



# The AMA History Project Presents: Autobiography of EDWIN (ED) LAMB

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AMA #1286



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*Edwin Lamb wrote the following autobiography and submitted it to the AMA History Project (at the time called the AMA History Program) in 2007.*

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## Ed Lamb and a History of Model Airplanes

I was born August 30, 1930 in the Midwest - Indiana to be more specific. My full name is Edwin Dean Lamb. I am the oldest of five children, each arriving at two-year intervals, and am called by my middle name, "Dean." My sibling's names are Donna, Doyle, Doris and Duane. Mom and Dad came up with the idea that we should all have names beginning with "D."

My family saw some lean years during the Great Depression. We lived in rural Indiana in a rented farmhouse that had a barn and a few acres, so we kept a cow, raised some chickens, and had a big garden. Dad had a job all during the depression years, although some weeks he only worked one or two days. He worked at the Perfect Circle Piston Ring factory in Hagerstown. It was enough to keep us fit, but we did not have anything to spare for frivolous things, that is for sure.

We hardly ever saw an airplane. When one flew close enough to be heard and seen, it was a big deal. There was an airport at New Castle. Sometimes Dad would take us over there and park on the side of the road so we could watch them land and take off. Once, when we had a family reunion at Memorial Park, an air race and air show was being held at a little airport next door. The airplanes made a lot of noise and the racers were so small compared to the big, old biplanes we usually saw. That was when I was probably seven or eight years old. It was enough to get me excited about airplanes.

Sometimes, when we went to town on Saturday, Dad would give me a dime to spend. Usually, though, it was only a few pennies for some candy. I can remember spending a few dimes for Comet kits that never amounted to anything. Once, I even managed to come up with a whole quarter that I spent on a Comet kit. I think it was called the *Gull*. It never really flew either. I was learning everything on my own. I did not have anyone around who knew or cared enough about model airplanes to give me any help. As a result, my skills were minimal all during that time.

One Christmas, my dad's younger brother, Uncle Ralph, came up with a really super gift for me. It was a big one, a real gas model kit. There was a problem, though; it did not come with a motor and there was no way I could come up with enough money for one. As I remember, it was a low wing monoplane that probably would not have flown that

well anyway. I did get it “built,” using the term loosely. Since I did not have an engine, I put some weight in the nose to try to balance it and tried to glide it off our upstairs balcony over the front porch. I think I just covered it with silkspan and a little dope. That airplane did not last long, either.

The first bona fide Free Flight model I ever saw was while I was in grade school. One day during recess, the Beeson boys, Phil and Fred, came to the schoolyard with an *American Ace*. They were test gliding from the top of the ash heap out behind the school building. It had a real gas engine and everything. They were older kids, past grade school age, and seemed to know what they were doing because the airplane actually glided very well. I was impressed.

During my grade school years, we visited my Uncle Cletus Mahoney occasionally. While we were there, my cousin Myron would take me up to the attic and show me a couple of big old Free Flight airplanes that belonged to his older brother, Marvin. I do not know what the names of them were. Marvin was not around or we probably would not have got close to them. In addition, one Sunday after church, my grandmother took me with her to a farmhouse for dinner. A couple of the kids in that family were into building model airplanes and they showed me what they were doing. They appropriated an old out-building for their workshop. They really had a setup in there! It made me a little envious.

I really did not get much further into modeling until I finished grade school and we moved from the country into Hagerstown, Indiana. I had a paper route there and started to earn a little money; very little money, that is. Nevertheless, it was enough. I started to get serious about model building. The house where we lived had a sort of storage shed built onto the back of it that I took over for my workshop. I had all sorts of things going on in there.

Fred Beeson, of the Beeson brothers I mentioned earlier, and his dad, Charlie, showed up at the athletic field at the high school with a Control Line airplane. They converted one of their Free Flights to U-Control. It was a *Miss Tiny*, covered with black silk, and they put a DeLong 30 in it. Wow! That thing would really go! As we were in town and far from open fields big enough for flying, Free Flight sort-of took a back seat. U-Control was the thing to do.

My first effort with U-Control was a thing called the *PDQ (Pretty Damn Quick)* I guess. It had a sturdy elliptical wing that was straight; it had no dihedral. The fuselage was hollowed-out solid balsa. I had a Cannon .30 engine in it, which made it very nose-heavy, and an ignition system that never worked right. Overall, it was a lost cause. I spent most of my time fiddling with the engine, trying to get it to run. I got it to run a little bit, but never really got the airplane off the ground.

About then, I joined the Academy of Model Aeronautics (AMA) and subscribed to *Air Trails* magazine. Inside was a description of a trainer-type model that impressed me. The fuselage was just a slab-sided box with heavy wire landing gear and big balloon tires. The tail surfaces were made of sheet balsa. It had a big straight constant chord wing with

plenty of wing area and enough dihedral to do some good. I sort of designed one like it by myself and put my Cannon engine in it. It had a "Clark Y" airfoil that was hand-drawn using my unaided eye to get it right. What I ended up with was sort of like a Clark Y with some thickness to it, and the combination got me in the air for the first time. I rubber-banded the wings on. It was not spectacular, just slow and manageable. I flew that old airplane a lot and got fairly good at it; at least good enough to think about where to go from there. This was near the end of World War II.

The Cannon was one of the first engines available after the war was over. Then there was the Rocket .46. I bought one of those, brought it home from the hobby shop, and promptly took it apart (to make sure it was okay and to satisfy my curiosity.) I wanted to know what was inside of there. I very carefully laid each part in a row on an old towel so I could put it back together just as I took it apart. That worked like a charm. I had it re-assembled with absolute confidence. It was exactly like how it came from the factory. Then I set it up to run it and found out otherwise. Every time I tried to flip the propeller, it would kick back and whack my fingers. I mean every time, no exceptions. I was getting beat up pretty bad.

Finally, I put the Rocket back in the box and took it back to the store. I told the proprietor there was something wrong with it and it just would not run. He took one look at it and said, "You have had this thing apart haven't you?" I said, "Well, yes, but I put it back exactly like it was." He said, "No you didn't." Then he showed me how the baffle on the piston was supposed to be on the side, away from the exhaust. I took it home, took it back apart, turned the piston around and it ran fine. I have never since put another piston in backwards.

I put the Rocket in a Bill Winter *Vagabond*. The *Vagabond* was a six-foot Free Flight model with a pretty high aspect ratio. It had real classy lines, a pretty airplane. Mine was not very pretty, but it was so-so. I really did not have a good place to try to fly it. Living in town was a bit of a problem. There were many farm fields around, but they all had crops or cattle in them, and in amongst the cattle usually was a mean bull. Then, there were many small woodlots/trees around. It was a problem. About the only flying the *Vagabond* ever did was at the local golf course.

My friend, Jerry Bertram, had a big old *Spook 72* that had been given to him. It had a DennyMite in it for power. It was as underpowered as my *Vagabond* was with a Rocket. That did not matter, though, because we never really flew them under power anyway. What we did do was glide them. We would take them out to the golf course where there were some pretty good hills and had gliding contests between the two of us (when there were no golfers around.) We had some good competition, which the



*Spook* usually won. I always envied how well the *Spook* glided and that is what initially gave me *Spook* fever.

Because of the lack of suitable flying space, we concentrated on U-Control. I quit my paper route and took a part time job in the local hardware store. I soon figured out that the manager of the store, my boss, could order engines for me at wholesale. This was a huge saving. The mark-up was usually about 40%. I ordered a Dooling *Arrow* racecar and an Anderson Spitfire this way (some pretty heavy hardware.) I had some success with the racecar, but that is another story.

I always wanted to do my own designs, and since I had a bit of success with my trainer, I thought it was a snap. I brought home a long piece of wrapping paper from the hardware store, got out the yardstick and pencil and went to work. I had a plan for a Taylorcraft that I enlarged. I forget what the span was, but I think it was about 50 inches. I put the Anderson in it. I wanted to fly upside down, so I used a symmetrical airfoil. The thing evolved as I went along with the building of it. It ended up with position lights and had penlights embedded in the wings for landing lights. A third line pulled a switch to turn the landing lights on and off and I actually was able to fly at night fairly well.

We flew at the local baseball diamond where we had a nice smooth runway. I would fire up the Anderson, go out and pick up the handle, pull the third line and the lights would light up for take-off. That was the signal for my stooge to let'er go! Once the airplane was airborne, another pull on the third line shut off the landing lights. The position lights stayed on all the time. Then, landings were accomplished the same way, all very realistic. I got along well enough with normal flying around. I could do loops and wingovers; horizontal eights were okay. Then I tried overhead eights and became a little disoriented. That is easy to do when you are flying in the dark. You can guess the rest, but I still have the Anderson and it is almost good as new.

A couple of years after I graduated from High School, the Korean War came along and it looked like some of us kids might be drafted into the army. Since I was always hot for airplanes and not too keen on the infantry, a couple of my buddies and I decided the best thing to do was to enlist in the Air Force. I ended up at Randolph Field in Texas, near San Antonio. I was a turret systems technician, working on the armament of *B-29s*. I was lucky enough to spend my entire four-year enlistment period there. Randolph Field is known as the "country club" of Air Force fields for a good reason. It was a good duty.

It was at Randolph Field that I finally got into model building in a serious sense. An officer, Captain Barkley, organized a model club and arranged for some good facilities for us. The Air Force provided many of the basic building supplies (wood, glue, dope and such) and we took advantage of it. I did not go immediately into Free Flight, however. U-Control and Radio Control were my major activities for a while. In 1954, Radio Control was still in its infancy. I had a single-tube receiver outfit with a Bonner compound escapement in a Live Wire *Junior*. I did have some success with it, although the reliability of it was somewhat tentative.

Our club was very successful and attracted a lot of attention from the brass at Randolph Field, the Air Training Command. Captain Barkley was quite an organizer and managed to talk the upper echelons into giving us a *C-47*. He cut special orders, sending us on a demonstration tour of most of the air bases in the Southwest. The purpose was to promote the model-building hobby amongst the rank and file of the Air Force. I suppose the idea was to find something constructive for the troops to do in the hope that it would help keep them out of the beer joints and the guardhouse.

Captain Barkley convinced many of the model suppliers to send samples of their wares for display on the tour, which amounted to a considerable stash of goodies. The club was able to keep all this loot after the tour was over and we put it to good use. Overall, this activity took the better part of three months during the summer of 1954. The Captain was the star of our show and a friend and I were his helpers. We managed to put on a halfway decent demonstration and it was well received.

After this tour, it was determined that Randolph Field, and our club in particular, should host the Southwest Regional Free Flight Model Contest. We were given a month to get ready for it and were given anything we needed to make it happen. That worked out well. As it turned out, there was not a very big attendance, but enough to make it interesting and the competition was not too tough. I managed to win enough points at this contest to send me to the Air Force Nationals that year.

In competition, I had the greatest success in 1/2A Free Flight, PAA Payload, and Clipper Cargo events. I was into Free Flight and I never looked back.

I was given another month to get ready for the Air Force Nationals, which was in El Paso, Texas that year. The winners of the Air Force Nationals attended the AMA National Championships (Nats) as part of the Air Force team. I spent that month building a new Clipper Cargo airplane of my own design. I had great hopes for it. The model was powered by a McCoy .049 diesel and lifted off with 28 ounces. Alas, the left wing picked up a little warp and the wash-in did me in with a slow and continuous roll to the right. That was my only entry, so I was out of the competition.

Even so, I took leave and traveled with the team to Chicago for the Nats that year, entering in the Nordic Glider event. My dethermalizer fuse was a little green, I guess, because it failed to function on the very first flight. I chased the glider cross-country until I came to a river too wide to cross. The Nordic was a very small speck in the sky that soon disappeared. I gave up on it.

Soon after this, my four-year tour of enlistment was over and I mustered out of the USAF returning to my hometown, Hagerstown, Indiana. By this time, I had decided that my first goal in life should be to become an aeronautical engineer. There is a kind of corny little story that goes along with this; it happened early in my Air Force experience.

One day, when I was alone in the forward section of a *B-29* on the flight line at Randolph Field, I saw the placard on a bulkhead next to the flight engineer's station. The placard

displayed the aircraft serial number, date of manufacture, some other information, and the fact that the Boeing Airplane Company in Seattle built the airplane. I thought what a marvelous airplane that was and what it would be like to be a part of designing and building something like that. Somehow, I determined that I should make that my career. I resolved to use the GI Bill to go to school and become an aeronautical engineer.

It was not easy. Up to that point, all through high school, I thought I would be a farmer and would not need a lot of math, so I only took the minimum to get by. After the big decision, I understood that to become an engineer I would need a lot more math just to pass the entrance exams. I enrolled in off-hours extension classes at Trinity Community College the last couple of years I was at Randolph Field in order to catch up. This put me in good shape to be accepted at Purdue when I applied there in the winter of 1955. It was a bit of a struggle, but I made it and graduated in August of 1958 with my Bachelor of Science degree in Aeronautical Engineering.

Along with all this, I met the love of my life, Phyllis. We married in June of 1957, so there were distractions along the way. Even with all the distraction, I was able to graduate a semester early by attending school that last summer. Since I thought I had another semester to go, I did not start looking for a job when I should. I did not take part in the job interviews that occurred in the spring, so I had to write letters and make applications belatedly. As luck (or providence) would have it, the only job offer I received was from the Boeing Company. I had applied to three companies. One gave me a rejection letter, Boeing wanted me right away and the third sent me an offer much later, after I already began work at Boeing. My dream came true and I worked at Boeing for 37 years. I retired in 1995.

Suffice it to say, the model airplane hobby took a back seat all during my college years, and for quite a time after that. We started our family even before arriving in Seattle. Greg was born almost immediately after we arrived there. After that, demands of family and work kept me from doing other things. There was more family, Little League and Boy Scouts, other hobbies, moving around the country with the job, lots of overtime on the Saturn-Apollo Program, etc.

I got into tropical fish, antique clock collecting and restoration, woodworking, photography; you name it, I did it. For a time while I was still in the Air Force, I owned a full-sized airplane. It was an Aeronca *Champion*. Prior to that, I belonged to a flying club at Tomco Aviation at San Antonio Municipal Airport where I earned my private pilot's certificate. I flew the little Aeronca all over the state of Texas and on a couple of trips back home to Indiana. Several of my Air Force buddies also owned airplanes and kept them at a little airport at Seguin, Texas, where I kept the Aeronca. There are many stories of adventures experienced by this group during the few years we had there. All good things come to an end, however. After I got out of the Air Force, I had to sell the little Aeronca. I continued to fly rentals occasionally until about 1964, when I finally gave it up.

There is more before getting back to model airplanes. When I returned home from the Air Force and before entering Purdue, I purchased a basket case Heath *Parasol* airplane from a friend in my hometown. I will not elaborate on this except to say that we have since carried this old artifact with us wherever we have gone around the country and still have it. It accounts for some of my inattention to the model airplane hobby over the years, yet another story.

I did not do much during all those years from 1955 through about the mid-seventies. There were a couple of U-Controls for the kids when we lived in New Orleans and my oldest son, Greg, tried his hand at building a *Dynamoe* model airplane. We had some fun with the U-Controls, but the *Dynamoe* was a lost cause. In the mid-seventies, the kids and I graduated from Boy Scouts; I had been a scoutmaster. I resolved to do some of the things I had always wanted to do. For one thing, I returned to model airplanes.

I recalled my long lost love for the big red *Spook* that Jerry Bertram owned. I knew about the Society of Antique Modelers (SAM) from the model magazines I bought from time to time. I ordered the plans from John Pond and built one. I still had my first Ohlsson 60 side-port, from when I was about 17. I was in business, except I did not know where I was going to fly it. I joined SAM and asked if there was a local chapter. Along with my membership card came a note steering me to Tom Cope as the contact for SAM 8. I contacted Tom and he took it from there.

I will never forget that day. Tom showed us the way to Harts Lake Prairie (HLP). There was no contest, just the brand new big ol' red *Spook* and us. My mom and dad happened to be visiting at the time and they were with us. It was a typical beautiful fall day, and the *Spook* flew for the first time. It flew well and I was pleased with it. I was hooked; my second childhood began.

Since then, I have belonged to SAM 8 (now the "Really Great SAM 8,") the Boeing Hawks, the Strat-O-Bats, the Willamette Modelers Club, the Flying Aces Club (FAC) Eagle Squadron, the Boeing Employees' Aerodynamic Modeling Society (BEAMS,) the Wichita Historical Aviation Modelers (WHAM,) and a few others. I still belong to most of them.

The experiences I have had, and friends I have known, give me so much pleasure to remember and to think about. Since that first flight at HLP, the *Spook* has sort of become my trademark and part of my identity. There have been crashes and rebuilds, and every time I make improvements. These experiences have taught me how to deal with most of the 'spooky' traits of the airplane. There are some. Almost every time I go to a contest, someone asks if I brought the *Spook* and will fly it. I will always have one!

There have been many other airplanes since then that I treasure as well. Trips to the Willamette Modelers Club meets, the SAM Champs and the Nationals have produced new friends all over the country. I befriended some of my famous childhood modeling heroes. I never dreamed of knowing them in person and on a first name basis, too. I like

to think I achieved a measure of fame of my own. At the least, many of the SAM folks know me well enough to keep in touch and ask about the *Big Red Spook*.

Some of the fame of another (more famous) Ed Lamb keeps causing a little confusion. Quite naturally, when I heard of the big unlimited rubber stick, the *Lamb Climber*, I had to build one. It is a good airplane and I have had a measure of success with it. Many times, when I get ready to fly it at the SAM Champs or elsewhere, someone will introduce himself to me wanting to meet "Ed Lamb." I have to explain that my full name is "Edwin" and that other Ed is (or was) "Edward." I have tried every way I know to find out what became of Edward to no avail. I think he must have been killed in World War II. I have not seen or heard anything about him since. I sure wish he were still around. I would like to introduce myself.

I am running out of things I want to say. The terrible happenings of the past few days back east, combined with the loss in the recent past of some of my closest friends and flying buddies, have caused me to reflect a bit. There is a kind of hurt deep in my gut that I hope will go away in time. Maybe later I will have a better attitude and be able to continue. There is a lot more to say, and I will.

-Ed Lamb

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