



The AMA History Project Presents: Autobiography of FRED PIERCE

Born July 26, 1926 Started modeling around 1932
AMA #43366



Written by FP; Formatted and Edited by JS (07/2007), Reformatted by JS (01/2010)

The following autobiography was written by Fred Pierce.

Autobiography of Fred Pierce

I was born in Shelby, Montana. The year was 1926. The modeling did not get a start for about six more years. According to my Mom, I was supplied with scrap wood and a handful of blue (perhaps you are old enough to remember) shingle nails. With this, and the help of my own little hammer, a not too good-looking aircraft would be constructed. Many courageous flights would be flown around the yard. The first toys I remember having were my hammer, an alarm clock, and a 22-caliber revolver, now defunct.

Charles Lindberg was *my* hero, if not many of the others in Shelby, Montana. (After all, this was cowboy and cattle country). The other kids thought I was weird as I buzzed around the yard, with an occasional daring flight to my friend's yard. This was all done with sound effects from one's mouth. You could even simulate a rough sounding engine or engine failure preceding the crash.

Since time flies, you grow and take on more difficult things. Following the building and destruction of many, many 10- and 25-cent model planes (I think it was around Christmas of 1938) my dad, growing tired of me drooling over the *Spiegel* catalog, page 391, showing several model engines, gave in, and bought me a Syncro B-30. No one could get this thing to run, much to my disgust. I cranked the arm off anyone who could be coerced to give it a try. It never ran. The airplane it was to go in was a 5-foot span *Stinson Reliant* by Cleveland. Dad got it in payment of a debt. The *Stinson* was beautifully built and sat in the dime store window for a long time but it finally wound up at home.



Fred in a Washington field

There was a large vacant lot south of our house. One nice day, while the *Stinson* still had that huge rubber band in it (I can still remember, it was about 1/8 in thick and 1/2 inch wide - the propeller had to have been carved from a balsa block about 16 inches long,) I took it to the vacant lot and wound it as best a 7½ -year-old could and still hang on. I managed to get around the wingtip, heaved a really large sigh, let go of the propeller, gave it a big shove, then watched the tail break off as it caught on my heel. Man, was that a heartbreaker. After this, many more kits were massacred. My dad took it quite well. (He did not kill me!) Dad was the depot agent and telegrapher for the Great Northern Railroad at Shelby. He had been taking

flying lessons in a Curtiss *Jenny*.

I never had a really good flying model until years later nor lived in a town with a model shop or other modelers. The kits I talk about came from a dime store or a general mercantile store. I felt lucky when I could get hold of an issue of *Model Airplane News*. I made my own glue from old toothbrush handles and other celluloid plus acetone from the drugstore. The only drugstore was in Havre, Montana, 35 miles away.

Jumping way ahead, World War II came along and I was living in Helena, Montana. I went to Helena because the high school had a cadet aviation program. I began to meet fellows of my age with aviation on their minds. A couple of cadets built and flew what we call today Old Timer ignition Free Flight models. The most model-minded one was flying a very large red cabin job with a Rocket engine. We put it through a woman's chicken wire fence. She called him and seemed quite mad, but gave him back his engine and a little bag of stuff. That was about all that was left!

To move this story along, I enlisted in the Army Air Corps along with two of my cadet friends in 1944, with the promise that we would not be called until the finish of our junior year and get credit for our senior year while in the service. Basic training was at Shepard Field in Texas, then onto Scott Field in Illinois for training as a control tower operator. I then worked at Langley Field in Virginia as a control tower operator.



In the interest of not becoming too boring, I will drop off talking about control tower operations. In the war, I joined a modeling group in Naples, Italy and a Spitfire group near Bologna. I really did not get a chance to get hold of any model items until going through the outskirts of Munich, Germany one day looking for firearms. I looked in the window of a garage and, instead of firearms, I saw on the windowsill a pair of diesel engines. The following week I made a deal with the owner; two



Fred fiddling with one of those weird Czech diesels



c. 1945: Fred in Furstenfeldbruck, Austria

cartons of cigarettes for the pair. (I have passed one of these engines around at club meetings; the other was traded off).

A young German fellow built the first model airplane I saw in Europe. He knew it was against the law, but once he found you were a modeler, it opened up many things. We had many of these people working for us. German Hitler Youth had engines and Free Flight models, some with diesel engines. On weekends, we would meet these modelers outside the airbase and fly. By the way, this base was called Furstenfeldbruck and was the fighter base for Herman Goering's yellow-nosed fighters. These included the Focke-Wulf 190, the Messerschmitt 109, and others. They were used during the war to protect Munich. Years later, it was where the Israel Olympic Team members were killed. This happened right in front of the tower where I had worked.

My serious modeling and engine collecting did not get going until I was back in the States. At one time, I had about 160 engines. I belong to a group of collectors called MECA (Model Engine Collectors Association). Tom Cope is member #100 and I am #146. Now there are thousands of collectors.

I have done all my serious modeling while here in Seattle. In the Boeing model shops, I worked on things like the 747 landing gear, the *Minuteman Missile*, space stations, hydrofoils, rocket launchers, and many other programs. My main job was in the new business area, answering requests for proposals. My life is still full of modeling. I have entered models in the Scale Masters seven times and have had four-quarter Scale models accepted. My Radio Control model of a Hungarian 2 place bomber scored 99.5 of a possible 100 points.



Many years ago, I won the NW Model Expo "Best of Show" award three years in a row.

I helped set up the Museum of Flight here in Seattle and checked out the engineering drawings for the main glass building. I rehung all the models in the "Red Barn" and approximately fifteen of my models are still on display there or elsewhere.

Recently I have been troubled with leukemia and it has caused balance and stability problems. This is why I have not spent much time at Harts Lake Prairie lately. I have slowed down a lot. (My autopilot gyro is kaput.)

God willing, I hope to see you at the field or at the meetings.

I hope you enjoy my story.
Fred.



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