
Autobiography of R. SAL TAIBI

Modeler since 1933

Birth Date: April 5, 1920 AMA Number: 3255

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Career:

- In September 1938 he designed the Powerhouse
- In April 1939 set a national record with a Bay Ridge Diamond Demon with an Ohlsson 23
- Met Joe Raspante in 1937 and in 1939 designed a 12-foot Radio Controlled (RC) model for him
- In 1940 the Powerhouse model won contests and the plans were published in Model Airplane News
- Designed the Brooklyn Dodger in 1941
- Went to work for the N.A.C.A at Langley Field, Virginia in 1941
- Won a first at the National Model Airplane Championships at Chicago, Illinois in 1941
- In 1958 designed another model called The Starduster
- Has been flying Old-Timer and modern Free Flight since retiring in June 1970
- Served as president of the Society of Antique Modelers (SAM) in the mid-1980s for four years and as secretary/treasurer for two years
- Attended every National Championship (Nats) from 1939 to 1994, except in 1946 when he was still in Germany
- Attended every SAM Champs since 1966
- A member of AMA since 1936

Honors:

- 1974 – AMA Hall of Fame
- 1975 – AMA Fellow
- 1978 – National Free Flight Society Hall of Fame
- 1989 – SAM Hall of Fame

Lifetime Membership in the following organizations:

- AMA
 - SAM
 - The Fresno Club
 - The Scamps club
 - The Thermal Thumbers Club
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As a teenager

In 1934 I met Louis Cannava who was in the same class that I was in. Louis was to have quite an influence in my life. Not directly, but through the manner of introducing me to the hobby of building model airplanes.

Louis and I were inseparable chums. We walked to school together, played after school and generally enjoyed each other's company, as young boys will. Louis was a model builder, while I had no interest in it. I would just watch.

One day Louis' mother sat on one of his models. I guess at that point, Louis had it. He offered me what was left the model and kit. I said yes, and Louis gave me everything – the kit, glue, pins and a small work board. It was that simple, I was a model builder.

I got so interested in model building that I spent less and less time with Louis and lost even more interest in my schooling. My all-consuming interest seemed to be in building models.

This eventually led to dropping out of school. I had an argument with my civics teacher, and that was my last day at school. I was motivated with building models and not toward schooling. My parents were not hard to convince. They needed the money.

So I left school and got my first job in the fur industry. I worked downtown in the manufacturing district in New York. I worked eight hours a day for six days a week and was paid \$12 a week. I don't remember how much money my parents gave me, but I had enough for model building, so I was content.

In 1938 I met another model builder named Leon Shulman. Leon was a good influence on me as he believed in competition, and flew in local contests. So I was off to making a name for myself in the field of model aeronautics.

Leon had introduced me to the Tambe Club. I belonged to it for a while until people like Leon, Scotty Murray, Mickey Beitchman, Pinky Fruchtmann, Carl Cecil, Maurice Shoenbrun and myself broke away from Tambe in 1936 and formed the Brooklyn Skyscrapers Club.

We went to all the meets in New Jersey and Pennsylvania. I went for two years and didn't win even a measly 10th place. In September 1938 I designed the Powerhouse. I won my first prize – first place in cabin. Then in April 1939 I set a national record with a Bay Ridge Diamond Demon with an Ohlsson 23. I won first place at Lake Hopatchong in September 1939, setting a class C Rise-off-Water (R.O.W.) record at that meet.

I met Joe Raspante sometime in 1937. He was flying a Buccaneer standard and was just finishing up Snow White. We flew together in all the New Jersey and Pennsylvania meets. Sometime in 1939 I designed a 12-foot Radio Controlled (RC) model for Joe. It really looked like an enlarged Buccaneer. We would go out to Hicksville to fly it. It weighed in at 17 pounds, ready to fly and had an O.K. Twin in the nose. This airplane was so heavy that the O.K. Twin would just barely fly it. I'd get the engine running, pick it up, run as fast as I could run and throw it.

It would settle down to about two or three feet off the ground and then start a very slow climb. Joe would kill the engine at about 200 feet and gently fly it back to earth.

We flew it in the 1939 and 1940 Nationals (Nats), always second to the Good boys. They were the first ones to complete the ½-mile upwind and return. It only took about four or five minutes, but seemed like an hour – what a struggle.

Joe went to work for Sperry Gyroscope and was so involved with the Bombsight work that he missed the 1941 Nats. In September of 1941 I went to work at N.A.C.A., and didn't see Joe again until about 1948 or 1949. I visited with him at his home on Long Island.

In 1941 I designed the Brooklyn Dodger for H&F Models in Brooklyn. I ran the Berkeley Models saw room (cutting balsa) from 1938 to 1941 when I went to work for the N.A.C.A at Langley Field, Virginia.

The Powerhouse model won quite a few contests for me and early in 1940 the plans were published in Model Airplane News. This was the first of about a dozen model designs that I had published in various model magazines. As my reputation as a serious contest flyer and designer grew, it seemed to spur me on, and in 1941 I was fortunate to win a first at the National Model Airplane Championships at Chicago, Illinois.

At this point I might say that winning in a contest requires much preparation, almost perfection in flying, plus a little break in many other factors, which I will attempt to place in their proper order.

First, a well-trimmed and sturdy model can be flown when there are thermals in the flying area. As Free Flight models are judged for endurance of flight, only the second reason is apparent. Get into a thermal and get a good flight.

Third, the judge who does the timing should have good eyesight. The models drift with the wind and if the timer has poor eyesight, he will lose contact with it and the flight ceases when that happens.

Fourth, the model must be retrieved for another flight. The winner is determined by the highest total time accumulated for the three flights.

Well, I was fortunate to get all of my flights in at the Chicago Nats. All were thermal flights and I was very careful about picking my timer for good vision.

At that time I thought that I had reached my highest achievement, but 48 years (1996) have gone by since Chicago, and I still keep bringing home the trophies.

The Adult

My fame as a model builder led to a job with the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics at Langley Field, Virginia. I had been there for only three months when Japan hit Pearl Harbor.

The programs at Langley Field changed from a casual research effort, to an all out effort for the design, modification and flight proofing of our military aircraft.

At this time in 1942 I was offered an apprenticeship in tool making, which I accepted. All the

draft age men at Langley Field were placed in the Army Reserves on an inactive status. This would keep us out of the draft and also discourage voluntary enlistments. We were needed for the research effort at Langley Field. Many tried to enlist, but were sent back when it was learned that they were employed at Langley Field.

The area around Langley Field was a real hotbed for model aviation, also. Most of the fellows employed at Langley were model builders like myself. Of the 500 employed at Langley, about 150 were avid modelers. In 1941 I met Frank Vollrath. Frank worked with me in the Machine Shop. We were good friends and fellow modelers. Frank got married in late 1943, and brought his bride to Copeland Park, Virginia, to live. In a few months his wife's sister came to visit for a few weeks. Her name was Nathalie Mary Snavely, and she was a gorgeous woman, and lots of fun. After a whirlwind courtship, we were married in Copeland Park, Virginia.

We lived quite happily for about a year, when we got the bad news. The reserves were being called to active duty. I was called in April 1945. While I was in basic training, Germany surrendered. I was sent to Lowery Field, Denver, Colorado, for training as a B-29 Machine Gun Turret Mechanic. My wife had joined me just prior to leaving Basic Training Camp, so we journeyed together to Denver.

I went to school during the day, and because I was on separate rations, was home every night at 5 p.m. My wife worked during the stay in Denver for a sugar company. Between her salary and my allowance for separate rations, we lived quite comfortably. I often look back and think of our three months in Denver as our second honeymoon.

About three or four months later Japan surrendered, and I was given orders to report to Camp Patrick Henry, in Newport News, Virginia, about 10 miles from where we were married. A few weeks later I left for overseas duty with the Occupation Forces in Europe. We were the first boatload of replacements for the homecoming fighting forces.

We landed in Le Harve, France on the coldest night I can remember. Prior to landing, the officer of the day came into our compartment and told everyone to get their long underwear on. It was an order.

I had on my long underwear, two pairs of socks, O.D. wool pants, tucked into my combat boots, O.D. shirt, a sweater, an Eisenhower jacket and an overcoat. I was clothed for cold weather, and I don't know when I've been colder. I shook from the cold, of course, standing on the dock for an hour while the Red Cross served coffee and donuts, and it didn't help a darn bit.

We boarded a train to Paris and upon arrival, the officer in charge said, "Get one case of C Rations for each car." By that time I knew how the Army worked, so I got a case for myself. It was a wise decision. As it worked out, our overnight ride turned out to be a week's ride to never-never land. Everywhere we went, the officer was told, "Your division doesn't belong here." After a tour of France, and part of Germany, we finally arrived in Furstenfeldbruck, home, at least for a few days. We were then transferred to the air base at Landsburg, a town that had

become famous because it was in that town that Hitler had written, "Mein Kampf."

During the day it was my job at the Landsburg Air Base to do the necessary machinist operations in the base motor pool. I built model airplanes in the evenings and flew them whenever I found the opportunity. I would say that my only problem was sex or the lack of it. Leaving the U.S.A. after being married for only 19 months, and being in my middle 20s, I missed the normal sex relations.

My moral standards wouldn't let me fraternize, so I stayed away from women. I would say that this was my toughest adjustment that I had to make while overseas. I did the normal sightseeing, Munich Beer Gardens, went to a few operas, spent two days at Berchtesgarden (Hitler's retreat), and visited my brother-in-law a few times. Frank Vollrath was stationed about 100 miles away and it was pretty easy distance to cover in a day and visit for a while.

I think my first sergeant had as happy a reaction as I did when my shipping orders came through, for my return to States. I needed that poor guy with the same question, every time I saw him, "When am I going home?" He was almost as happy as I was to be going home.

We arrived in New York and the Statue of Liberty never looked so good. I remember sailing past Coney Island, and thinking how many happy days I had spent there. It sure was good to see the city again. It may sound corny, but for two cents I'd have gotten down and kissed the soil of the good ol' USA.

I was discharged in Chicago and decided to settle in Indianapolis, Indiana. Before going overseas, enroute from Denver to Virginia, we had stopped in Indianapolis for a two weeks stay. While there I had fixed a home for my wife to live in. It was just two doors north of her parents' home. It seemed very comfortable, so I got a job at the Naval Ordnance Plant, and we lived in Indianapolis for the next five years.

Again the influence of modeling enters into the picture. We had heard and read about the California climate, and the no down payment homes that could be purchased by veterans. We had been trying to purchase a home in Indianapolis. We saved \$500 and we got that amount and by that time the down payment had gone up to \$800. When we saved the \$800 the down payment had risen to \$1200. It appeared that the real estate people were always out of reach. We got discouraged and decided to see if the easy housing was really available in California. My wife wanted a home and I had heard about the excellent modeling sites in California. In addition flying went on there all year round.

So we made a quickie trip to California and while out here I arranged for a transfer to the Naval Ordnance Test Station in Pasadena and purchased a home in Lakewood.

We arrived in California to stay in April of 1951. I met many friends in the next two years. One in particular Bill Baker owned a company that manufactured model airplane kits.

One day Bill asked to accompany me to the flying field to watch a model fly. He was contemplating the production of a model kit and wanted my opinion concerning its design, flyability, etc. The model was not a good design. The designer was flying it under low power because of its instability, so I recommended him to bypass this model.

At that point Bill Baker asked me if I would design a model for him to manufacture. We came to terms on the royalty rates and in 30 days I presented him with the finished working drawings for a model called the Spacer. We both made out very well on this one. It sold very well in the States and also in foreign countries. It was by far my best design, and netted me a little over a \$1,000 in royalties.

In 1958 I designed another model called The Starduster. This model was a better model than the Spacer, and it showed such promise that I decided to make some money myself instead of settling for royalties. In 1959 two modeling friends, R.A. Van De Walker and Curtis Stevens, and myself formed our own company called Competition Models.

We each invested \$550 and started manufacturing the Starduster series of Free Flight model airplane kits. In time we added two other items to our line. All this effort has been on a spare time basis. The wives do some of the packing and make trips to the post office and the bank.



The first year this was easy to accomplish, but it has grown to be quite a task. We are at the point where I feel that we will have to hire at least one full-time employee. Our investment has paid off quite well, but we are at a point now where we must expand further or sell the company to someone who can operate it on a full-time basis.

In 1963 I was interviewed for a position at the Downey branch of the Bureau of Weapons. The interviewer stated he liked my qualifications but did not know if I could be hired for lack of education. At this time he was shocked that I had made no effort to complete my high school education. Up until this interview, most of the people that had hired me knew my past experience, and had hired me for the job that I could do for them without the need for the educational requirements.

A few weeks later I had my wife make the necessary inquiries to the local school in regards to enrollment for study to earn my high school diploma.

The first week in January 1963, I took the GED tests. I took psychology, US government and history. Upon completion, I was eligible to receive my diploma.

I graduated in 1964 from Lakewood High School. I retired in June 1970 from my government job, and have spent the ensuing years helping my son, Mike, at Superior Aircraft. I do all the die-cutting for Mike. I now fly both Old-Timers and modern Free Flight. I have three Old-timer models.

Since retiring I have been active flying Old-Time models, such as modern AMA and Nostalgia. I have dabbled with RC and actually placed third in RC Old-Timer Antique. I still go flying at least twice a week.

I made my first trip to England in 1986 and loved the people and the flying. Nan went with me in 1994, and thoroughly enjoyed the country and the people.

I served as president of SAM in the mid 1980s for four years, and as secretary/treasurer for two years.

At age 75, I was lucky enough to win the Free Flight Power championship, in 1995. I still enjoy building and flying and my wife Nan keeps saying, "Keep flying. It's keeping you young."

Addendum

I have attended every Nats from 1939 to 1994, except the 1946 Nats as I was still in Germany.

Have attended every SAM Champs since 1966 and have been a member of AMA since 1936. I hold a lifetime membership in the following:

- (AMA) Academy of Model Aeronautics
- (SAM) Society of Antique Modelers
- The Fresno Model Club
- The Scamps Club
- The Thermal Thumbers Club

Sal, 5/96

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