



The AMA History Project Presents: Biography of COL. ROBERT E. THACKER, RET.



Born 1918 Started modeling in 1926 AMA #68197

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Career:

- Began modeling at age eight, influenced by a next door neighbor
- Made money in grade school building balsa gliders
- 1930: Competed in Junior Birdman of America competition
- 1975 and 1976: Flew in National Scale Glider Championships
- Placed in Gas Scale and Glider in national competition
- Experimented with early solar-powered air vehicles for Lockheed Aircraft
- Has provided for the following publications: *Flying Models*, *Radio Control Modeler (RCM)*, *R/C Scale* and *Model Builder*
- Graduate of the Air Force Test Pilot Academy at Edwards Air Force Base, California
- Currently designing and building remote control drones for the aircraft industry

Colonel Robert Thacker is a lifetime modeler, having built models since the age of eight. He got his start through his next-door neighbor. That neighbor's father ordered by mail a "real airplane that would fly." This plane was a twin pusher, and the Colonel had to have one. He has not looked back since.

In 1929, Colonel Thacker began constructing a *Spirit of St. Louis*; perhaps one of the most reproduced models of that year, just two years after Lindbergh's historic trans-Atlantic flight. Colonel Thacker joined a modeling club in 1932 in El Centro, California. He was with this club for a few years.

In competition, the Colonel first entered a contest in 1930. This was the Junior Birdman of America contest, sponsored by Hearst Newspapers. He competed with a hand-launched single-pusher rubber glider. The Colonel does not recall the results of that contest but that it was held in Los Angeles.

In Nationals, Colonel Thacker competed in 1975 and 1976 in the National Scale Glider Championships. He did place in Gas Scale and Glider in those contests, though it is not certain what those scores were.

Air Force Career

Colonel Thacker has experimented with airplanes, both model and full-scale, all of his life. In 1945, Colonel Thacker ran an accelerated service test of the *P-80*, the first combat ready jet. As a member of the U.S. Air Force, he was also called on to pilot the solar powered 32-foot aircraft, which was designed by Lockheed Aircraft around 1972. He was a member of the Air Force from 1939 until 1970. He holds the distinction of being one of the only officers to fly two combat tours, one in Europe and one in Japan, during the Second World War.

Colonel Thacker served in World War II, flying *B-17s*, in Korea, flying *B-29s*, and in Vietnam flying classified high-altitude missions. He is a graduate of the Air Force Test Pilot Academy at Edwards Air Force Base in California.

Honors that Colonel Thacker has received include two Silver Stars, ten air medals, the French Croix de Guerre with Palm, and three Distinguished Flying Crosses, one of which was for his flight of the Betty Jo, named for his wife. Colonel Thacker flew the *P-82* from Honolulu to New York in 1947. This was the longest non-stop fighter flight carrying the maximum weight for takeoff of a fighter and set the speed record between Hawaii and New York.

Model Airplane Designs

- Designed the *Bowlus Baby Albatross*, feature in the September 1975 issue of *Model Builder*
- Designed the Giant Ducted Fan *BD-10*, featured in the February 1994 issue of *Flying Models*

The following is from the January 2010 issue of Model Aviation magazine. Brebeck was inducted into the 2009 Model Aviation Hall of Fame.

Robert Thacker

Tora Tora Tora! is a film history of the Pearl Harbor attack as seen from both sides. One of the early action scenes depicts a group of *B-17s* attempting to land at Pearl Harbor in the early moments of the attack.

This event marks the beginning of life in the U.S. Army Air Corps for Lieutenant Robert (Bob) Thacker. The flight began in Los Angeles many hours earlier with Bob at the controls and an Air Corps Cadet as his navigator. As they approached the field, clouds of smoke were rising. Not until their final approach, with Japanese fighters shooting at them, did they realize how much in harm's way they were.

An illustrious career in aviation began for "Col. Bob" in 1926. He was eight years old when he and two of his friends built their first model airplane. To their surprise, it flew very well, and with the success of building and flying his first model airplane, Col. Bob said, "I was hooked on aviation for the rest of my life."

Bob built and flew every type of model airplane that he could get his hands on. Not only did he learn the fine art of building and flying model airplanes of all types, he also learned why they flew and how their performance could be improved. One of his proudest moments was getting a 30-minute flight with a Carl Goldberg microfilm model at the Chicago Nationals.

With this knowledge, and his aviation background in modeling, he was fully prepared to become a Flying Cadet in the United States Army Air Corps at the age of 18. He continued to build and fly model airplanes and compete in events during his military years.

Bob recalls that his first Radio Control endeavor took place while on tour in Japan, flying a *Smog Hog* on Galloping Ghost. His first real Radio Control success came when he was stationed in Oslo, Norway in 1968 with an *Orbit* employing small servos.

Col. Bob enjoyed a long and exceptional career in the Air Force, retiring in 1970. He was one of the few officers to fly two complete combat tours in World War II. In the summer of 1945, he ran an accelerated service test of the *P-80*, the first combat-ready jet aircraft.

Bob graduated from the Air Force Test Pilot Academy at Edward Air Force Base in California. He was cited for valor against an Army enemy twice and was awarded two Silver Stars, 10 Air Medals, many Theater and Battle Stars, plus the French Croix de Guerre with palm. Bob also received three Distinguished Flying Crosses.

After retiring from the Air Force, he moved back to California and took up the challenge to find an adequate flying location for modelers in the Los Angeles area.

In Southern California, it is extremely difficult to locate a flying site. Even if you find the land to develop, the areas are restricted. Col. Bob's Air Force career was fraught with challenges that he met and overcame; this would be no exception.

Bob arranged a meeting with the Major General at Camp Pendleton, and convinced him that model builders and fliers are reliable and good guys. They would abide by all the rules and regulations on the station, and Col. Bob would personally supervise the operation as long as he was there.

The joint military and civilian club, with approximately 125 members, has been running successfully since 1970. Col. Bob usually flies there every weekend, along with about 25 of his longtime flying friends. He still builds and flies Scale model airplanes.

Col. Bob has been a frequent contributor to the major model magazines, publishing articles about many aspects of model building and flying. He had plans published in *RCM*, *Model Builder*, and *Model Aviation*. The one that he is most proud of is his Bowlus *Baby Albatross* Scale sailplane. He earned a first place in the two Soaring Nationals in which he competed. A kit of his *Baby Bowlus* is available from *Sky Bench*.

Colonel Robert E. Thacker, Ret., resides in San Clemente, California, with his wife of 68 years, Betty Jo. He is still active in engineering, designing, drawing, building, and flying remote control drones for the aircraft industry, as well as scale model airplanes for the rest of us. His recent endeavors include ducted-fan models and a turbine powered *P-80*.

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