



The AMA History Project Presents: Autobiography of JOHN A. DEVRIES

Born October 22, 1924

Started modeling in 1934

AMA #1427



Written and Submitted by JD (10/1999); Transcribed and Edited by SS (06/2002)

Career:

- Learned to model at YMCA camp at age 10
 - Won a “gold” medal and \$5 at his first contest at Rochester (New York) Polo Field
 - Made more than 20 ID models for the Navy in his high school shop class during World War II
 - Volunteered for aviation cadet training in 1943 leading to an almost 30 year career in what would eventually become the U.S. Air Force
 - In the mid-1940s started the Johnson Air Force Base International Model Airplane Club
 - Joined an Radio Control modeling club while stationed in Alaska during 1958
 - While stationed in Washington, D.C. beginning in 1959, joined the Northern Virginia Radio Control Club
 - While stationed in Europe helped to form the SHAPE International Model Airplane Club
 - Retired to Colorado in 1972 at age 48 and joined the Pikes Peak Radio Control Club, serving as its newsletter editor for 22 years
 - Began writing for model magazines in the early to mid-1970s
 - Published two books, “Taube, Dove of War” and “Alexander Eaglerock”
 - Had several scale models published in the model airplane press
 - By October 1999, had written 145 giant scale columns for Model Aviation magazine
 - Attended the Paris International Scale Model Championships in 1984
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I was born, at a very young age, on October 22, 1924 in the Rochester (New York) General Hospital – where I'd gone to be near my mother.

For quite a while, I began to grow, learned to talk and walk, and drove my tricycle off the stairs, thus knocking out most of my baby teeth. At about that time, I became interested in airplanes. My great-grandfather, Horace F. Atwood, was fascinated by them and regularly took the family to the LeRoy, New York Airport in his huge Pierce Arrow to watch airplanes take off and land. On the odd Sundays, he'd take us to the Rochester Municipal Airport to watch the American Airlines tri-motor low winged Stinsons do the same thing.

At the tender age of 10, I was packed off for eight weeks to the Rochester YMCA camp (Camp Cory) where I learned how to build rubber-powered model airplanes. My counselor, Walt Foertch, was the instructor. When I returned home after the summer, I started to build a scale model of the Curtiss A-8 attack airplane. I only finished the wing but it was a very pretty yellow wing, covered in Japanese tissue.

My second model was an SE.5 and the bloody thing actually flew (from shoulder height to the ground). It ended its days when I launched it from the porch roof with a lit firecracker in the nose for balance weight. Shards of balsa all over the front yard!

There were innumerable rubber-powered models built in the next few years. In addition, there were many, many solid balsa models constructed. The value of these latter models was to teach how balsa may be carved and it also led to carving flying model propellers from balsa blocks. The skills acquired still exist today – almost 60 years later.

As a young airplane model builder I began to collect the magazines that were available on the subject. Model Airplane News and Flying Aces cluttered my bedroom. At about this time, my foster father took the family along on one of his dealer visits for the Eastman Kodak Co. When I heard that he was including Baltimore, Maryland, on the trip, I looked forward to a possible visit of what appeared to be the biggest U.S. kit manufacturer. The Burd Co. usually occupied the rear cover of the magazines with huge ads (often for Dick Korda's Wakefield-winning rubber-powered model). Anyhow, we did get to visit the Burd “factory.” What a let down! It was on the second floor of a dingy building and had all the beauty of a loft. At long tables, women were assembling the parts for kits and stuffing them into boxes. The design department was a small room with a couple of drafting tables set up in it. Off in a corner was an ancient printing press. No guided tour; I was able to wander around and see what was happening. But – it was a wonder that the flashy magazine ads could be backed up by the apparent confusion of the poorly lit loft!

The first model airplane contest I ever entered was conducted on the Rochester Polo Field that was next to the Genesee River. My model was a rubber-powered Denny Condor and it was a particularly good flyer. I don't remember which event I entered but the Condor won me a “gold” medal and \$5 in real money. I proceeded to squander most of it (\$4.50) on all nine available Cleveland Dwarf kits (1/2-inch scale) of the Thompson Trophy winners. They were 50 cents apiece. In any event, I built the Caudron C.460 (the 1936 Thompson winner) and went whole hog on making it scale. Entered in a static contest conducted by Sibley, Lindsay and Kerr department store, the Caudron won me yet another \$5 (that I squandered on a new, blue pair of swimming trunks). Point in passing: I still have three of the Cleveland Dwarf kits!

At about this time the thing for model builders was gas-powered Free Flight. My contribution to the cause was a Scientific Red Zephyr powered by a very well used Brown Jr. engine. Never did get the Brown running at full tilt (nor did I ever get a GHQ engine to run at all nor the build-it-yourself Synchro Bee). A golf course was the local flying field and I watched the flight of an Ohlsson .23 powered Lancer. The mid-winged and relatively small model flew quite as well as my Red Zephyr albeit a bit faster. The experience led me to acquire my first Ohlsson .23 although I never did install it in a Free Flight. The reason: Jim Walker had invented U-Control and the Ohlsson was installed in an AJ Fireball. That model flew like a dream and – what with the spindle – formed almost solid balsa Fireball fuselage, made for a particularly rugged bird. Concurrently, I built a Stanzel Baby Tiger Shark, which also used the Ohlsson.

Throughout high school, I continued to build Free Flights, U-Controls and rubber-powered scale models. My uncle John apparently caught the bug and started to build huge Free Flights. I'd built the Scientific Flea (with the motor simulating ratchet on the propeller) as well as the Goldberg

Valkyrie. Uncle John borrowed the plans for the latter model and blew them up to an eight-foot wingspan. He flew his big model with a Trojan .28 (something that you couldn't do today!). Part of the high school shop curriculum was to make 1/72nd scale models of World War II warplanes in shop class and I built more than my share. Wood, plans, cardboard templates as well as flat black paint were provided, and I built more than 20 ID models for the Navy. I graduated from high school in June 1942.

It was time for college so model airplanes were put away for my first year at MIT (Course 16 – Aeronautical Engineering). Stayed in Cambridge, Massachusetts, until the following April (1943) when World War II caught up with me. I'd volunteered for aviation cadet training because I wanted to be a pilot. There was an extended period in Alabama (pre-flight at Maxwell) and Georgia (Douglas for PT-17 Primary, Cochran for BT-13 Basic and Spence for AT-6 Single Engined Advanced). I graduated as a second lieutenant on August 4, 1944. During flying training I'd run into another model airplane builder, Bob Starr, who was carving an Allison engine from blocks of wood. He used the springs in collar stays to simulate the Allison's valve springs and carved the gearing from flat bits of pine. Beautiful model. Since wartime kits were all pine and cardboard we didn't try to build any of them although, somewhere along the line, I purchased the Joe Ott kit for Roscoe Turner's Laird racer (a Free Flight gas model). But Bob and I did design and build some rather elaborate chuck gliders out of manila folders and library paste (they were lousy fliers). Bob, after the war, flew for Ray Stits. He was the pilot for Stits' Bee and Bi-plane.

My first assignment after graduation was as an instrument instructor for French aviation cadets. After attending the Air Force's Instrument Instructors' School at Bryan, Texas, I began instructing the first of 23 classes of French cadets and officers. (It should be noted that I got married to Mary Frances Morris on August 18, 1945, three days after World War II ended.) In any event, for the last six months of the French program, I became the only French-speaking single engine advanced instrument instructor in the Air Force. (French came from four years of it in high school.) I briefed every class every day and flew washout rides for French students who couldn't get the hang of instrument flying. Those rides were exercises in utter frustration because nobody ever got washed out – the French having given their cadets their pilots' wings when they finished basic flying training. When the program ended in February 1946, the French Air Force (Armee de L'Air) presented me with a set of numbered and registered French pilot's wings.

The next assignment was to Wright Field, Ohio, where I was assigned to the reconnaissance lab. Not much business at the office so I spent most of my duty time helping the enlisted folks prepare three C-54s to participate in the documentary photo mission for the 1946 atomic bomb tests at Bikini Atoll. Learned a lot about aerial photography. The weekends were spent either building Class A U-Control models (atom-powered) and yet another Fireball or watching the guys in the park in Dayton who were flying pulse jet U-Control airplanes. Noisy! And HOT! I got promoted to first lieutenant at Wright Field.

The Air Force decided, in August of 1946 to transfer me to Japan as, of all things, a public relations officer. For about three months, I OJT'd at PACUSA in Tokyo. We lived in the Tokyo Electric Building and walked to work. The morning and afternoon walks were frequently held up while Dugout Doug (General MacArthur) arrived for or left from work. His office was on our route.

With my new credentials well in hand, PACUSA sent me to Nagoya, Japan to be the public information officer (PIO) at Headquarters, 5th Air Force. The only problem: the 5th didn't need a PIO and for the first time in my military life, I was asked where I wanted to be assigned. While I was in the Replacement Depot when I first arrived in Japan, most of the pilots of our group were recruited to fly L-5s at Johnson Air Force Base. Actually, they were assigned to the 35th Fighter Group to fly P-51Ds! With that background, I asked to be sent to Johnson to fly L-5s. That got me a good job in the 40th Fighter Squadron with a Mustang all my own! At the time, the 40th only had two mechanics assigned. Both were old master sergeants who knew their way around 51s. All the pilots became their own crew chiefs and we had to attend a mechanics' school taught by a North American Tech Representative. Part of the schoolwork involved rebuilding a Merlin engine that was then installed in the 51 that we'd restored (it had been cannibalized for parts). One of our students flew the newly restored Mustang to the Kisarazoo Airfield where, after the clock had been removed from the instrument panel, the bird was pushed off the dock into Tokyo Bay!

In any event, you could only fly if your airplane was in commission. So the routine was fix your bird all night and fly it all day. They did provide "local help" (my "assistant" was a former Japanese major who taught flying at the Kamikaze school!). Anyhow, we got my P-51K (the only one in the group) – the K indicated a Mustang with an Aeroproduct propeller rather than the D's Hamilton-Standard – cleaned up and painted (my Mustang was named Smooch II – Smooch I was my wife).

Although there was a lot of fun flying, we usually had weekends off. A couple of crew chiefs from the 339th Night Fighter Squadron (P-61s) also based at Johnson and I started the Johnson AFB International Model Airplane Club. Base Commander Colonel Ray Clifton gave us an unused wooden building on base as a model airplane workshop. Among other perks, we were able to use the building's window framing for engine bearers in our U-Control models. We flew on the base's baseball field – the pitcher's mound was the center of our U-Control circle and we made sure that the bases had been removed before we could fly. I tried my hand once again at designing a model and came up with a neat dark blue low-winger that flew with yet another Ohlsson .23. Ohlsson's were only \$16.50. We got all of our modeling supplies mailed to us from a hobby shop in Honolulu, Hawaii.

Being a fighter squadron wingman required additional ground duties, particularly when some real crew chiefs showed up in the squadron. For a while, I was the squadron utilities officer and was put in charge of constructing a handball court. I had a crew of Japanese who dug the court out of the ground and lined its walls and base with concrete. This exercise was conducted in an open bay in the same building where the base paint shop and tactical photo-processing lab were located. We were almost finished when a fire started in the paint shop. It not only burned down the building over our handball court but the building next to it – our group's officers' quarters! The handball court ultimately became a decorative pond in the patio garden of the rebuilt officers' quarters.

About this time, I was accepted into the Regular Air Force. Ray Clifton figured that a Regular officer should be more than a P-51 wingman so he sent me to the Aircraft Controllers' School

located on Johnson AFB. Graduation meant transfer to Shiroy Air Base, the radar installation that protected the Tokyo area. Aircraft controlling meant shift work so model building took a back seat to a lot of late night activity with the big CPS-1 radar. To get the necessary monthly flying hours, we had a liaison squadron who ferried us back and forth to Johnson in Stinson L-5s. I still flew 51s with the 40th but found that they'd ash-canned my K so that all the birds in the squadron would have ham-standard props.

Our first daughter was born in Tokyo General Hospital and, when she was six months old, we were transferred back to the States (flew home on Pan American Airlines DC-4s; we celebrated Christmas 1948 all across the Pacific Ocean). The new assignment was at Moses Lake AFB, Washington where I was the chief controller of the 637th Air Control and Warning (AC&W) Squadron. Again, shift work, but I do recall that I built a Control Line model of the 1930 Thompson Trophy winner – the Laird bi-plane flown by Speed Holman. I used the Cleveland kit's plans and carved the fuselage out of a balsa block. It was a beautiful little model, but it was destroyed by the movers when we left for the Air Force Tactical School at Tyndall AFB, Florida. They forcibly removed the upper wing so that the model would fit into a packing box!

After graduating from tactical school in June of 1950, the powers-that-be decided that I should remain at Tyndall as an instructor in the Air Force Aircraft Controllers' School, which was also located on the base. After a brief visit to Maxwell AFB to complete the Academic Instructors' School, I returned to Tyndall. I had to return to Moses Lake, Washington to close up our house (and sell it!). The trip was accomplished in a Beech C-45 that I flew from Florida to Washington and return, solo.

The next 3-1/2 years were spent teaching officers to be aircraft controllers. However, there wasn't any place to fly model airplanes in northwestern Florida so model building took a back seat to increasing our family. Our second two daughters were born during the Tyndall assignment. I, also, got two promotions and left Tyndall as a major in the newly formed blue-suited United States Air Force.

The new job was at Kirtland AFB in Albuquerque, New Mexico, in the atomic testing business. In fact, right after I'd checked on base, I was on my way to Eniwetok for the 1954 test series. I was assigned to the business of controlling aircraft participating in the hydrogen bomb tests. We used Navy radars from a command ship to make sure that all aircraft flying around the detonations were in a safe position. Since I was prone to seasickness, the task group operations officer (thankfully!) transferred me back to Eniwetok to run the aircraft control facility on the island. That job ultimately led to several more atomic tests both in the Pacific and in Nevada for me.

Among the other folks that I worked with at Kirtland was a Raytheon Tech Rep named Marty Oberg. It was during this period that the transistor appeared as well as Radio Controlled (RC) model airplanes. Marty designed a Radio Control radio that was transistorized and I built it into a Free Flight model that I'd designed. The radio was unique in that the airborne antenna stretched between wing tips inside the wing. It wrapped around two balsa disks installed in the wing tips. The model never flew because we didn't have a suitable transmitter. Later on I acquired a complete radio system (the Berkley Aerotrol) an escapement single-channel set (with the RK-61

glowing purple tube) that was installed with all of its batteries in a DeBolt Livewire. When the Scientific transmitter wouldn't work, I had a ground-based transmitter with the attendant Y antenna. It was a big black metal box and wasn't the most reliable bit of Radio Control gear that I've ever seen.

After about 2-1/2 years in the atomic testing business, I was assigned as the plans officer for the 4950th Test Squadron at Kirtland. The job was to plan all of the aircraft activity during nuclear tests and led to the supreme job of my Kirtland assignment. I was selected to plan the first (and only!) nuclear device delivery from a fighter aircraft. The job entailed assembling two F-89s, with aircrews supplied by the Air Defense Command, and launching an atomic defense rocket (the MB-1) over the Nevada Test Site. We were based at Indian Springs AFB (about 60 miles north of Las Vegas) and trained for the mission for about six weeks. The family, with the new son that was born in Albuquerque, came along and we all lived in a trailer in the base trailer park.

The rocket was "delivered" on the July 19, 1957 – with great success (it went off only 800 feet from the designed burst location). For a while there, I was "the world's greatest expert on atomic rockets." That resulted in a transfer to the 11th Air Division at Ladd AFB in Fairbanks, Alaska because the local F-89 fighter squadron (the 449th) was working up on the MB-1. Earlier on, I'd been selected to command an AC&W squadron on Hamilton Island in the Gulf of Alaska but the nukes took precedence. I moved my family from Albuquerque to Rochester, New York, and headed off to the cold north, alone. The solo tour lasted 13 months, broken by a month's leave in Rochester. Surprisingly, there was a very active Radio Control club at Ladd AFB and flying was year-round. The weirdest part of winter flying was getting our glow plug engines warm enough to start. The technique was to position our models just aft of an automobile's exhaust pipe and run up the car. When the model's engine was sufficiently warmed up, it was a quick flip to get it started. A lot of automobile gas was wasted in the process because things cooled off very fast at 20 degrees below zero! The 1958 to 1959 time frame was still single-channel, rudder only aircraft. Nobody in Alaska had one of the new-fangled multi-channel radios at the time.

I was "rescued" from Fairbanks by yet another school. In January of 1959, I was ordered to the Joint Operations Staff School, in Norfolk, Virginia. No model building in Norfolk, but I did get a chance to fly Navy aircraft (T-28Bs and the Navy version of the C-45). Got promoted to lieutenant colonel just before graduating from the joint operations course and got transferred to the headquarters of the U.S. Air Force in the Pentagon. There followed four years of frustration, relieved only by the fact that the house we bought in Springfield, Virginia, had a great model making room in the cellar. The model that represents the Washington, D.C. episode was a Radio Control scale biplane – a Great Lakes Trainer. Best part of that exercise was that it was equipped with a Kraft multi-proportional radio. I joined the Northern Virginia Radio Control Club and really appreciated all the great fellows who were members. One of them, Lt. Col. Hurst Bowers and I became fast friends. Our fourth daughter was born at Fort Belvoir, Virginia, during the tour.

When it came time (thank goodness!) to leave the Pentagon, I got my second chance of my career to ask for and receive an assignment. I asked to be transferred to Colorado Springs, Colorado, and the Air Force concurred. I'd wanted a job with the Air Defense Command but the

higher-ups figured, with my joint operations staff background, that the North American Air Defense Command (NORAD) was a more suitable assignment. I ended up in the war-gaming office of NORAD, with Air Force, Army, Navy, and Royal Canadian Air Force peers. T'was a great job and introduced me to computers (we planned our "wars" using one of the early IBM machines). Can't recall any of the models I built during the five-year assignment but I do remember that I purchased a great (albeit heavy) MicroAvionics radio system as well as another Kraft system. The latter included three airborne sets that all used the same Radio Control transmitter.

After four years in Colorado Springs, I got the biggest surprise in my military life. The high-priced-help made me a full bull, eagle-bearing Colonel. The net result of this exercise was to extend my NORAD tour for a fifth year. Then, there was yet another surprise. I got a phone call from Washington, D.C. asking me if I'd like a tour in Europe. Needless to say, I heartily concurred and soon the family and I were on our way to Belgium. Before we left, I had to sell the car that I'd built in my garage. It was an Aztec, a sporty, light fiberglass body mated to a 1967 Volkswagen chassis. The much lighter car was a speedy one. A good Canadian friend, Don Houlihan, was very instrumental in helping me build the car.

The new job was as the executive officer for an Italian General who was Chief of Readiness Testing for SHAPE headquarters. A very emotional man, Brigadier General Tornatoro, was reduced to tears when he had to fire one of the British officers in our division. In fact, he left the job to me. After about six months working for General T, I was promoted to the job of executive officer for the SHAPE director of operations. He was Major General Lightner and he was assisted by a German Major General. For the next two years, I shuffled papers – not the most interesting job in the world. The staff job was onerous but the off-duty time was most rewarding in the Radio Control sense. Together with several other modelers, we formed the SHAPE International Model Airplane Club and we had the world's best flying site. It was a former German airfield's aircraft parking area. During World War II, the field supported a JU.88 squadron and the twin-engine bombers and had several hardstands, all of which were concrete and connected to the field's operational runways with smooth, straight concrete taxiways. We could park our cars in the hardstands and fly from the taxiways. Best part of that exercise was that we almost always had a runway into the wind.

The house we rented in Mons, Belgium, had a very interesting place to build model airplanes. It was a room between the kitchen and the backyard and it was six feet by 12 feet. It had a sky-lighted ceiling and it was a bear of a place to build Radio Control models. Talk about your hangar rash. It was a daily occurrence.

Determined to learn how to fly RC, I bought a used Mighty Mambo from a Belgian enthusiast and installed my Micro Avionics radio in it. The model, ultimately, was called Patches because every time I'd dork it, I'd use a different color Monokote over the necessary repairs. I finally ran out of colors and had yet another Belgian builder make a DeBolt Jenny for me. The Jenny was covered with ribbed butcher's paper and was remarkably sturdy. The yellow model lasted until its last flight (obviously!). I lost control and rammed it into a Belgian haystack. Not incidentally, the grass areas of our flying field were used by Belgian farmers to pasture their livestock. That was at least until one of our club members flew into a cow! No damage done but the cow emitted a

very loud “whoosh!” The Belgian experience resulted in the construction of a Sterling Radio Control Spitfire that flew off the building board (until it, ultimately re-kitted itself).

I, finally, had had it with the NATO paper wars and let the boss know about it. That put me cross-threaded with an U.S. Air Force three-star general – and resulted in my transfer, on base, to a much smaller and, at the time, highly classified organization. There, I worked for Brigadier General Bob Cardenas, who had been the Air Force test pilot on the Northrop B-35 and B-49 flying wing bombers.

After 30 months in Europe (and a lot of official traveling, including flying North American T-39s from Wiesbaden, Germany) it was time to return to the States. Happily, I was returned to Colorado Springs but this time to the Air Defense Command. The job was a make-do in the readiness testing office and lasted only a year. Somebody decided that I'd be the best commander for the radar outfit at Shemya Island, Alaska – at the far west end of the Aleutian Islands. Having spent all time I needed in the Far North, I exercised my option to retire from the U.S. Air Force. So, after 29 years, eight months and six days I left the service. I was 48-years-old. I had 4,600 flying hours in 116 different types and marks of airplanes – from J-3 Cubs to WB-50s – and visits to all 50 states and 44 foreign countries.

In my absence from Colorado, two hobby shops had been established in Colorado Springs. The first was Musicks that was a part of a drug store on the western part of town. Bob Burows was the owner and split his time between the soda fountain and the upstairs/downstairs hobby emporium. I bought my first real Radio Control engine from him (a K&B .45, the Radio Control engine at that time). Heretofore all of my Radio Control engines had been controlled by exhaust throttles. The K&B had both a Radio Control carburetor and an exhaust throttle. At about the same time, I joined the Pikes Peak Radio Control Club and began 22 years as the club's newsletter editor.

Musick's closed out as a hobby shop when Bob Burows took ill; and it was succeeded by Custom Hobbies, owned by Jack Aycock. The Pikes Peak Radio Control Club met in the back room of Custom Hobbies until it outgrew the facility. Later on, Aycock sold out to Jack Merritt who moved the shop to a bigger store. Aycock then went to work for Royal Products as their buyer.

With all the free time and after more than 40 years in the airplane model hobby, I decided to write about it. Dick Kidd, the technical editor of Radio Control Modeler magazine, encouraged me and teamed me with Col. Art Johnson, both of us writing their scale model column on alternate months. During this period, I met Dick Phillips, a Canadian who was the “father” of giant Radio Control scale. Dick and I got on very well and went into the book publishing business. At the time, I'd had two books published, “Taube, Dove of War” and “Alexander Eaglerock.” Like Dick, I figured that there was more money in publishing than in writing (Ha!).

Among my other retirement activities, I'd had several scale models published in the model airplane press. They included: the 1929 Velie Monocoupe, the Berliner-Joyce P-16, the Minowa sailplane, the Ryan Fireball, Howard Hughes' H-1 Racer, the Pensuti Triplane (a Peanut scale model) and the Tutor N (a non-scale scale model trainer). When Bob (?), who wrote the giant scale model column for Model Aviation magazine, found that his day job was expanding, he

asked me to write a guest column. He decided to quit and, happily, I got the job (at present, I've written 145 giant scale columns for Model Aviation).

My model activities haven't been limited to time behind the computer word processor. I worked for a year or so as a clerk in Jack Merritt's model airplane emporium and learned a lot about the business. I've attended the Toledo show several times, visited the QSAA Fly-In twice in Nevada and, in 1984, returned to Europe for the Paris International Scale Model Championships. At this latter event, I met Phillip Kent, one of Britain's supreme Radio Control model columnists, designers, and builders. Hit it off with him and ever since we've been swapping copies our respective publications ever since.

Of late, I've had a problem with cataracts in both eyes. It has pretty well shut down any model airplane activity other than plastic kit modeling. Recently, I've had operations on both eyes and things are a lot clearer in the vision department. In the meantime, I get my flying time on my computer with the Real Flight Radio Control simulator.

That pretty well brings us up to date. I'm celebrating my 75th birthday this week.

*(signed) John deVries
October 19, 1999*

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