



# The AMA History Project Presents: Biography of DANIEL J. PRUSS



Written by DF (09/2010); Reformatted by JS (09/2010)

*The following was written by Dan Fritz in September of 2010.*

## DANIEL J. PRUSS

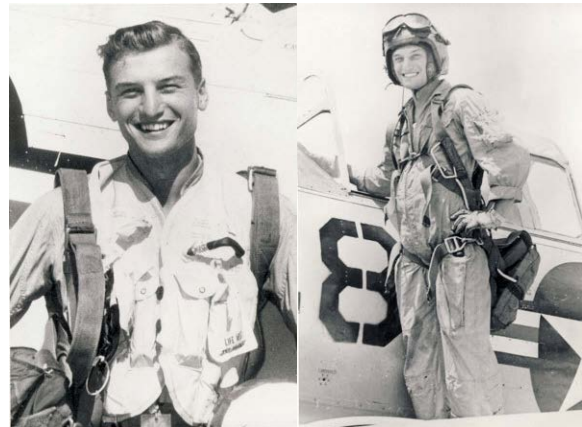
(January 24, 1932 – June 28, 1986)

S.O.A.R. Biography by Dan Fritz



Author's note: Nearly a quarter century has lapsed since Dan Pruss' death, and an entire generation of radio controlled sailplane enthusiasts has never known him. This biography would not have been possible without assistance from those who did. The responses to my inquiries for information were remarkable and spanned the country. The outpouring of respect, admiration, and genuine warmth those who knew Dan still hold says far more about the man than anything I could add. I would like to thank everyone who assisted with this biography. I would like to especially thank the children of Daniel and Patricia Pruss, Jack Hiner, Stephen Moskal, Neil Liptak, Ray Hayes, Gordon Pearson, Tom Kallevang, and Jackie Shalberg of the National Model Aviation Museum.

Daniel J. Pruss was born on January 24, 1932 in Joliet, Illinois. He developed a love of aviation early and was actively involved in model aviation by the time he was a teenager. His early modeling included free flight and control line. In 1954, he entered the U.S. Navy where he received flight instruction and became a pilot. He eventually became a naval flight instructor. Dan served on active duty until 1957 and continued to serve in the Reserves until the mid 1980s. He retired with the rank of Commander. Following his active duty service Dan found employment with North Central Airlines. He remained with North Central as a commercial airline pilot until it was renamed Republic Airlines following a merger with Southern Airways in 1979. During that time, he flew four of the five aircraft types ever operated by North Central: the Douglas DC-3, Convair CV-340, Convair CV-580, and



*Two photos from early in Dan's Navy career showing him in flight gear on and in front of an SNJ.*



*Dan in his airline pilot's uniform*

Douglas *DC-9*. Dan continued to fly the *DC-9* with Republic after the merger. Republic was ultimately purchased by Northwest Orient in 1986 and it is now part of Delta Airlines. In July 1953, Dan married Patricia and together they had five children, all of whom were raised in Plainfield, Illinois.

Jack Hiner relates he moved to the Joliet area in 1959 and joined the Joliet Electronic Modeling Society (J.E.M.S.). Dan was already a member. Jack recalls being welcomed into that club by Dan and how Dan worked with him to improve his flying skills. A warm welcome and enthusiastic mentoring were common memories among those who knew Dan. He often invited modelers to his home to discuss, build, and set up their models followed by flight instruction.

His friendship with Jack in the early 1960s provided the foundation that would eventually result in the founding of the Silent Order of Aeromodeling by Radio (S.O.A.R.). Like many early RC modelers, Dan and Jack were frustrated by the limitations of the radio equipment at that time, which was based on vacuum tubes (“reeds”) and clockwork escapements, and not suited for higher performance models. This pushed them toward RC soaring. Little was known about that side of the hobby. Early attempts at launching had the towline in the model’s nose as with full-sized sailplanes. Dan’s son, also named Dan, recalls marathon tows where he would run great distances pulling a model only to hand the towline to Jack who would continue to tow it until they were both exhausted. Eventually, they discovered the advantages of placing the tow hook near the center of gravity, but that was pioneering stuff at the time. Dan quickly developed a love for RC soaring that would last the rest of his life.

During the mid-1960s, two developments allowed for the widespread development of RC soaring: The electric winch for launching and solid state, proportional radio gear. Dan was an early adopter of both. As RC soaring began to grow, Dan was a tireless organizer, motivator, and promoter. By all accounts, his enthusiasm was infectious. One of the keys to his success was that he was supportive, accommodating, and never critical. Steve Moskal summed up what many people intimated by writing “I always remember he never ever criticized me or anyone – always calmly making suggestions for improvement.” A modeler from California competing in the 1974 S.O.A.R. Nats remembers to this day the gratitude he felt when his receiver failed on the flight line and Dan not only lent him a replacement but also held up the flight group so he could install it.



*Dan Pruss CD-ing at the S.O.A.R. Nats microphone in hand*

Jack Hiner relates that Dan and Dave Burt founded S.O.A.R. Dan was flying in the Joliet/Plainfield area while Dave was flying in the Chicago area. S.O.A.R. was chartered with the AMA in 1967. In its early days, the club flew on fields located in Skokie, Maywood, Joliet, and Plainfield. Both Dan and Dave flew with others who formed the core of the initial membership. As with most of the early members, Dan served on the S.O.A.R. Board of Directors and held various offices on the Board over the years.

The 1970 AMA Nats were held in Chicago; at that time, RC soaring was not included. The early members decided to host a soaring Nats in conjunction with the AMA Nats, and the first of what would eventually be seven "S.O.A.R. Nats" was held that year. The entire club pulled together for these events, which were influential in promoting the hobby at the national level. The number of entrants grew each year to nearly 200 participants at the last event in 1976. Dan was deeply involved in the organization of these events. He acted as Contest Director (CD) for all of them. The contests were run using a public address system and Dan acted both as emcee and CD. Many people still remember Dan's voice calling out flight groups. He also presided over the awards ceremony following each event. He was very much the face and voice of S.O.A.R. for many years. All relate that he was firm, efficient, and fair. Due largely to the success of the S.O.A.R. Nats, RC soaring became part the AMA Nats from 1977.

The League of Silent Flight (LSF) was established in 1969. It soon gained prominence among RC soaring enthusiasts by establishing goals and recognizing achievements. Dan joined the LSF and supported its efforts. Today the League acts as the official Special Interest Group to the AMA for soaring. The first LSF president was Bob Andris, LSF No. 4, who served from 1969 to 1971. Dan Pruss was LSF No. 60, and he served as the third LSF president from 1974 to 1977. During the time he was president, Dan's daughter Laura acted as the LSF treasurer.

Dan was a prolific writer on the topic of RC soaring. He wrote a column for *Model Aviation* magazine entitled "Radio Control: Soaring" from 1975 until the year of his death in 1986. He also contributed additional articles about specific events.

As RC soaring gained popularity, Dan became involved at the international level. Dan was named one of the AMA's delegates to the Fédération Aéronautique Internationale (FAI) in Paris, France. The FAI is the world governing body for air sports and aeronautical records, including all aspects of manned and unmanned flight. Dan served on the FAI's aeromodeling commission, the Commission Internationale d'Aeromodelisme (CIAM), from the early 1970s until the year of his death. Review of the CIAM meeting minutes shows that no later than 1973 Dan was part of its working group on RC soaring. In 1974, that working group was transformed into a separate subcommittee and Dan was elected its chairman. He remained chairman of the RC soaring subcommittee until 1976 and he would hold that position again in later years. That subcommittee produced the rules, which were adopted by the FAI under category F3B, for the first-ever soaring world championships held the following year in South Africa. Dan Pruss' name last appears in the CIAM meeting minutes in 1986, when it was recorded that his position as chairman of the RC soaring subcommittee was being assumed by another U.S. delegate due to Dan being "seriously ill."



***“Who is Skip Miller?”- Dan had these shirts printed after then-teenage Miller won the first ever F3B World Championship in 1977. Dan was Team Manager.***

Perhaps due to his intricate knowledge of the rules as well as his leadership abilities, Dan was asked to be the Team Manager for U.S. F3B Team for the 1977 Soaring World Championships. Dan agreed. He is remembered for being a serious and focused manager who never lost sight of the fact that RC sailplane competition is also supposed to be fun. Dan was elated when his young, previously unknown pilot Skip Miller won the overall world championship. Dan ordered a batch of bright red T-shirts with “Who is Skip Miller?” printed in bold black letters across the front, which he enjoyed wearing and passing out as souvenirs.

the last of the S.O.A.R. Nats that year. The event was one lap around a 76-kilometer course set up on country roads outside the Joliet/Plainfield area. In part due to the limited number of available frequencies at the time, the Race was a team event with participating clubs being allowed to enter only one model. Dan was the Contest Director. The first Race was well received and the event continued on after the S.O.A.R. Nats ended. It drew teams from across the country. Dan continued to act as Contest Director for all of the Great Race events up to the time of his death.

To commemorate the U.S. Bicentennial in 1976 and promote cross-country flying, S.O.A.R. created “The Great Race,” which was first held in conjunction with

In addition to his contributions as an organizer and contest director, Dan was a serious RC sailplane pilot and competitor. He flew in many of the contests he directed and he competed in regional events throughout the Midwest. Dan was a personal friend with Lee Renaud, who designed many of the popular RC model sailplanes of the 1970s and 1980s. Dan was known to campaign an *Aquila* or a *Grand Esprit*.



***Dan’s basement after a Great Race***

Together with his backyard neighbor, an American Airlines pilot named Sullivan, Dan started a business called Su-Pr-Line Products. It marketed plastic pushrods. Dan’s children and others remember cutting lengths of tubing from large drums in Dan’s garage and packaging them with threaded rod and clevises. The company and its pushrods still exist as Sullivan Products. In part because of his pushrod business, Dan attended many model expos where he met and was able to interact with most of the leading figures in model aviation. Dan’s modeling interests also included a model sailboat that he enjoyed sailing with his sons.

By all accounts, Dan Pruss was a true gentleman who was famous for having a sometimes coarse but never vulgar sense of humor, which more than one person described as “wicked.” He kept a personal stationary printed with “From the Desk of Dan Pruss”

*From the desk of . . . Dan Pruss*

from which he sent a multitude of personal letters expressing his gratitude, humor, and general camaraderie far and wide. His letters often included photographs; he was an avid photographer. He took particular joy in creating captions for the more intriguing of his shots. Dan clearly formed strong friendships and many have retained his letters and photos to this day. He is remembered as a very genuine man who took as much joy from the success of a friend and fellow competitor as he did of his own.



***Headstone at the graves of Dan and Patricia Pruss, Saint Mary Immaculate Cemetery, Plainfield, Illinois. Note the Soaring Flight eagle from S.O.A.R. newsletter.***

Dan Pruss died on June 28, 1986 following a battle with cancer. His loving wife Patricia died two years later. Both are buried in the Saint Mary Immaculate Cemetery in Plainfield, Will County, Illinois under a common headstone. As a lasting tribute to the club he helped create, an image of the bald eagle taken from the *Soaring Flight* masthead used for the S.O.A.R. newsletter appears on the headstone with the caption “And He will raise you up on eagle’s wings.”

In memory of Dan Pruss, S.O.A.R. created the Dan Pruss RC Soaring Team Award in 1987. The award is given each year at the AMA Soaring Nats. The award forms Article VI of the S.O.A.R. bylaws. As stated, therein the award was created “to honor member Dan Pruss by fostering the spirit of team

competition at the AMA Nats – a spirit that was the enduring legacy of Dan Pruss in the national soaring contests he created and his guidance of our national teams in international soaring events.”



***Dan with one of three prototype Buteos, Lee Renaud’s last design.***



*This caricature was one of Dan's favorites and proudly displayed in his workshop. It depicts his close friend Lee Renaud, founder of Airtronics and designer of many popular model sailplanes during the 1970s and 1980s. Lee is using his shoe to draw an airfoil when he has an epiphany. The "My Nice Guy" award was bestowed upon Lee by several people, the first of whom is Dan Pruss. A Convair CV-340 airliner in North Central Airlines livery, as flown by Dan, sits nearby.*

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