
Biography of JOSEPH ELGIN

March 2, 1920 – March 22, 2002

AMA Number: 87610

Transcribed and Edited by SS (6/02)

Career:

- Worked for the Cleveland Model Company from 1939 to 1940
- Worked as a lithographer from 1940 on, retiring as vice president of Photo Litho Plate Co.
- Most famous for designing the Playboy Sr. in 1940; other designs include Playboy Jr., Condor, Eaglet, Baby Playboy, Itsy Bitsy, Viking, Termalier and Gull
- Belonged to both the American Airlines Gas model Club and the Balsa Butchers Club while growing up in Cleveland, Ohio
- Built makeshift model airplanes during his time in a German prison camp during World War II
- Won a national championship and participated with various flight teams in the early 1950s including for Wakefield and FAI competitions
- Placed first at an international meet in England in 1953
- His cartoons were published in the book “Behind Barbed Wire”
- In 1980 was a founding member of the Cleveland Society of Model Aeronautics and served as its president
- Served as president of the Buckeye Soaring Club

Honors:

- 1982 – National Free Flight Society Hall of Fame
- 1990 – Society of Antique Modelers Hall of Fame
- 1998 – AMA Pioneer Award
- 1999 – Honored at the Society of Antique Modelers’ Championships
- 2000 – AMA Hall of Fame

Joe wrote the following article for the May/June 1999 issue of SAM Speaks, the newsletter of the Society of Antique Modelers. The piece was first published in the January 1989 issue of the SAM 1 newsletter as a letter to the editor.

Joe Elgin and the Cleveland Playboy

I started working for Cleveland Model in Ohio in the fall of 1939. The Condor Eaglet and Fleetster were drawn, followed by the Playboy, Jr., a class B ship that I had lost earlier in the year. I lost the ship and won the event and another O&R 23. The Playboy, Sr., which was next, was designed to compete with the newly introduced Goldberg sailplane. We really looked over this design and kit. It was a superb kit with all the die-cut ribs and parts. This certainly wasn't reflected in the Playboy kit. The airfoil section was very similar to the sailplane and it was no accident. I had seen the sailplanes fly, and will never forget those test hand glides. That was some airplane.

The Playboy Sr. was drawn and kitted. We did not have a prototype to photograph for ads or labels for the first kits. They used a pen-and-ink illustration for ads and labels were drawn by Jim Powell. I got permission to give two kits to Bill Schwab, an old friend and active modeler. It was mid-winter and testing was hardly possible in the Cleveland winters in the spring of 1940.

Bill was flying the Senior and the model was quite successful, winning many of the local contests and, as the ads show, was very successful for several years at the Nationals (Nats).

In my opinion, the two small gas models that were created for the then small Atom engine, the Baby Playboy and the Itsy Bitsy, were too small. There were also provisions to power for the Baby Playboy with rubber by extending the nose slightly. I wish that at least they were 225 to 250 square inches of wing area. It was impossible to get these models to eight ounces per square inch. I built two Baby Playboys; one for the store and another for a customer who asked to have one built for his son. We never flew the prototype and never did find if our customer successfully flew his.

Any Old Timers out there who built one of these, did you have any luck? Airframe, without motor, foil and batteries weighed in at about three ounces – a very fragile plane. If it survived the first flight, one was indeed very fortunate. The kit price was \$1, a great price. Recently I built a scaled-up version of about 500 square inches, powered with a K&B 19. It is a real performer. It is, however, not as attractive a plane compared to the Playboy Sr. The Itsy Bitsy is a good looking plane – streamlined fuselage with twin rudders. I often thought that it too would be good for Radio Controlled (RC) assist, but rudder control of twin rudders is a problem. Too complex for me.

I was an avid indoor and outdoor rubber flyer and as a result the Wakefield Gull and the Thermalier were added to the Free Flight program. In 1939, Dick Korda won the Wakefield and it was beginning to be a very popular event. I built and flew that model at a few meets in 1940. I didn't break any records with it. The Thermalier is a class C outdoor stick at just over 100 square inches and it was a good beginning plane. It didn't take much rubber and flew quite well.

About the most interesting program involved the six Nature Series planes. Ed (Pachasa) Packard had this idea for some time. With illustrations from Jim Powell, an excellent artist, we came up with six small rubber-powered models. Lack of rudder made V-tails a must. They weren't "mile-fliers," but made good conversation. I built all six, and we could get them to at least fly across the room.

The Tribute to Brave Nations Series was six Free Flight designs using the same printwood (wing and stab were the same in all six). Five were rubber and one a glider. These were named for the nations of World War II that were overrun by Germany starting in September 1939. As small models, just over 100 square inches (class C), they could possibly be used in a new category for SAM. I think I saw the Norseman at the 1988 SAM Champs in Indiana. The Flying Dutchman, a true rubber stick, is one I will never forget. It was an amphibian with Japanese tissue-covered pontoons heavily doped to be waterproof. The plans failed to show the width dimensions on the pontoons and we got a lot of letters asking for the dimensions.

Indoor flying was very popular in Cleveland. We had a beautiful armory in downtown Cleveland, which was open to all indoor flyers at any time as long as there was no military activity. We at Cleveland Model, I think, were the first to kit a class A Rise-off-Ground (ROG) microfilm model with complete instructions showing how to make microfilm.

Three hand-launched gliders were kitted, two class A indoor and one class B indoor.

The Viking was the last model before departing Cleveland Model and starting as a lithographer apprentice. At the Chicago Nats in 1940 I witness some small gas models (no pylons) that were great performers. The Viking was a result of these observations.

I have all the drawings of these models except the glider in Tribute to Brave Nations Series and the two class A gliders in the indoor series. I would like to obtain these if possible.

Going back to the Playboy Jr., the original was a 56-inch span under 300 square inch slab-sided. In 1941 it was altered to 54-inch span and the chord was increased to seven inches and additional longerons were added as in the Playboy Sr. This, I believe, was an improvement. It is the version that is most commonly seen.

I spent the war years (World War II) in the Air Force A.E. school in Biloxi, Mississippi – navigator training and 19 missions over in Germany. I was shot down and spent 16 months in a prisoner of war (POW) camp. While in camp, I was able to build some simple rubber-powered planes using elastic from suspenders. Even had a few fly over the fence and returned by the prison guards. After the war, I went back to active modeling in activities as follows:

1950 – First in Nats, CO2

1951 – Team member Wakefield in Finland and team member in FAI gas in France

- Wakefield design built by several modelers in the Cleveland area with good results

1952 – Ho'Boy, a 176-square inch ½-A built by friends and originally powered by a Wasp and later used an Albon Dart

1953 – Team member FAI gas in England

1954 – Proxy flyer for English flyer Ron Moulton on Long Island, New York, in FAI gas

Presently I'm involved in RC soaring and SAM events flying these models: ½-A Texaco Playboy Sr., Playboy Sr., scaled up Baby Playboy, Goldberg Interceptor, Korda's 1938 Diamond Zipper, Wakefield Gull and Thermalier.

Ed Packard would not allow anyone to put a name on a drawing. I would have been pleased if only the drawing said, "Drawn by Joe Elgin." I toyed with the idea of putting a "J.E." somewhere. Dick Korda's Champion was being kitted when I started. He had won the Wakefield that year and Cleveland Model tried to buy the design. They just didn't come up with the money and someone outbid Cleveland.

Korda's gas model was the alternative. Korda's name appeared with the ad for several months. In later editions it became Cleveland's Champion. The Playboy was named by Ed Packard, as were most of the planes. At the last minute, just before the drawings went to the printer, he

suggested that we should let the builder have a chance to make a cabin version if the builder chose to.

The few lines to indicate the cabin version of the Playboy Sr. left a lot to the builder's imagination. It was an excellent idea, as it also became a good competitor for the Old-Timer cabin events. I've never seen the Playboy scaled up, but have seen many from .020 to full size.

James Bennett wrote the following piece on Joe Elgin. The date and place of publication are unclear.

Joe Elgin

Who designed the Playboy? I mean the gas-powered model of the 1940s. How many knew it was Joe Elgin?

Joe grew up in Cleveland when the local club was the world-renowned Balsa Butchers. Chester Lanzo and Dick Korda were members. So were George Reich and Jerry Kolb. All were individual champs and record holders.

At age 18 in 1939, Joe became a principle designer for Cleveland Models. First was Playboy Jrs., a class B design he had built and flown. Next, Playboy Sr., a class C, was put into production even before building and testing. Bill Schwab built the first Senior kit and took a sixth place at the 1940 Chicago Nationals. A 33-inch span Baby Playboy was created for class A using the Atom engine. It was advertised as the first \$1 gas model kit. Itsy Bitsy was another 33-inch span \$1 gas model kit designed by Joe for the Atom engine.

After this series there were kits like the rubber-powered Gull and Thermalier. Then, the seven-foot span Towline, the Condor, a \$1 kit, and the Eaglet, a smaller towline. Joe's indoor flyers included that Baby ROG and two HLGs, the Dart and the Javelin. Another group by Joe were the Tribute to a Brave Nation series.

The August 1940 Model Airplane News magazine carried an article by Joe co-authored with Bill Schwab entitled "Models on the Fly." It was about a tiny film-covered model powered with a fly. The fly had to be carefully glued to the stick fuselage. A mid-engine, a tail first, a tandem and a biplane in addition to the conventional tractor were built.

After being downed by an FW190 as a B17 navigator, Joe became a POW for 16 months. While there, his creativity again came through. He cut wood (not balsa) into thin strips, scraped glue from furniture and used rubber thread from suspenders for power. A model was built that flew outside the compound. Guards were cooperative and did the retrieval.

Joe was a member of the 1951 U.S. Wakefield team that went to Finland. He and his wife Arnie then traveled to France to participate in the first FAI international power competition. Two years later at Cranfield he was a team member when the U.S. won individual and team championships.

He continued in FAI flying as a proxy at the 1954 World Championships at Suffolk County Air Force Base.

The following piece ran in Model Aviation magazine; the date is unknown, but it was around the time Joe was nominated for and inducted into the AMA Hall of Fame in 2000.

Joseph Elgin

Joseph Elgin, 80, hales from Ohio. Growing up in the Cleveland area during the Great Depression, he discovered aeromodeling. He regularly flew and competed against such aeromodeling luminaries as Dick Korda and Chester Lanzo.

Both before and after World War II, he successfully competed in Free Flight on a world-class level. In 1951, he competed in FAI Wakefield, representing the United States in Finland. The same year, he competed in gas Free Flight in France.

The year 1953 saw his participation in gas Free Flight in Cranfield, England.

His connection with Cleveland Models resulted in the design and kitting of many famous Free Flight designs. Included in this list are the Playboys Jr. and Sr., Condor, Eaglet, Baby Playboy, Itsy Bitsy, Viking, Termalier and Gull.

In 1972, working in conjunction with Chester Lanzo, he designed a more portable sailplane winch.

Elgin's national competition included a variety of events through the years. In 1950, he finished first in CO2 Free Flight at the Nats. The FAI Free Flight Gas team trophy was earned in 1953, along with a first in Free Flight Gas with a .15 glow engine.

He was a founding member of the Cleveland Society of Model Aeronautics in 1980. He served as president of that group as well as president of the Buckeye Soaring Club.

His many model designs continue to be flown today by thousands of modelers worldwide.

The following obituary for Joe ran in the Cleveland (Ohio) Plain Dealer on March 26, 2002.

Joseph Elgin, Designed Model Airplanes

By Alana Baranick

STRONGSVILLE – Services for Joseph Elgin, who designed model airplanes that have been flown by hobbyists for more than 60 years, will be at 11 a.m. today at the Berea United Methodist Church, 170 Seminary Street, Berea.

Elgin, 82, a retired Photo Litho Plate Co. vice president, died Friday at his home in Strongsville. He designed the Playboy Sr., a Free Flight gas-powered model with an 80-inch wingspan, which was introduced in 1940 by the Cleveland Model Company.

Although he worked for the company for only a year before pursuing a career as a lithographer, Elgin created several other model planes and gliders for do-it-yourself kits.

Elgin, who was born in Central City, Pennsylvania, began flying models competitively while growing up in Cleveland. He belonged to the American Airlines Gas Model Club on the city's west side and its east-side counterpart, the Balsa Butchers Club.

During World War II, the Lincoln High School graduate served with the Army Air Forces in Europe as a navigator on a B-17.

He was wounded and captured after his aircraft was shot down on his 19th mission over Germany.

He managed to build simple model planes, propelled by elastic from suspenders, during his 16 months in German prison camps.

After the war, he returned to his job at the Photo Litho Plate Co. and resumed competing at model air meets. In the early 1950s, he won a national championship and participated with various flight teams, including a group representing the United States that placed first in an international meet held in England in 1953.

Elgin received the Academy of Model Aeronautics Pioneer Award in 1998 and was honored at the Society of Antique Modelers Championship in 1999.

He was an amateur photographer, who entered his back-and-white photos in May Show competitions at the Cleveland Museum of Art. He also was a cartoonist, whose depictions of wartime experiences were published in the book "Behind Barbed Wire."

Survivors include his wife of 54 years, Arnella; daughters Debra Page of Berea and Jodi Dragan of Raleigh, North Carolina; and four grandchildren.

Arrangements are by the Baker Funeral Home of Berea.

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