



The AMA History Project Presents: Biography of JOHN CROSETTO

Born March 19, 1923 AMA #1832



Submitted by JC (03/2007); Transcribed and Edited by JS (08/2007)

John Crosetto wrote the following autobiography in March of 2007.

Glidermanjon....an Autobiography

On March 19, 2007, I was 84 years old. My fascination with Free Flight started when I was nine, three-quarters of a century ago. Looking back, growing up in a little coal mining town in the Cascades (Cle Elum) in the 1920s was a very rich and rewarding experience. Being an Italian kid among a bunch of other Italian, Czechoslovakian, Yugoslavian, Polish, Irish, English, and a few African American kids, when there were no TVs, computers, cell phones, iPods, unions, Social Security, or Medicare, gave us the opportunity to get to know each other and to appreciate life's more simple pleasures. It also provided a colorful background that enabled me to understand some of the fundamental truths we all have to learn in the process of growing up. We were all poor, but none of us felt poor because that is the way we all were. We grew up knowing everyone in town, and they knew you. Nobody handed you anything. You had to work for what you wanted, and you soon learned the difference between right and wrong.

A *Jenny* was one of the more modern airplanes of the day. You could get a ride for a dollar when the "barnstormer" pilot showed up in town. Of course, a dollar was a day's wage for many of the farmers and lumberjacks that lived in Cle Elum in the 1920s. You could make a little more than that if you worked in the coalmines, provided you could shovel enough coal. John L Lewis tried to organize the miners, but more money and better working conditions did not come easy in those days. As the song says, "a lot of men died..."

My dad ran the corner grocery store. He worked 12 hours a day, six days a week, all of his life. We ate what he could not sell, my mother was a wonderful cook, and as a result, I never went hungry.

There were several rock dumps around Cle Elum. "Rock dumps" were mounds of rock and coal hauled out of the mines and ready to load onto railroad cars on their way to the coast. The dumps were usually 100 or more feet in height. They provided a handy place to learn how to ski in the winter. We used barrel stays for skis.

I became "Glidermanjon," and a life-long free-flyer the day I climbed to the top of a rock dump, tossed my hand-launched glider into the sky, and watched it sail away. Since then, I have built more than a thousand hand-launched gliders and I will probably build another dozen or so this summer, not counting the 10,000 or so Styrofoam gliders I designed and built as part of the NDC Corporation, but that is another story.

My grandson, Luca, joined the Academy of Model Aeronautics (AMA) and placed second in an Open Cat-Glider competition at the age of 3½. When I die, he will inherit a shop full of balsa wood and three- or four-hundred gliders, as well as dozens of old airplanes, motors, and all the tools and gadgets a free-flyer collects in the course of a lifetime. I feel really good about that.

In the late 1930s, the nearest model airplane contests were in Yakima, Washington. I distinctly remember the first time I heard an O&R 23 turn on. It was hotter than anything else was on the field and I knew immediately that gas-powered Free Flight was something I needed to explore. In my early teens, I established contact with the Doug Kruse Model Shop on 45th Street in Seattle. Doug developed the Husky and Husky JV engines, and designed and marketed several rubber-powered kits. In Cle Elum, we formed a club of six or eight kids my age. On several occasions, I hitched a ride to Seattle with a truck driver friend of mine to buy balsa and other supplies for the club at the Doug Kruse Model Shop.

The first engine I owned was a Husky. I designed and built my first gas model, carved a propeller out of alder wood, and had my dad drive me to the local airport (after work) for its initial flight. After much cranking (the Husky was not a hot engine,) I got the thing going. I watched it rise-off-ground (ROG) into one big loop and full-bore crash nose-first into the ground. Good-bye propeller, but a good learning experience.

More kits were beginning to show up around that time. I saved my nickels and bought a Curtis *Robin* kit. It had about a six-foot wingspan and slab balsa sides, and therefore was rather heavy. I managed to make it fly with a hand-launch, but it never got more than about six feet off the ground, with the Husky doing its very best; another good learning experience. My first really successful Free Flight (except for my hand-launched glider) was with a rubber-powered *Space Conqueror*. It had about a 36-inch wingspan, and I was able to get several flights of two or three minutes with it before losing it too. This was well before successful dethermalizers (DTs) had been invented.

I graduated from Cle Elum High in 1941, a memorable year. After a few quarters at the University of Washington (UW,) I joined the Army and spent the next 42 months seeing parts of the world I had only read about courtesy of Uncle Sam. There is a picture of me in a family album in my Army uniform, holding an *Air Trails* magazine (around 1944,) but that is the only contact I had with model airplanes during World War II. When I got home, my Husky and all my other model airplane stuff was gone and I went back to school at UW. I was living at Union Bay Village (a veterans' housing project on what had been a landfill in Union Bay,) where I squeezed out enough time to build another glider or two while getting a degree in Mechanical Engineering.

On one of those warm spring days, when there was lift in the air, I was flying my hand-launched glider at the Union Bay Baseball Field on the shore of Lake Washington. I managed to hook a thermal that took my glider nearly out of sight, but as it went higher and higher, it drifted over the lake and into down air. Coming down, it drifted back over the shore and proceeded to rise again, higher and higher. This “circular” flight pattern happened three times before it flew away with a timed flight of more than nineteen minutes, my best ever!

I went to work for Boeing the day after I finished my last exam at UW. My salary was \$255 a month. The “normal” starting salary for engineers in 1948 was \$250 a month, but I received an additional \$5 because I was a Tau Beta Pi.

The first day on the job, I was handed a dishpan and a sponge to wash the metal templates used as durable drawings. This lasted about two weeks and then I was assigned to the Hydraulics group of the Mechanical Equipment Unit.

I had gone to work at Boeing thinking I would stay at least five years, but after five years, I was hooked. I was testing hydraulic fluids, hydraulic pumps, motors and actuators, and designing valves and seals. I had access to state-of-the-art lab equipment and a phone book with numbers that would let me talk to some of the best engineers in the country, with expertise on every imaginable subject whenever I needed help. I loved it. I did much of the tech staff hydraulic work on Boeing *CIM-10A BOMARC*, the *B-52*, and the *KC-97* in-flight refueling system. I was granted a couple of patents and thought I knew more about aircraft hydraulics than any other man on earth did. I retired after 40 years at Boeing, having seen the world, managed several important programs, and served as Chief Engineer of their Ballistic Systems Division while, with my wife, raised a family of seven kids (all college graduates and good citizens,) and continued to enjoy my passion for Free Flight.

When I was promoted out of the lab and into supervision, my job at Boeing became intensely competitive. I played a significant role in several major competitions. I was part of the team headed by T. A. Wilson that won the Minuteman Program, and part of the team headed by Doug Graves that won the Boeing *E-3 AWACS* competition. I was also part of the team that won the *C-5* competition, but lost the contract and part of the team that gave up on the *Supersonic Transport* (SST.) I spent six years as the System Engineer for *AWACS* and two years as the Program Manager for the Roland Program. I headed the Hard Mobile Launcher Program from start to finish, which we won after beating General Dynamics and the Glenn L. Martin Company (now Lockheed Martin) in a three-year competition, a very satisfying experience. I was also head of the Boeing Airplane Company (BAC) Surface Transportation Unit for several years and Chief Engineer of the BAC Ballistic Systems division when I retired.

As a result, I never felt intensely competitive about flying model airplanes. I was able to win a prize or two in local contests and I usually did well in the hand-launched glider event, but I was never a threat to serious competitors and held no aspirations to compete in national or international contests. For me, a Free Flight contest was a time to relax and enjoy the thrill of watching a model I had designed, built and trimmed to fly free, but I did get involved in organizing a few model airplane activities in the area.

I was the head of the Model Airplane Club Council of Puget Sound (MACCOPS) when Don Zipoy and I persuaded the King County Parks Department to permit the use of Marymoor Park for flying model airplanes. Again, with help from Don Zipoy, I was able to persuade my friend Ollie Boileau, then president of the Boeing Management Association, to have the BMA put up a \$1500.00 scholarship for the winner of a model airplane contest at the Boeing facility in Kent. I was the contest director for the first

scholarship contest. Marty Thompson won it and went on to become a frequent winner in contests up and down the West Coast. The scholarship contest was repeatedly sponsored by the BMA, but was ultimately dropped when Boileau moved on to run General Dynamics and I was assigned to manage an automated transit program in Japan.

The Strat-O-Bats of Kent were the most prominent Free Flight club in the area in the 1960s and early 1970s. Clair Coultran, who ran a model shop in Kent, was the unofficial leader. Phil Hainer, Bud Nelson, and a dozen or so more were active members. Don Zipoy, Bob Duffield, and I started the Eastside Model Airplane Club in Bellevue, and when Coutran moved his model shop to Bellevue, the two clubs merged to become the Strat-O-Bats of Bellevue. This was about the time Tom Cope set up SAM 8 with Homer Smith and me, along with seven or eight other guys, as charter members. Today, the SAM 8 has become the Really Great SAM 8 (RG SAM 8), the only surviving Free Flight club in the area. I have been the club president for more years than I can remember.

The RG SAM 8 has about 100 members; forty or so show up each month at the Rainbow Café in Auburn for our regular monthly meetings. We have become a close-knit club of old timers who share a common interest that binds us together as good friends. We have learned to work together and play together, and we enjoy being together. Though we are a rather relaxed group, we have some truly excellent builders and flyers that compete effectively at all levels of Free Flight competition. We also sponsor four contests a year at Harts Lake Prairie on the Fort Lewis Military Reservation and award prizes to the top three contestants in more than 20 events at each contest. Bob Harper is the editor and publisher of our monthly newsletter, an excellent piece of work.

I still compete, but not as vigorously as I once did. My endurance began to fade at the age of eighty. As a younger man, I could fly all day each of our two-day contests, but now I am ready for a nap after lunch on the first day. My afternoons are spent talking about the highlights of yesteryear while enjoying the view and the camaraderie of the club. However, the spirit is still there. I still look forward to the next meeting and the next contest. I think I will until the day I die...it has been a great ride.

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