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# The AMA History Project Presents: Biography of ALAN HEIBERG OLSON

September 29, 1927 - July 16, 2018 Started modeling in 1935  
AMA #312437



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Written & Submitted by AHO (03/2001); Transcribed & Edited by SS (01/2003); Reformatted by JS (11/2009); Updated by JS (02/2023)

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## Career:

- Built his first gas model airplane at age 11 in August and September 1939
- Served in the U.S. Army Paratroopers during World War II
- Earned a Master Aviation Mechanic license and then a private pilot's license after World War II between 1947 and 1948
- Attended Cal Aero Technical Institute from 1947 to 1948 and frequently flew Control Line models with his classmates from
- Received a B.A. in psychology and sociology from California State University in 1954 and three years later (in 1957) received a Bachelor of Divinity then a Master of Divinity from the San Francisco Theological Seminary
- In 1948 placed second in the All Western Open U-Control in the senior stunt division
- Restored numerous classic and antique full-sized airplanes including a 1946 Taylorcraft BC 12-D, a 1946 Funk B-85C and a 1943 Stinson Reliant, V-77 Gullwing

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*Alan Heiberg Olson wrote an autobiography that he self-published in 1996. The following is an overview and excerpts from the extensive autobiography relating to his modeling activities. For the complete 294-page bound biography, please see the AMA Library.*

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## Background Summary

By Stacey Shannon

Alan Heiberg Olson was born in Twin Valley, Minnesota, in 1927 to Clarence and Marie Olson. He was the middle of five children with two older sisters (Leona and Clarice), a younger brother (Leslie), and a younger sister (Sonja). A couple of years after he was born his father accepted a position as Superintendent of the Water and Light Department in Ada, Minnesota, and moved the family there.

Ada, a town of approximately 2,000 people, is where Alan spent his growing up years. He attended school in the same building from kindergarten all the way through high school. He also spent time on his grandparents' nearby farm.

The Olson family attended the Norwegian Lutheran Church where Alan developed a deep faith and belief in God, which later led to him becoming an ordained minister. He also found a love for hymns that has sustained throughout his life. As an adult, Alan has written numerous hymns.

Alan's life changed in October of 1939 when his mother died of breast cancer at age 40. Though such a loss was far from easy for 12-year-old Alan, he continued in activities throughout his sixth grade year of school including learning how to read music and picking up an even greater

interest in model aviation. Following is Alan's account of his early experiences in model aviation.

## **Model Airplane Builder**

By Alan Heiberg Olson, from his autobiography, "Who's Flying This Thing"

In the basement I had a table or bench set up that was off limits to all others; absolutely nobody else touched that spot! Once, when my sister Clarice got into the basement room, she poked a broom through the wing of one of my airplanes. She thought she was going to die! These things were sacred. She was on sacred territory and nobody was going to touch those models I had spent so much time building!

I spent hundreds of hours building model airplanes. In fact, I would get up before school around 6 a.m. and work an hour on my models because I had something I wanted to get done on them. I was eager to get it going before school started. When a person wakes up in the morning to work on projects before going to school and then can't wait to get home from school to work on them again, you know that person is deeply into something. I remember doing that quite a bit. Fortunately, not too long ago my sister Clarice sent me copies of pictures of those models taken from her album. (*Photos are reprinted in "Who's Flying This Thing?" See the AMA librarian to look at a copy of Alan's autobiography.*)

I built my first gas model airplane when I was 11-years-old. It is hanging above our heads today in my hobby room at home. It is a six-foot wingspan Free Flight model known as "The Thunder Bird." It was built from a kit by Scientific Model Airplane Company in Newark, New Jersey, in 1939 for \$4.95 post paid. I built it during the summer of that same year when I was staying with Grandma and Grandpa Heiberg in Twin Valley. My cousin Lowell Heiberg helped with building it. Actually, I did all the building myself while he gave me pointers and tips on how to do it. I was building it at Grandpa Heiberg's home while he was building one of the same models in his home. So, it was that we built them the same summer. While identical models, he painted his bright blue and I painted mine red with yellow trim. He also helped me sign off the airframe: "OK for cover." I still have his initials on it. Lowell helped me cover it with bamboo paper. Having kept this model airplane all these years, it is one of the most precious things I have.

Back then, we used to take these models out in the early morning sunshine to the huge hayfields near Twin Valley. These were wide-open spaces on the prairie without a tree in sight, no fences or telephone lines in any direction – a wonderful place to fly these Free Flights. We would crank up the gasoline engines, tune them in (launch them) and let them roar away, hoping for the best. If we had them trimmed properly, they would climb almost out of sight until the engine quit then they'd glide down. We would chase them to beat the band and hope for a nice smooth landing, which they usually did. These are wonderful memories of a worthwhile enterprise.

In Twin Valley, there were three boys who built models and flew them with us. One was Enoch Haugseth, the son of a doctor, who later became an aeronautical engineer for Boeing Aircraft in Seattle. He built a Comet Zipper with a Super Cyclone engine, which climbed straight up like a rocket. It was very impressive – a very good flyer. Another enthusiast-builder was Dean Smith, a

good friend of Lowell Heiberg. We would all go flying together. For me, as a youngster, to see these gasoline models fly and learn how to trim and operate them – this was very impressive.

## **Model Airplanes and More Model Airplanes**

By Alan Heiberg Olson, from his autobiography, “Who’s Flying This Thing”

Ever since I was a youngster, I was interested in airplanes. When I was eight-years-old, my cousin, Lowell Heiberg, in Twin Valley gave me a kit of a model airplane. I can still remember the name of it and the design of it. It was called a Brewster Buffalo. It was a little model and had about a 20-inch wingspan or so. I built it and tried to fly it but it was too heavy since I’d not used the proper glue – a lighter weight glue. Neither did I have the proper covering materials and so on. It flew like a rock. I learned how to build planes from that and it wasn’t long before I was buying a magazine called Model Airplane News from a local drugstore. Inside the front cover was this beautiful full-page ad for an aircraft school in California.

The school was located on Grand Central Air Terminal in Glendale, California. This was one of the outstanding popular airports for all the sports flyers and military flyers in the early days, one of the early airports. It’s no longer in existence because now the area has all been industrialized. Only the original administration building and the airport terminal building are still there, being saved, I think, probably for a museum as an interesting historical spot in that area.

To go to that school was the goal and dream of my life – that when I became of age I would go to that school. There was nothing else I really wanted to do other than to be around airplanes and to become an aircraft engine mechanic and an airplane pilot.

When I was a child in Ada, Minnesota, I remember a black fuselage bi-plane with red wings that flew over and was going to land out at Bosworth pasture. I would run down the street waving my arms, “Give me a ride, give me a ride!” Boy oh boy, if we could just go out and stand at the airport fence and watch that plane come in for a landing, this was the greatest thrill of my life. I was truly enamored with aviation and flying from a very early age. As I went through my teenage years, I learned to build larger model airplanes. I built all types of airplanes – low wing airplanes, high wing airplanes. I built bi-planes, one of them a floppy wing airplane called an Ornithopter, and I built sailplanes, little gliders, and large gliders. I built a six-foot wingspan glider. In the middle of the winter, here I was out in the middle of the intersection in the wet snow and puddles and six-foot snow banks on the corners trying to get this glider to turn in a circle because I was so eager to test it. It would hit the banks and slide off. I think that from the time I was a child I have built model airplanes probably into the hundreds.

When I got out of the U.S. Army Paratroopers in 1947, I went home and spent all one summer at our lake cottage at Twin Lakes, Minnesota. I said, “This is the last real long vacation I’ll ever have in my life because I am going to go to school, then I’ll go to work. So, I’m going to take some time off to myself. I’d had my time in the service and now I’m going to have this break.” I’d spent much of my life at Twin Lakes and much of it with Elaine (*NOTE: Elaine, Alan’s stepsister from when his father remarried when Alan was in seventh grade, later became Alan’s wife.*)

## **Growing Up and Getting Educated**

By Stacey Shannon

When Alan graduated from high school, he entered the U.S. Army and became a paratrooper during World War II. After leaving the service, Alan eventually earned a Master Aviation Mechanic license in 1948 and a private pilot license the next year. He attended Cal Aero Technical Institute in Glendale, California. While at Cal Aero, Alan frequently flew with and challenged classmates in flying Control Line in an area outside of their dormitory.

Alan wrote about one of his most humorous true stories of U-Control model flying while at Cal Aero:

“Cal Aero Technical Institute was a school for aviation designers, draftsmen and engineers, and then there were the mechanics. These were the practical men who did overhauls, fixing and keeping the airplanes running. There was a lot of competition between those of us that were just designing the model and those who were using their engineering skills designing models.

“There was another fellow across the dormitory who was an engineer. He was always kind of mocking our little planes, saying he could build a plane that could fly a lot better. We challenged him to show us. We had our planes flying pretty well. He designed a new U-Control system. He said it had to be real lightweight. He built his airplane using a slide rule and all his technology to design this thing. It had a pretty powerful engine on it. Out in front of the dormitory where we all lived, there was a little triangle space just big enough to fly these U-Controls. So, sometimes we’d get out there to test them.

“The day came when he had his plane finished. It was all covered with a kind of a white tissue paper covering. It also had long white wings. His name was Dave Harbold. Dave got his plane tuned it, took off and it started screaming around that circle. We were all standing there, a pretty big crowd, because the thing was making a lot of noise. All of a sudden, the plane really started picking up speed when one of the wings just folded back under the increased air force. He lost half of his wing, but was still flying with half a wing (it was the outside wing that dropped off). There he was holding the handle with the two long wires 50-feet long. By now he’s got half the drag do the plane just really picked up speed, the engine started really screaming and going around faster and faster. Pretty soon, the other wing couldn’t take the force and just folded back and the airplane went into the ground just like an arrow. There it tumbled and somersaulted, finally breaking into a hundred pieces. We were all practically rolling on the ground laughing, saying we would never fly in an airplane that he designed. Never! So this was one that the mechanics had on the engineers. That was one of the very humorous events that happened at Cal Aero.

“We did have good times with the classes. We had welding – two weeks of welding, two weeks of wood splicing. We had to build wing ribs, learn covering – a whole week of covering and painting. We learned gas tank repair, engine repair, magnetos, and carburetors, with a week on every accessory of the engine. An aircraft mechanic has to know everything from sewing to painting to cable splicing to disassembling and overhauling engines. You really have to know it all. It’s a very practical course and you can fix almost anything. In fact, at one time, I thought I

could fix almost anything in the world. If you gave me the tools and the time, I could fix it. Of course, I know now that you can't. Times have changed."

Alan continued his education and in 1954, he received his B.A. from California State University in Chico, California, with a major in psychology and sociology. Three years later, he had received a Bachelor of Divinity and a Master of Divinity from the San Francisco Theological Seminary in San Anselmo, California.

Below, Alan writes of his flying adventures while a student at Cal Aero.

### **A Prize-Winning Model Airplane**

By Alan Heiberg Olson, from his autobiography, "Who's Flying This Thing"

Mentioning that prize-winning model airplane, I'll have to go back to Cal Aero. About three-quarters of the way through that year, I was getting pretty good at flying models. We took a trip up to explore this job position and to visit Arbuckle near Williams, California. I took a little plane that I had designed and took it out to a farmer's field where the grass was two or three feet high and I really rang that plane out. I learned to fly it upside down, in loops, dive it into the grass, and fly inverted. Of course, I crashed it that day. I probably crashed it 20 to 30 times. It didn't matter if I crashed it because the grass was tall enough not to let any rough terrain hurt the airplane. The grass just cushioned the crash landing, keeping the propeller from damage. We had only to clean it off, crank it up again, just keeping at it. I really learned to get over the fear of flying it in any direction.

Back at school, I next designed a bigger airplane. A contest was coming up that was to be held at the Arcadia Race Track (Santa Anita Park, a horse track in Arcadia). The event was the All Western Open Model Airplane Contest. I decided that I wanted to get in that contest with my airplane. Everyone said, "No, you're not good enough for that." They were all telling me that I couldn't do this and couldn't do that. But I decided I was going to do it anyway. Norval Ferguson said, "Well, let's do it." We got the engine tuned up, learned to fly it, and practiced. The weekend came. I'll never forget the day we took it to the judging stand and put the plane on the table. They were judging on the design, finish, and all the different aspects of the plane. I had a little ignition Madewell engine that we had converted over to glow plug operation. It was a very wicked running engine that at times would throw the propeller off, run backwards and do all kinds of crazy things. We finally got it started, tightened the propeller and it was really running very, very well. I got it tuned in just right. The airplane took off smoothly. I really amazed myself, finding I could really fly it well. I'd dive that thing wing over, straight down and bring it out just a few feet from the ground, turn it very sharp while inverted, fly it level all the way around, bring it up with a special maneuver called a clover leaf with a wingover and a figure eight with a loop at the end.

A 12-year-old beat me out for first place, but I did win second place in the All Western Open U-Control senior stunt. That was in 1948. The name of the plane was Snap, Crackle, and Pop because that's the way the engine would perform. It was a very raspy, unpredictable engine. I still have that medal in a little box in my dresser.

## **Moving On**

By Stacey Shannon

Eventually Alan became more interested in full-sized airplanes that often took the place of model airplanes in his life. Alan restored numerous classic airplanes including a 1946 Taylorcraft BC 12-D, a 1946 Funk B-85C and a 1943 Stinson Reliant, V-77 Gullwing. Alan said, “We restored and flew our Stinson Reliant over 1,000 hours in the 20 years that we owned her. She was donated to the Santa Maria Museum of Flight in 1992 located on the Santa Maria Airport where it is on display today [2003].” See attached photos of the models and full-sized antique and classic aircraft that Alan restored and flew.

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