



The AMA History Project Presents: Biography of GEORGE "BUD" KILBEY, JR.

April 14, 1926 - December 23, 1992



Written & Submitted by ET (03/1999), Written by SL (02/1993); Transcribed & Edited by SS (2002), Reformatted by JS (10/2009)

Career:

- Built and repaired numerous planes such as a BT-13, a J-3 Cub, a Knight Twister, a Waco Taperwing, a TravelAir 2000 and a 1929 Fleet Model 2
- Won the Nationals in 1957 with a Radio Controlled bi-plane
- Won the grand champion award in 1962 at a National Antique Meet in Ottumwa, Iowa for craftsmanship on his 1929 Fleet Model 2
- Built a scale Waco Taperwing in the mid-1950s based off measurements of his full-sized plane

The following article appeared in the South Bend (Indiana) Tribune on February 28, 1993 following the death of Bud Kilbey.

'Bud' Kilbey Soared on his Airplanes

By Sherri A. Lively

MISHAWAKA – By trade, George “Bud” Kilbey was a tool and die maker. But those who knew him say he lived for airplanes, specifically the open-cockpit variety.

“My earliest memories are of a plane in the garage,” Mark Kilbey said about his father, who died in December. Mark remembers model airplanes suspended over his bed, his father flying overhead and calling out his name, and Saturdays spent at fly-in breakfasts and air shows. The elder Kilbey made his son wear black pants, a white shirt, and a black tie every time they flew.

“No tie, no fly,” Mark said.

Bud Kilbey spent his life flying, building, and repairing planes of all sizes. There was the BT-13, then a J-3 Cub, a Knight Twister that he built, a famous Waco Taperwing, a TravelAir 2000 and a 1929 Fleet Model 2 that he restored to perfection and that still flies today at the Mishawaka Pilot’s Club.

A longtime friend of Kilbey’s, Bob Harlin, said he saw Kilbey’s Waco in a 1930s film clip of the LINCO Flying Team at the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C. It featured stunt fliers Michael Murphy and Col. Joe Mackey. Mackey sold that Waco to Murphy in the 1930s. Kilbey bought it from a Benton Harbor man in the 1940s.

In 1957, he won the National Championship award for Radio Control flight with a little blue model bi-plane.

In 1952, when Kilbey was 26, his tiny creation, the Kilbey Special, made its test flight at Bendix Air Field in South Bend, now Michiana Regional Airport.

It took Kilbey three years to build the experimental bi-plane in a Mishawaka garage, and then it proved too much for him. Kilbey sold the plane after rolling it on takeoff. It changed hands several times until a pilot flew it into a fog-covered mountain on the West Coast, said Bernard Rice, a local historian and pilot.

In 1962, right after Kilbey finished the Fleet, he flew it to the National Antique Meet in Ottumwa, Iowa, and took home the grand champion trophy for his craftsmanship. Back at home, a 1927 TravelAir 2000 and a 1930 Waco Taperwing waited to return to the air. The takeoff never came.

A fire in the late 1970s destroyed the Riverside Tool & Engineering Company [which Kilbey owned] and damaged the Waco and the wings of the TravelAir 2000, which he had stored there. The body of the TravelAir was in Kilbey's garage at home.

Kilbey then moved the business to the old Carnegie Library and lived there.

In the basement of the library, the retired Kilbey meticulously restored the Waco and TravelAir using templates he made from the old parts, seat covers, and wings to create brand new ones.

“Given an object, the time, and the right tools, Dad could make anything,” Mark said.

The basement was stuffed with airplane parts, some half a century old and never used, that Kilbey had collected over the years. Kilbey prided himself on the history behind each part, such as the gleaming wood propeller on the Travel Air, which he bought from the original maker of that style, Mark said.

Tragically, the work became increasingly harder for Kilbey as his hands, twisted by rheumatoid arthritis, became useless. During the last decade of his life, he relied on friends to be his hands.

They helped him nearly finish his planes while he shared his knowledge of everything from creating the perfect wing covering to flying loops.

“He did outstanding work. I sure miss talking planes with Bud. I don't know anyone with as much knowledge as he had,” said Harlin, his friend since 1935.

As for the Waco and TravelAir, Mark wants to sell them and his father's vast collection of parts. Aviation buffs from across the nation have called about his sales advertisement in an aviation trader's magazine, but Mark is waiting for the right buyer.

The following article appeared with the previous one in the South Bend (Indiana) Tribune on February 28, 1993.

Son to Decide Fate of Historic Library

By Sherri A. Lively

MISHAWAKA – George “Bud” Kilbey, Jr. died on Dec. 23 [1993] in the old Carnegie Library at 112 N. Hill St., where he had lived for years with his beloved airplanes, memories and a dog named Bugs.

Kilbey purchased the historic building in the mid-1970s to house the family business, Riverside Tool & Die, and then took up residence there in recent years.

The Beiger Heritage Corp. has long been interested in acquiring the old library for restoration. Now, Kilbey’s death at age 66 puts the library’s fate into the hands of his son, Mark Kilbey, who plans to sell it.

The Carnegie Foundation, named for Andrew Carnegie, the Scottish industrialist and philanthropist who built U.S. Steel, established libraries throughout the Great Lakes and Northeastern states. Most were built of limestone and have been restored, such as libraries in Niles and Syracuse, said Teri Speiser, secretary of the board for Beiger Heritage Foundation.

But the one on Hill Street is special, because it is the last library the foundation built and the only one to reflect Flemish gable architecture, Speiser said. It was built in 1916, three years before Carnegie’s death.

The city considered razing the library in the mid-1970s. To save it, the Beiger Heritage Corp. acquired the library and sold it to Kilbey, Speiser said. He was trying to sell the library for around \$70,000 – a “for sale by owner” sign hung on the front door – but there were no takers.

Over the years, potential buyers had considered converting the library into a church, a photography studio, a bed and breakfast, an engineering studio, you name it, Mark Kilbey said.

Beiger Heritage has the first option to buy the library or approve another buyer under its contract with Kilbey. Speiser said corporation members want the library and are waiting for the younger Kilbey to market it. “The building was not damaged. It is in good shape,” Speiser said.

Large sections of plaster have fallen from the walls, but the elegant glass globes that illuminated reading tables decades ago still hang in front of the panoramic east window.

At Kilbey’s death, the library’s contents were a nostalgia buff’s dream. On the main floor was a jumble of old bicycles, old airplane model kits never opened, aviation magazines from World War II and airplane wing templates meticulously designed by Kilbey.

Mark Kilbey said special items will go to his father’s close friends and the rest of the antiques will be sold to the highest bidder.

Evan T. Towne compiled the following information on George “Bud” Kilbey, Jr.

He was born April 14, 1926 in Mishawaka, Indiana, to George and Mary Kilbey.

In the mid-1950s, Bud took an extremely difficult project. He decided to build a model-sized Waco Taperwing. He had the full-sized one in his shop, so instead of buying a kit to build it, he took measurements from the aircraft and drew his own set of plans. He made it exact scale and extremely complete in every respect. His goals were very high; he would build his model Waco, install an Anderson Spitfire engine, then install a radio control system, and attempt to win first place in a National Model Airplane contest, competing against all of the “professional” contest fellows. In those days, everyone competing in Radio Control had to have a ham radio license, not a small task – code and all!

The model part was no problem for him, but then he had to figure out all of the control surfaces and how to set up the radio servos to do the job. When people asked him why he was doing this, he said that he was doing it because everybody told him that he couldn't do it and he was going to prove that he could! With only three years of flying Radio Control experience, at the age of 31, he entered his Waco in the 1957 National Model Airplane Contest (Nats) held at Willow Grove Naval Air Station, Pennsylvania. It was the 26th Nats and held from July 29 through August 4. He became the unknown guy with the beautiful biplane. I looked up all the information that I could find in three different issues of Model Airplane News magazine. October gave only a list of winners and they even got his name wrong – George D. Kilboy, Jr. was first in Scale Radio Control (the regular contestants didn't know where he came from). Several of the other winners in Radio Control had been flying for 15 or 20 years.

In the November issue, they got his name correct and had two nice photos of him and his plane and four other information statements:

- “Radio Control Scale went to George Kilbey's massive 1/5-scale multi-channel Waco F-3 biplane.”
- “All we can convey to you scale bugs is the thought that if the picture of those Wacos looked good sitting on the ground, you should have seen George Kilbey's 1/5-size blue and yellow F-3 biplane swing around overhead, glide over the edge of the runway and rumble along to a stop.”
- “He had an Anderson Spitfire for power, Bramco 5-channel control and a Bramco throttle – and had everyone on the field with a stiff neck watching him fly.”
- “George knocked off 102.5 points to take the undisputed first place.”

The following statements ran in the December issue:

- “George Kilbey's F-3 Waco had silvery rigging ‘wires’ made from the flat plastic craft materials for weaving.”
- “The plastic strip, about 1/8-inch wide and less than 1/16-inch thick not only made the most realistic flying wires, but it also prevented interference with the radio – a probability with ‘real wires.’”

Then, Air Trails magazine model annual for 1958 devoted three full pages featuring a large photo of both Bud's Waco F-3 and another by Dick Thomas. Underneath the picture were listed all of the statistics about the planes that actually performed in the 1957 Nats.

After this, he had proven his point, so Bud returned to his first love – full-sized airplanes. In 1962, he restored a 1929 Fleet Model 2, which he flew it to the National Antique Meet in Ottumwa, Iowa. He won the grand championship trophy for his craftsmanship. For years, this plane could be seen at the Mishawaka pilot's club.

Eventually Bud moved in to the old Carnegie library he bought and lived in his fairyland of objects as he rebuilt the Waco wings. He had taken patterns from old parts and wings to make new ones. Unfortunately, he never did get the Travel-Air wings finished.

Around 1990 Howard Pippenger, my old model airplane buddy, wanted me to see the treasure trove that he had found when he visited at Bud's library. I was just amazed that one fellow could accumulate such an exotic collection of antique pieces and parts, many in their original boxes. Bud could tell all kinds of stories as to what it was and how he got it. I was extremely impressed by Bud. Later at a hobby show, Howard even showed me the blue and yellow Waco that Bud had won first in Radio Control Scale in 1957. How I regret that I didn't take a picture of it!

*(signed) Evan T. Towne
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