



# The AMA History Project Presents: Autobiography of AL LIKELY



Written by AL; Formatted and Edited by JS (07-08/2007), Reformatted by JS (10/2009)

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*Al Likely wrote the following autobiography.*

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## **An Autobiography of Al Likely**

The first recollection of model building I have is from the early 1950s. With an allowance of 25 cents a week, I can recall purchasing various small plastic models at a drug store in north Seattle. I constructed all types of models; ships, cars, tanks, airplanes, and an assortment of oddities built from leftover plastic cluttered my room. The first attempt with a balsa model failed during construction. The exact model escapes me but it was a small Comet kit. While attempting to use a double-edged razor blade, I managed to slice a fair amount of flesh from a knuckle on my right hand. I still have the scar. My mother and the doctor decided it would be best if I stuck with plastic, which I did for quite a while.

The next move my mother made had a life-long impact on me, and the rest of the family for that matter. On Christmas morning in 1955, I found a Jim Walker *Fire Baby* under the tree. This was one monumental step from plastics to a flying model, with a gas engine, fuel, a battery with wires and clips, lines and a handle, and other assorted goodies. I was not familiar with any these things, let alone knew how to use. To this day, I do not think my father was aware of this gift, as he was as surprised as I was. Neither one of us had a clue what to do with this stuff. I recall vividly how cold it was on the back porch in December as we took turns flipping that cub hour after hour. That metal propeller was sharp. I learned several new words from my father that evening and well into the night. By some miracle, we got it running and I have never forgotten the sound, smell, and sight of the orange glow from that little Cub, while surrounded in a Tester's fog.

We did not know it then, but another miracle was about to take place. A few days later on the local schoolyard, with lines and handle attached and ready, it was time to fly. The plan was simple. I would stand with the handle while my father would start the engine and launch the airplane. I would "gently" (as stated in the instructions) initiate a take-off from the sidewalk and fly over the grass. My father would duck and run. We had no idea what to expect, having never watched one of these things fly.

Then the miracle happened. My father started the engine, launched the airplane, ducked, and ran as planned. The airplane took off from the sidewalk and flew over the grass as planned. I can still feel the slight pull on that cardboard handle as the *Fire Baby* flew around relatively level and somewhat under control for the entire flight. It ran that balloon tank dry, and landed in the grass, flipping onto its back. It was a perfect first flight.

I flew that *Fire Baby* many hours through the summer and fall of 1956. I can honestly say I do not remember ever having crashed that airplane. It just wore out. I wish I had it back today.

During 1956 and 1957, with the help of a paper route and the support of my parents, I built a variety of ½A Control Line models. Some were successful and some were not. My second engine was a K&B .049 Fury. Living in a populated area and not being old enough to drive, Control Line was my main modeling interest. Free Flight was something I only read about in magazines. The first “large” model I (we) built was a Sterling profile *P-51*. I acquired and installed a K&B .23 Green Head, with 12x6 nylon propeller. Really! You will understand when I say it flew slow and steady. Soon to follow was a new McCoy .35, which put new life into that *Mustang*.

The years 1958 through 1961, I was involved in a great deal of modeling activity. I had a part time job during high school, which provided a little cash. I had also met R. F. Stevenson (Steve) who supplied me with many kits and a few engines. He would bring three kits over at a time and I would build all three, giving one completed airplane back to him. We remain good friends to this day.

This was the time of the Sand Point Meets, and Jim Walker Memorial Meets at Fort Lewis. I was flying Control Line Scale, Carrier, Stunt, and some Combat. This was also my first attempt at Free Flight. I built a *KIWI A* with a Fox .15 and flew it at Harts Lake Prairie. I never flew it in competition, but had a lot of fun. That airplane was lost in the woods on the south end of the field around 1960, and it is still there as far as I know. My second Free Flight airplane was a Goldberg *Blazer* with a K&B .049 Fury. The first flight was made on a very foggy morning on my grandfather’s farm in Centralia, Washington. The airplane was launched into the fog. My father and I stood there and watched as it immediately disappeared overhead. We never found that airplane either. This era also saw the formation of The Seattle Sky Raiders Control Line Model Airplane Club. Putting together a club was talked about off and on as early as 1958, but the first real effort to organize it was in 1959. Once again, it was R. F. Stevenson who provided financial support, and my father, Bill Likely, did most of the initial administrative work. The club, which was centered in northern Seattle, became very successful and is today one of the most active Control Line clubs in the Pacific Northwest.

One project I remember in particular was the construction of a concrete deck for launching planes in Carkeek Park. As I recall, Steve funded the materials and the club provided the labor. The Seattle Parks Department was then notified of this new facility in one of their parks. They in turn designated that area as a model airplane airport. This was in the early 1960s. Try doing that today! The deck is still there. In those days, we had friendly competition with the Auburn Strat-O-Bats, a rival Control Line club. The Strat-O-Bats have of course since turned to Free Flight, and The Sky Raiders have generally moved south.

In 1960, while still in high school, I got interested in full-scale flying and was able to start taking flying lessons at Kurtzer Flying Service on Lake Union. I would ride the bus down there one Saturday a month for an hour of dual each time. The cost was fourteen dollars an hour in a Taylorcraft. I actually soloed in that airplane in May of 1961 at the age of seventeen. Many years later, I would be instructing out of San Diego in a Pitts *S2A*, and charging one hundred fifty dollars an hour. Times change.

The years 1962 through 1972 are best described as a blur. After high school, there was college, women, Air Force, Vietnam, crop-dusting, women, marriage, flight instructing, charter flying, my daughter’s birth, right seat with a commuter airline.....in that order as I recall. The only model I

built during that time was a *Veco Dakota*, and I flew it a few times near Davis, California. For the most part modeling was left behind during those ten years, but my father had neatly stored away all my modeling equipment in the basement of his home, where it was recovered in 1973. I have heard so many horror stories of things thrown out over the years, but fortunately, mine was not.

In 1973, I was back in the Seattle area working for the Boeing Company, and more or less settled down. Living near what used to be a nice Free Flight field in Kent, Washington I caught the modeling bug again and started building on a regular basis. About this time, I met John Clear and Dick Stark while flying at the Kent field. The three of us met several evenings each week to fly, build, or tell modeling stories over pizza. I learned a great deal during the time I flew with these two modelers. We concentrated on sport flying, but did compete on occasion. They were both prolific builders and John was one of the cleverest people I have ever met. Dick Stark lost his life in a hang glider accident in August of 1977. Shortly after that, I lost touch with John Clear.

From 1978 through 1982, I was involved primarily in Free Flight Scale, both indoor and outdoor. Divorce had an impact, both good and bad, on my modeling activities. More time to build, but no shop to build in. Try building in a closet. Just as the situation was improving from my knothole, another life altering change was about to happen.

In February of 1983, I moved to San Diego, California to work for General Dynamics. To my great fortune, I ended up working in the same building, on the same floor, with Walt Mooney. What an experience that was. Walt had more energy than any five people did. At his suggestion, I joined the Scale Staffel Model Airplane Club, and flew with people such as Tom Arnold, Bob and Sandy Peck, Bill Hannan and many other top modelers. The education was priceless. The emphasis was on sport flying and having fun. I was active in the Experimental Aircraft Association (EAA) and the International Aerobatics Association. I also worked part-time as a flight instructor teaching aerobatics. This also proved to be interesting due to the constant lack of a definitive horizon in the smog. We used to say, "It's VFR but you can't see anything." However, that is another story.

The year 1985 found me back in Kent, Washington and again working for the Boeing Company. There was a strong trend within the Control Line world around this time towards Old Time and Classic Stunt flying. The designs that were popular were the designs that I had been flying in the late 1950s and early 1960s, *Ringmasters*, *Noblers*, the *Veco* line, *Barnstormers*, and others. So... back into Control Line I jumped. I re-joined the Sky Raiders and discovered the club had migrated south of Seattle also. There were many new faces, but it was a very strong group. I went "round and round" until the mid-1990s.

I never completely let go of my interest in Free Flight Scale, and in 1995, I had a phone call from Larry Olson. He was trying to get some of the old Scale modelers together for a fun fly. I pulled the 20-year-old *Fairchild 24* off the wall and drove to the field. I borrowed some rubber, a winder, some lube, and packed in the turns. The airplane flew and flew well. I was hooked. Therefore, I joined the Flying Aces Club. One of the first Scale meets I attended was at Harts Lake Prairie, and the local SAM 8 group was also there. I thought, hey, I could do that. Thus, I joined SAM 8. It has been the best time I have ever had. These two clubs have consumed the majority of my time since I retired in 1998. I have some forty completed airplanes scattered throughout the house. The majority of them are flyable, while some need to be trimmed.

Now it is 2000-and-something. Most of us are, or soon will be, asking ourselves the following questions: What is next? Has it all been worthwhile? Would I do it over again? Would I do it differently? Do I care that Free Flight may be going the way of the five-cent Coke? Am I concerned the next generation is not interested in Free Flight modeling? Does any of this really matter?

I have answered each of these for myself, as honestly as I know how. The answers are surprising, and will be kept to myself.

One thing I know for sure – if my doctor tells me I only have six months to live, I will build faster.



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