



The AMA History Project Presents: Biography of LT. HAROLD (JOHN) W. ALDEN

May 22, 1897 - October 25, 1951



Transcribed by NR (08/2000); Edited by SS (2002), updated by JS (09/2007, 07/2014)

Career/Honors:

- Served as an assistant to Mr. Enyart in the operation of the National Aeronautic Association (NAA)/American Academy of Model Aeronautics (AAMA)
- 1975: Model Aviation Hall of Fame
- 1979: National Free Flight Society Hall of Fame
- 1996: Society of Antique Modelers Hall of Fame

The following biography was taken from an article written about H.W. Alden by the first president of the AMA, Willis Brown, in the book entitled "A History of the AMA" published in 1966-67

Extraordinaire

Memories of the Man

Lieutenant H. W. Alden of NAA and AAMA*

** American Academy of Model Aeronautics. When the AAMA reorganized into a self-governing organization in 1936, it dropped the "American" preface and just became the AMA as we know it today.*

-Norm Rosenstock, August 2000

In 1934, correspondence from the National Aeronautic Association was signed by H.W. Alden as chair of the Model Airplane Committee. Evidently, NAA headquarters selected Lieutenant Alden to take the load off Bill Enyart. Correspondence was growing so fast that Bill could not keep up with it.

Tall, sparse of frame and a born champion of youth, aviation was this man, "John" H. W. Alden. His home was in Ridgefield, N.J. where it is understood that he operated a "mill of some sort." He never had an office in NAA Headquarters, evidently operating out of his home and office. It is known that he paid the heavy correspondence costs as well as much travel, from his own pocket. George Johnson of Universal Model, Model Airplane News (U.M.A.N.) provided membership cards and made halftones for Alden's page in U.M.A.N. It is likely others contributed in kind to the early expenses of the American Academy of Model Aeronautics.

It has been said that Lt. Alden was the typical Boy Scoutmaster-type leader, in the best sense of the term. He worked constantly for fair competition, and always had the interest of the youthful contestants uppermost in his mind. Although not the "diplomat type" that characterized Bill Enyart, he fought for what he believed to be right. He was a strong believer in the amateur nature of model airplane competition, and the right of experts in the youth group to self-government.

H. W. Alden's Early Interests In Model Aviation Described By Son

The following is quoted directly from a letter from his son, John D. Alden, and gives a brief but excellent summary of the many years of service given to model aviation by “John” Alden.

“As you may know, my father, Harold W. Alden, prided himself on being one of the pioneers in model aircraft in this country. I believe he built his first model in 1908. I still have the propellers of a twin pusher he built prior to the World War I. In the late 1920s and up to 1937 he was extremely active in setting up model clubs, arranging contests and attempting to establish an organization of national scope devoted to the interests of serious minded model enthusiasts. He played a leading part in arranging and directing the national contests in 1933 on Long Island, 1934 in Akron, Ohio, 1935 in St. Louis, Missouri, and 1936 in Detroit, Michigan. In 1937, he suffered a serious breakdown in health, due in part to overwork in connection with his model airplane activities and retired completely from the field. Although he never, again took an active part in model work, his personal interest in it never declined. During and after the war he was occupied in defense industry, and was killed on October 25, 1951 by a group of Philippine guerillas while working on a Navy contract in the Philippine Islands.”

Since the 15th century, man has been trying to build model planes that would fly. The phenomenon of model airplane clubs evidently began about 1910. The sport of competition between members was not only fun, but it gave knowledge gained by experience in designing planes that would fly faster, higher or farther.

The following information about Lt. Alden was part of a letter written by Willis C. Brown to Frank Zaic dated November 1, 1963. At the time, Brown was serving as the AMA historian and was working on compiling the history of the AMA. In doing so, he was seeking information on Lt. Alden and reported some of his findings to Frank Zaic. Only the part of the letter concerning Lt. Alden is transcribed here. For the complete letter, please see the History Project's file on Willis C. Brown.

...I phoned the U.S. Navy, Bureau of Personnel, and told them of my interested in Lt. H.W. Alden and asked if it would be possible for them to give me reliable facts concerning the last few years of Lt. Alden's life. When he called me back, he hedged a bit, but said that he could give me the story on Alden in brief form as follows: “H.W. Alden was born May 22, 1897. After service in the U.S. Navy where he held a commission as lieutenant, he was placed on the retired list as of February 15, 1930. He received an honorable discharge from the Navy May 17, 1938. On October 25, 1951 he met his death in the Philippines where as a civilian employee of a contractor, he was ambushed, robbed, and killed while carrying money for a civilian payroll.”

The following information on Lt. Alden was part of an article in the November 1975 issue of Model Aviation magazine profiling the 1975 inductees into the Model Aviation Hall of Fame. Lt. Alden was inducted that year – 24 years after his death.

Lieut. H.W. (John) Alden (deceased), as now only real old timers can recall, was one of the most important, if not the most important, person of his time who labored during the late 1920s and early 1930s promoting model aviation. He worked so hard at it that this activity contributed to a break in his health, which compelled his retirement from this field. He was a leader in the noblest sense of the word at a time when there were very few leaders indeed, and it may safely be said that without him, there may not have been an Academy of Model Aeronautics – or at least its birth would have been deferred to a later date and perhaps a different set of objectives. This great achievement over-shadows the many things he did to put organized model aviation on its feet – but everything he did was of a quietly heroic nature.

From Ridgefield, New Jersey, Harold W. “John” Alden was the man in charge of youth aviation for the National Aeronautic Association (NAA), of which the Academy is the biggest division today. In those early days, model aviation boomed to such an extent that NAA was swamped with correspondence from modelers and it fell to John Alden to “take over.” He did not flinch or fail and formulated goals and ideas, which still sound inspiring today.

He became the first secretary-treasurer of the new AMA in 1936 (when the AMA was founded during a Detroit Nationals) and in 1937. He contest directed the National meet during the early 1930s through 1936. He conducted the day-by-day operation of AMA Headquarters in 1935, 1936 and 1937 when overwork cost him his health. Though he was forced to retired from active modeling activity, he never lost interest in his beloved model aviation.

The late Willis C. Brown, first president of the AMA, and a modeling early bird and leader in his own right, recalled Alden’s efforts this way: “H.W. Alden was the moving force, with his personal model building experience, in NAA where he constantly promoted model building interests. Model airplane correspondence from NAA was signed by ‘H.W. Alden, Chairman, Model Airplane Committee.’ Evidently, NAA selected H.W. Alden for this job to take the load off Bill Enyart.

“Champion of youth aviation, Alden was called by some ‘the typical Boy Scout leader type.’ He never had an office of his own, preferring to work out of his home. NAA provided a ‘mailing address without office’ in the then new Rockefeller Center Office Building (in New York City) to add to the prestige of the new American Academy of Model Aeronautics...”

(Note: In about 1940, Winthrop Rockefeller established in Rockefeller Center the old Air Youth program with a graduated series of beginner-type models.)

“Alden was very much the leader of national contests. He saw to it that prizes and trophies were available, and NAA help provided the banquet annually...”

Frank Zaic is another old timer who recalls working personally with Alden.

“Although there may have been a countrywide feeling in the early 1930s,” Frank states, “that we needed a national organization, no one volunteered to do the actual organizational work with the exception of Lieut. Alden. He became the center to which others looked for leadership...he was willing to do the work of solidifying the hopes of model builders in having their own mature organization. Without Alden, we may not have an organization as we do today...”

In Part One of the *History of the Academy of Model Aeronautics* appears a letter from Alden's son, John, who recounts that his father built his first model in 1908. His son still has the propellers from one of his father's twin pushers from before World War I. One wonders how much Harold W. Alden did for modeling during the "dark ages" before Lindbergh's flight in 1927. Unfortunately, no scribe reported on the earlier stages of what apparently was a most intensive career in the service of others.

As far as credit for all he had done is concerned, Alden was star-crossed. We all stand deeply in his debt for his all but unknown, though significant promotion of our activity. His end was to be tragic and, typically, in the interest of his country. During and after World War II he was occupied in the defense industry and was killed on October 25, 1951 by a group of Philippine guerillas while working on a Navy contract in the Philippine Islands.



Lt. H. W. Alden, c. 1934



Lt. H. W. Alden (top row, left), cropped group photo in front of Wright Aeronautical Corporation.

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