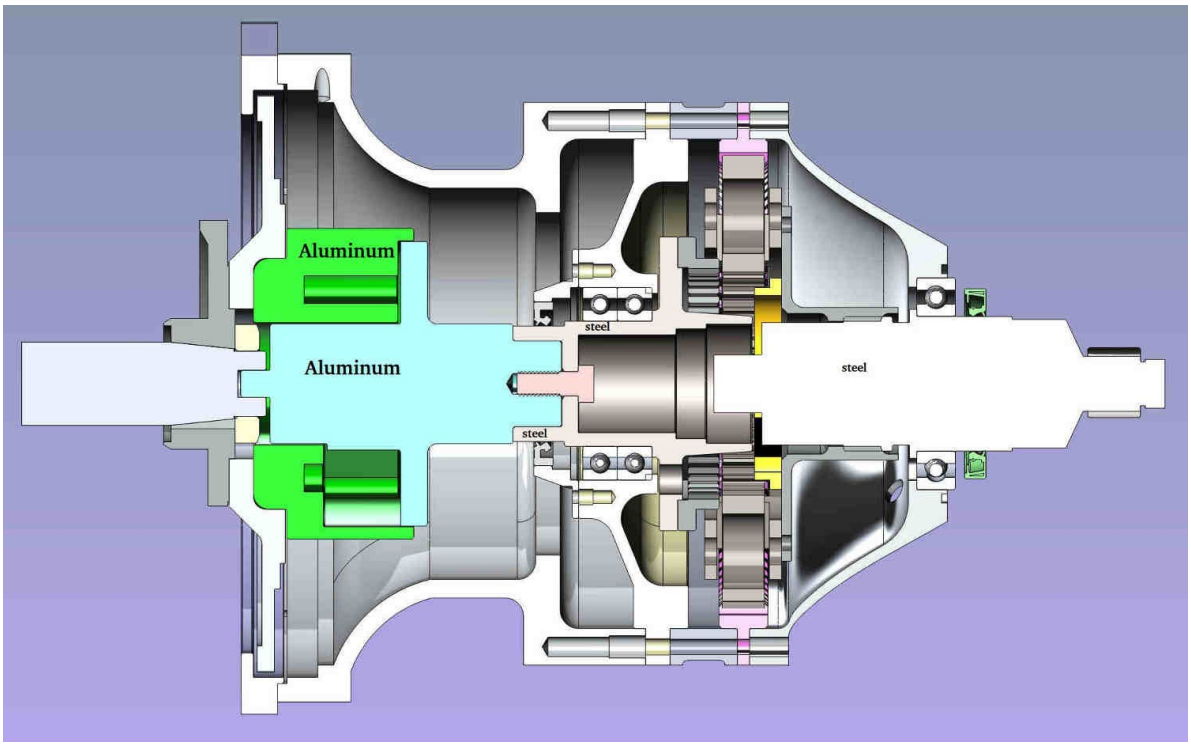
A new larger capacity water pump was used. An intake p-port was chosen which is very streamlined on the inside with the fuel air mixture entering the engine straight in directly. No intake valve to get in the way. This results in a volumetric efficiency of (believe or not) 120%. That means the engines gets 20% more air than the displacement. More air, more HP. An after market Motec EFI system was chosen to supply fuel to the engine. The cast iron rotors are slightly modified stock rotors and a stock eccentric shaft.



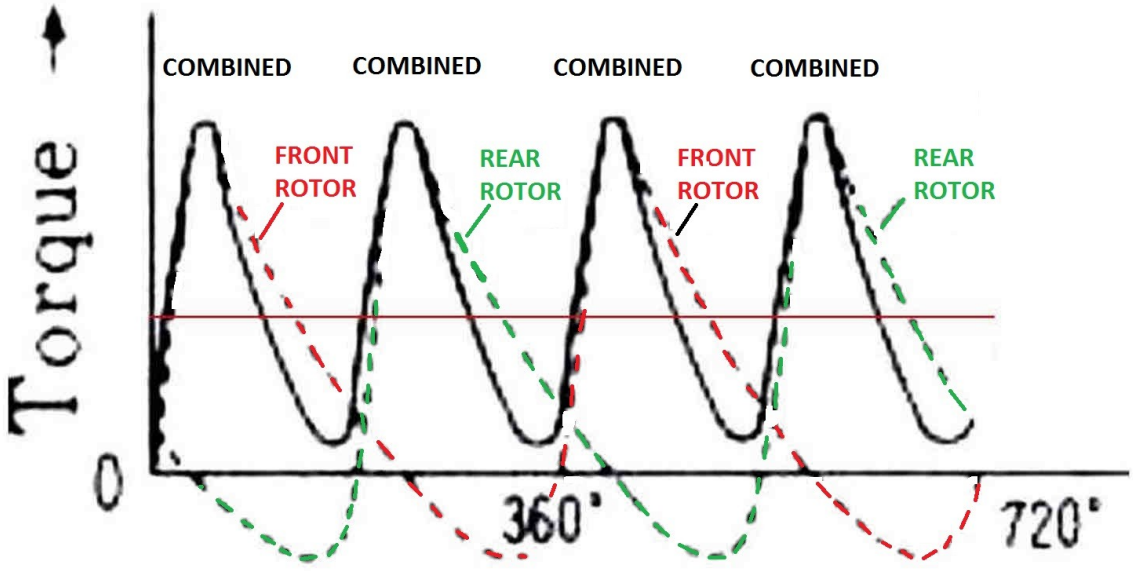
A Bell 47 helicopter final drive was used as a three to one gear box. It weighs about 35 pounds. An extension was machined to accommodate a gear box cooling system. This turned out to be unnecessary so it was gutted to save weight. The extension was left in place giving more room for the cooling system.







All intermittent internal combustion engines have torque pulses. The torque pulses on a two rotor rotary are less severe than a four cylinder piston engine. Never the less it is a good idea to use a rubber coupling between the engine and the gear box. Diesel engines are the worst and Diamond aircraft are having a lot of trouble with this. They have no rubber coupling. The diesel torque pulse is severe.



NOTE : FRONT AND REAR ROTORS ARE 180 DEGREES OUT OF PHASE TWO PULSES PER ENGINE REV.

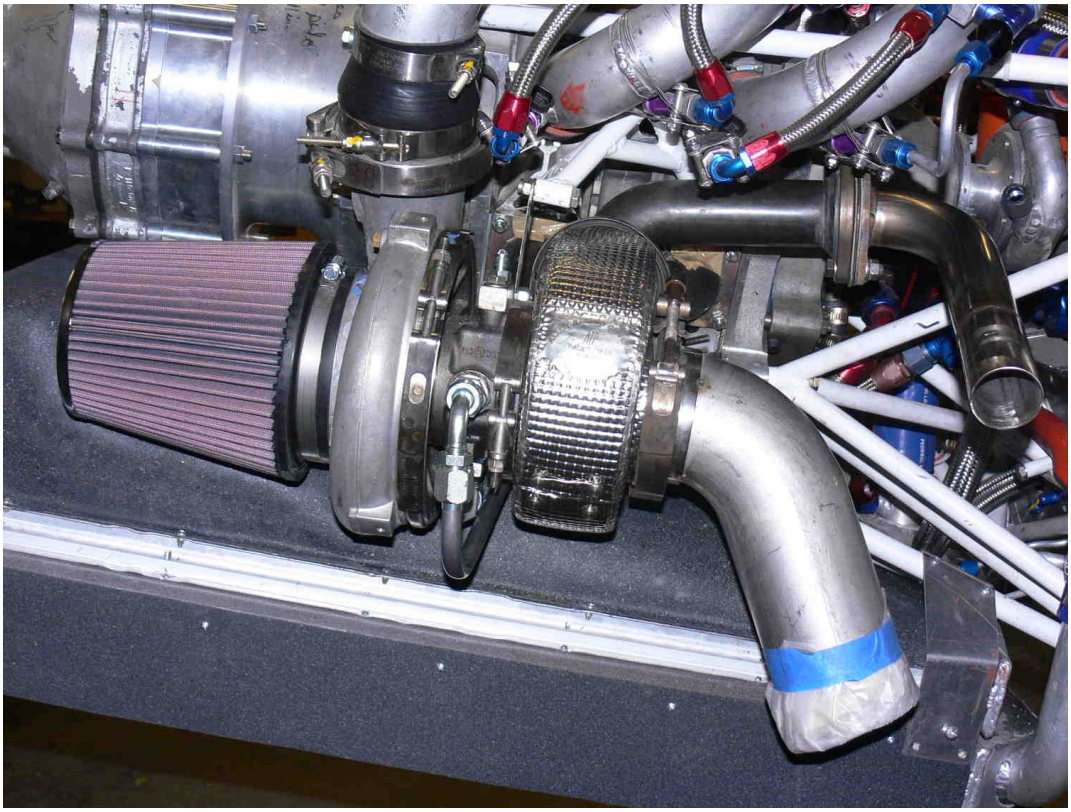
Lycoming does not do that on their geared versions and that limits the TBO to well under 2000 hours. In case you were wondering all radial aircraft engines used in WW II had planetary geared engines.

Here are some pictures of the rubber coupling I designed to mitigate the shock load on the gears..





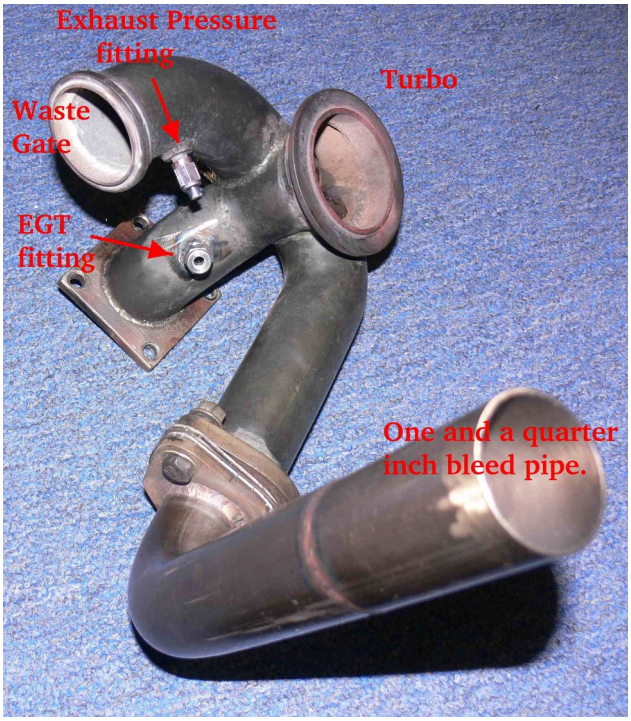
Unfortunately when we received the engine from Racing Beat it had a damaged turbo charger and a leaking waste gate. We had to buy a new GT40 turbo for $2500.



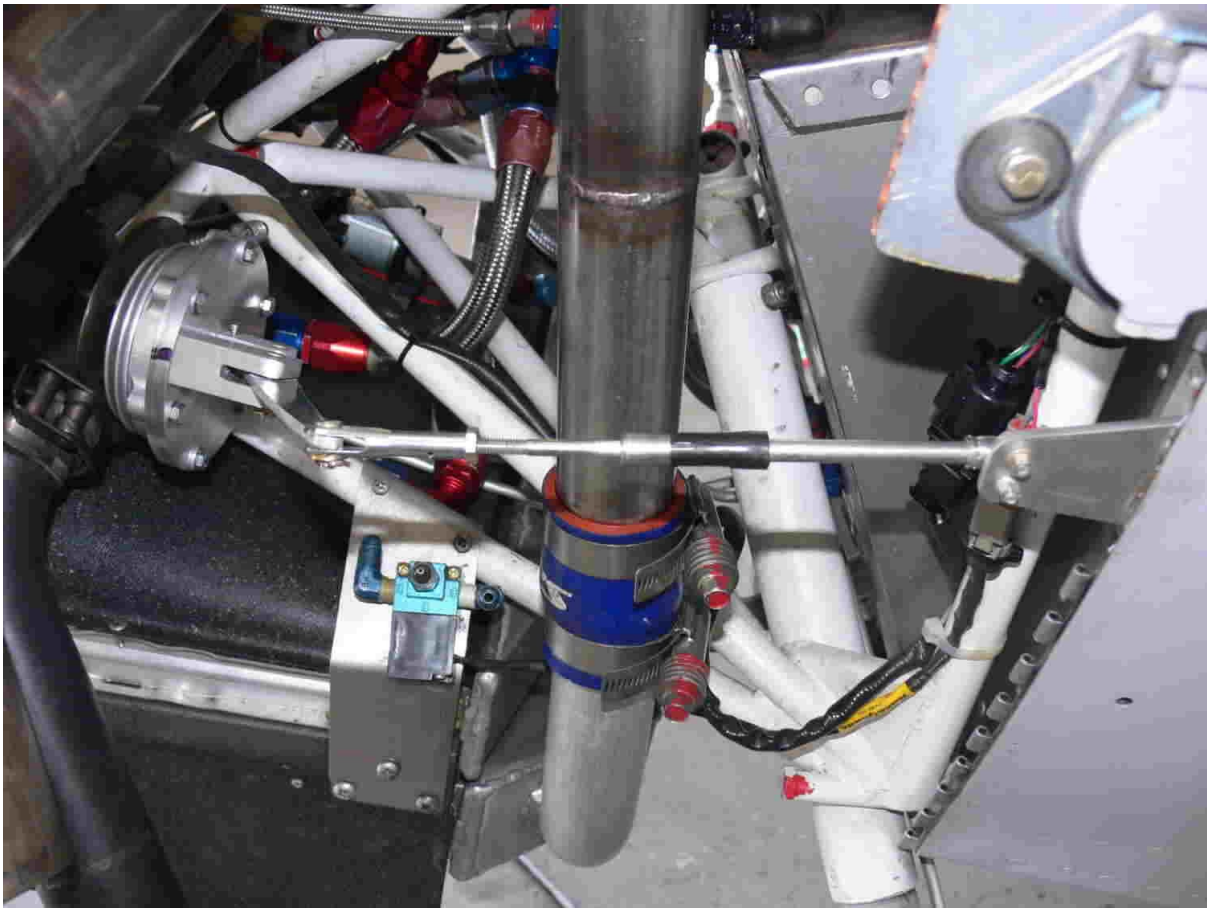


There is a turbo bypass pipe with a 1.25 inch diameter hole.
This indicate the extraordinary waste energy in the exhaust common to all internal combustion engines.. If we had built a turbo compound version to recover some of this waste energy we would have had 900 HP with the same fuel burn. The BSFC would be well below .40.

The excess energy was so much we installed a exhaust by pass pipe with a 1.25 inch hole in the restrictor plate. This is wide open at all times.



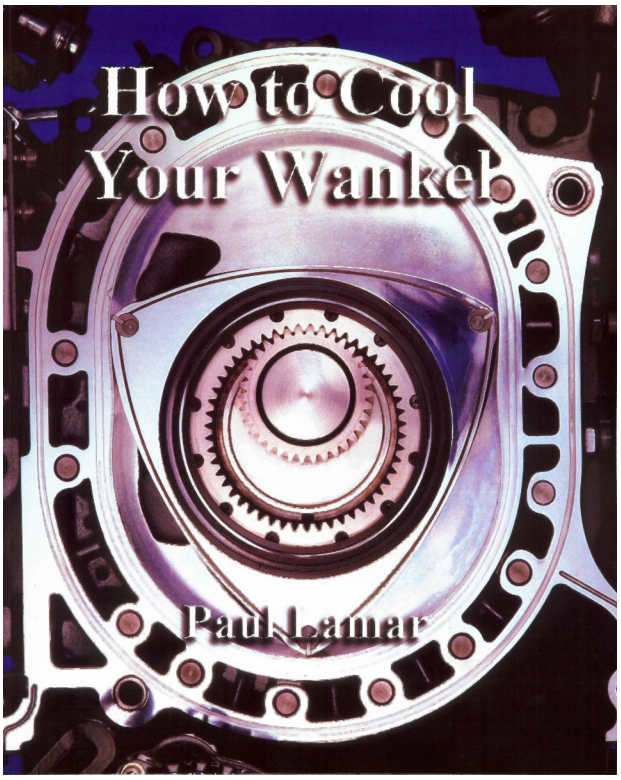
I converted the waste gate to manual control by the pilot. This turned out to be unnecessary as well. The pilot can control the power with throttle alone. The intake manifold blow off valve limits the boost.



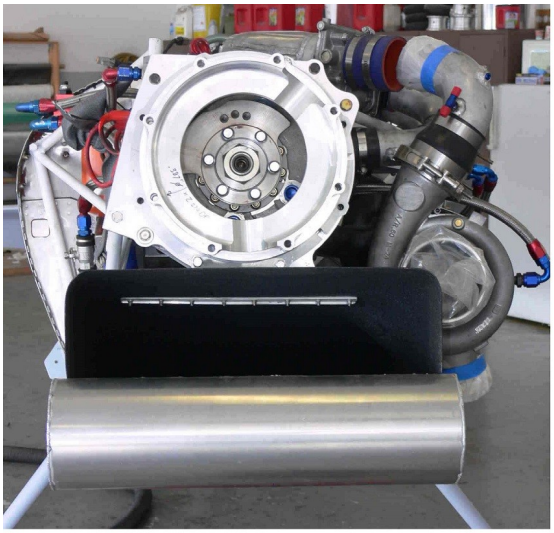
The pilot was moved to the back seat and the 20 gallon methanol fuel, 10 gallon water and 4 gallon oil tanks were installed behind the stock firewall. The water was unnecessary as the methanol cools the charge adequately . It is impossible to over heat 4 gallons of Mobile One oil in 2 minutes of max power running so no oil cooler was required. We did install one and tested it. It worked.

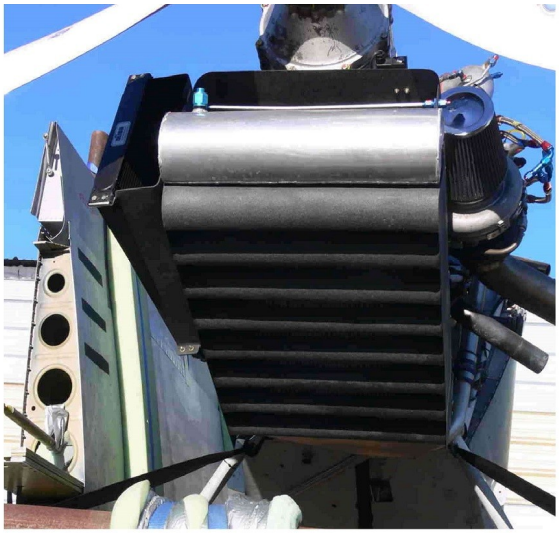


I wrote a book called How to Cool Your Wankel so I designed the liquid cooling system.



It was a real challenge so I choose two large area thin core pick up truck radiators and TIG welded them back to back in what is known as a cross counter flow configuration. It cools extremely well. The water temperature never gets over 150 F. A fiber glass cooling diffuser and curved louvers on the bottom of the radiators were made by Aviation FX.





A new carbon fiber instrument panel with altimeter, air speed and EFIS screen was made and installed.



We are still fine tuning the Motec EFI which has been a real challenge. A manifold blow off valve that can be adjusted up to 85 inches of mercury and that was a huge simplification. The manual waste gate is not really needed as the blow off valve does enough of the boost control on an aircraft installation. Nothing the pilot can do with the throttle will damage the engine.

The propeller driven absolute time to climb records is 120 seconds from a dead stop on the runway to 3000 meters. It is held by a Sport Class Reno racer with Turbo Lycoming. This is not a weight class record. This is an absolute record. The empty weight of this aircraft is only 1000 pounds.

The power to weight ratio of the record holding Sport Class Reno Racer engine was approximately 2 pounds per HP. The power to weight ratio of this aircraft is only 1.8 pound per HP. That all has to do with the extraordinarily exceptional power to weight ratio of the Wankel engine. 2.2 HP per pound of engine weight at the reduced level of 550 HP..

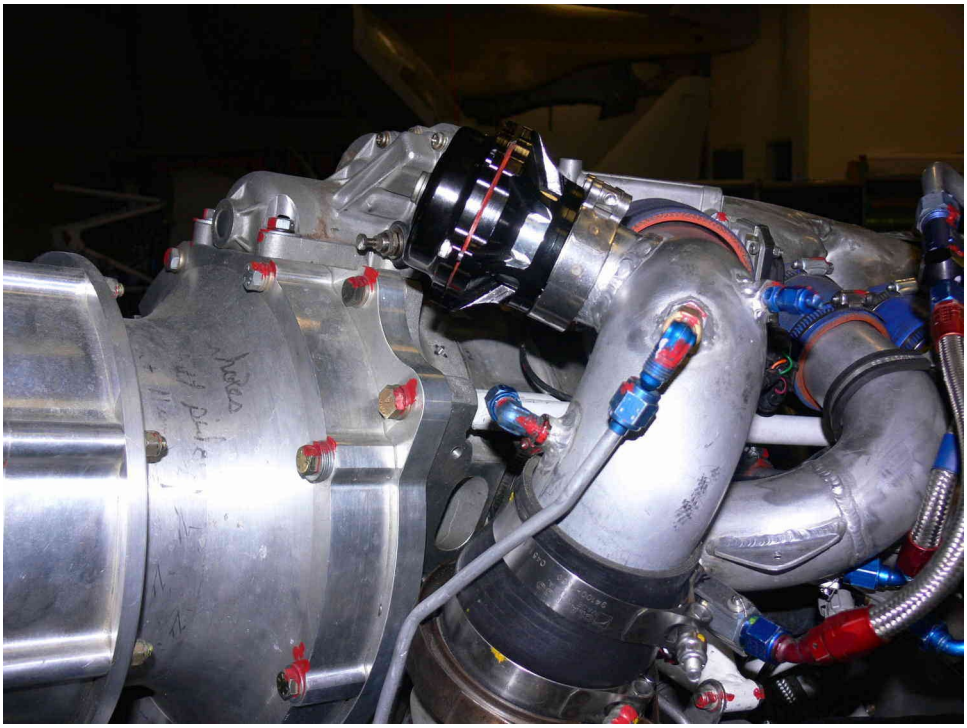


Historically this engine development is on a par with the jet engine and the turbo prop engine on a engine power to weight basis. Pratt and Whitney Canada, manufacturer of the PT6 turbo prop engine, has filed well over a 100 Wankel patents in the past few years so they know the Wankel aircraft engine is inevitable. Even Rolls Royce is considering it for the core of a ducted fan jet engine due to a superior compression ratio.

Not only will it best a turbo prop on power to weight ratio but it will burn three quarters of the fuel for a given horsepower. The cost of the engine would be at least half of any turbo prop engine. In addition it would have higher altitude performance up to 50,000 feet.

We estimate the Harmon Rocket aircraft will climb vertically at 175 MPH based on the over all aircraft exceptional power to weight ratio. This should easily break the 2 minute record. A 84 inch diameter 3 blade Cato prop was chosen. Unfortunately this prop did not have enough blade area as this prop is only good for about 500 to 525 HP. At 2600 prop RPM 8,000 engine RPM the 84 inch prop tips are transonic. No additional thrust is available regardless of the additional HP applied. With a better prop and higher boost and 650 HP straight up at 175 MPH should be possible. A decision was made to set the record with the prop we had.

Consequently we had to set the blow off valve to 73 inches of HG while we had run the engine as high as 85 inches of HG at 8000 RPM. The blow off valve will be all that is needed to control a Wankel rotary engine as it is not possible to over boost it and damage it.





Dan test flew the aircraft for ten minutes at California City in the desert and here in Santa Paula California. We have run the engine for several hours on the ground with many runs at full power for more than 5 minutes at a time. Coincidentally this is part of the FAA certification procedure required for aircraft engines. Dan has flown the aircraft to 10,000 feet at least half a dozen times and broken the record each time. The best flight we have had so far is one minute forty seven seconds. The record is just under 2 minutes. It starts right up like a car engine.

The success of this project proves beyond a shadow of doubt the Wankel rotary engine will be the aircraft engine of the future.

We hope to attempt the official time to climb record soon.

Paul Lamar