



The AMA History Project Presents: Autobiography of RICHARD L. SMITH

June 3, 1924 - 2012

Started modeling in the early 1930s

AMA #517



Written by RLS (01/2003); Submitted by CM (01/2003); Transcribed & Edited by SS (01/2003), Reformatted by JS (02/2010)

Career:

- Won first place in the high school engineering contest by designing and building a wind tunnel
- 1942: Made a perfect score on the Army Aviation Cadet Test
- Piloted 35 bombing missions over Germany in a B-17 then volunteered for P-51 duty and completed 25 more missions during World War II
- Received the Distinguished Flying Cross, seven Air Medals, the Purple Heart and a Letter of Commendation for Bravery from General Lew Lyle
- 1950: Was on a U.S. Air Force model airplane team and piloted the team to the Nationals
- Was a major force in acquiring five flying sites
- Served as District II coordinator for eight years
- Served as president of various clubs for 21 years
- Served as newsletter editor for 43 years
- Served as contest director at 40 local contests
- Introduced the Delta Dart Program to the Rochester, New York Park Systems
- Awarded nine U.S. patents while working at Northrop, Kodak and Fender
- Flew with the Southern California Show Team
- Helped form the United Pylon Racing Circuit in 1968

Honors:

- 2000: AMA Superior Service Award

Richard wrote this biography with the help of Charles Mackey who submitted it to the AMA History Project (at the time called the AMA History Program) for him in January 2003.

I was born in Rochester, New York, on June 3, 1924. My parents were Leon H. Smith and Marie C. Smith. My father was a draftsman at a brass casting company and my mother had been raised on the Chippewa Indian reservation in Cass Lake, Minnesota. Her father was a half Indian and was also a professional baseball player who played for the Brooklyn Dodgers and participated in the first baseball strike. My paternal grandfather was a professional photographer.

My first airplane was carved by my father in 1930s and was a replica of the Spirit of Saint Louis. I played with this model and there began my lifelong love of aviation. In the early 1930s, I began building models and became an addict. I would spend on week's allowance on a kit and have to wait until the next week to buy the glue. At that time, rubber-powered models were the thing. In 1934, I began buying Model Airplane News magazine and had quite a collection, which my dear mother threw away while I was overseas in World War II.

Around 1938 my folks bought me a Brown Junior engine for Christmas and my godfather gave me a kit for Megow's commander. I built the airplane and flew it a couple of times in parks in Rochester. I attended my first contest in 1939 at the Bell Aircraft Field in Buffalo and joined the AMA at the contest. It only cost a dollar then.

I continued to build Free Flight models and even tried U-Control with a Walker Fireball Ukie. I entered the inter-high school science fair in Rochester in 1941 and took first place in engineering with a wind tunnel, which I built from scratch.

I enlisted in the Army Aviation Cadets in 1942 and got a perfect score on the entrance exam. I was called up before the commander of enlistment who thought I had somehow cheated. I told the officer that I had read everything possible about aviation from the time I learned to read, but if he wanted, I would gladly retake the exam. The officer said no, that he trusted me and wished me good luck.

I failed the physical exam because I was six feet, three inches tall and only weighed 147 pounds. I was eight pounds under the required weight for my height. I went to my family doctor and asked how I could gain eight pounds in one week – that's when I had to retake my physical. The doctor said that I couldn't gain that much in a week, but that he had heard of people eating that many bananas to gain weight for a short time. I bought eight pounds of bananas and the morning of my physical, I got up at 5 a.m. and ate the bananas before 8 a.m. I passed with flying colors. When I got to Nashville, Tennessee, to take my tests for Aviation Cadets, I again weighed 147 pounds. The doctor questioned how I got that far. I told him about eating the bananas. He was amazed and asked what I wanted to fly. I said a P38 or B26. He changed the 147 to 155 and wished me good luck.

I graduated from Aviation Cadets in February 1944 and went overseas as a B17 pilot. I completed 35 B17 missions in the 303rd Bomb Group, Eighth Army Air Force. I then volunteered to fly a second tour in P51s as a combat scout. I completed 25 missions and was forced to bail out of my P51 when the engine caught fire over Belgium on April 1, 1945. Lousy April Fool's joke! I was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross, seven air medals and the Purple Heart.

I returned to the States and became staff pilot for the base commander at Greensborough, North Carolina. I remained in the Air Force, and in 1950, I won a place on the Air Force model airplane team flying a Goldberg Cumulus, which Carl Goldberg helped me trim out at the Air Force contest. I believe that I placed in the top 10 at the Nationals (Nats) in Dallas in 1950.

I left the Air Force in 1952 to raise my six sons and returned to Eastman Kodak as a toolmaker. Within a year or so of returning to Rochester, I began modeling again and built my own radio because with all those kids, the money was short. In 1954, I approached Kodak personnel about forming a Radio Control modeling club. They said yes and we were given a field where we flew and accepted outsiders – non-Kodak people – to fly.

We continued to fly at the Kodak Field, and in 1958, we formed the Radio Control Club of Rochester. We welcomed the club to the Kodak Field and in 1960, we held the first annual New York State Radio Control Championships at which we flew pattern and pylon.

We bought 200 Delta Darts and started a program with the city playgrounds teaching kids to build and fly. After a year, we held a contest at each playground (12 in all) and then we had a fly-off of the winners at the downtown mall. This event was well publicized and was leverage for our next challenge. In 1964, Kodak called me in and said that they would need to build on our flying field. As they didn't have a replacement site, I was forced to other options.

One of my neighbors was a politician and I asked for his help. He got me an appointment with the Monroe County Parks director. When I showed up for my meeting, the director said he had been expecting us ever since we had helped so many kids with the Darts program. We were given a site North Hampton Park, which had been a full-sized aircraft field used by the former landowner. This site is still in use by the Rochester Club and their guests. The New York State Championships continued to be held there for many years.

In 1968, we held a meeting at Harold DeBolt's house in Buffalo and formed the United Pylon Racing Circuit made up of clubs in Canada and upstate New York. I got my AMA contest director's license shortly thereafter and still hold it. I began flying in and running pylon meets and was joined by such flyers as Harold deBolt, John Grigg, Ernie Nikodem, George Privateer, Bob Dunn, Don Steeb, Bob Brown, Dave Gierke and many others whom I don't recall their names.

In the early 1970s, I began flying Radio Control gliders and again asked the parks director for a field for gliders exclusively. He responded with a site at Black Creek Park that is still active. Black Creek Park is the site used by the Boy Scouts for their annual camp-in. We always took the time to put on a demo for the Scouts. Again, this field is still an active site.

I became newsletter editor for the Radio Control Club of Rochester and held that position until I left for California. During the 1960s, I used to attend the Buffalo Symposium, which is where I met such greats as Walt Good, Howard McEntee, Hal DeBolt, Ed Izzo, and many others. At one symposium, I saw a demo of digital proportional radios. I was working on automation systems at Kodak and suggested that we use the digital concept to control our machines. We called the system the "Kodassembler," and it went over big. We used the system to assemble cameras.

While at Kodak, I observed vacuum forming of plastic sheet and built my own system that I demonstrated at club meetings and at Buffalo. I also built one of the first hot wire foam cutting systems and demonstrated it at the Buffalo Symposium in 1964. It went over big. I designed a hot wire control system, which was safe because it didn't have high voltage present at the cutting wire.

In the late 1970s, John Grigg became District II associate vice president for the AMA. John asked me to become contest coordinator, which I served as until I left for California.

I continued to fly pylon until 1982 when I was forced to quit because I had a nerve transplant in my right arm and I was afraid I might lose control while flying. While recovering from the operation I was invited to visit my son in California where he worked for Fender Guitars. He wanted me to look at their plant because I was then a manufacturing engineer at Kodak. While on the visit, I looked over the factory and wrote an engineering report on my findings.

I returned to Rochester in March and in late April, I received an offer from CBS, who owned Fender, to come to California and redesign their assembly plant. I retired from Kodak with 40 years working time. We arrived in California in June of 1982 and I worked for Fender until 1985 when they were selling the plant. I left Fender and went to work at Northrop on the B2 program. Again, I worked as a manufacturing engineer. In my work career, I had nine patents at Kodak, two at Fender, and two at Northrop. I finally had enough in 1988 and retired.

In California, I continued to fly and got extensively into giant scale. I founded the Century Flyers with Dave Johnson and Ron Karwacky. I lived in Yorba Linda and flew with the Southern California Airplane Model Pilots' Society (SCAMPS) at Torrance, California, on the helicopter base. I built a giant scale Zero, which I flew with the Southern California Show Team. I got 729 flights on the Zero, which was used by Robart in one of their advertisements. I completely wore out two sets of retracts on that plan. I lost the Zero when I dove it inverted for a low inverted pass. When I pulled up it exploded at the wing root – too many negative gs.

In 1989, we move out to Hemet, California and I joined the Hemet Model Masters. We had a field that we lost due to development. I approached the city fathers looking for a site to fly. I was Hemet Model Masters president at that time and we were offered a site near a flood control wash, which we accepted, and then we installed a paved runway and pit area. We were immediately threatened by a neighbor who tried to get us removed from the site. For eight to 10 years, this neighbor caused us much trouble, but with good leadership and support from the city council, we have remained at this site.

In 1992, I became secretary and newsletter editor of the Hemet Model Masters. I also was president of the Century Flyers Giant Scale Club IMAA Chapter 100. I did the newsletter for that club also. We began flying gliders at the Valley Wide Recreation Park in 1992 and we formed the Valley Wide Radio Control Glider Club, AMA charter number 3323. The park gave us a gold cart to mount our winch and retriever on and I built a new retriever to match the cart. When the area where we flew was taken over by a new owner, we moved our operation to Valley Wide's Winchester Park.

I continue to fly several times a week and travel to meets at other AMA clubs in California and Arizona. I am still secretary and will finally give up the newsletter for the Hemet Model Masters after January of 2003. It's time for a younger member to do some of the work. I have become interested in electric flying models and have several ready to fly.

Overall, it has been a wonderful life being an addict for aviation!

*(signed) Richard L. Smith
January 2003*



June 1944: The crew of the Naffius



Dick as a pilot during World War II, when he became known as "Spider"



"Spider" in an Easy Does It.



The 1950 Nationals



This photo of Jack Alborough (left) and Dick ran in the February 11, 1960 issue of the Kodakery magazine, along with an article about the formation of the Radio Control Club of Rochester



This photo also ran in the February 11, 1960 issue of Kodakery magazine, and showed a club meeting. From left, seated: Roger Blunt, Dick, Howard Gillette, Chet Turner, Bob Thorne, and Harold Korber. Standing: Don Steeb, Art Turner, Mike Tarricone, and Jim Wells.



Kodak took this photo of Dick for its weekly newsletter in 1960, when he was president of the Kodak Aeromodelers. He was tuning the radio that he had built.



Dick and his P47 at Hemet Field



April 1980: Dick talking to Boy Scouts at the Black Creek Park glider field where he demonstrated Radio Control glider flying to the Boy Scouts who were camping at the park.



Dick and his MEC Wind model



Dick with his Zerome model

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