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# The AMA History Project Presents: Biography of VERNON KREHBIEL

Born November 3, 1918 Started modeling in 1927  
AMA #17087



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Transcribed & Edited by SS (12/2002), Updated by JS (10/2008), Reformatted by JS (10/2009)

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## Career:

- 1937: Formed VK Model Aircraft Company; the first kit produced was the Challenger, a Free Flight model
- 1939: Placed second at the Nationals
- 1960: Put out the Radio Control Mach I kit; next produced the Compact, a Radio Control version of the Challenger and then a Cherokee
- Gave lectures at various trade shows and conferences
- Ran an active hobby shop in addition to producing kits; eventually opened a hobby shop in Buffalo for a year
- Worked as a final inspector in the Curtiss factory before serving as a crew chief in the Air Force
- Flew in some of the Army's contests near the end of World War II
- A charter member of the Flying Bisons model airplane club
- Chief model builder and head test pilot for his company

## Honors:

- 1998: Model Aviation Hall of Fame
- 1999: Society of Antique Modelers Hall of Fame
- Received the Cole Palen Achievement Award for his Rhinebeck work

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*The following information on Vernon Krehbiel ran in the January 1999 issue of Model Aviation magazine after he was elected into the Model Aviation Hall of Fame in 1998.*

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Vernon Krehbiel, Williamsville, New York, can be recognized through the initials "VK" of the famous VK Model Aircraft Company. A 1927 Scripps Howard newspaper spurred on his initial interest in models. The column, entitled "How to Build and Fly Model Airplanes," led to Vern producing scale models of the Spad, Nieuport, and Polish fighter.

In 1929, the advent of *Model Airplane News* magazine provided a new source of information. Coupled with this was the creation of a long relationship with Howard McEntee. Vern began to produce rubber-powered flying models sealed up from the three views found in *Model Airplane News*.

Vern's first gas job was a *Flying Quaker* powered by a GHQ engine, which predictably didn't run! It was replaced by a Baby Cyclone Model B. The engine remained in his possession until his recent death.

A true believer in the theories of Charles H. Grant, Vern incorporated many of his ideas in the models that he designed. His success in many events testifies to his skills.

After a stint in the Air Force, he returned to the family business. In 1947, he married Shirley Freiheit, who proved to be the motivational inspiration in the VK Model Aircraft Company. While still flying Control Line and Free Flight he was bitten by the Radio Control bug. By 1960, he and Shirley decided to create the VK line of models. The company soon burst the seams of the shop behind their home and moved to Akron, New York, and surroundings that are more spacious. Through Shirley's insistence, the company concentrated on classic scale designed "since they would never go out of date." They are still produced by Lew Proctor models today. Vern received the Cole Palen Achievement Award for his Rhinebeck work and spent many years on the lecture circuit at events such as Toledo and DCRC conferences.

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*The following article on Vernon Krebiel ran in the September/October 1965 issue of American Modeler magazine.*

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### **Versatile Vern Designs His Own Kit Models** Behind the Scenes with the VK Model Aircraft Company

Like so many youngsters of his time, Vern Krebiel was led into airplane modeling by that Pied Piper of the Skies, Charles Lindbergh. Vern started making non-flying planes soon after Lindy's historic trans-ocean flight and we'll bet a Spirit of Saint Louis was among them! Shortly thereafter, the Scripps-Howard newspapers started a modeling feature and Vern had his first try at flying models. Baby Rise-off-Ground (ROG) kits for 50-cents then hit the market and these were sampled, too. A loner out in the country, Vern could not interest any of his buddies in modeling. In 1929, when he was 11, he started building rubber scale planes, among them a series designed by American Modeler magazine's present Radio Control editor.

Vern was to start gas modeling with a loser; his first engine, like many others of its breed, refused to run. He worked a full year to save enough to purchase a Model B Baby Cyclone. Another year of saving bought him a Brown Junior.

As far as Vern knows, Carlton Harris flew the first gassie in the Buffalo area around 1934 and within a year of that milestone a club had been started and Vern finally had company. He was quite active in Free Flight competition and soon began hearing tales of a legendary modeler from the Finger Lakes area of New York who flew a monstrous plane powered by a Herkimer Twin, reputed to have knocked over a tree! Vern finally met this modeler at a Canandaigua meet – Harold deBolt.

VK Model Aircraft Company was formed in 1937 in Williamsville. This was really out in the country in those days, but is a suburb of Buffalo now. The first kit was called Challenger; a photo Vern showed us depicted the usual high wing cabin plane of the era, wheels far forward to protect the precious prop. It was a 68-inch wingspan job that weighed some three pounds. Flown at first with a Clark Y wing, this was later changed to Grant X-8 for better performance. The design did well locally and many were sold in the Buffalo area. There was also a more advanced plane called the Master; while it had elliptical wings and was a good performer, it wasn't overly popular as there were warping problems.

Krehbiel (pronounced Cray-beel) ran the company alone. Wood was bought from Megow cut to size. Dope came from Karl Ort who was with Berryloid at that time (and was a rather legendary character in the airplane surplus business after World War I). Cement came in 10-gallon cans; Vern bottled it and sold this to local hobby dealers. He ran an active supply shop for neighboring modelers in addition to producing kits.

By 1939, Vern had graduated to a Comet Zipper and at the Nationals (Nats) that year he won a coveted second place. He lost the plane doing it, for as he points out, you practically *had* to lose a plane to take a high place. While flight length had earlier been “limited” by an allotment of 1/8-ounce of gas per pound of model weight (later cut to 1/16<sup>th</sup> and then 1/32<sup>nd</sup>), even the newly-inaugurated 20-second engine run couldn’t save his plane.

Having worked for some time in the family gravel business, Vern opened a full-fledged hobby shop in Buffalo. About this time U-Control came along; he had little success in selling this to local Free Flight modelers, so he scheduled a big demonstration of the new technique.

Arriving at the snow-covered field, Vern found a goodly crowd awaiting him. But almost immediately after launch, his underpowered plane (a Walker Fireball with O&R .19) was swept up over his head by the wind. Vern says he dropped the handle and ran for his life, thereby probably setting back U-Control flying in the Buffalo area by at least three or four years!



The shop was sold after a year and Vern went to work in the Curtiss factory as a final inspector. His next move was into the service and he eventually settled at an Air Force base in Homestead, Florida, where he served as crew chief on C-46s. After three years of this, a hurricane flattened the area, and since the war was over, Vern went back to Buffalo and the gravel business. He did little modeling during the war, but often visited a hobby shop in Miami, which did a good business in the Stanzel line. Toward the end of World War II, Vern bought a G-Shark and flew in some of the Army contests.

VK Model Aircraft was pretty dormant until 1950 when Vern was bitten by the Radio Control bug, but he did sell model supplies locally. He built about two U-Control planes a year and can recall flying during the winter in the Buffalo Armory.

With the coming of Radio Control, the Krehbiel modeling went into high gear. His first attempt was an original design with Cub .09 power and Berkeley Aerotrol equipment. Steered by a SN Bonner escapement, his first flight in a snowstorm was completely successful, but it wasn’t the

first for the area. DeBolt had acquired a Rudderbug and had it in the air some two weeks before Vern made his snowy debut.

After many flights, a new plane with Cub .15 power, compound escapement and rudder and elevator control was launched. Then he had a try at rudder props; his transmitter was from Air Trails magazine plans and the receiver was a two-gas-tube Lorenz. Pulser construction was beyond him, so he had friend in Cornell Labs built it, also from Air Trails articles. This equipment flew an English design, the Sky Scooter, .09 McCoy powered. Control was a bit spongy, but there were many good flights. Then along came CD 3-reed equipment and Vern graduated to multi, first flown in a LW Cruiser.

Radio Control goods were scarce in the area and VKMA was expanded as a local source of supply about 1950. Getting deeper into Radio Control, Vern became intrigued with kitting a plane and, after several years of testing and modifying, finally put out the Mach I kit in late 1960. Finding his activity in the gravel business interfered with VKMA, Vern went into the latter full time and has been at it ever since. He has invaluable help from his wife Shirley who kept the books (and still does), handled ad paste-ups and many other chores. Shirley is the magician who gets that huge bundle of balsa into the “itty bitty box”; modelers who have tried to repack the Mach I and other VKMA kits will appreciate her genius! Vern’s brother-in-law Jim Freiheit worked part-time during this period.

Mach I was designed to carry the then-popular Bramco 8, a rather large package. The plane had a deep fuselage for this reason, but by the time the kit came out, the much more compact 8s and 10s were available. Vern was often kidded on his “pregnant” design!

The Compact came next, then the Challenger. The latter was marketed almost an exact 25 years from the time the earlier Free Flight Challenger kit came out and was given the same name to celebrate the occasion.

Active in local model clubs from their inception, Vern was a charter member of the Flying Bisons, which was formed as a Free Flight group in 1938. This was mostly a U-Control club after World War II and now is almost 100% Radio Control. Recently unearthed papers show that of the original forming group only three modelers are still active – Krehbiel, DeBolt and Jim Moynihan (the latter is perennial headman for the Bisons Mid-Winter Radio Control Conferences). There is a new club in the area – the Flying Aces. It includes many single-channel flyers (the Bisons are mostly multi) but the group is going multi and is very partial to Challengers.

The latest kit is Cherokee, seen in early stages at the 1964 Bison Conference and in final form at the 1965 affair. It has been flown both on reeds and F&M props. Like all VK designs to date, it is intended essentially for the sports or “Sunday” flyer. However, Vern let Washington hotshot Joe Solko fly it at the 1964 Indiantown Gap get-together; after a couple of minutes of familiarization with the new plane and F&M props (Joe had been strictly a reed flyer) the plane was doing maneuvers Vern still hasn’t been able to duplicate! Having seen an expert fly it, Vern feels the Cherokee might be a good competition plane at that.

The Challenger and Cherokee are in production now. Jim Freiheit is considered shop foreman, since it has been necessary to bring in after school and weekend help; he has worked full-time for VKMA for over two years.

Several designs have been tried out and dropped due to doubtful market. There was a competition version of the Challenger, for example, with practically no dihedral, low decalage, and lots of power. There was also a pepped-up Compact. Neither was kitted; they weren't planes the average sports flyer – best VKMA market – could handle. There was also a neat biplane quite like the Hawk Pshaw on a 1961 American Modeler magazine cover; a modeler poll showed most modelers thought that making two wings was too much work!

Vern is a scale lover (Cessna influence shows in his Challenger and the new Cherokee bears considerable resemblance to Mr. Piper's little beauty) and would love to kit a real scale job; he longingly considers World War I or between-wars biplanes. But the next VKMA kit will probably be a semi-scale Whitman Tailwind. Test models have been flying well on 550-square-inches, but the kit version will likely go up to 600 squares, which is more useful for various multi systems.

Krehbiel does all the basic design and makes preliminary drawings. Needless to say, he is chief model builder of VKMA and also head test pilot. Howie Thomas of Buffalo does the final planes.

What's in the future? Concern is literally for the bulging walls and ceilings of the shop where balsa is cut and has expanded into the Krehbiel garage as well as spilled over into the basement rumpus room. It appears that continued success will make a new building mandatory. Vern owns land out in the country; part of it is his private flying field. It is a logical site for the whole operation, including expanded retail parts and Radio Control equipment shop. Nearness to the flying site would mean lots less time lost for Vern when he goes to help his many local customers check out and test fly new planes. Maybe VK Model Aircraft Company will be back out in the country again!

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