



# The AMA History Project Presents: Autobiography of WILLIAM (BILL) AUSTIN WYLAM



March 9, 1915 – June 4, 2015

Modeler starting in 1924

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*The following is an autobiography by William A. Wylam. William was inducted into the Model Aviation Hall of Fame in 1993.*

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I was born in Chicago, Illinois, in 1915, and my childhood was spent in the Chicago area. At the time, my father was a civilian flight instructor of aviation cadets for the U.S. Signal Corps at Chanute Field in Rantoul, Illinois. After the Armistice, we lived near the Checkerboard Airport at First Avenue and Roosevelt Road in Maywood, Illinois. It is now the site of the massive Veterans Administration (VA) hospital.

I started modeling around 1924, building a number of twin pushers and single tractors. After seeing several scale model exhibits, I became deeply interested in this fascinating hobby. My source of information was the aviation column of the Chicago Tribune. The building of these solid models of different scales provided a wealth of experience and education. Looking back, my early models were crude and rough. The only tools I had were razor blades, a knife hand, a drill, and a sandpaper block. The wood was scraps from home construction sites.

Later my models became more realistic. I used photographs to make corrections and add details. Finding these photographs was a great chore; the aviation editor of the Chicago Tribune was of some help. More than once, I had a set of good drawings but no photographs, or a set of photographs with poor drawings. The drawings in the Chicago Tribune were crude. The drawings in another early publication were of better quality. Believe it or not, the Methodist Church of Illinois sponsored this early publication (the title long forgotten).

In about 1925, I joined the Airplane Model League of America (AMLA) as one of its charter members. The J. L. Hudson Company, an upper-class department store in Detroit, sponsored this club. The managing director of the AMLA was Merrill Hamburg, an avid modeler and a great promoter. AMLA became very popular among those who were already in the hobby. All of its members accepted its rules and promotion of skilled craftsmanship in the early days. A large number of its "graduates" became leaders in their major occupations. As a club, we shared our views, tips, tool use, photographs, drawings, etc., which developed in the formation of the AMLA newsletter. The original newsletters were ditto copies. J. L. Hudson Company printed the newsletter later.

My own experience in craftsmanship came from my desire to be a winner at the AMLA national contest. Almost every AMLA member, thanks to Merrill Hamburg, had this goal. In 1929, I came close to the winning circle. I lost by several points to Lawrence McClellan's Stinson SM-

2A model. He had an upholstered cabin in his model; my Lockheed *Vega* had the best paint job with a painted interior. This Lockheed *Vega*, and several other models, was donated to the Smithsonian.

At the nationals, I was fortunate to meet Arthur J. Cravens of La Port, Indiana, along with a number of other top craftsmen. Art Cravens was one of the early judges at the nationals and one of the first scale airplane modelers. He helped Merrill Hamburg start the AMLA. In order to make a living building models, Art became involved in naval ship modeling and bid on the U.S. Navy ship model contracts. He was never out of work, even during the depression years. He started a project by constructing the hull, superstructures and cabins. Eager volunteers built the rest of the required accessories. Arthur was over 80 years old when he passed away in 1946. There were over fifty modelers at his funeral.

Steady growth in AMLA membership resulted in the creation of a newsletter. After Lindbergh's flight, the growth in membership was enormous, and the AMLA newsletter expanded into a magazine format. In 1928, the J. L. Hudson Company decided to discontinue connection with AMLA because of internal business problems. Shortly afterward, Bernard McFadden of McFadden Enterprises, a New York publishing house, rescued the faltering AMLA. The AMLA original magazine was *The American Boy*, but was renamed *Open Road for Boys* by the McFadden publishing group. In 1932, both McFadden Enterprises and AMLA fell upon hard times. AMLA discontinued; publishing rights to *Open Road for Boys* magazine were sold to publisher George C. Johnson. The title was changed to *Universal Model Airplane News*.

Heavily inked lines were required for printing early drawings in the AMLA newsletter. Not all of the early drawings were printed by AMLA or *The American Boy*. When George C. Johnson acquired the publishing rights, he received the contents of AMLA's files. Several of the unpublished drawings for AMLA were published by *Universal Model Airplane News*. The *Polish Fighter* drawing, published by *Universal Model Airplane News* in 1932, was actually drawn around 1930.

In 1930, I was very fortunate to learn the basics of mechanical drawing from an excellent instructor, Fred H. Zimmerman. The model-building hobby ended when I became deeply involved in airplane drawing. At the 1930 AMLA nationals, an organized meeting of model craftsmen was held to discuss the possible sources of detailed drawings and photographs. This was a serious and mysterious problem for a large number of model craftsmen. Art Cravens was the chairman of this lively and valuable event. Without the detailed drawings and photographs, it was necessary to locate the actual airplane, record the measurements, and photograph all details. The average modeler could not afford these special trips.

From the early days of AMLA events, I personally know Nicholas Loftus-Price and Charles Hampson Grant. Nicholas was aviation editor for McFadden Publications and *Open Road for Boys*, and was the first editor for *Universal Model Airplane News*. Around 1931, Nicholas returned to McFadden Publications; Charles Hampson Grant became the editor of *Universal Model Airplane News*. After the Art Cravens meeting, I approached Nicholas with a plan of publishing detailed drawings with cross sections and photographs. The editor liked the whole plan but he painted a grim picture of the future. In 1932, I reopened the publishing plan with

Charles Hampson Grant. Both he and George C. Johnson, *Model Airplane News*' president, became interested, but the magazine could not support this type of journalism. At that time, the deep business depression was worldwide. George said that when the advertising income was sufficient, he would approve publishing only three-view drawings. Later, if *Model Airplane News* could support the complete original publishing plan, I would be notified. From 1932 to 1940, the drawing work was irregular, sometimes with no pay, or placed on hold for six months or longer.

During the summer months of 1933 and 1934, I was a volunteer assistant to Paul Garber, working with the Smithsonian's aviation collection. This experience cemented a lifelong friendship. While I was in college, I was a part-time designer for Cleveland, Comet, and General Models, all model kit manufacturers.



*Bill Wylam at his drawing table, creating "Wylam drawings."*

Between 1941 and 1948, advertising revenues soared, leading to the acceptance in 1946 of my original 1930s publishing scheme. Within a year after the start-up, George C. Johnson passed away. His death changed the entire picture, as incompetent management replaced him. Around 1948, a serious business recession affected the entire hobby industry. Many retailers, manufacturers, and aviation publishers were forced to discontinue their operations.

The postwar years had the greatest growth in the entire model airplane history. This business boom started around 1950 and peaked around 1970. I left *Model Airplane News* in 1970 because of my heavy workload at NASA. I retired as Senior Electrical Engineer from the Space Program in 1984.

George C. Johnson was a man of vision and integrity. I was fortunate to know this extraordinary person. I have the same opinions about Charles Hampson Grant and Howard G. McEntee. Personally, I enjoyed the lifelong relationship with Charlie and Howard. Also during the thirty-odd years I was with *Model Airplane News*, I was fortunate to meet many outstanding aviation figures and modelers. Some were:

**Orville Wright and General Henry H. Arnold:** In 1943 or 1944, the fortieth anniversary of the Wright Brothers' first flight was the main theme of the U.S. War Bond Drive in New York City. General Henry H. Arnold was the keynote speaker and Orville Wright was the honored guest. At the banquet, George C. Johnson, the president of *Model Airplane News*, presented a framed panel to Orville Wright. It contained my original drawing of the *Wright Flyer*. Mr. Wright was impressed and remarked that it was the first time that he saw a correct representation of the original *Wright Flyer*. Also at this banquet, General Arnold credited both Charles Hampson Grant and me for our extraordinary contribution to the rapid growth of both the Army and Navy aviation-training programs.

**Charles A. Lindbergh:** Mr. Lindbergh was interested in my aircraft drawings, and he later inquired to George C. Johnson if I was related to Jim Wylam. James N. Wylam was my father and Mr. Lindbergh knew him from Checkerboard Airport in Maywood, Illinois. I was later a weekend guest at the Lindbergh's home in Connecticut.

**Admiral Marc A. Mitscher, U.S. Navy (USN):** This famous World War II aircraft carrier commander used a large number of my U.S. Navy aircraft drawings to decorate his den and office. These drawings were printed on expensive wallpaper. I was also a guest of this great man.

This is entirely from my personal memory as I kept no diary and have forgotten many events, dates, and names.

William A. Wylam

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### **William Austin Wylam**

Bill Wylam moved from his beautiful home in Santa Barbara to Vista Del Monte on January 15, 2005. He was born on the west side of Chicago (Oak Park,) and later, the family moved to Lockport, New York.

#### **Educational history**

- Lockport High School, diploma, 1931
- Brown University, BA - Biological Science, 1935
- Armour Institute of Technology, BS - Mechanical Engineering, 1938
- University of Illinois, BS - Electrical Engineering, 1948
- Wayne State University, DS - Honorary Doctorate, 1969

#### **Employment history**

- Bell Lab, Whippany, NJ - Transistor Commercialization
- Electro Motive Division, General Motors Corporation, La Grange, IL - Diesel Electric Locomotives
- Collin Radio, Cedar Rapids, IA - Military/Naval Radio
- Sperry-Univac, St. Paul, MN - Military/Naval Computers
- North American Space, Downey, CA - Apollo Space Program\*
- Boeing Company, Huntsville, AL - Saturn Space Program\*
- Rockwell International, Downey, CA - Space Shuttle Program\*

\*NASA assignment

#### **Professional history**

- Over 1500 published airplane drawings
- Twelve books on airplanes
- Over 1200 copyrights
- Seventeen industrial patents

- ππππ3 NASA citations

## Family history

- **First marriage**
  - Florence Evelyn Hedrick, in Urbana, IL, 1946
  - Three children: Kathleen Jane Wylam, Albany, NY; Lauren Elizabeth Wylam, Vancouver, WA; Stuart Hedrick Wylam, Orange, CA
- **Second marriage**
  - Doris Vivien (Pascal) Read, in Santa Barbara, CA, 1984
  - One child: Thomas Thornton Read (stepson)
  - Five granddaughters and one grandson

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