
Autobiography of KARL ANTHONY GIES

Modeler since 1937 Birth Date: September 21, 1937

Written & Submitted by CG (2005)

Edited by JS (10/07)

The Vision and the Promise

During World War II, I lived in my maternal grandmother's house in Missoula, Montana. My Dad had been drafted into the army shortly after Pearl Harbor and we were to stay in Missoula until he got back and was discharged. My grandmother owned four houses, all in a row, with a huge field in back that went down to the Clark's Fork River. Across the river was the main line of the Chicago, Milwaukee, and St. Paul railroad, which ran from Chicago to Seattle. On an almost daily basis, we would watch trains from the riverbank carry troops, airplanes, tanks, trucks, artillery, and more on its way to Seattle and then off to the Pacific Theatre. I was four years old when the war started.

My dad survived the Philippines Campaign and General McArthur, whom he loathed. He served as a medic with an infantry company in the Sixth (Red Arrow) Army Division. In 1946, we moved to Lewistown, Montana where my dad had purchased a saloon, "The Elkhorn." He promptly renamed it "The Glacier Tavern." It seemed that every town in Montana had a Stockman, Glacier, or Mint bar. This is the last business an alcoholic should be involved.

One of the more popular pastimes of boys and men in Lewistown was building model airplanes. My father's brother owned a model airplane hobby shop in Great Falls, Montana during the war, which he closed after owning it for a couple of years due to lack of inventory. Uncle Raymond was somewhat disabled from being burned badly and built all kinds of model airplanes. He would let me launch small rubber models that he built. I was hooked. I can still vividly remember his hobby shop with all kinds of models hanging from the ceiling and many colorful and alluring model airplane kits. Great box art and extravagant claims were an integral part of the model airplane industry in the forties.

There were four stores in Lewistown that sold model airplanes, but the best one was Shull's Tire & Hobby Shop. Old Mr. Shull let his entrepreneurial grandson, Bobby, who was in high school, maintain a hobby shop in this smelly old tire shop. Nate's Sport Center was almost as good. Both places had a large inventory of model airplane kits, engines, and model supplies.

The vision usually started with reading a Comet, Scientific, or Megow ad in a model airplane magazine along with one of the many thrilling stories. This was followed by a trip to the various stores selling models, looking at the models hanging from the ceiling and then through the kits. The next step was acquiring the necessary funds for purchasing a kit and model cement. There were always plenty of sidewalks to shovel, lawns to cut, and beer bottles to rack at my dad's tavern. All of the bottles were returnable back then and bottle uniformity was not part of the brewery business. They did not have beer in cans yet.

Then there was the model kit claim or promise. All of the boxes were colorful and had extravagant claims: “Flies at Least a Mile,” “Winner of Many Contests,” “Designed by Dick Korda, World Champion,” etc. Most of my friends were drawn to models of World War II fighters.

Once I acquired the kit and accompanying promise, it was the end of the visioning, dreaming stage, and actual construction started. Opening the box and taking out the plans, balsa wood, wheels, sawed propeller, nose block, and fittings was an early thrill for me. Looking over all of this stuff, studying the plan, and anticipating actually having my own Douglas Dauntless dive-bomber was almost more than I could handle.

We lived in a huge Old Dutch Colonial house and I had my own bedroom after one too many battles with my younger brother. A card table and pine boards were my shop in the bedroom. The tools and supplies were simple: pins, wax paper, ruler, model cement, dope, sandpaper, tack hammer, X-Acto knife, razor blades, and paintbrushes. Technical support consisted of my mother and other kids. My dad had absolutely no interest in this folly and was never home much anyway. Mom graduated with a home economics degree from college and knew how to read patterns and sew. This skill came in handy when helping me interpret model plans. My bedroom reeked of model cement, dope, and banana oil. I cannot remember what I used banana oil for, but it smelled great. No matter what the weather, my mom was always opening the windows because of her concern over the fumes.

While building a model, I always had my radio on, listening to the “Green Hornet,” “Sky King,” “The Shadow,” “Sergeant Preston of the Yukon,” and, of course, “Flash Gordon.” This was not only a world of model airplanes, but also a world of good against evil. Evildoers lurked everywhere in my imagination. When I got bored with building, I read funny books or “The Hardy Boys” books, a series of adventures on boys being private detectives. I never knew a kid in the forties who did not want to be a private detective. While all of this was going on, I was secretly “The Masked Avenger,” “Harold Ramirez, Private Investigator,” or some other imaginary hero. How many of us as boys were “Walter Mittys?”

Models were built quickly as a boy. If they did not build fast, they did not happen. I tried to build a Cleveland Scale kit given to me by a neighbor and gave up on it. Once a model was completed, it was back to the vision and dreaming stage. The finished model was suspended from my bedroom ceiling by a thread. This was followed by days of intense staring and admiration. I could lie on my bed and watch the completed Douglas Dauntless waft about in the house breezes and become some imaginary Marine Corps or Naval aviator hero.

The Comet Douglas Dauntless stayed on my bedroom ceiling for years. I did not want it to suffer the fate of most of my early modeling efforts, which had disastrous flying results, many of which ended in horrific fires.

From military model airplanes, I went to the Comet, Scientific and other model airplane kits that were designed “to fly at least a mile, win contests, or be almost unbeatable.” My first successful

flying model airplane and it was a very modest success but captured my heart and imagination, was a Scientific "Victory" designed by Dick Korda. At this time, I had a new neighbor and mentor. A kid named Larry, one year younger, moved in behind us. His dad was a civil engineer, farmer, private pilot, expert mechanic, and a one-time model airplane builder. He helped me with the Victory as Larry was also building a model airplane and this was all done in Larry's basement with a deluxe shop. The kit came with a sawn prop and his dad helped me with it. He also helped us trim our models so that we could achieve a modicum of success. Success was the model flying perhaps as high as a small tree (30' to 50'?) and gliding in like a real airplane. Models were like girls, a little success went a long ways. We did not have or even know about winders or lubing the motors. These were hand wound models with poor rubber, but they somewhat flew. We built many Comet, Scientific and other rubber powered model kits that had great claims and promises fueling our expectations.

We ventured into gas models with a couple of real simple models. The pinnacle of our success was a standard Berkeley "Brigadier" gas model with a 58" wingspan. Larry had an O&R .19 or .23 ignition engine. My part was purchasing the Brigadier kit and necessary supplies. Len helped us a lot and we covered it with red silk span. Larry had an older sister who was into art and she helped us with some black trim. This model was built so well under Len's expert supervision that it flew with very few adjustments.

Larry was a kid who got bored with things quickly and always pushed the envelope. I can still remember him saying, "Let's fill it up with fuel, and see how high it will fly." I knew that this was not a good idea and should have stopped him. The result was we could no longer see the model in the sun filled sky but could still hear the engine with our young ears and of course, the model was lost. His dad was furious with us but did take up his plane and look for it. In my memories, I am still looking for it today. It would be years before I could get a rubber model to fly high enough to flirt with the mystery of the endless sky and go wherever the gypsy thermals take it.

I had periods of inactivity in model building but still always kept in touch with it. I got back into to it in the late 1960s and pretty much stayed with it. I went to my first SAM Champs in 1991 and it was a life changing experience in respects to model airplanes. This hobby helped me through two divorces and probably kept me from going totally insane. But then it is an insanely great hobby.

Cheers,
Captain Cornell Crawford, Neighborhood Hero
Performing random acts of heroism and minor miracles on an almost daily basis.
Aka Karl Anthony Gies

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