



The AMA History Project Presents: Biography of DR. JAMES TANG



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Plastic Surgeon Flies the Tiny Skies

The U.S. Air Force's loss is plastic surgery's gain. Eyesight that didn't pass muster for fighter-pilot training was good enough (with corrective lenses) to allow James Tang, MD, of Houston, Texas, to excel in plastic surgery. As for jetting off into the wild blue yonder, he takes flights of fancy with RC airplanes and helicopters he builds and flies.

"...I'm quite nearsighted," he said. "I function quite well with my contact lenses, but the Air Force had other ideas. In another life, I would have loved to have been a fighter pilot, perhaps a 'Flying Tiger' of World War II."

James says his childhood dream was to emulate his heroes- the fighter pilots of World War I and II – and become one of the celebrated flying aces who patrolled the skies and kept the world safe from tyranny.

He spent a good part of his childhood building model airplanes and flying rubber-band-propelled airplanes. But as often happens, James set aside the hobbies of his youth for more adult pursuits.

That is, until he discovered the fun of flying RC models and joined the NASA Radio Control Club in Houston – not far from the University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston, where he did his plastic-surgery residency. James is currently a member of the Northwest Radio Control Club.

He said, "I've built about 40 RC airplanes since I started my practice in Houston in 1983. Most were built from kits and some were ARF planes – almost ready to fly. They take relatively little work to complete. But today I have only three airplanes and three or four helicopters."

James says he would have more in his fleet, but that would mean time spent with his hobby and less with his wife, Elizabeth.

"She'd like me to spend more time with her," he said.

He adds that plastic surgery and his hobby have several elements in common: "The precision and patience required for excellence and satisfaction gained in a job well done."

“The two fields have a strong correlation,” he said.

James has never lost a patient, but he can't say the same about his aircraft. “I was flying a propelled glider, which uses power to climb and then glides back after the fuel runs out. I sent one quite high, where it was just a speck in the sky. I gave it a downward command and expected to track it in, but I lost it early on and never saw it again. I drove around for quite a while but couldn't find it; it simply disappeared. That was a strange experience.”

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