



# The AMA History Project Presents: Autobiography of WILLIAM (BILL) JOSEPH HARRIS

March 14, 1928-July 2, 2005    Modeler since 1935



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Written & Submitted by WJH (1990s-2000s); Edited & Formatted by NR (2011), reformatted by JS (07/2011)

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## **Modeling Career/Interests:**

- Early U-Control flyer
- CO2-powered model race car driver
- First contest attended was the Philadelphia Flying Circus
- Attended the New York Mirror Meet, met Frank Ehling
- 1948: Flew Control Line Speed and Combat
- 1948: Flew a Radio Control Rudder Bug by Walt Good
- 1952-1969: Flew FAI Free Flight
- 1953-1954: Flew with the US Free Flight team for FAI competition

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*The following autobiography was written by Bill Harris as his friends knew him. He sent Norm this diary-of-sorts in installments over a long period of time. As a modeler's diary, it is an intimate story of an average modeler who tells his story of growing up with modeling, and the gratification and pleasures of modeling. Assembled and edited by Norm Rosenstock, AMA Historian.*

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## **An Old Timer Recalls**

### **Part 1**

Having been born in the Lindberg era, it was predetermined that I would be air-minded. There is an early picture of me at the age of two in a metal pedal-airplane. I remember the biggest thing in my young life was when my father would take me to an airport and let me watch airplanes take off. Those airports - Hoover, Capital, and Queens Chapel - are now under blacktop. I remember seeing trimotors, both Ford and Stinson. I also remember Chamberlain flying in a Curtiss Condor sponsored by Amoco Gas. I almost got to ride in it, but it cost a dollar and I had to have an adult along. Dad was not that much of an adventurous soul.

When I was about three, I remember Dad built a rubber model bi-wing, yellow wings and brown fuselage. It flew right off the dining room table much to my delight. I don't remember what happened to the model, but I know I was not allowed to touch it when Dad wasn't around.

Around the age of seven, I was introduced to solid models by my father's friend's son, Howard Jasknick. I still see him whenever I need lumber as he now owns the Laurel Building Supply Company on Main Street in Laurel, Maryland. He was also a captain in the Army Air Corps and flew B-24s in Europe. He no longer builds models.

I even found at my local 5-and-10-cent store that they had one-cent scale models. Yes, one cent! It was a matchbox with a piece of 1/4 square and two pieces of 1/16 balsa and a 3-view!

The next models I built were ten-cent Hi-Flyers and Megow rubber models. I remember someone showed me how to use dope to cover with tissue.

About that time there was a radio show called Air Blazers about adventures in planes, and if you sent in ten cents, they sent you this model in a mailing tube. The fuselage was a crutch with bulkheads that the stiff paper was wrapped around. The wing frame was covered on only one side. The printed paper left you with a nice scalloped color scheme. Well, the company sent me two models instead of one. My father built one, and I built the other. It was only the second model he ever made, and it flew better than mine.

I remember the first time I saw a rubber model bigger than the 10- and 25-cent-ers I was building. I remember seeing my first Cleveland kit. It was like the Cadillac of models, but they cost more than I could afford. Then for Christmas my Aunt Eva from Massachusetts sent me this beautiful Henschel *Parasol* rubber model by Megow. I would unroll that kit and place everything out 20 times before I started it, making sure I knew where everything went. It met a terrible death. But that's another story.

I would like to drop back to my times in the third or fourth grade and my pal Walter Spittel. (Walter and I had been to school together from first grade through high school.) I had just constructed my first self-designed model, having been really impressed with the *Supermarine Spitfire*— pontoons and all. I carried it to school in a large paper bag. After school on our way home, we decided to slide down this railing. Putting my precious bag safely to the side, we were off! But Walter somehow managed to fall off, and of course landed on my bag. Looking inside was a big mistake. The model was so crushed; I lost my cool and gave poor Walter a bloody nose. Walter, wherever you are, I'm sorry! This was the first time I ever started a brawl. But not the last.

## Part 2

[Editor's correction to last month's article: Although he was a very gifted baby, Bill did not build his first model at 3 years of age. His dad built it.]

### The War Years: 1941-1945

For those of you who are younger than me (that's about everyone in our club!), think about building models if you didn't have foam, plastic covering, heat guns, or CA glue. Now add to that no silkspan, silk, tissue (Japanese), or balsa wood. Even glue was sold in bottles. LePage's and Comet were the brands most available to me.

Model engines were not being made except for the GHQ. Frank Ehling says that is because they had so many parts on hand prior to the war. But they didn't run unless you did a lot of machine work. Many said the GHQ stood for Gee How Quiet!

Most of my modeling supplies were purchased from a local 5- & 10-cent store. I built just about every model they had. I had graduated from solid models to 10-cent rubber powered. First the Hi-

Flyers and Megow. The largest Megow model I built was a Henschel *Parasol*. This was an all-balsa kit. The kit must have been produced before the shortages hit. The kit was sent to me as a Christmas present from my Aunt. I would estimate that the kit cost about 75 cents to a dollar. It was to be my biggest model ever. I would take the kit out and put all the parts around to make sure I knew where everything went. Then I made boxes for all the parts as I cut them out.

The body was round, so it had a lot of formers and stringers. Building the model took me a couple of weeks. The final assembly was a work of nerves. The wing was mounted above the fuselage and had a lot of struts. When I had everything done, I put the model next to the coal bin in the basement and arranged several chairs around it so that no one would bump it. That night a big spray tank we used for our apple trees fell from the nail in a ceiling rafter we used for a hook and smashed my model like a bug on the windowsill! I was able to save its wing and stab. With a lot of repairs, it finished its life as a glider.

The other day at our flying field, someone brought up the subject of walking on the wing or stomping a model. I never did that. I have blown them up or set them on fire but never jumped on one. It always seemed to me that airplanes should always have a heroic sendoff, like going to Valhalla.

Now (going back to the War years) some of the kits showing up were using cardboard and spruce. Some of these were the Cleveland and the Joe Ott kits that, before the war, were top-of-the-line. For a dollar I bought the Cleveland *Condor* glider. Its wing with all the spars made of 1/16 spruce and cardboard would not even support its own weight. I had to use struts to support it. It never did fly.

In 1942, I entered into high school. They had a program where they gave you a 3-view and some templates to build these solid models from pine. They would use these templates to check the models, and they were really strict. I only had one model accepted. It was a Japanese *Nakajima 97*. For all of this effort you were given a certificate of approval. I remember one senior who worked on a British *Lancaster* bomber for over a year before it got accepted. I remember to this day the foul-smelling glue that you had to heat up in an electric pot.

While in high school I helped organize and became president of our aviation club. Our sponsor was a teacher by the name of Marjorie Harrison and she owned her own *Ercoupe*. I never got a ride after quite a few promises. Out of this club, a few of us became CAP (Civil Air Patrol) cadets. We were stationed at the College Park Airport but our training and classwork was at the old Coolidge High School in Washington to get to the airport we had a long streetcar ride from Mt. Rainier and it only ran about every two hours. Well, we washed the CAP planes and serviced them, and for all this, one or two cadets got a ride. We never had a search mission. One of our club members said he had a motor to sell for five dollars. I jumped at the chance. It was a *Skychief* – another loser. It was made of cast iron and pot metal. Today it is worth about \$75-\$100.

Prior to the *Skychief* fiasco, Winnie – a friend of mine – came to me. He had a Thor engine that also never ran. He had some Christmas money burning a hole in his pocket. We went shopping for a good used motor. We ended up in this model shop on 7th street, N.E. in Washington, DC

near the old Atlas Theater. There was a young boy, maybe two years older than us, working there. He had this fuselage with an O&R .23 in it. He took us into the alley and started the engine. It ran great, billowing bright 70-weight oil fumes. We returned to the shop, and he said he had to go into the rear of the shop to remove the motor. A short time later he returned with the motor. We flipped it over, and it snapped back real good. I think we paid about \$8 for it. We rushed home, hooked up the ignition from the Thor, and flipped and flipped and flipped. Nothing. Winnie's grandfather, being somewhat smarter than we were, asked if we had checked the gap on the spark plug. We took out the plug and very neatly soldered to the inside was a spring. It supplied the snap that we mistook for compression. Stuck again!

Even if I didn't have a motor, I built my first gas model. The war was over, and balsa was again in use. The model was an *American Ace* Class B Free Flight, which was never flown before I enlisted in the Army in September 1946. I was 18 years old.

### Part 3

Author's note: Bill Harris is recovering quite well, thank you, from his hip surgery and has been seen driving his car and otherwise acting half [all right – 75%] his age.

### Post War

In 1943, I was hired part-time work at the Giant Food store number 4, located at Rhode Island Ave. near South Dakota Ave in NE Washington. In June of 1946, I graduated from Bladensburg High School under the name of William J. Harris. In September of 1946, when I enlisted in the Army, I became Pvt. Joseph W. Harris. I was able to stay abreast of model activity from the magazines *Air World* and *Model Airplane News* when I could find them. Sometimes they had old copies at the Service Club.

I never got any balsa in my hands until I was shipped to Adak, Alaska. For those who would not care to look it up, Adak is located about half way out on the Aleutian Island chain – closer to Russia than we cared to be.

Well, the hut I was assigned to had eight men assigned to it. We had no water, only electricity and a coal-oil stove for heat. The squad leader assigned to our hut was Sgt. Robert Winter, a native of California and veteran of the Battle of the Bulge in the European part of WWII. He was only a kid assigned to the Tank Corps under General Patton at the time. Did he ever have stories to tell about him!

Well, he showed a great interest in my hobby and became my building buddy. We built several rubber-powered models and some CO<sub>2</sub>-powered cars. We found a log on the beach that was part of a life raft – and it was made of balsa. The blocks were glued together and doweled with hard wood, but we got some rather good blocks from it.

We met some other people from the Air Force who also built models. One of them had an Arden .09. I had never seen a drone or a diesel until that time. He had to start the engine in the hut and ran outside in order to run it because the weather was so cold.

After about a month went by, we heard that Bob's buddy had this *Fireball* Control Line model with an O&R .23 in it. He got so frustrated waiting for good weather that he fired it up, ran outside and launched it. It did a big loop and hit another hut, leaving a big dent in it. That completely destroyed the *Fireball*.

Bob and I decided to step up to gas-powered models. I sent our money to my father and instructed him to go to Corr's on 9<sup>th</sup> Street and buy a *Rocket* .46 for me and a *Phantom P-30* for Bob. Both of us decided that the best model for us was a *Zing* made by Comet and designed by Carl Goldberg to take any engine from a .19 to a .49. My engine was not a good choice. Bob's ran very well and smooth. We never got to fly the models before I was shipped home. So I boxed mine up along with some other models and Christmas presents and sent them home.

I arrived home in January of 1948. I had a lot of catching up to do, so I didn't get back to models until about March. By this time I had found out that my brother-in-law's younger brother, Lonney (who was my age), was interested in models and had a DeLong .30. The DeLong ran on a glow plug! A what?! Glow Plug?! – The first time I ever saw one.

We modified the *Zing*, took out the ignition system, and flew this model on 50-foot lines of solid steel (.016 inches in diameter.) It was really fast. We clocked it at about 90 miles per hour even with wheels on the landing gear.

I was not a complete deadhead with Control Line flying, because I had bought a *P-39 Airacobra* kit made by Jim Walker that I learned to fly Control Line on. This was a whip-powered (no engine!) model on about 25-foot thread lines. It saved me a lot of broken props in the future.

Lonney introduced me to his school chum, Arnold Matias, who in turn introduced me to Dick Bell. Dick, as many of you know, is still one of my best friends and lives in Florida. He was our Speed champion doing magic with his little hand tools and files. Lonney dropped out of modeling right away, but Arnold, Dick, and I formed a trio that set the pace in Control Line flying in the Washington area.

The very first contest I went to was the Philadelphia Flying Circus. It was held in a park in Philadelphia. The Free Flight was separate and outside the city limits. Arnold and I went by train. I did not have a model I could enter, so I went as Arnold's pit man and club hand-launch expert. Arnold had this new McCoy .29-powered all-sheet metal Speed model called the *Invader*. It was manufactured by McCoy. All Arnold did was run the engine when he discovered he had made the tank with the fuel pickup line on the wrong side!

Well, anyway, I got to see Leon Shulman flying his Diesel (Drone) to first place in Stunt with his secret weapon – a profile Stunt model. Also, Matt Kania was there. He won a beauty event, and I think Harold deBolt was there, too. When they were giving out the trophies, two guests that Arnold knew from Corr's showed up – Carl Wheeley and Clayton Newlin. They had driven up and offered us a ride home. Carl, as you may or may not know, was a World Champion in 1954 Free Flight Gas. He later on became the Publisher and Managing Editor for *Model Aviation* magazine before retiring to a farm in southern Maryland. I used to see Clayton every once in a

while at the AMA Nationals when they were held in California. His main interest now is antique Free Flight.

The first glow plug in the Washington area was owned by Dick Bell. Just before I met him, he went out to Suitland to the census building's parking lot where any given Sunday you could find 20 to 30 modelers flying Control Line. He had the glow plug with him when he saw his friend, Andy Oliveri, a speed flier who had just finished a run with his Dooling .30 at 90 miles-per-hour on ignition. He asked Dick if he could try his glow plug. They switched battery terminals to get the 1.5 volts the glow plug needed and started it up. They reset the needle valve and clocked a whopping 105 mph. That was considered a major jump in speed – 100 mph in Class B. When Andy got his own glow plug with the same model he got 110 mph – only to be beat by Dick who did 115 mph with a K&B .29. Still later he hit 118 mph.

But the real story was that Andy, after he used Dick's only glow plug, burned it out. Dick, who was only sixteen at the time, says Andy never paid him or replaced the plug that cost \$1.00. I didn't mention it earlier, but of course it was an Arden glow plug. (Arden was the first manufacturer to bring out a glow plug.) A little later, an Arden had a replacement coil for their glow plugs and it only cost 50 cents!

#### Part 4

Here we are back in 1948 again. Stranded Control Line wire was not yet used. All Control Line was flown on solid wire. Loops were the big maneuver. Bill Benton was the king of the loops in the Washington area. He could do about 16 loops. How, you may say? (For those who don't know, solid wire Control Lines got "sticky" when they are wrapped around themselves a few turns.) Well, he would wind up his lines the opposite way about eight times, then, when he looped he would unwind the first eight turns, then wrap them eight turns the other way.

Bill had been in the Navy with Hal deBolt, so he only flew Demco kits: *Super Bipes*, and later the *Stunt Wagons* – powered with an Atwood .60, they could go about 105 mph (Stunt model going 105 mph? True!) Bill later flew an enlarged Stunt Wagon powered by a Hornet .60! He had to use 75-foot lines to keep up with this one!

It was also at this time I saw my first inverted flight. This was a year before the Philadelphia meet. The man (I don't remember his name) was flying a crutch-type plane with about a 54-inch wing with a Super Cyclone .60 on ignition with a penny-balloon fuel tank (not pressurized.) He flew on 70-foot lines and when he was inverted he flew very high – 40 to 50 feet.

But Bill Benton became the best flier in the Washington area at this time with his *Stunt Wagon*. His fame lasted until we saw his friend Hal deBolt with his Stunt Wagon 60 doing loops after the engine stopped!

Matt Kania visited Washington promoting his new *Flying Circus* Control Line model. He showed up at Corr's Hobby Shop and gave away a kit to anyone who would take it home, show up Sunday at the Lincoln Memorial and fly it. Well, if you didn't have a .29-size engine to put in it, he gave you an OK .29. Well, we showed up, and Arnold and Dick were there when the kits

were given out. They had powered theirs with McCoy .29s.

Well, we could go round and round and loop. But watching Kania was really inspiring. While starting his model, Arnold had a backfire and caught the wing on fire. Before he could get it out he had the silkspan covering on the top of the wing destroyed. Since he had nothing to lose, he flew the model inverted. He became a very good Stunt flier and even won a few contests.

But Speed was my first contest entered. The McCoy .19 was brand new. We each had one. Dick built an original model, and I built a Dmeco *Speed Wagon 20*. Arnold had a *Stunt Wagon* scaled down to a .19 size engine. Dick took first at 123 mph at a contest in Virginia. I came in second at 105 mph, and Arnold came in third with his *Stunt Wagon* flying inverted – because the engine leaned out inverted and flew faster. My first contest second-place was just whetting my appetite. I flew this model in a lot of contests, but the best I could do was 105 mph. About this time, I also had a Torpedo .29-powered Speed model that would do 115 mph.

The typical speeds at a contest were 130-plus for Class D, 125-130 for Class C, 115-120 for Class B, and 105-120 for Class A. Half-A engines weren't around yet.

Darrel Dolgner and George Thompson entered into our clan at this time. George was responsible for our first all-Control Line contest. This contest was held over grass, and it featured Speed Classes A, B, and C-D combined, plus open-class Stunt. The site was where the Kennedy Stadium now stands in Northeast Washington, D.C. at the end of East Capitol Street.

Well, I started to get interested in Free Flight. Carl Wheelley, Clayton Newlin, George Thompson, and Darrel Dolgner were also dabbling in it. The K&B .02 Infant engine came out, and soon after that came the .047 Spitzzy. Arnold built the first model – a Profile *Power House* by Berkeley. He lost it on about the third flight. I built an *American Ace* rubber model modified for 1/2A. It was a great R.O.G. (Rise off Ground) model. I put a dethermalizer on mine, but I never had a timer. I controlled the power run by how much gas I put in the tank. Not long after this, Dick was drafted. Soon after this, Arnold was activated with the National Guard in time for the Korean War.

Between 1952 and 1969, I was real active in Free Flight. Also, the club kind of swayed that way. I was lucky enough to make the U.S. FAI Free Flight team twice (Nordic Glider – also called A2 Glider), so the contest was to be the first time the U.S. competed in Nordic Glider (towline glider). We had to send our models over to Denmark by air mail.

The model I sent was a modified floater from a kit by JASCO, designed by Frank Ehling. It had a one-piece wing with a 72-inch wingspan and a built-up box fuselage. It cost me \$200 in mailing fees to send it there and back.

I wrote about five pages of instructions for whoever was to be the proxy flier for my model on how to fly my glider. Telling the Danes how to fly an A2 was like telling the Wright brothers how to fly.

I don't remember how well it placed, but when the model came back, the towhook had been completely torn out. The repair was done by them to reinstall it. I found out later that the winds

were really bad – 25 mph.

George Perryman was also a member of that team. He worked for Lockheed in Atlanta and somehow had them pay for his fare to the contest – with pay. He was the only American who made the trip.

The next year, I recovered my old floater and added an auto-rudder. It flew even better than before and won for me a place on the U.S. team the next year. The bad note was it had a bad habit of getting lost. I lost it one time during the qualifying round at Frederick, Maryland. It was found just outside Hagerstown (80 miles away!).

I had another model on the same layout, moments, wingspan, area, and weight. But it had a unique T-tail arrangement. I lost that one also.

JASCO had just come out with Frank's new Nordic A2 glider. So I used the wing and elevator to make my new replacement models for the trip to the World Championships in Germany. It is the one that appears in the *Frank Zaic Yearbook*! One model was quite well tested, one brand new. We were sponsored by the USAF this time, so transportation was no problem.

Well, I can't or don't want to remember how far down I placed in the World Championships, but I sure gave it a good try. The other members of the A2 team were Herb Koethe (who also flew on the Wakefield team), and he came in second. The others were Henry Cole, Jerry Clobb, and I. I do remember on one of my flights the wind changed 180 degrees. The model I flew off the tow about 50 feet up – just enough to make it an official flight and a no-good low-time flight (40 seconds.) The shortest flight I ever made in Nordic A2 ever.

I had made friends with the Irish team because they liked Americans. I ended up giving my best two A2 Nordics ever to one member of the Irish team. He never wrote me a letter, so I don't know how they performed for him. The box the models were in was just too big to haul around Germany for the rest of the week.

If you have never been to a World Championship as a spectator – or even better as a contestant – you just can't imagine how high you get.

## **Part 5**

My interest really turned more and more to Free Flight. My first Free Flight contest I can't be sure of, but it was in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. I learned more about model flying in this model. Hand-launched gliders were a great way to get started. It was in Lancaster that I flew both Free Flight and Control Line. I flew combat against Red Reinhart – the East Coast answer to famed California Stunt flier Bob Palmer. I lost to Red, but after this loss I didn't lose a Combat contest for two years. Combat rules were really bad back then. Each contest set up its own rules. But it was mostly that you had one airplane and you had to beat your opponents every match.

In Easton, Maryland, I had the fastest, lightest model I ever built. It weighed about 14 ounces and had a Fox .29R on it. I ran an 8x8 prop. The speed was so fast I had a hard time lining up on the



slower models. About the second match I drew a flier with a *Warrior* powered by a Torp .29 Special. I was so fast and tight I ruined two loops inside his one. That's what got me into trouble. I came out of the second loop and hit him right in the bell crank area. His model went into a stall, the engine screaming away, and spun straight into the runway. My model disappeared – gone – vanished! The engine fuel tank and bell crank landed on the tarmac but the entire model blew away in a thermal in a million pieces! This was the only time I had a Control Line model disappear. (I've had a lot of Free Flight models do that.)

I also had a Zeek Free Flight model with an O&R .23 on it. The dethermalizer fuse went out. Back in those days we had to make our own dethermalizer fuses from window-blind cord. We soaked this window-blind cord for two days in a mixture of saltpeter and water, and then let it dry for another day. It was terrible stuff – the most inconsistently burning fuse imaginable. Sometimes it would burn half a minute to an inch, and sometimes three minutes. The Brits were the first to use the cotton-center type fuse that we can now buy from SIG. We had now a small group of Free Flight modelers. Carl Wheelley, Ben McMullen, Darrel Dolgner, and myself. We rented an upstairs room over a Homoco gas station. It and its parking lot were on Maryland Avenue off the Mall in Washington, D.C. We used to test-glide our models on the Mall. We worked all kinds of hours in our shop. You could go there almost any time from 6:00 pm Friday until 2:00-3:00 am Sunday, and could almost always find someone there. It became the Free Flight meeting place in Washington, D.C.

We even had card games while waiting for some glue or paint to dry. Our shop had an oil-burning stove and I brought a used AC unit for the summer. In later years, the shop was moved over to the basement of J.D. Gregor's hobby shop on Georgia Avenue.

This was 1948. But I never made the move. While we were still at the Homoco gas station site, a George Thompson joined our group and talked me into a partnership building and buying an R/C (with a Citizenship radio unit). We built a *Rudder Bug*. The only place one could obtain plans was through *Aeromodeller* in England. This 8-foot beauty was covered with yellow silk and red dope trim. Doc Good's original *Rudder Bug* was powered with a Forster .29, but ours used an O&R .29 glow. It weighed 8 ½ pounds. We never had a runway long enough to see if it would R.O.G. We found that if we launched it from a hill you had a better chance of flight.

Once while I was flying it, it got into a thermal and I could not get it out. So flying it straight helped but it was getting so far away. I kept it in a left turn until the tank ran dry. We chased the model and saw it come down about a half-mile away. This was in Potomac, Maryland. We took bearings and started a search. We were sure it came down behind this barn, but we couldn't find the model. McMullen was chased by a bull in a field during our search. I could swear he jumped over a six-foot-high fence in his escape. (I didn't jump over it – I stepped over it! - *R.B. McMullen, September 1998*) It must have been the orange shirt he was wearing that got the bull's attention.

We were tired and thirsty, so we went to this small country store for milk, soda, and Twinkies. I noticed a bulletin board with local for-sale and want ads. I asked the clerk if I could put up a notice for my lost model. She said yes. As I was making up my ad, this small boy of 9 or 10 came up and asked if I was the one that lost the model. I said I was, and then he said his uncle had just

found one. I took the boy with us, and we went back to where we saw the model last. The boy directed us to his uncle's house. As we drove up, the uncle was coming out of the house to meet us. The boy jumped out of the car and ran toward his uncle yelling, "Here is the man that lost the airplane." The uncle shot a glance to the boy that would have stopped Ben's bull in its tracks. He took us to the garage, got out his ladder, and climbed up where he had stored the model. He had taken the wing off and removed the batteries. We showed him our AMA card and the "If Lost" sticker under the wing plus our AMA number under the wing. He could not deny it was ours. The uncle was unhappy, but I gave the kid a dollar. He was very happy.

## Part 6

A few years ago – 3 or 4 – I heard that my *Rudder Bug* was being flown by Arnold Mathias somewhere in Virginia. In 1948-1949, I only knew of four Radio Control models being flown in the Washington area – Doc Good's *Rudder Bug*, ours, and two others. One of these was a *Rudder Bug*, and the other was a *Brigadier* by Berkeley Models. The radio we had was not the best, and the escapement (which actuated the rudder) would stick or run down, and you had to crank up the rubberband (which powered the escapement – can you really believe we used stuff like that in our Radio Control models?) after every flight.

## More Ramblings

We were putting on a demonstration on the Mall where the Washington Monument is in the background. Matt Kania was in town promoting his new *Flying Circus* kit and was giving these away at Corr's hobby shop (on 9<sup>th</sup> St. N.W. in downtown Washington, D.C. – between H and I Streets) to anyone who would build it and fly it on the coming Sunday. This was already Friday! He also gave away new OK .29s to anyone who didn't have an engine. I never got into the big give-away, but my friends Arnold and Dick did. They each put McCoy .29s on theirs.

When we got to the site, Dick still didn't have his tank mounted. We rubber-banded the tank in place and found out there was not enough clearance for the engine's air intake (the McCoy .29 had a rear disc-valve intake.) I took out my side dikes (cutting pliers) and cut out a V on the backside of his intake. The motor outperformed any other *Flying Circus* there! Three ounces of fuel ran about 5 minutes, even though he could only do wingovers and loops.

Arnold had a different problem. His engine backfired and set his airplane aflame. He took off his coat and smothered the fire, but the top half of his wing covering was gone. Until this time Arnold could only do the stunts that Dick did, but now with a really badly loaded model he flew anyway. We were shell-shocked. Arnold was flying inverted and even doing outside loops and eights. When he came down we asked him how he was able to do these maneuvers. He said he now had the courage because he had nothing to lose! Arnold became the premier Stunt flier of our little group.

We then met many others that were flying in the Washington area: Andy Oliveri, Joe Carter, Junior Jones, Sam Dubois, Jim and Roger Green (not the SLOW Club Roger Green), Bernie Shulman, Rodger George, and Ben McMullen (who later became the editor of a model aviation magazine.) Ben also wrote the "With the Model Builders" column for *Flying Models* magazine

for a couple years in the early 1950s.

Then renewing friends with Carl Wheelley, along with Darrel D. Dolgner and Ben, I got the Free Flight bug. I have to admit that at this time my most pleasure-filled and rewarding years started.

It was when we went to the New York Mirror Meet, the largest one-day contest in the world with over 1000 entries, that I met Frank Ehling, the famous model designer. (I had flown in the meet the year before in Class "A" Speed using a brand-new McCoy .19.) Frank knew Carl Wheelley because Carl had won a lot of contests as a Senior, including the Nationals. Carl had just sold his design, the *Senator*, to *Air Trails* magazine. At that time, *Air Trails* was edited by Al Lewis, who had introduced Frank to Carl.

Well, Frank had this brand new Contax 35mm camera and was only shooting pictures for *Air Trails*. This was because he was considered a professional and was not allowed to compete for the big prizes (TVs, boats, etc.) At one time after the War, the meet sponsors gave away an *Ercoupe*! Anyway, that was how I met Frank Ehling.

## Part 7

### Reflections on the New York Mirror Meet

As I said before, it was the biggest one-day contest ever held. Just some of the prizes I can remember are a full-size *Ercoupe* 2-passenger sport plane, canoes, boats, TCs (and those were rare in 1949), cases of Wheaties, flying lessons, shoes, scholarships, radios, hi-fis, and of course, watches and desk sets.

But the flying time was limited. For example, one flight in speed and maybe two if time permitted. Only one attempt – and Free Flight, no attempts! All flights were official.

The cars would be lined up for a half-mile overnight to get into the gates at Floyd Bennett Field. There was much engine running and police cars patrolling.

The second time we went I took a tent. I never could figure out how Harold deBolt was making his first flight while we were still in the processing line. Harold flew all the Speed events – B, C, and D. I don't think he flew Stunt at the Mirror Meet, but he did at Andrews Field. But the caliber of the models was very good and the New Yorkers always came up with something special. For example, metal speed pans and all-metal speed models. The first fiberglass model top I ever saw was there.

I also remember that they flew a Control Line Carrier event in which a Dyna Jet-powered model was entered. It couldn't make it off the deck, but it flew and crashed in a fireball that rolled right up to within 10 feet of the grandstand. (No AMA insurance back then!)

Free Flight was always a panic because they had very little crowd control. The model used to rise-off-ground and someone would be walking by and WHAMO! Or the plane would spin in – and you know how an engine sounds when it is headed toward cement.

They did a little better at things later on when the contest was moved to Grumman Field. Radio models were not quite as good as they are now and any flown over the fence were stolen. The same with the Free Flight. Sometimes an engine would be broken off and the model left in one piece. A Radio Control model was field for ransom. And Jim Walker was shot down, as they used to say in PJC, when someone would turn on his transmitter and crash another plane.

Because he was somewhat better than everybody else, he was in a class all by himself – just as he was in Control Line. He even held patents that were not model airplane oriented, such as the self-adjusting lens or eye-on cameras. The camera people just waited until the patent ran out.

I saw Jim Walker perform only twice. Once at the Nationals where he flew a Control Line off the water with motor control. It was rumored –but never came off – that he was going to give away a MG car in a non-national event using his *Ceiling Walker* rubber-powered helicopter. But the event never got off the ground (not the model – the event!!).

Many other models using this system of torque and counter-torque set many records both Indoor and out.

But most of all what I seem to remember best is a Radio Control lawn mower he had. It was a two-cycle-type mower that he could spin on a dime.

He also showed many things he could do with this little model, like the *A-J Interceptor* – a folding wing catapult glider. He would make it fly inverted.

He also had this 10-cent glider you would fling that he did a whole show with in the hangar at night. To describe a few things: he would fly a horizontal eight and it would land back in this hand. Toss the model vertically from the underside and the model would loop and bounce off the floor – and land in his hand.

His premier stunt was to have two people facing each other about one foot apart, nose-to-nose. One had a cigarette in his mouth. He would throw the model in a sharp 90-degree bank and the model would pass between people, knocking the cigarette out of the mouth. Sometimes this would alter the course of the model and it would not land in his hand.

## **Part 8**

Reggie's Pink, Liquid Dynamite, White Magic, Blue Blazer, Nitro X and Blast were just a few names of special fuels that hobby shops had to stock. Some of the engine manufacturers, such as McCoy, Herkimer, O&R, and Arden also put out some fields. Then too, so did some earlier gas companies such as Phillips 66 and Shell.

Also many of the larger spark plug companies made miniature plugs - Crown, AC and Champion (who also made a great glow plug.) Of course Arden was the first to make a production glow plug. It was not a new idea; the Germans used a type of glow plug to start up some of their old diesel engines even before the First World War. Then came glows from O&R, McCoy,

Herkimer, Testor's – and even some from OS that were very poor. Most plugs cost 75-cents then, so the price increase doesn't seem that bad because we can still buy some plugs for under \$2.00.

Kits that I can remember were Megow, Comet, Bay Ridge, JASCO, VECO, Scientific, Eagle, and Capitol. These are only a few that I can name of without taxing my brain. There were many more like Dmeco and PDQ, which later became Sterling.

There must have been fifty to seventy-five engine manufacturers in this country between the years 1938 and 1958. Fox came out about 1948; production, that is. If my memory serves me, he first made a .60, then a .49, then the famous .35, then the .29.

I could not stand the looks of the sand-cast Foxes. I never owned one until about 1952. When he came out with the first Fox .29R, I bought it because all the people who had bought the original ones were still flying that ugly, sand-cast, black-burnt-head motor for years after my beautiful McCoys and K&Bs were worn out.

The Fox .35 now is still the same basic engine we were flying in 1950! They have changed the prop drive washer, 4-bolt head, and two-bolt backplate. But most of the other parts are the same. I don't think Duke ever imagined when he came out with the .35 that it would still be around this long.

When he came out with the .35 it was a bastard (pardon me) size. AMA engine classes were:

- A .09-.19
- B .20-.29
- C .30-.49
- D .50-.60

So here was the Fox .35 right in the middle of Class C. Even Free Flight never used the Fox .35 until he came out with the .29. For those not familiar with Free Flight classes, you could fly the model in two classes just by changing the .35 (Class C) to a .29 (Class B), so there was no need to have two planes. Today the big switch is .049 to .051. When ½As came to be, the displacement changed Class A from .051-.019. The next big change was the elimination of Class C Speed. It still exists in Free Flight, however.

I know most of you have not flown HLG (Hand-Launched Glider.) But at one time, there were four classes (A, B, C, D), and these were not governed by wing area only. I can't remember those areas, but I do remember putting a K&B .02 on a Class B. But we put engines on everything – rubber models, boats and cars. Then we did the same thing when Jetex came out!

## **Part 9**

### **Control Line Combat – and All That Good Stuff**

Combat. I first started flying in Combat about 1948. We had no rules except what someone dreamed up at the contest site. Mostly it was “beat everyone on the field with a single model.”

Keeping it light was not the issue – making it endure was the hope.

My best early model was a B&B Vampire wing on an original profile fuselage with a normal elevator and rudder. It was light – about 19 ounces with a Fox .29R (which I still have). This was one of the first engines where Duke Fox used some very strong porting and high compression. Several times it started without the battery clips on!

The contest where it met its demise was held in Easton, Maryland (on the Eastern Shore) at the airport. I was flying Free Flight and Combat. I had just lost my *Zeek* Class A Free Flight model out of sight and traveling toward the brand-new Chesapeake Bay Bridge. That was the first Sunday that the bridge was open. I can remember it well because you not only paid for the car but for each person on board – and I had about 4 Junior AMA members without much money. It cost me about \$7 each way.

Well, after that and losing my *Zeek*, I was to say the least p\_\_\_-off. I went at Combat like an avenging angel! I won the first match, and the second was like a semifinal today. I drew a guy flying a *Warrior* with a Madewell .49 in it. Like I said, the rules were loose, so a .19-to-whatever on up, even a .60 engine on 60-foot lines was “legal.” Well, we had a mid-air overhead. His engine shed its prop and was making a shaft ran as it stalled and went it on the hard cement runway. My model just disappeared. The bellcrank with lines and the engine with the tank almost hit us on the way down. But the rest of the model just disappeared in the same direction as my *Zeek* had earlier.

I also had the opportunity to fly against Red Reinhart and Hank Spielman, both now deceased. They were basically Stunt-oriented flyers. It was against Hank at a Linthicum contest (near Bub’s mom’s old house) that we flew so close we took each other’s rudders off (me inverted). In the Washington-Baltimore area I was undefeated for two years. But there were only two or three contests a year.

It was at the Linthicum contest that I had a very strong line entanglement. The lines were wrapped when we banged together. My handle broke and my lines, from centrifugal force, went sliding out toward his model. His engine was dead, but mine was still running. Now picture a model flying on 120-foot lines and doing loops with another model 60 feet out suspended in the lines. Here I was in the middle of the circle with my model still running, thank goodness away from the spectators.

Well, I put his lines under my armpit. Moving more slowly I went toward my model. When I got about 20 feet from my model, the engine stopped. That was good, because I don’t know what I would have done when I got there and it was still running. The model I was flying was a *Half Fast* – a Bill Netzeband design – covered in red silk and with a very good-running OS .35. The model was trashed.

## **Part 10**

### History of the SLOW Club

There were several of us who were used to flying Control Line together, but we did not really get organized into a club until we wanted to run a contest. George Thompson was the spark, so we elected him president and secretary/treasurer. That was the first all-Control Line contest held in the Washington, D.C. area. The name of the club came later. This was 1948.

The events were A, B, C, Special, and Stunt. The place was the Bennington section of Washington next to the Anacostia River just about where the Kennedy stadium is now. So that was the start. Members for the non-club were George Thompson, Dick Bell, Arnold Mathias, Andy Olivari, and me. We had a few short-timers also, but I can't remember their names.

A short time later we gained a few more like Darrel Dolgner, Richard "Fish Market" Carroll (his father owned a fish market in D.C.), John Thornhill, Jimmy Dowling, Ruppert, Ted White, and Phil ("PJ") Johnson. Yes, our own PJ, who was just a Junior at the time!

Arnold, George and I showed a little interest in Free Flight. We went to a contest in Baltimore where A Free Flight was first flown. Along with HLG, I was hooked. I did well in HLG (about 4<sup>th</sup>) and my original ½A was terrible. Arnold lost his JASCO ½A *Flash* in a thermal even though it had dethermalized. (But you know I can ramble.)

Well, it was after Carl Wheeley and Ben McMullen joined our club that we officially became the SLOW club. The name was chosen because there was a club in California called the FAST club, and that stood for the First All-Speed Team. Because our club was diversified flying everything, Control Line, Free Flight, Indoor, and Radio Control, we decided to chide them with our new name. (We said that SLOW stood for Skylancers of Washington – but we made that up to fit the acronym. There was also a kit Free Flight model named the *Skylancer*.)

George Thompson and I built and flew a *Rudder Bug* with Citizenship Radio Control equipment (465 MHz frequency!) in 1948. I only knew of three others flying in Radio Control then. One of them was Dr. Walt Good and the other was a friend of Doc's - and I fail to remember his name. But his model was a Berkeley *Brigadier*. We flew at Potomac, Maryland (in a field adjacent to the elementary school) and at the landing strip at Beltsville Agricultural Center. But I almost did as much changing Radio Control models as I did with Free Flight models. We had a description of a Radio Control model; it was "a model airplane that landed at a place that it would not have landed in if it did not have a radio in it."

My little club was very active at this time in all phases of modeling, but mostly Free Flight. FAI Team Trails were getting everyone interested. We were also corresponding with a club in England and having a correspondence contest with them. We did not have anyone who flew towline glider, so I was selected to build an Unlimited-class towline glider.

Well there I was, new to Free Flight and what about this towline stuff? Build it big, build it light. I built this wing about six feet by eight inches with undercamber, a large (30%) elevator with twin rudders (I like twin rudders), and the fuselage was a crutch-style with build-up to a triangle top. I stuffed enough lead and clay in the nose 'til it balanced. I did not know about towhook location, so I put about six hooks along the underside of the crutch – 3 on each side. I didn't know it at the time, but this is what made me the premiere Glider flyer in our club – the only one.

There was no limit for how long a towline could be, so I ran out about 300 feet. Even if I did not get the model overhead, it was a ways up. The weather must have been very bad in England because we won. Carl Wheeley and Darrel Dolgner flew Gas and Wakefield, and I flew Gas and Glider. Total points, we won. Carl went on to be a member of the US Free Flight Team that won in England. I was a member of the FAI Nordic Glider Team that had its models proxy-flown in Denmark in 1953 (or 55?)

In 1954, Carl repeated his qualification and won the World Championship FAI Gas event flown here on Long Island in 1955. I placed again on the Nordic team in 1955. This was the first time all FAI Free Flight events were held at one site in one country. Twenty-eight countries competed.

## **Part 11**

### Onward and Upward

Someone asked me just recently what my first engine was. It was a Sky Chief – a cheap imitation of a dynamite Dennykite. I never got it to run; I later traded it to Arnold Matias for a couple of glow plugs or something.

My first engine that I bought new was a Rocket .46, and it did run but not very good. I had my dad buy this for me when I was overseas with the U.S. Army in the Aleutian Islands. The weather was so bad I had to wait till I got home to run and fly my *Zing* Control Line model. But it was not on ignition. By that time glow was in.

I just got back today from flying at Goddard. (Sounds like a song title.) And it was wonderful! Well not like that; it was cold and overcast. But we still got a lot of testing done. Today reminded me of the old days when we went flying and it was cold. We always took a can of diesel fuel for priming. The sport engine fuel mixture in those days was only methyl alcohol and castor oil, no nitro! So this made for easier starting. Starting batteries were not so good either.

But there were a few starters for Speed models. The one that I remember the most was one Dick and I made up using a 1936 Chevy starter motor and a 6-volt car battery. It was heavy enough that once placed on the ground you did not have to worry about it tipping over. Later on, Andy Oliveri bought an inertia-style, hand-cranked unit that really turned over fast. It was much better than the electric. But if you had to start a balky .60, that would slow it up a bit.

Winter and cold were our real enemies in the winter. The only contest I remember during the winter was the one in Atlantic City in the Convention Center. The events were A, B, and C Speed, Stunt, and Scale. The first flight in Stunt the contestant did a wingover and hit the hanging loudspeakers. That not only took off the outboard wing but demolished the model when it hit the floor. They still flew Stunt but left out the overhead maneuvers. That didn't help the poor guy who hit the speakers.

One other interesting thing was they were going to fly Jet Speed, but the noise was incredible. There also was a Jet-powered Scale model. They cancelled all the Jet flights and Scale was only



judged and not flown because of the one Jet.

One other interesting thing happened to Andy Oliveri in Class C Speed. We just put in a flight of about 130 mph and were preparing for the second. When I stuck the spinner in the starter the spinner came off, but the engine was screaming away (9 x10 Tornado thin-blade.) I looked at Andy – What to do? He shrugged his shoulders and gave me a signal to launch. I had started the engine with the model in the takeoff dolly, so all I had to do was place it on the floor and let it go. She shot into the air – Andy’s models never rolled very far. When he landed, we found out he had increased his speed by 2 mph! We did a little head scratching on that: spinner/no spinner?

Andy won first place in Class C and second in Class B. Kenny Curtis won third place Class A. His first-ever Speed model had a VECO .19 in it. For those who are new members, Ken Curtis was one of our old members. Bob Violett was also a member at this time. That’s Violett of Viojet fame!

## Part 12

### My Experience Flying FAI – and the Results

My first FAI contest I ever attended was run by the AeroCrafters of Baltimore. It was held in Daisy, Maryland – just a short distance from where Bill Dwyer lives now. We (USA) were only competing in Wakefield at that time – 1950. The other events (Free Flight, both Gas and Nordic) were not of World Championship caliber yet. I was only there as a spectator.

Some of the well-knowns there were Cliff Mountplaisur, Tony Beck, Woody Blanchard, Bill Dunwoody, Bob Hatscheck, the Fletcher brothers, Henry Struck, Mat Kania, Lou Andrews – and our own John Thornhill.

Not only did I do some timing, but I also did some chasing.

This was before the rule changes. You could build the model as light as you wished and just put as much rubber to bring it up to weight as you needed. Dick Querman had a very long fuselage model made up of 1/8”-square balsa. It was a typical box fuselage. The motor, when wound, would torque the fuselage to about 30 degrees at the stab. On about his second flight he must have put in a half-turn too much, and when he let go of the prop for R.O.G., the model disappeared into a squirming, jumping lump of rubber. Within the rubber were the entire model’s wings, tail and prop. I understand one of the photographers got a shot of it just as he let go of the model with the fuselage about to snap. It was a very good contest. It did get my juices flowing.

A couple of years later, FAI brought in Gas, and a year later Towline Glider. This was when I got aboard. Because of my expertise in towline (see five previous Ramblings ago) I decided to build an honest-to-goodness A2. I chose a JASCO *Thermalair*. The proportions were about right. All I had to do was to build a smaller stab. (The stab was too big anyway.) I lengthened the fuselage about 7 inches and the stab was about 45 or 50 square inches with twin rudders (I liked twin rudders). I later, after flying it, added a third rudder under the stop for auto-rudder adjustments.

The model was an outstanding success. It won every event I ever entered it in but one – the

Nationals at Willow Grove, Pennsylvania. I lost it on the very first flight. I did get it back later after the contest was over. But this model was responsible for winning me a place on two Nordic teams before losing it big-time at a New Jersey FAI Team selection. I had to scramble then to build two models for the final FAI contest in Germany.

Again, I relied on a JASCO kit. Frank Ehling had just designed a Nordic A2 using the old cross-section rules. I built the wing, and the rest was mine. I will try to put a three-view in the text somewhere.

I met Frank about this time. I had built some of his ½A Gas models and a Class A *Super Phoenix* which I did not have much success with until he showed me how to trim it.

I met Frank at the FAI Semifinals being run by John Worth in Norfolk, Virginia. He was competing in FAI Gas. Frank had a beautiful .15-powered FAI model called the *Upstart*, powered by, of all things, a Cub .14 (Ugh!!). The engine was of very little power and would only get about 100 feet high, but the glide was outstanding. He told me later he had this Webra .15 diesel at home that had much more power, but he wanted to use an American motor.

Right now this model has been rediscovered and plans are available. Dan Belief from the Virginia SAM Chapter is currently flying one.

That's it for now.

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