



The AMA History Project Presents: Biography of DR. GORDON J. ROBERTS, Ph.D.



April 9, 1927 – March 31, 2012
AMA #48151

Written by DN (09/2012), reformatted by JS (01/2013)

The following was written by Dennis Norman, published in the September 2012 issue of Model Aviation magazine, in the Free Flight Scale column.

Gordon Roberts entered this world on April 9, 1927 and left it on March 31, 2012. He was the only child of Arthur and Elsie Roberts. Following the early loss of his father, Gordon was raised by his mother and his maternal grandmother, Agnes Green. They lived in the town of Fenton, in a district of central England collectively known as Stoke-on-Trent, a region noted for coal mines, fine clay, earthenware, and exquisite bone china.

Gordon loved sports and competition. He played cricket in the summer and rugby in the fall. With cricket, he enjoyed the casual intricacies of the game. In rugby, he relished the hardy, sometimes rough, physical challenges of the game. His love of competition foreshadowed much of what he would accomplish.

Gordon discovered aeromodeling in his teens and joined the Five Towns Model Aeroplane Club. He became a member of the Society of Model Aeronautical Engineers (SMAE), England's equivalent of the AMA.

Before World War II, he built and flew models with the Five Towns Club at Meir Aerodrome, a small local field. Gordon met Eric Clutton and began a lifelong friendship. Both had studied at schools previously attended by Reginald Mitchell, one of England's great aeronautical engineers, who designed the famous Spitfire. Mitchell died in the 1930s, but the Spitfire went on to inspire the world as England struggled for its life in the dark days of the war.

Shortly after the war began, Meir became an auxiliary airfield. It was approximately 200 acres and barely large enough for military use, but when the nearby Grindley Land Aircraft Factory was converted to repair damaged aircraft, Meir became busy.

Grindley Lane produced the impressive Beaufighter for the Royal Air Force. By 1943, it began assembling American aircraft, such as the *P-51* and the *B-24*, which had been shipped to England in crates.

Although too young for military service, Eric was given work at the Aerodrome. In his mid-teens, Eric was bright and responsible and was eventually allowed to taxi newly assembled Mustangs from Grindley's production area to the airfield where military pilots ferried them to their bases!

Years later, skeptics challenged Eric's tales of being entrusted to taxi Mustangs, but he produced photos and statements from eyewitnesses, including Gordon, to substantiate his claims. Eric

eventually became one of England's top designers of full-scale sport aircraft. Both he and Gordon gained fame as model aircraft designers and builders.

Gordon excelled in school. He was inspired by chemistry and began a lifelong pursuit of chemical research and problem solving. After graduating from college, he spent three years in the ceramics industry where he became a British ceramic research associate. He was respected for his astute and meticulous research which resulted in a number of new and improved ceramic glazes.

Success led him to begin graduate studies at Leeds University. He became an expert in isotopic tracer techniques, which he used to explore and better understand the fusion processes in glass. He completed his studies at Leeds with high distinction and received his Ph.D. in chemistry.

While at Leeds, Gordon came to the attention of a prominent visiting lecturer from Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio. Cleveland's Ferro Corporation was searching for a senior glass chemist and contacted the visiting professor who enthusiastically recommended Gordon for the position. Ferro hired him and he moved to Cleveland with his family.

At Ferro, Gordon's research resulted in numerous patents and worldwide recognition in the glass industry. He retired from Ferro at age 70, but remained a part-time consultant to the company.

Gordon helped found the Cleveland Free Flight Society (CFFS). Dave Stott and Bob Thompson had started the modern Flying Aces Club (FAC) in New England and the FAC's successes electrified the CFFS.

Gordon began designing, building and flying world-class models that soared like homesick angels in FAC competitions. His penchant for detail and scientific training enabled him to excel in Free Flight model construction and flight.

Gordon's stellar achievement in modeling was his participation in FAC competition. He casually referred to FAC flying as "game," but one which he played with unusual verve. When competing, the mild-mannered Englishman became a *tiger*! To him, the prospect of winning was the only point of participating in a contest.

Gordon was a relentless FAC competitor. After 16 victories, he was awarded the prestigious Blue Max medal. He rapidly rose through the ranks and became the FAC's first air marshal and was admitted to the FAC Hall of Fame in 2006. In 2011, he received the FAC's only Ace of Aces medal, in recognition of his spectacular achievement of more than 500 FAC first place awards!

Despite his many FAC successes, Gordon never became a Grand Champion in the FAC national competition. At the FAC Nats, he was pitted against other worthy opponents. Legends such as Don Srull, Dave Reese, and Jack McGillivray made decisive winning difficult at the national level.

Gordon was a successful competitor because of his hard work, determination, and his unique scientific background. As a chemist he knew the most sophisticated means of weighing things. When it came to building models, he accurately determined the weight of balsa and converted it

to a pounds-per-foot standard, allowing him to select the lightest, yet strongest, pieces of balsa; even his largest models were unusually light when compared to those of his competitors.

He chose simple subjects with good proportions and minimal drag. *Debut*, one of his most famous Embryo Endurance designs, flew so well that it was named a Model of the Year by the National Free Flight Society (NFFS.)

Because of the *Debut's* outstanding performance, many flew out of sight and were lost. He eventually built nearly two dozen of them. A *Debut* was cremated with Gordon's remains and now soars with him in eternity.

After meeting Gordon in the mid-1970s, my friendship with him deepened when, as a lawyer, fellow modeler, and friend, I helped him deal with his divorce and transition to single life. When my first marriage came apart, Gordon came to my aid, offering me friendship, understanding, and housing in his new condominium. I stayed there for nearly six months.

You can call a person your friend for years, but you are not well acquainted until you become roommates. Gordon was delightful company. He prepared splendid suppers for us with the order and precision of a trained professional. His kitchen was meticulously run and often tidied even while dinner was in process.

In sharp contrast, Gordon's hobby area was like the portrait of Dorian Gray. He loved building models, but he cared little about keeping his modeling area tidy. He was prolific and had dozens of models littering the furniture and floor of his small recreation room.

When Gordon took a two-week vacation a month after I moved in, I naively saw an opportunity to organize and display his collection of models. I began by neatly placing small straight pins in the walls of his recreation room. From each straight pin I carefully hung a model, making a small pinhole in the tail end of each fuselage.

It took several days, but I felt that I had created a neat and colorful display of Gordon's models hung on the walls like butterflies. For good measure, I cleaned the room's carpet and attempted to more comfortably arrange the furniture.

When Gordon came home and saw my efforts, he was nearly catatonic with rage. He took great offense at the tiny punctures in his models and nearly evicted me on the spot! Realizing the magnitude of my offense, I quickly apologized and promptly returned the models to their proper places.

The incident taught me much about Gordon and about myself. It also made it clear that if I chose to date, I could not bring ladies to Gordon's place; I am sure they would have found the sight of his modeling area disturbing.

After recovering from his displeasure, Gordon encouraged me to begin building models with him and even offered to expand his workbench for that purpose. I didn't accept his kind offer and eventually, I moved to my own apartment.

When I met and married my wife, Linda, Gordon was best man at our wedding. Linda and I have been happily married for nearly 30 years and have been blessed with three wonderful children.

Helen Brady, one of Linda's friends, was a widow and businesswoman in charge of the Gwinn Estate in the Cleveland suburb of Bratenhal. Helen seemed the opposite of Gordon. He was soft spoken and mild mannered (unless provoked as mentioned previously); Helen was outspoken and almost brash. Despite these differences, Linda and I invited Helen and Gordon on a blind date to see Liberace perform at Cleveland's Front Row Theater.

The two were instantly attracted and married a year later. Gordon moved to Gwinn for several years and rented out his condo. When Helen retired, the two moved back to the condo and lived in harmony until Helen's death in 2002.

In his final years, Gordon added painting to his list of leisure time pleasures. He preferred paint-by-number types, but his skill at neatly painting the numbered spots led him to produce many exceptional pieces, which he framed and gave as gifts to family and friends.

He also enjoyed working crossword puzzles and did so almost daily.

Gordon also continued to build model airplanes at an impressive rate. Two weeks before his death, Jim Hyka, Russ Brown, Rich Weber, and I visited him. We showed him two CDs of old aviation movies and had pizza.

Our visit lasted more than four hours and Gordon was tired. Even so he invited us to come down to his workshop and see his latest creation. Despite the seriousness of his illness, he continued to find happiness and peace in model building.

There is an expression that typifies the Brit's attitude in adversity: be calm and keep moving! Gordon did both and inspired me by his example.

Well done, dear boy. Well done!

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