



The AMA History Project Presents: Biography of FRANCIS MCELWEE

Modeler for 70 years October 9, 1918 - 1998
AMA #1951



Written by REM (03/1997); Transcribed by MR (01/1999); Edited by SS (2002), Updated by JS (10/2008), Reformatted by JS (10/2009)

Career:

- 1934: Began competing in Free Flight; competed against greats such as Shulman, Goldberg, Garami and Shereshaw
- Was a successful fighter pilot during World War II, flying P-51s
- Competed in the New York Mirror Meet. Won several events in U-Control and Radio Control
- Was a member of the Alpha Squadron, an AMA show team. Designed built and flew an Radio Control flying saucer
- Designed built and flew the Radio Control Flying Flag, at the bicentennial. The model now resides in the National Model Aviation Museum

Honors:

- 1997: Model Aviation Hall of Fame

The following biography was taken from a Model Aviation Hall of Fame application. Robert E. McKay and Leon Shulman submitted the application on March 12, 1997.

Robert E. McKay
109 West Edward Street
Iselin, N.J. 08830
March 27, 1996

AMA Headquarters – Hall of Fame Committee
5151 East Memorial Drive
Muncie, In. 47302
Council of AMA Presidents

Gentlemen:

I would like to introduce to you as a candidate for nomination to the [Model Aviation] Hall of Fame, Mr. Francis McElwee.

Fran was born on Oct. 9, 1918 and started building model airplanes in 1927. He joined the NAA in 1936 and was assigned number 1951, which he still holds today, AMA 1951.

He began competing in 1934 in Free Flight Gas, Rubber, Towline and hand launched gliders. Flying against such greats as Shulman, Goldberg, Garami, Shereshaw, etc. He posted his share of wins.

In 1942, Fran joined the United States Army Air Corp as a cadet; in 1944, he graduated as a pilot

and was sent to England to join the 339th Fighter Group of the 8th Air Force. There he flew P-51s as fighter escort with bombers over Germany. He flew 29 missions until the end of the war in Europe. He was credited with two victories, An FW190 and a ME-262 Jet. He also survived a Midair collision with another P-51, in which both pilots bailed out successfully. He was in training to escort bombers to Japan, when the war ended in 1945.

When Fran came home, he returned to modeling and the Linden (New Jersey) Model Aircraft Club. It was at this point in 1945 that I first met Fran McElwee. I was a 14 –year-old kid who would have given my eyeteeth to have flown fighters in World War II. And he was a man who had done it all. From that point on we became good friends and competitors.

In 1945 and 1946 Fran was flying Free Flight and U-control stunt, he won first place in U-control stunt at the New York Daily Mirror Meet in 1946 and 1947. He also won first place in Radio Control at the mirror meet in 1947 and 1948. In 1948, his Radart was proxy flown to fifth place by Leon Shulman at the Nationals at Olathe, Kansas. In 1951, he won second place in the Navy Radio Control bombing event at the Dallas, Texas Nationals.

In 1972 Fran became a member of the Alpha Squadron of Pennsylvania, which was the first AMA show team, of which he remained a member until 1982. Among the aircraft he flew while perforating were his Flying Saucer which towed a banner reading “Radio Control a great hobby” on one side and “This side for hire” on the other. This was always good for a laugh. Another of his great designs was the flying flag, which was flown during the bi-centennial. This model is now in the AMA museum. Among his designs and articles that have been published include:

- Ideas for flaps added to U-control models and a fuel tank for inverted flying; Model Craftsman – 1946
- Thunderwin - A U-control, semi scale P-51 designed to do axial rolls; Model Craftsman - May 1946
- Stunting is Easy - co-authored with Walt Schroeder for U-control flying; Air Trails - October, 1947
- Defender – U-control stunt model Mirror Meet winner 1946, 1947; Flying Models - June 1948. This model was also published in a British Plan book in 1949 and was kitted by The Scientific Model Airplane Co. in a scaled down version.
- Radart Radio Control rudder only, 1947 Mirror Meet winner; Air Trails - April 1949
- Robot Radio Control rudder only; Air Trails - September 1951. This model was republished much later in Model Builder
- Flying Saucer Radio Control Show plane; Model Airplane News - April 1973
- Mini-Mini Saucer - Smallest Radio Control model, 4-inch wing span x 9-inches long; Model Airplane News - September 1973
- Flying Flag - Radio Control Show plane for the bi-centennial; Model Aviation - September 1976

You have read as many of the facts and dates of Fran's qualifications as I can find at this time. I am sure there are many more.

About the man and people

Fran has been a tinkerer and innovator in this hobby as long as I have known him. He is always ready to help a fellow modeler solve a problem or adjust an airplane. He is one of the pioneers in making Radio Control the hobby we have today. In Mr. Norman Rosenstock's book "Tales of an Ancient Modeler," chapter nine, he is said to be the Radio Control guru of the time.

Fran at age 77 has slowed down a bit, but he can still be seen at the local schoolyard with his 1/2A Radio Control planes. You will still see him get together with his old buddies at the VR/CS reunions, formerly at Selinsgrove, Pennsylvania and recently in Delaware. We expect to see him again this year with his 24-inch Live Wire Trainer. A lot of us "kids" may not have remained in this hobby, had it not been for Fran McElwee. I hope my presentation has been good enough to have the council give this great modeler the recognition he deserves by nominating him into the [Model Aviation] Hall of Fame.

Thank you.

Sincerely,
Robert E. McKay AMA # 25319

Fran McElwee passed away the same year that he was inducted into the Model Aviation Hall of Fame.



The following is a letter from Leon Shulman on behalf of Fran McElwee.

Leon Schulman
173 Essex Avenue
Metuchen, NJ 08840

March 12, 1997

Dave Brown, President
4871 Trudy Lane
Hamilton, Ohio 76537

RE: Fran McElwee Nomination for Hall of Fame

Dear Dave,

It is with pleasure that I submit the name of Fran McElwee for the honor of being accepted into the [Model Aviation] Hall of Fame.

Fran more than typifies the ardent modeler that stands out in the hobby we all enjoy. Fran contributed so much to our hobby that I believe he should be recognized officially for his many years of constructive activities. As a teenager, Fran built and flew Free Flight gas powered models when just getting (and keeping) an engine running was an accomplishment in the mid to late 1930s. He was an active competitor and won many local and regional meets on the East Coast. When World War II started, Fran joined the Air Corps, and won his Pilot Wings, flying P-51s in the European theater. After the war, Fran designed and flew Control Line models and was an innovator with many original concepts. He developed, flew, and had published a Control Line model design that would do rolls while flying on a tether.

In 1946-47, he designed, built, and flew his original designed Radio Controlled models with a diesel engine putting on flying demonstrations on the East Coast and Canada – showing the practicality and consistency of controlling a model via Radio Control. He met Jim Walker at one of the Nationals, and with Jim's blessings sketched his Popsito control system, then duplicated it and weeks later successfully flew the system. As a competitor, he flew his own Radio Control designs in the Mirror Model Flying Fair and won first place two years running.

Fran was a member of the Official AMA Show Team for several years starting in the early 1970s flying his (original design) Radio Control American Flag model. Fran wrote and had published several magazine articles of his designs over the years. His experiments led to innovations that were use by many other modelers who followed his lead. Other modelers and several manufacturers in the hobby industry quickly adopted these. He was an active member and officer in many clubs through the years and always a formidable competitor.

Fran's contributions to our hobby were (and still are) numerous and stimulates the originality portion of us 'n modelers who are fortunate to come in contact with such an innovative individual.

Fran deserves. Fran has earned this honor. I know you will agree.

*Sincerely,
Lean Shulman, Life Member #8, H.O.F. 1978*

P.S. Sadly, I learned that Fran just was released from the hospital with a diagnosis of cancer...



Unknown date: McElwee flying

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AMA History Project
National Model Aviation Museum
5151 E. Memorial Dr.
Muncie IN 47302
(765) 287-1256, ext. 511
historyproject@modelaircraft.org

