



The AMA History Project Presents: Autobiography of WILLIAM (BILL) C. HANNAN



**Modeler; Columnist; Author; Book Publisher;
Designer; Graphic Artist**

Born July 3, 1931 Started modeling in 1937
AMA #19349

Written & Submitted by WH (06/1996); Updated by WH (07/2002); Transcribed by NR (03/1997); Edited by SS (2002),
Updated by JS (12/2007, 08/2009, 11/2018, 01/2019)

Career:

- Newsletter editor for the North American Aviation Flightmasters flying scale model club
- Vice President, Free Flight Scale, National Association of Scale Aeromodelers
- Research and Development for Williams Brothers, Inc., San Marcos
- Vice President, Free Flight Scale, National Association of Scale Aeromodelers
- Author and publisher of numerous books on rubber scale
- Wrote column, "Hannan's Runway," in *Model Builder* magazine for nearly 25 years

Honors:

- 1986: National Free Flight Society Hall of Fame
 - 1987: Model Aviation Hall of Fame
 - 1997: Kits and Plans Antiquitous Hall of Fame
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The following was written by Bill Hannan in June 1996 and submitted to the AMA History Project. It was updated by Bill in 2002. Note the Editor's 2018 update at the bottom of the autobiography.

How to review a lifetime devoted to a hobby? Perhaps by reflecting upon the un-payable debts owed to supportive parents, relatives, wife, teachers, friends, and children. To thank a few is to risk overlooking the many, of course. I can easily identify with those "other Academy" members (Motion Picture Arts and Sciences) "Oscar" winners, trying to deliver thank-you speeches in the short time they are allowed. Composing this autobiography for our own Academy seems to me equally challenging... Some years ago, in one of my modeling books, I compiled a thank-you list totaling more than 175 names, but it was still far from complete.

A hobby probably represents only a small facet of most people's lives – simply a sideline interest or a spare-time activity. In my case, model building has been a persistent, central passion that evolved into my means of support and, at times, nearly an obsession. How did this happen? Looking back with 20/20 hindsight, I can single out some of the early age circumstances, which brought about these results.

Model building is a quiet, solitary, even a lonely endeavor. By contrast, model flying can be much more social, which may be why some people prefer to classify it as a sport. If viewed in

that context, it is an individual sport, more akin to, say, figure skating, than to rough-and-tumble team sports, which I categorically avoided as a youngster.

Also, at an early age, I concluded that I was much more comfortable with words and drawings than with numbers, more at ease with practical demonstrations than with theories, and more impressed with mechanical things than electrical devices. These perceptions have seldom wavered and such seemingly small opinions and choices have had far-reaching influences in my life.

The French have an expression “*déjà vu*,” which translates to “already seen,” or in current idiom, “been there, done that.” This seems to describe numerous “non-coincidental” reoccurrences in my direction as a model builder.

How did it all begin? During the 1920s, my grandfather Schuyler Colfax Hannan, operated a large gasoline station in Billings, Montana, and owned a strip of land adjacent to the local airport. Thus, he encountered many early aviators, including one who was later to gain worldwide fame. Young Charles Lindbergh arrived in town low on funds and took a temporary job at a Billings automobile repair garage. Lindbergh rode a motorcycle for transportation, as did Ted Hannan, my father; so, having that in common, they became casually acquainted. Although not aviation-minded, Ted later served as a *B-17* tail-gunner during World War II.

In 1928, the year after Lindbergh’s epic transatlantic flight in the Spirit of St. Louis, Ted Hannan married Pearl Reid, and in 1931, I was born. By the time I was about three, my favorite toys were airplanes and my grandfather would sometimes take me to the airport to watch the activities. He even arranged a hop for me in a Ford Tri-Motor, but my only remaining memory of that flight is of the wicker passenger seats creaking, with a sound just like my mother’s wicker clothesbasket.

Another time, I rode aloft in an open cockpit biplane, seated on my mother’s lap, and I have often wondered what type of aircraft it was. Later, perhaps about 1936, I could identify some types myself, and was most impressed seeing famed stunt pilot Tex Rankin’s Ryan *ST*, with his name painted inverted on the fuselage.

With such early exposure to airplanes and aviators, perhaps it was natural for me to be attracted to model building. Although my parents had divorced, my mother and relatives always encouraged my hobby. An old photograph of me at age six, holding my first stick and tissue effort, a Comet Fokker *D-7*, shows dreadful workmanship, but at least it was an indication of my enthusiasm for the hobby.

While gaining more experience by building a succession of solid “shelf” models, I became an avid reader of model magazines, especially *Flying Aces*, which doubtless helped shape my own writing interests. Many years later when my mother remarried, my stepfather Wally Strachan, moved us to another Montana town, and I was privileged to commute during summertime to visit my grandparents via Boeing *247*, an aircraft that made an indelible impression on me. A dim recollection: climbing over the wing spars and floor heaters inside the cabin, escorted by a friendly flight attendant, on the way to my assigned passenger seat.

During the early part of World War II, I was too young to participate in the government aircraft identification models program, however I managed to obtain the plans, and built a series of those 1/72nd models for my own amusement. Instead of the officially prescribed flat black, mine were painted in authentic (more or less) color schemes, based on photos found in *Air Trails* and *Flying* magazines.

Meanwhile I continued to build stick and tissue models, mostly of Comet manufacture, purchased at a counter in a local department store. My weekly allowance, earned by shoveling snow off the sidewalks in winter and mowing the lawn during summer, was 10 cents. In those days, a dime would pay for a Saturday movie, two candy bars, or a Comet kit, but I usually splurged for the kit. At a very early age I decided that money spent on candy or soft drinks was a poor investment; too short-lived in gratification, and not even very nutritious. To this day, my opinion on that subject has not changed. Balsa is a better bargain!

My first contest entry, encouraged by my mother, was in a grade-school display event. As I recall, my model placed second or third, winning a 5-dollar prize. This was a staggering amount of money to me, and I fulfilled a fantasy by spending it all on magazines. To my frustration, I became very nervous trying to decide which one to read first.

One summer my schoolteacher aunt, Florence, took me on a Greyhound bus trip to visit relatives on the East Coast. We stayed for a while in my Uncle Bob's Yonkers home, and as luck would have it, an older model builder lived nearby, and he took me to famed Van Cortlandt Park in New York. There, for the first time, I saw gas models in action. Noticing how mesmerized I was by them, this kindly fellow presented me with one of his old Brown Junior ignition engines. Crowning this sensory overload for me, just a youngster from the "Wild West," was a visit to Polk's New York hobby store!

My stepfather died soon thereafter. The war was still on, and we moved to San Diego, California, where my grandfather worked at Consolidated-Vultee, so I was again immersed in aviation surroundings. In nearby Hillcrest was a hobby shop, where I obtained my second ignition engine, a used Ohlsson .23, which eventually powered a "goat" (Free Flight model converted to Control Line). A move to Los Angeles at war's end solidified my interest in Control Line models, which were then so dominant.

During a brief sojourn in Eugene, Oregon, my Uncle Orville introduced me to automobiles, via maintenance and painting of his Model A Ford, my mother remarried, and we again moved to aviation country in Burbank, California. That city was home to some famous movie studios and Lockheed Aircraft, which contributed both directly and indirectly to our family's way of life. My stepfather, Ben Reynolds, worked for a company involved with movie films and, later, for a manufacturer of precision parts.

Burbank High School offered Aircraft Shop and, not surprisingly, it became one of my favorite classes. There, hands-on experience was gained in working on airframes and radial aircraft engines. Additionally, several of my classmates, Bruce Walton, Bill Holle, and Mel Duke, shared

my interest in model building, which persisted in spite of our other distractions, such as motor scooters, hot rods and, inevitably, girls.

This was an exciting time of life for me, with lots of aircraft from Lockheed frequently flying over our house and even one of Jack Northrop's fabulous flying wings, an unforgettable sight. As for model airplanes, I was certainly in the right place at the right time to witness plenty of action by well-known flyers. Another strong influence on my modeling was Ced Galloway, who operated Burbank's House of Hobbies. Looking back, I marvel at his patience with me hanging around, asking questions while he worked on his fine scale Control Line models. He carried detail and finishing to a much higher level than I had ever seen before. (Later he constructed models full-time for Lockheed.)

While still in high school, I worked at Glendale's Grand Central Airport as an aircraft line-boy, being paid in flight instruction time. Oddly, I did not enjoy flying and quit the job and lessons after a short time. By curious contrast, some years later, my half-brother Lee became a pilot and Hollywood screenwriter, while half-brother Michael became an Air Force instructor and, eventually, a pilot for Delta Airlines.

Upon graduating from high school, I worked in industry for a time, and then during the Korean War, entered the U.S. Navy. After attending intensive schooling for reciprocating engine and propeller maintenance, I was assigned to a jet squadron! Ah, well. Even though kept busy servicing *F9F Panthers* aboard the aircraft carrier *Kearsarge* in action off the coast of Korea, time was found for model building. Fellow engine mechanics Jack Fox, John Burgess and I constructed a semi-scale Boeing 247, mostly from memory, and powered it with two K & B Infants. We flew it on very short Control Lines at night in the hangar deck, until a Chaplain threatened to put us on report for disturbing his meditation!

Also aboard that carrier was Cliff Weirick, later to become an AMA President. When I first encountered him, he was restoring a Morton M5 model radial engine in the ship's machine shop. Years later, when he was in the Radio Control business in southern California, we renewed our acquaintance. Returning to NAS Miramar air base near San Diego, I courted and married Joan Merrill who not only tolerated my model airplane obsession, but also learned to fly Control Lines herself while we were dating. Subsequently my squadron was transferred to another aircraft carrier, the USS Randolph, which operated in the Mediterranean fleet.

Following my four-year tour of Navy duty, I enrolled in college, majoring in technical illustration. This was followed by a series of jobs with aerospace firms, including Lockheed, and ultimately doing freelance graphic design. With a move to North Hollywood, Tony and Addie's Hobby Lobby, which catered to all model aircraft interests, became my favorite place to get advice and buy building supplies.

During the 1960s, while raising our daughter Doreen, now a successful writer, and our son Ken, who also became an avid modeler, I began writing articles for various U.S. and overseas model airplane magazines, making me appreciate my high school and college English-class teachers! Credit is also due such caring editors and aviation writers as well as Bill Winter, Larry Conover, John Underwood, Merle Olmsted, Ron Moulton, (England) and Georges Chaulet (France).

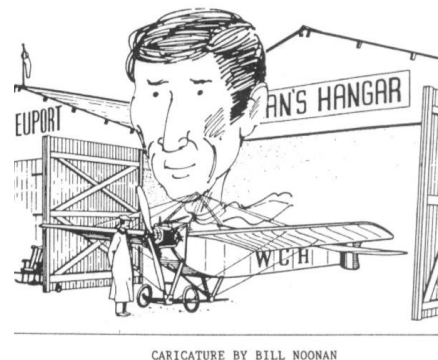
It became my turn to play editor for about a year when close friend and Flightmasters newsletter editor, Bill Warner's house suffered a devastating fire, and he asked me to substitute. Compiling the *North American Aviation Flying Scale News and Views* gave me fresh understanding about the time and effort involved in such productions. Club editors are truly unsung heroes!

In my spare (?) time, I joined artist Otto Kuhni and Flightmaster Kingsley Kau in operating Obscure Aircraft, a mail order model plans business, which led to my Plans & Things, a part-time cottage industry operation, which was later absorbed by Bob and Sandy Peck, of Peck-Polymers.

During the 1970s and 1980s, I assisted the Williams Brothers with research, pattern carving and instruction sheets for their display model kits. Their very first 1/72nd scale model subject was my old childhood transport, the Boeing 247, complete with internal wing spars and cabin heaters! Later projects included Pratt & Whitney Wasp and Wright J-5 (Lindbergh's engine!) kits.

Who would have thought that my solid-model building experience, familiarity with Boeing 247s and reciprocating engine schooling would prove useful so many years later? It was a continuing education working alongside Granger, Larry, Fred, and Don Williams, all master modelers and machinists, for which I am particularly grateful.

During research for the J-5 engine project, we frequently visited the San Diego Aerospace Museum, which displayed a *Spirit of St. Louis* replica. Not only did I have the opportunity to study the aircraft, but also to converse with three people who had worked on the original, and hear their fascinating firsthand stories about Charles Lindbergh.



An unexpected extension of my hobby interests occurred in about 1972, when Bill Northrop asked me for some part-time production assistance with his newly launched Model Builder magazine. Although my direct in-house involvement was short-term, that experience led to Bill granting me my own column, *Hannan's Hangar*, a title suggested by Peanuteer Dave Stott. Thanks to loyal reader support with photos, human-interest stories, news tidbits and philosophical quotations, plus skillful editing by Bill Northrop and Phil Bernhardt, the column continued for nearly a quarter-century, until *Model Builders* demise in 1996.

Although I never thought of myself as a particularly dedicated competitor, contests were often a source of fun (and sometimes frustration) for me through the years. Among the most enjoyable were the Northrop Flying Wing meets, and events sponsored by the Los Angeles Flightmasters, the San Diego Orbiteers and Scale Staffel and the Las Vegas Vultures. Then too, a great deal of credit for sustaining my interest in Free Flight, especially Peanut Scale, should be extended to

the Flying Aces Club. Also satisfying were the proxy-flown events conducted in England, Belgium, France and Japan. This very rewarding low-cost entertainment also yielded more wonderful ongoing pen-pal friendships.

In 1975, Doug Gillies, a Scottish modeler and historian, invited me to tour French and United Kingdom aviation museums with him, a once-in-a-lifetime experience, a chance to meet many of my overseas pen friends, as well as to conduct research on some of my favorite aircraft. Needless to say, we were treated royally by modelers everywhere, and returned home with priceless reference material and photos.

In 1977, at the Riverside, California Nationals, both my son Ken and I had the good fortune to win trophies in Free Flight flying scale categories, thanks in large measure to Bill Brown's delightful little C02 power plants, and plenty of willing help from fellow competitors. Winning was fun, but my strongest memories are of the great times we had "hangar-flying" with the other contestants and spectators from several states and as far away as France and Japan.

Although Ken became a quite accomplished Radio Control glider-guider, I was never really attracted to Radio Control. My standard explanation is that I still have not solved all the challenges of Free Flight! Actually, I feel as if I have been pursuing several hobbies simultaneously most of my life and dare not take on any more. My many years of aircraft research, for example, have resulted in a library that takes up more space than my models. Then in addition, there are other interests, such as photography, toy collecting, and hiking and, most recently, cross-country skiing. Considering that I studiously avoided physical sports when I was young, it has been gratifying to discover something nearly as rewarding as chasing Free Flight models! On second thought, perhaps chasing models kept me in good enough condition to take up skiing.

Somewhere along the way, I became involved in publishing, encouraged by such people as Richard Miller, originator of the *Model Airplane News* VTO column, artists Otto Kuhni and Bill Noonan, model historians John Brown and Jim Alaback, my late good friends "Peanut Professor" Walt Mooney and photographer extraordinary Warren Shipp. Their lasting influences are constant reminders of my good fortune in having known such talented and generous individuals.

The late Paul Matt, also a dedicated modeler and aviation historian, went out-on-a-limb by publishing my book "Peanut Power," and also freely offered advice when Joan and I launched our own model airplane publications. Joan had long wanted to start her own business and decided that aviation and modeling books showed promise. Thus, the Hannan's Runway mail-order business was born, nurtured and continues to thrive as this article is being composed.

Although my output of new models has greatly diminished, model building remains much more important to me than "just a hobby," and I'm grateful not only for the lifetime of satisfaction and fun it has yielded, but especially for the opportunity of sharing interests with so many wonderful like-minded people. I reflect how remarkable it has been meeting such legendary personalities as Bill Brown, maker of my first engine, Irv Ohlsson, maker of my second engine, Bill Bishop, founder of the Comet Company who produced my favorite stick and tissue kits, as well as Carl

Goldberg, Russ Barrera, Ken Hamilton, Ken Sykora, Frank Zaic, Jack McCracken and so many more. Some of them are gone now, a forceful reminder that we are just as fragile as the models we build and fly. Let us all appreciate each other more!

Many thanks to Norm Rosenstock and John Worth for their dedication in helping to preserve our modeling heritage.

Appendix:

Club offices held

c. 1966: Newsletter editor, North American Aviation Flightmasters flying scale model club
c. 1977-1978: Vice President, Free Flight Scale, National Association of Scale Aeromodellers
c. 1982: Vice President, San Diego Scale Staffel club

Books authored

1980: *Peanut Power*, Published by Paul Matt
1991: *Peanut Power*, Reprinted by Aviation Heritage Books

Books published by W.C. Hannan, Graphics, and Hannan's Runway

1983: *Volume 1, Scrapbook of Scale*
1984: *Volume 2, Scrapbook of Scale*
1985: *Models and Musings*
1992: *Models and Musings*, revised and reprinted

Peanuts & Pistachios International

Volume 1, 1986
Volume 2, 1987
Volume 3, 1988
Volume 4, 1989
Volume 5, 1990
Volume 6, 1994

Stick & Tissue International

Volume 1, 1991
Volume 2, 1992
Volume 3, 1993

Plans 3-Views International

Volume 1, 1990
Volume 2, 1996

Gbs & Gee Bees International

1995

Models and Modelers

Volume 1, 1997

Volume 2, 1998

Models and Methods

2000

Model Builders and their Models

Expected release date August 2002

Kitted model designs

Stringless Wonder, rubber-powered kite, Peck-Polymers, Santee, California, 1973

McDonald Madcap, rubber-powered scale homebuilt, Mark's Models, San Marcos, California, c. 1976 (later marketed by Peck-Polymers)

Uncle Sam, rubber-powered dihedral-less biplane, Sig Mfg. Inc., Montezuma, Iowa, c. 1978

Nieuport Monoplane, rubber-powered Peanut variation of antique Ideal kit, Vintage Aero, Tenafly, New Jersey, c. 1974

Tres Kroner (3-Crowns), Swedish variation of Uncle Sam, Akus, Alvängen, Sweden, c. 1985

Antoinette, simple rubber-powered antique monoplane, Akus, Alvängen, Sweden, 1990

Industry

Obscure Aircraft/Plans & Things, North Hollywood, and Escondido, California, Mail-order Free Flight scale model airplane construction plans, c. 1965-1970

Williams Brothers, Inc., San Marcos, California, Scale model display model construction kit research and development, c. 1971-1986

Books in which Bill Hannan articles appeared

National Free Flight Society Symposium, 1970

Flying Scale Models of World War II, 1974

Aeromodeller Annual, 1974-1975 (England)

National Free Flight Society Symposium, 1995

Bill Hannan Autobiography, Appendix, Page 3

FIY Navy, Matrobooks, 2001

Periodicals in which Bill Hannan articles or drawings were published, c. 1965-1994

Aeromodeller, (England) (various issues)

Aeroplans, Volume 6, 1994

Air Wars, Volume 8, 1986

American Aircraft Modeler (various issues)

American Modeler (various issues)

Cross & Cockade Journal, Winter 1965

Flying Models (various issues)

Junior American Modeler, May/June, 1972

L'Album du Fanatique de l'Aviation (France), April 1983 *Le Modele Reduit D, Avion* (France)

Model Airplane News (various issues)

Model Aviation (various issues)

Model Builder (various issues)

Model Retailer, February 1977

Radio Control Sportsman (various issues)
Scale Models, (England), February 1980
Sig Air-Modeler (various issues)
Sport Modeler, January 1975

(signed) *Bill Hannan*
July 2002

[Editor's update (2018): Joan and Bill have moved from Hawaii, where they spent a year, to Washington state.]



Bill Hannan in a corner of his densely populated hangar.



2005: Bill at home in his workshop with a version of the Farman Moustique, likely to be walnut scale.

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