
Biography of JOE RASPANTE

Pioneer, RC Modeler, Experimenter

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Joe was a Radio Controlled (RC) pioneer. His contemporaries were Clinton B. Desoto, the Good brothers, Jim Walker, etc. His first RC model was a Super Buccaneer, scaled up to double size, by his good friend, Sal Taibi. The radio was one that Joe had designed and built himself, and used a telephone dial in the transmitter as a control selector.

Joe started in “Ham” radio in 1929 as a teenager. As his skills grew with radio he started to make a living from radio repair. In time he earned a franchise from the Majestic Radio Company, and called his radio repair shop on Atlantic Avenue, in Brooklyn, N.Y., the “Majestic Radio Repair Shop.” It opened in 1937. He had a Ham radio station and metal working equipment in the back of his shop, where he developed the radio equipment that he later used in his models.

Knowledge of his accomplishments reached companies like Union Carbide Co., makers of the Eveready batteries. When Joe needed very small and light weight batteries for his models, the company was glad to make up these special batteries for him.

Joe was flying RC as early as 1937 and attracted the attention of Elmer Sperry with his early RC model.

This story as related to me by Joe about 1964 and is only as accurate as my memory. (The year is uncertain, probably 1939.) One Sunday while out flying his giant RC model, a teenager who had been watching Joe working on his model came up to him and started to ask him questions about his RC model. Joe always gave time to kids, answered all his questions. Joe observed that the father of the boy stood back a ways and didn't speak. This incident repeated itself for a number of weeks, before the father stepped forward to thank Joe for his patience with his son's questions. He introduced himself and Joe was surprised to find out that the father's name was Elmer Sperry. Sperry subsequently hired Joe in order to bring his talents and skills to his company. Elmer Sperry appreciated what Joe had achieved with no engineering staff, as Sperry had experimented with RC and understood what Joe had accomplished. Joe worked for Sperry for 27 years until his retirement in 1967.

Around 1938 Joe designed and built the famous model, Snow White, which became the standard of excellence in modeling. The model won many contests and was considered by many competitors as a model that was hard to beat. If Joe showed up with his Snow White, the best

you could hope for was second place. Snow White won the prestigious Berryloid competition at the 1939 Nationals (Nats).

Raspante competed in RC during the 1939 and 1940 Nats taking a second in 1939 and third in 1940. Joe flew his familiar double sized Super Buccaneer. Joe designed and built the Willie III around 1938-39 and was a replacement for the Super Buccaneer. The last time that the Willie III was flown in competition (to my knowledge) was at the New York Daily Mirror's (a local newspaper) 1946 Model Meet, where Joe took a first place.

On Nov. 25, 1939 Joe was a guest, and speaker on John Gambling's "Model Airplane Club of the Air." This was broadcast on radio station, "WOR-Mutual Network." During the program, Joe spoke to modelers about RC modeling.

He also loved scale model powerboats. I remember his six-foot Chris-Craft boat that was powered by an Avion Mercury engine. He was the consummate inventor. The stand that this boat sat on had a geared starter crank with a dog clutch (gear) that engaged the propeller under the rear of the boat. To start the engine, all he had to do, was to turn on the fuel cock, switch on the ignition and crank the starter handle.

He later on built a large (I'm not sure of the size) PT boat that had the "Works." It was powered by a water-cooled, four-cylinder, inline, four-stroke engine that he built. The boat was, of course, built to his exacting standards, complete with every detail. It had guns that swiveled and fired blanks. A loud speaker on board that called out the swabbies to sweep the deck, "fore and aft." An anchor that raised and lowered and Torpedoes that could be fired, all by radio. This boat model is now on exhibit at the Navy's floating museum, the aircraft carrier Enterprise, which is anchored at a pier in New York City.

Recently, I had the honor of returning Joe's last RC model the Willie III to the modeling world, when I delivered it to the A.M.A. museum in Reston, Va. The first time I saw the Willie III was during the 1946 New York's Mirror Meet. The New York's Daily Mirror was a newspaper that was interested in modeling, and used to run a large (1,000 contestants) contest every year. In 1946 it gave away a full scale Aerocoupe as first prize to the meet champion.

In 1946 Joe had entered his large model in the contest's RC event and won first place. I never got a good look at the plane at the time as I was a contestant at that meet and did not have too much time to take a closer look. I did remember seeing the model airborne and commented on its size.

Many years later when our club, the L.I.D.S. held the first RC contest at Mitchell Field, Long Island. I was on the contest planning committee. I was charged with the meet's publicity and was looking for something that would attract a large crowd and be the showpiece, the grabber of attention of the meet. I immediately thought of Joe and his big RC model.

This was 1964, and I had not spoken to Joe for years. I felt kind of funny calling him for a favor,

after not calling him for so long. When he answered the call he responded as if I had spoken to him only last week. He was always pleasant.

I quickly came to the point, "Joe, do you still have that big plane that I saw at the Mirror Meet?"

"Well ... yes and no."

"Joe what does that mean?"

"Are you busy now?"

"No."

"Well why don't you come over to the house now and I'll show you."

I called Harold Brink, who was on the committee with me and we went over to Joe's house. Joe lived in a modest house in the village of Lake Success, not too far from the Sperry plant where he worked. We knew which house was Joe's by the 1953 Ford Thunderbird sitting in his driveway. This classic car was Joe's pride and joy, and Joe kept it in pristine condition.

We were taken to the basement, which was totally finished. It was divided (if memory serves me) into two parts. One part was his work shop. It was quite large, I would say, 15 by 20 feet and finished like a kitchen. That is it had cabinets along both long walls with Formica tabletops. There were also hanging cabinets above the counters very much like a kitchen. The floors were finished with asphalt tile and highly polished. The ceiling was complete with a hanging ceiling and recessed fluorescent lights. It looked more like a laboratory than a modeler's work shop. It was a personification of Joe. He was always dressed and groomed neatly.

On the counter (workbench to us common folk) was Joe's fabled PT boat, sitting on its stand. He removed the top so that we could see the innards. Needless to say, Harold and I were dazzled and overwhelmed. Even though the shop was clean as a whistle, as Joe opened cabinet after cabinet, drawer after drawer, you suddenly realized the pristine condition of the shop belied what really took place there. It was definitely a working shop; it was just Joe's manner of working that kept the shop in that condition.

Then we went through a door to Joe's radio station. Joe was an active "Ham" (Amateur radio operator) and his radio station was as professional looking as any commercial station. The station was designed and built by Joe, and had the same fastidious appearance as his shop. (This was 1964 - later Joe converted his station to a video broadcast station as noted by Mr. Holms.)

After getting the grand tour of Joe's shop he took us upstairs to the top floor of the house, and explained that all of his large airplanes used to be kept in the attic. At a certain point he had the attic finished to give Joe Jr. his own room. When this was done the big planes that were stored they were placed outside the room's walls. In other words, they were between the room walls and the roof. Sometimes called the eaves of the roof. The only access to this area was a small removable panel, about 30 inches wide by 48 inches high. Joe moved aside the dresser to expose the panel. Harold and I looked at each other in disbelief as we peered into the crawl space and saw the fabled Snow White covered with dust, looking, for the most part, like a ghost from the

past. Also seen were portions of his large RC plane, Willie III.

Joe reached in and grabbed the wing tip of the Willie III wing and pulled it out through the small opening. He could only bring out about four feet or so before reaching the adjacent wall. Fortunately that wall had a window in it so Joe opened the window and had most of the wing out the window before the other wing tip appeared. He then pulled the wing into the room and placed it on the floor. It just about went from wall to wall. At the time, it was the largest model I had ever seen. The wing was in terrible shape, or at least the covering was, it was all torn, dried out and brittle – obviously in no shape to be shown. The fuselage still in the attic looked a little better.

It was about four weeks to go before the contest. I turned to Joe and asked, “Can you get this plane fixed in time for the contest?” He thought for a moment and replied, “I’ll need a little help. I can get the rest of the plane in shape, but that wing will take a little time.”

Harold who was up to now stunned by the presence of this famous pioneer and awed by the tremendous size of the plane, suddenly found his tongue. “Can I help?” he volunteered. Joe just smiled, put his arm around Harold's shoulder and said, “Do you know how to cover with silk?” When Harold assured him that he could, Joe gave him the job of recovering the whole wing.

On the way back, all Harold could talk about was about Joe and that big airplane. Joe and Harold became old friends after that and, with Harold's help, the plane was ready in time to be exhibited at the meet. As a matter of fact, it was Harold who transported the plane to the contest. The presence of the plane at the contest attracted an awful lot of attention, which is what we wanted.

At the meet it was probably the most photographed plane at the field. I know that I took a lot of shots. One of the pictures that I took was with my two children (ages 5 and 7) sitting under a wing of Joe's plane, which I now have framed and hanging on the wall. Another picture that I took, with Joe holding the wing tip was used on cover of the now defunct Grid Leaks magazine.

The contest was in the spring, and after it was over I had not heard from Joe until one day in September, when he called to tell me that since the plane was in such good shape, he decided to equip the plane with modern RC equipment, his Orbit 8 Channel reed system and fly his Willie III once again. (You must remember that this is 1964.) He wanted to get my opinion as to the latest techniques in RC, having been inactive for so long. His concern was whether the two speed points (Yes! The O.K. Twin that powered the plane was on ignition) would be adequate to bring down his plane, with the ignition in low speed. This may seem a strange question, but you must remember that the plane (all eleven feet of it) weighed 14 pounds. Seven of these pounds were radio and batteries. The installation of the Orbit equipment was only one and a half pounds, making the new weight only 8-1/2 pounds. (Joe builds light.) With the area and the high lift airfoil he had it was possible to have a problem bringing the plane down. I suggested that he install a choke butterfly on the intake to work together with the low speed points, to richen the

mixture and slow engine down enough to land.

A week later Joe called to say that he would be coming out to our Mitchell Field flying site. He was ready to fly the Willie III once more. I called a number of our club members to assist with the project, and had the presence of mind to bring my camera to record the event. After Joe assembled the plane, and we took our pictures, Joe decided to let Larry Davidson, an experienced “reed” flyer handle the controls, as Joe felt that he did not have enough “stick” time to do justice to the task. Present at the field that day was Joe's son, Joe Jr., who had never seen the Willie III fly, because the last time it flew was in 1946 at the New York Mirror Meet, where he took first place. That was the year that Joe, Jr. was born.

Joe got the engine started very quickly and, after checking out the control functions, Larry gave the signal to release the plane. The plane shot forward and within six feet was airborne. It climbed to an altitude of about 400 feet, and it was only then we were aware that Larry was having any trouble. The trouble was that the plane wanted to keep climbing and Larry found it necessary to apply more and more down elevator. After circling the field a couple of times it was decided to bring the plane down. Low throttle was turned on (due to the two speed points there was only two speeds -high and low) and the laborious task of bringing the plane down commenced. The worst fears of Joe and myself came to fruition. The plane was so light that the plane wanted to climb even with low throttle. Larry had to resort to full down elevator and low throttle to get the plane to lose altitude. After three or four circles of the field in this mode, Larry got the plane down to about six feet off the runway, but due to the ground effect the plane just would not come down any lower. He made another circuit of the field, banking sharply to keep the plane as close to the ground as he could and, this time, a half a dozen helpers ran along under the plane trying to grab the wheels, or any part of the plane to pull it down out of the sky. (It flew so slow that they could stay under it for a couple of hundred feet.)

The scene was comical, almost like the Keystone Kops routine – or even reminiscent of a dirigible landing. They finally managed to grasp one of the wheels and brought the plane down safely. It was its last flight. A couple of years later Joe told me of his plans to donate the plane to the Nassau County Museum.

The pictures I took that day were published in Model Airplane News in 1965, under the title, “25 Years Young.” Today (1987) it could be called 47 Years Young.

This is an excerpt from an article about Joe and his Snow White by author Al Holmes in the August 1982 Model Builder:

“About the designer: Joe Raspante is a unique person. His interest and talents range in every direction. Today most of his time is spent with his model airplanes and boats, and his TV ham station (that's right TV). When I first met him, years ago, it was only a radio station. Every item in his station is hand made by him, with the exception of TV monitors, cameras (color and black & white) and a recorder. He has a servo system he made to operate a robot that moves, focuses and zooms his cameras while he broadcasts.

It's far out!"

The problem of duplicating the Classic model of Snow White has been rectified by the Al Holmes' who wrote in the same article as above:

"I personally had known Joe Raspante for over 40 years. He was a quiet, soft spoken, gentle man. His skills were in electronics, model building and metal-working. He was a scratch builder who knew no peer.

The (ham) radio station was built and fabricated entirely by hand. This also includes the equipment he required to convert his "radio" station to a "TV" station. His "TV" station resembled a commercial station. The model airplanes that he built were also built from scratch and were of such sound design and quality that his last RC plane he built, survived years of neglect and is on display at the A.M.A. Museum today. The model, Snow White, also survived, but was dismembered (sacrificed) in order to produce a set of plans so that modelers could reproduce this fabulous model."

In the same issue of Model Builder the above article was prefaced by the editor, Bill Northrup:

"Snow White was simply a very beautiful gas model, designed and built by Joe Raspante in 1937-1938, which went on to win many beauty contests, where flying ability was also an important factor. Its beauty has remained timeless and, down through the years, it has been considered by many modelers as something special, revered, something with a mystique and aloofness, mostly because it could not be duplicated...[there were] no plans, no kit."

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