



The AMA History Project Presents: Autobiography of LAWRENCE S. (LARRY) KATZ



Born April 22, 1930 Started modeling in 1936

AMA #8429

Written and Submitted by LK (06/1997); Transcribed and Edited By SS (07/2002), Reformatted by JS (09/2009)

Career:

- Built scale models airplanes for the military during World War II
- At age 13, got a job at a hardware store working on its hobby display case
- As a youth helped form a model club in his area
- Served as president of the Richmond Model Flying Club in Staten Island, New York
- Had designs of Radio Controlled Lite Flyer models published

Reflections on a Lifetime Love Affair with Model Aviation

By Larry Katz

A 61-year love affair with model aviation includes memories and incidents inevitably inscribed in my mind. All are hobby related, but not all are directly associated with building or flying model airplanes. I suppose this infatuation commenced with the realization that man could actually fly. From that day to this, my eyes have automatically glanced skyward to follow every passing aircraft.

I was only six and the very first model airplane was nothing more exotic than a 10-cent Ideal kit of a simple stick Rise-off-Ground (ROG) model, but it ignited the spark, defied gravity and inspired a lifetime avocation.

Over the years, hundreds of models graced my workbench, each a new challenge and learning experience. Well, almost all, except the one I retired in 1937 by releasing it engulfed in flames from the second story of my boyhood home. How could I possibly know it would fly across the street and into a neighbor's open window? You guessed it – 10 minutes later the local fire department arrived to extinguish the blaze. I have never forgotten the subsequent lecture and effects on my derriere. Never again was that blunder repeated. All succeeding models were retired in a model builder's cemetery – basement rafters. For all I know, they may still be there.

My first scale model also met a horrible fate. For some strange reason, I suspended it with wingtips balanced on the legs of a four-foot upside down open stepladder. I suppose the span was perfect while the airplane's wings were drying. Unfortunately, the author of Murphy's Law also resided in my home. Someone brushed against the ladder, it folded, and a crushed Stinson Reliant ended up in the rafters, too.

Those were also the pre-dope days and banana oil was the finishing product for tissue-covered models. Evidently, the combination of fumes, both banana and cooking gas, was more than my mother could endure. It was then I became an all-weather builder and finishing was completed outdoors.

Certain things never change, no matter how long you spend in this hobby, like always being called when I was holding glued parts together. That was the pre-California days. Fifty years have passed and my wife also knows exactly when to call – right after I mix five-minute epoxy.

I will never forget the important role I played in winning World War II. While too young for military service, I constructed scale models of various U.S. and enemy aircraft for military spotter identification classes at Floyd Bennett Field, Brooklyn, New York. If it wasn't for those models, I'm absolutely certain the allied air war would have fizzled.

Of course, our Radio Control toys are much more costly, but in the late 1930s and early 1940s, holidays and birthdays usually brought gifts costing a dollar or more. That was really reason to revel because a Thermic 50, for example, seemed as impressive as today's quarter scales.

Most youngsters delivered newspapers or shoveled snow for extra spending money. I entered the work force as a 13-year-old store manager. Well, it wasn't exactly managing. A local hardware store owner decided to devote a four-foot glass display counter to hobby materials. By impressing him with my credentials (seven years of modeling experience), I was hired at 25-cents an hour. All of my pay, approximately \$3.75 a week, went for model airplane supplies.

It wasn't long before I graduated from rubber models, hand-launched and towline gliders to those powered by incomprehensible gems called Atom, Bantam, Ohlsson & Rice and Forster. But, also included were some genuine duds. It's difficult to recall how many hours were spent trying to coax a Rogers 29 and GHQ to run. Oh, what I would have given for an electric starter, but I did acquire a super-calloused second finger on my right hand and retain all 10 fingers, so I can't complain.

Balsa wood was a rather scarce commodity during World War II but a Coast Guard Station based on the Rockaway side of the Marine Parkway Bridge connecting that peninsula and Brooklyn used balsa for rafts. There was always plenty available. Additionally, Coast Guard boats were always willing to recover Free Flight models that landed in Jamaica Bay, and there were lots of those.

After reading about the Brooklyn Skyscraper Club, my flying buddies and I decided to form our own; first, the Rockaway Glue Chewers and then the Rockaway Modelaires, but membership never exceeded 10.

One of my first engine-powered models was a 46-inch Scientific Coronet Free Flight. It seemed so large at the time. When I recently decided to take a trip into nostalgia land and scratch built the same airplane, it seemed tiny. Either it got smaller or I got bigger. My wife insists it's the latter.

Periodically, I would take public transportation, bus, and subway to New York City. My itinerary was always the same – a stop at America's Hobby Center and then hiking to Polk's, Macy's (which had a good hobby department) and, finally, the Museum of Science and Industry and show at Rockefeller Center.

Eventually I decided to become a model airplane designer. Four months later, ready for its maiden voyage was a six-foot Free Flight appropriately named Larry's Load. One of my flying buddies and I set out on our bikes for the local park about a mile from home. The flying field was located at Jacob Riis Park. Bordering on the north was Jamaica Bay and to the south was the Atlantic Ocean. In my handlebar basket were the usual – fuel, tools, booster battery, rag and extra propellers. My left hand held Larry's Load and my right firmly grasped the handlebar. About halfway there, I was forced to suddenly brake when cut off by a car. The airplane and I became airborne. My landing was a perfect three-pointer on top of Larry's Load. The remains were stuffed in the basket and it was back to commercially produced kits. Yes, Larry's Load might also be in those rafters.

I mated my new Ohlsson & Rice .23 with a Bay Ridge Mike. It had been advertised as a "Winner at the Detroit Nationals with a 2 minute and 50 second out-of-sight flight." I bought a deluxe kit, which included air wheels, silk covering and finished propeller for \$3.50. It was ready to go the first week in November that year. The day was perfect with little wind and temperature was about 50 degrees. Water temperature was about the same. The reason I mention that should be quite obvious. It landed in the Atlantic Ocean approximately 75 yards off shore. With \$25 of my hard-earned money floating that close to shore, I stripped to my shorts and plunged into the water. It was only after retrieving the airplane and reaching shore did I feel cold. In fact, I thought I'd never stop shivering. That session led to near pneumonia, expensive doctor and medical bills, but I survived and so did Bay Ridge Mike.

The next phase of my interest in model aviation involved a very serious conflict between hobby and social life for I had finally discovered the opposite sex. Thereafter, each model bore the name of a current flame. Unfortunately, both airplanes and flames met the same fate. All I retain are photos of both.

One particular ½-A Free Flight named Babs, short for Barbara, made news. In fact, I still have the newspaper article in which an airplane pilot approaching Idlewild Airport, now Kennedy, reporting passed a three-foot model at 2,000 feet. That article appeared a day after Babs hooked a thermal over Jacob Riis Park.

Model building and flying continued until Uncle Sam required my services. I couldn't wait to complete the initial phase of basic training so I could send home for a small Free Flight model and support equipment. It wasn't easy hiding everything in the G.I. footlocker during barracks inspections. Finally, the moment arrived. No weekend duties and the regular Saturday review of troops complete. I changed into jeans, grabbed my airplane, and headed for the same huge parade grounds we had marched on earlier. While preparing for a first flight, an older gentleman joined me. He, too, was dressed in civies (civilian clothes) and had a gas-powered Free Flight. We exchanged first names and assisted each other for about two hours. We left after agreeing to meet the following Saturday after troop review. It was during the following week's review that I noticed my flying partner on the reviewing stand. I couldn't believe what I saw. He was the base commander, a full bird colonel. When he joined me that afternoon, the first thing I did was salute. He said, "Forget about that, we're here to have fun."

God bless model airplanes. Never again did I pull weekend guard duty, K.P. or latrine duty while at that post. Special permission was also granted to keep a small workbench, which I built, in the barrack and my plans displayed on the wall next to my bunk. This all ended when orders came down for our outfit to leave for Korea.

Once home from frozen Chosen, I introduced my future bride to the glories of model aviation. She was initiated when I called for her at 5 a.m. to attend a Mirror Model Flying Fair at Floyd Bennett Field, Brooklyn. Those yearly meets were sponsored by the Hearst-owned newspaper, the Daily Mirror, and attracted upwards of 200,000 for full scale and model air shows. How wonderful they were.

We donned our pith hats and she became my official helper and cheerleader and in charge of lighting a dethermalizer fuse. Unfortunately, she failed her first test and my initial flight landed in Jamaica Bay. An enterprising boat owner opposite the field retrieved my airplane and held it for ransom. By the time I satisfied his demands, it was too late to compete again, and saltwater had taken its toll on balsa and silkspan.

After marriage, model building resumed on the kitchen table in our two and a half room apartment. Two days before departing on our first anniversary vacation, both timer and dethermalizer malfunctioned and I lost another one. This was launched in Brooklyn and when last seen was a speck in the sky and headed east. I thought what a depressing way to start a vacation. But, later that day, a phone call from Rosedale, Queens – almost 10 miles away – brought fantastic news. It had landed safely in a backyard vegetable garden. When I arrived, the airplane was waiting, a reward refused, my faith in human nature restored and we were go for a great vacation.

After the birth of my first son, model building shared the kitchen table with diaper changes and small tub baths. I was also in charge of formula making and at times, I felt like a mad scientist. That came to a screeching halt after my son started to eat dirt.

In 1962, we purchased a home on Staten Island. Wow, just think of it – a full basement after sharing a small kitchen table for almost eight years. It was then I decided to graduate and my first model in the new shop was Radio Control.

Staten Island boasted one of the oldest continuously operating model airplane clubs in New York state, the Richmond Model Flying Club; it was founded the same year I built my first model in 1936. I began taking flying lessons and learned that it wasn't as easy as it appeared. My first unassisted takeoff landed against the right front door panel of the club president's new car, an ignominious way to introduce myself. After one year, three airplanes, assorted advice, much assistance, tremendous encouragement, desperately appreciated consolation and sympathy by many and enough splintered props for a substantial bonfire, I accomplished my solo. That wasn't easy either.

May I first destroy the notion that soloing requires a smooth takeoff, ability to maintain level flight, controlled turns, satisfactory approach, and uneventful landing on the field. On the contrary, the club's illustrious field controller invested many long evenings designing some

novel innovations. When my big moment arrived, there to test my proficiency was none other than our honorable field controller. There preliminary flights, eight assorted landing approaches, including one at 300 feet altitude and four hairy landings, three on the field and he announced, "Let's get it over with." Over the din of my chattering teeth and knocking knees, I think I recall some encouraging voices saying, "You can do it, Larry."

The engine started, but it didn't sound right. Then I noticed a sudden increase in wind velocity and a raindrop. My thumbs seemed to be developing cramps. Before I knew what was happening, the airplane was heading down the runway. I gave it up elevator and was airborne. The field controller issued his first command, "Do as I say." My knees sounded like kettledrums and beads of perspiration were even forming on my thumbs. Then the instructions came, "Gain altitude and make a left turn. Keep it over the field. Make another left. Straighten out. Make a right. Keep it level. Make a figure eight. Try another one. Keep it in front of you." So far, so good, but then it happened. Our innovative field controller started to poke me in the ribs and inquired whether I was ticklish. How could I be ticklish with \$350 of blood, sweat and tears floating 200 feet above my head? He said, "Just checking."

Then he administered the real test of my Radio Control prowess. With a tug at my belt and a downward thrust on my jeans he asked, "What would you do if I pulled your pants down?" Then I recalled seeing a club movie of someone else soloing under his direction. This guy wasn't fooling. Suddenly my engine quit and with that our daring field controller said, "I don't want to get you upset, but you've got a dead stick." Somehow, I managed a perfect landing on the field and our field controller autographed my flight status card with a flourish. I was grateful for two things – the completion of this important stage of Radio Control and a dead stick in the nick of time, which prevented a potential scandal.

Gosh, the years flew by and included almost all facets of Radio Control, club fun flies, contests, mall and air shows, a yearly visit to the WRAM show, John Byrne's model aviation displays at Rockefeller Center, the AMA's modeling museum at Reston, Virginia (moved to Muncie, Indiana) – a place I called aviation lover's paradise – the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum, old Rhinebeck and, of course, the Sussex Air Show. As the years passed by, I found myself reverting to those old Free Flight days, except with Radio Control, you could bring them back. Mixed in were occasional indoor rubber sessions at local high school gyms or Columbia University's Lowe Library. Through it all, the comradeship, which I suppose is evident in every club, provided enjoyment, relaxation, support, and the inspiration to continue in this beautiful hobby as long as God grants life, use of hands and use of eyes.

The years on Staten Island accounted for dozens of interesting and humorous occurrences. One, in particular, took place while I had the good fortune of presiding as president of the Richmond club. The yearly installation dinner for new officers was approaching and an entertainment program needed. The local newspaper contained a classified ad for a belly dancer. I called and she agreed to perform. A few days later, a large autographed photo of her arrived in the mail. Little did I know at that time it had been taken 15 or 20 years earlier. Her fee was to be \$175. The evening arrived and so did the belly dancer, all 175 pounds of her. I had paid for her by the pound. She was big, I mean really big. In fact, she was huge and probably never took a dancing lesson. There were enough laughs that evening to last a lifetime.

Sometimes model aviation fanaticism causes marital friction, but usually not as catastrophic as when one fellow club member received an ultimatum from his wife: "It's either me or the model airplanes." You guessed right again. Model airplanes prevailed and a divorce decree was granted shortly thereafter.

Nothing was more thrilling than to preside as emcee when our club honored retired General George A. Vaughn who was credited with downing 13 enemy airplanes. Among aces who survived World War I, he was second only to Eddie Rickenbacker. It was a trip into aviation history to hear him discuss his first lessons and experiences in a Curtiss Jenny in 1915 and flying both Camels and Spads in 1918.

In 1920, he had joined the National Guard and helped form New York State's first aviation squadron in Hempstead, Long Island. That squadron was later moved to Miller Air Field, New Dorp, Staten Island, with General Vaughn commanding officer. The general and associates also formed the Casey Jones School of Aeronautics, a technical flight school, at Newark Airport in 1932. The school later moved to LaGuardia Airport and became the Academy of Model Aeronautics.

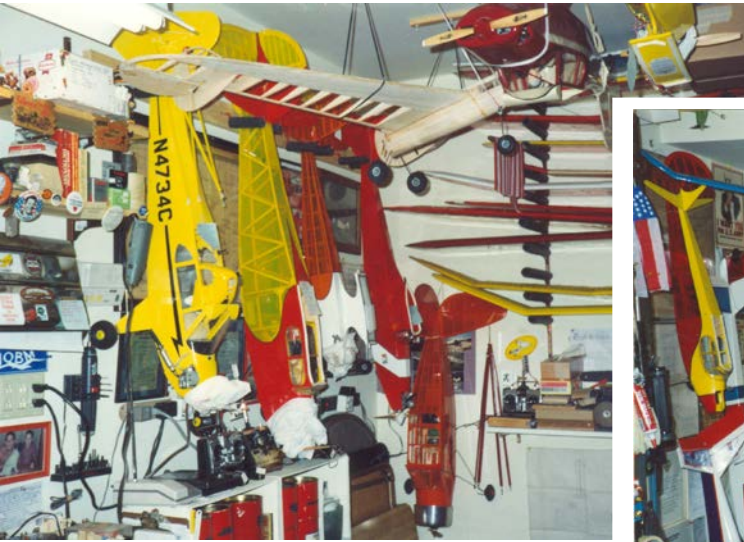
The years passed by and my wife and I became empty nesters. It was time to consider retirement and a changed lifestyle. That search led us to neighboring New Jersey. My criteria for retirement included sufficient workshop and storage space and a nearby model flying field. On one excursion to the Toms River area, I noticed some Radio Control flying in progress opposite an attractive adult village. That community featured homes with two car attached garages which would permit conversion of half to a 8 by 16 foot hobby shop, somewhat cramped, but satisfactory. I also learned that there were active clubs in the vicinity and a choice of three model flying fields, including Lakehurst, within 15 minutes drive. Best of all, other model buffs lived in the development. When the weather is good and wind subdued, my wife can receive an early morning call, "Can Larry come out and play?" That means pack the car and let's go flying!

In retrospect, there's only one depressing aspect of the hobby. So few youngsters are involved. So many are missing the lifelong enjoyment of this wonderful sport-hobby. If only nationwide model organizations, local clubs, manufacturers, magazine publishers and other profit-making components of the hobby could join together to ignite the spark that fascinated a generation past. It's ironic that those who claim kite flying as a sport-hobby will see that activity included as a demonstration sport in the 1996 Olympics. Why not model aviation, too?

Noted Publications

- "Little Larry," a construction article for an indoor Radio Control airplane, *Flying Models* magazine, September 2000

Larry Katz [*signed*]
June 22, 1997



Above, 2001: Larry's model shop



Larry in 1945 with a Bantam-powered Coronet.



1995: Larry



*Larry in 1995 and his 108-inch Dallaire Sportster
with a 35-millimeter camera pod.*

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