



# The AMA History Project Presents: Autobiography of WILLIAM (BILL) BERNARD CAVANAUGH



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Started modeling in late-1930s

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*Bill Cavanaugh wrote the following article on July 24, 2004.*

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## **Modeling Biography**

By Bill Cavanaugh, AMA 5315

I consider myself a genuine “Old Timer” in the hobby, having been born in 1924 and having begun my modeling life in my early teens, during the Great Depression. I got interested in indoor rubber-powered stick and tissue flying through the Boy’s Division at the Camden, New Jersey YMCA where I worked part-time. The name of the club was the Camden Balsa Butchers, and the leader of the group was a commercial artist named Joe Krush who was a meticulous builder. Joe designed a series of balsa gliders with droopy noses that he called “Snoopies.” I lost contact with Joe when my family moved to Baltimore in 1941, but I noticed that he did the cover for one of Frank Zaic’s publications, so he must have continued in the hobby.

During the Depression years, family money for fun was non-existent, so when a Philadelphia newspaper offered prizes for kids who could get new customers and deliver the paper for six months, I looked through the catalog and saw that among the prizes offered were a Megow *Commander* kit and a Brown Jr. Model D engine. The kit would require me to get two new customers and the engine would require four more customers. This was an irresistible challenge to get a real gas model, and I managed to get the six new customers – mostly relatives and friends – and deliver the papers for the required six months.

I built my new gas model and joined a local club called the South Jersey Gas Model Association (SJGMA), whose leader was Everett Angus (who later became a president of the Academy of Model Aeronautics.) I joined the AMA at this time, and so had to be one of its earliest members. With the help of SJGMA members, I was thrilled that the *Commander* flew and was encouraged to build more gassies in the next few years while attending High School and working part-time at various jobs to finance my hobby. I remember building a *New Ruler* and a *Comet Mercury* powered by an Ohlsson 23 and a Bantam 19. A fellow modeler and friend, Adam Derengowsky, would pick me up on weekends and take my models and me to the SJGMA field where members would fly Free Flight gas models and spend most of their time retrieving them from the surrounding countryside.

After my family moved to Baltimore the summer before my senior year in High School, I worked part-time for the Baltimore YMCA and also for Katz Model Shop on Charles Street, just a block or so from the Y. I continued flying with a local club at a field near Loch Raven Reservoir.

I graduated from Forest Park High School in 1942 and went to work for the Glenn L. Martin Company in Middle River as a machine operator. The nation was in World War II at this time and I was drafted into the Army in March of 1943. My modeling career was then interrupted for an extended period. I was in the military service until March of 1946. After a brief stint as a draftsman, I enrolled at the University of Maryland, graduating in 1950 with a Bachelor of Science degree in Economics and Business Administration. I was married in 1953, had four children starting in 1954, and worked as a business manager and executive for several companies. In the 1950s, I became interested in full-scale flying and bought a one-fifth share of a Piper Vagabond, in which I earned my private pilot ticket at the College Park Airport. A museum on the site now commemorates its history as the earliest established commercial airport in the country. I later bought the other owners' shares of the Vagabond and owned it for several years. I also qualified for a sailplane pilot's rating at the Schweizer Soaring School in Elmira, NY on vacation to Harris Hill.

A business career opportunity opened up for me on Long Island, New York. I moved with my family to Huntington in 1964. One day I stopped at a hobby shop and discovered that the fantasy of every modeler that he could control his model from the ground had come true. Commercially available proportional radio control had arrived! I then got back into the hobby and joined the Long Island Radio Control Society (LIRCS), which met in the Huntington Library. My first radio control plane was a Senior Falcon, powered by a Webra 60. I built my first RC radio from a Heathkit, later graduating to Kraft equipment. The LIRCS was a powerhouse of a club with members who were destined to become well known in the hobby. A few that I remember are Bob Aberle, Nick Zirolì, John Burns, and Bob Kress.

Having recently gotten my sailplane pilot's rating, I was interested in model sailplanes, but in the 1960s, there were no AMA clubs in my area devoted strictly to soaring as there are now. The only kit sailplane available that I can recall was the German Graupner Cirrus. I built one of these and was the subject of some ribbing at the field. Nevertheless, many in the club asked for a chance to fly the Cirrus. Since then sailplanes have become more and more popular and soaring is now a recognized special interest segment of the AMA.

In 1971, I moved to Columbia, Maryland with my family and became a manufacturer's representative in the technical education field. I continued my model interests and became a member of the District of Columbia Radio Control Club (DCRC). There I became friends with RC legends Walt Good, Don Clark, Maynard Hill, and other well-known modelers. DCRC was a large club with several interest sub-groups, one of which was the Glider Group. I was one of the organizers of this group and was its coordinator for five years, writing monthly articles on the group's activities for the DCRC newsletter. Don Clark recommended me as District IV Vice President of the National Soaring Society. I was appointed and served for several years. I received the Dr. Monzka award from DCRC in 1976 from my modeling activities. The Glider Group eventually broke off from DCRC and was organized as an independent club, the Capital Area Soaring Association (CASA), a club that continues to the present. About this time – 1986 – I moved to Baltimore and joined the Baltimore Area Soaring Society (BASS). I have been active in this club to the present, holding offices of President, Vice President, Secretary, Director, and Newsletter Editor. BASS honored me by making me a life member in the mid-1990s.

One of the things I enjoy is writing humorous articles. Many modelers get so serious about the hobby that they forget that the whole idea is to have fun. Most newsletters and model magazines reflect this super-seriousness. I tried to lighten up the hobby by injecting a little humor in the newsletter of my clubs. Several of my articles are on the BASS web site, soarnd.org. One tongue-in-cheek article that I wrote, "Sandbaggers, Out of the Closet," appeared in Model Airplane News February 1981 issue.

Walt Good retired from the Applied Physics Laboratory in the mid-1970s and moved to Port Richie, Florida. I visited him and Joyce twice on vacation. The second time in 1980 I stayed a week and conducted a recorded interview with Walt that lasted approximately eight hours. The concept was that we would together write a book on Walt's life. I would draft a chapter at a time, submit it to Walt, who would review it for accuracy and possibly suggest changes. After two chapters, some disruptions in my life pushed this project to a back burner, and we never did get back to finishing the book. Now in 2004 Walt has passed away and I am 80 years old, and it is clear that the book will not be written, at least not by me. So I have had the audio tape re-recorded on CDs and donated a copy to the AMA Archives. I have also sent a copy to Joyce Good. I plan to send a copy to the Smithsonian, if they will accept it, to provide history of the Guff, Walt and Bill Good's plane that flew the first accredited radio controlled flight in 1937. The Guff now hangs in the Air and Space Museum of the Smithsonian.

My modeling has provided me with challenge and enjoyment throughout my life, not to mention the friendship and fellowship of others of a similar bent to my own. Most were, like me, ordinary modelers; some became well-known stars of the hobby-all contributed to provide a life segment that has been fulfilling for me. My appreciation goes to all AMA members, literally hundreds of them over my lifetime, who have contributed joy to my life.

Bill Cavanaugh  
July 24, 2004

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