



The AMA History Project Presents: Biography of ROBERT (BOB) COPLAND



Written & Submitted by RGM (09/2002); Transcribed & Edited by SS (09/2002); Reedited by JS (03/2021)

Career:

- Associated with the Hawker Company (which later merged into British Aerospace) for 45 years; held various positions including head of design.
 - Well-known member of the Northern Heights Model Flying Club.
 - Placed second in the Gamage Trophy in 1936.
 - Competed in numerous Wakefields; sometimes flying as a proxy.
 - Won second in the Stout Trophy with his four-ounce model.
 - One of his innovative designs won the Pilcher Cup in April 1937.
 - Won the Weston Cup in 1938.
 - Won the King Peter of Yugoslavia Cup in the late 1930s or early 1940s; established world records for duration and altitude.
 - Had designs kitted, including the popular Northern Star and GB 3.
 - Set a record in indoor Round-the-Pole flying in 1944 with his Thistledown.
 - Won the national Model Aircraft Cup and the national Flight Cup in 1950.
 - Won the Queen's Cup in 1951.
 - Got his full-sized pilot's license and became an instructor.
 - Throughout his career contributed to the Hurricane, the Hunter and the Harrier.
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The following biography was written by R.G. Moulton.

Another link with the golden years of the 1930s has been broken with the death of Bob Copland on November 9, 2001. He was 78 and, as the senior fellow of the SMAE, commanded the highest respect, both in the sport of aeromodeling and in full-scale aviation. His association with the Hawker Company and its subsequent merger into British Aerospace spanned 45 years, from apprenticeship to head of design with a staff of 300.

Throughout he was the leading member among a galaxy of great names in the Northern Heights Model Flying Club – first coming into prominence during 1936 when he placed second in the Gamage Trophy. He then entered the Wakefield trials to compete among 123 entrants on what is now Heathrow Airport and qualified for the team at sixth place. They sailed on the Aquitania, returning after what must have been an overwhelming experience for those times, on the Europa with third place in the Wakefield and second in the Stout Trophy taken by Bob with his four-ounce model.

That design was a typical lightweight with box fuselage and with changes of the rules Bob turned to the first of his famous streamlined shapes with planked fuselage, no doubt influenced by his contemporaries, especially R.N. Bullock and Frank Zaic.

This new design, colored orange with red trim, as his long-standing friend, Ken Young, recalls, won the Pilcher Cup in April 1937 then went on to win the Weston Cup. Unfortunately, his position at 10th in the trials did not qualify for a place in the national team that year.

By 1938, the more familiar black fuselage and white surfaces had been adopted for a new model. Again he won the Weston Cup and, although he just missed the Wakefield team by placing seventh in the trials, he was able to fly proxy for Australian Jim Fullarton at the meeting in France.

Meanwhile a new international event for the King Peter of Yugoslavia Cup had been established and Bob not only qualified, he won the Cup. In doing so, he established world records of 33 minutes and nine seconds for duration and a 6,800-foot altitude. Having already set British records for indoor duration, Bob was very much in the limelight. So much so that Dr. A.P. Thurston, the president of the SMAE who had generously sponsored the team and accompanied it to Yugoslavia, recommended Bob to Sydney Camm, the chief designer at Hawkers.

Dr. Thurston had the similar experience of being apprenticed to the great inventor, Sir Hiram Maxim, and worked on his huge aeroplane. He recognized in Bob Copland the same attributes and skills that had established himself in the earlier days of aeronautics.

Sydney Camm also had good reason to recognize the potential of a contest-winning aeromodeler – he had been one himself. So, Bob was recruited to work at the Canbury Park Road factory in Kingston upon Thames to work on the first production Hurricanes.

The new model, which became known as GB 3 by virtue of its third team place in the 1939 trials, was taken to the Wakefield event in America and placed fourth. Bob had again sailed on the Aquitania across the Atlantic and this time returned on the Queen Mary – no small experience for a 22-year-old attending his third Wakefield finals!

Although always associated with the streamlined Wakefields, Bob kept his interest in the lighter four-ounce slab-sided models. His Parastar was featured in *The Model Aircraft Constructor* with its high-mounted wing as Bob's riposte to the many diamond fuselage designs then in use. But, it was the Northern Star, which became far more popular as a kit model. Produced by Premier Aeromodel Supplies, along with a kit for the GB 3, each of these designs had been developed through regular flying at the Northern Heights club field, Wagon Lane, Cockfosters, north of Greater London.

Despite the 1939 to 1945 hostilities and the anti-glider obstructions all over this field, it was the scene of somewhat restrained continuation of the famous Gala Days, which Bob's club had been running since 1933.

The Club also influenced indoor Round-the-Pole (RTP) flying during the war years, Bob setting a record with his Thistledown design at three minutes and 53 seconds in 1944. Publication of the plan spread interest throughout Britain.

By 1947, Bob created a new streamlined Wakefield, which he took to the Irish Nationals and the North/South Challenges between the Halifax and the Northern Heights Clubs, often with first placing. Another Wakefield team place eluded him, though he had the experience of a proxy entry for Hewittson of New Zealand in 1949 at Cranfield. Two more nationals successes came in

1950 when he won both the Model Aircraft and the Flight Cups in keenly fought competitions. Then came another challenge.

Dr. Thurston's patronage of Northern Heights' Gala Days had strong connections with Hawkers and elsewhere. The Galas were held on the Hawker airfield at Langley and a Gold Cup had been purchased to be known as the Queen's Cup for royal presentation as of 1949. [Editorial note: The Queen's Cup was presented at both the 1948 and 1949 Galas. *Ref: Aeromodeller, August 1948 and August 1949.*] It called for a model larger than the Wakefield specification.

Bob scaled up his design of 1947 and won the Cup in 1951, having narrowly missed it the previous year when his regular (and friendly) adversary, Rob Warring, won with his box fuselage as had Phil Smith in 1949. However, Bob stuck to his elegant form. He went to Rome in 1952 with the British team for the FNA Cup and placed second.

In 1953, he qualified again for the Wakefield team of four, along with the O'Donnell brothers, John and Hugh, plus Ted Evans. Bob's was almost the only streamliner on Cranfield and rule changes were much against him. Even a reasonable performance was not enough for more than a 25th place.

Ever the true competitor who never gave up, Bob persisted and in 1958 was third in the first part of the team trials, but for reasons unknown, did not qualify. He was rewarded by being team manager for the event in France in 1959.

He had represented his country in the U.S., Italy, Eire, Yugoslavia and France, flown his designs in four Wakefield finals and proxy flown for Australia and New Zealand at two others. As if this were not enough, add the prestigious King Peter Cup, the Queen's Cup, the national records and first places and the competitiveness of Bob Copland becomes clear. Not that he gave up in 1959. On the contrary, his Northern Heights Club had an enviable companionship that took them as a group to Dublin (which Bob especially enjoyed) and into Radio Control (RC) with their club glider – designed, of course, by Bob. It had the club's nine-channel reed control unit and created another first with its flights at Ivinghoe Beacon and Nympsfield in 1961.

It was the gliding site in Gloucestershire that deflected Bob's interests. His long friendship with Ken Young whose Royal Air Force (RAF) service has taken him into gliding at the Bristol Club site soon got Bob into the cockpit and, eventually, a pilot's license. Ken was instructing in the RAFVR at Henden, so it was no surprise that Bob became an instructor, too, taking cadets over the Northern Heights of London for their first experience of flying. One wonders how many of those young cadets were also aeromodelers who can claim, "I flew with Bob Copland!"

With eventual retirement, Bob went back to the building board in 1982 making another GB 3 to sustain his interest in the expanding vintage movement. His real ambition was to design and make a true scale model of the Harrier. By 1989, this was 60% completed with a fiberglass fuselage an extremely ingenious mechanism for the four propulsion ducts. Alas, the onset of arthritis was to prove too great a handicap and his ambitious project was never completed. Golf and bowls became his main pursuits – before a jug or two of the golden nectar at the bar.

Ever the perfectionist, Bob was noted for his quiet deliberation on anything from a decision in committee to the design of mechanical detail. Yet, he was the most approachable expert. His appearance at the vintage meetings over the past years has always created a flurry of excitement. At the prize-givings, he would willingly do the honors and every time he was introduced, as if that were ever necessary, he would get the loudest applause.

In his long career, he had contributed to the Hurricane, the Hunter and the Harrier – each an elegant thoroughbred. It was much to his credit that his funeral on November 16 was so well attended by those who had worked with him on those aeroplanes and especially those who envisaged the first P1127 prototype, which became the Kestrel and thence the amazing Harrier.

Bob never married – his love was for aviation. He lived with his sister, Lorna, and her husband, John, and their family to whom we extend our deepest sympathy.

“When you look back and you would not change the past you have lived.” – Frankly Speaking by Frank Zaic

Bob would certainly have enjoyed that quote.

(signed) R.G. Moulton

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