



# The AMA History Project Presents: Biography of R. SAL TAIBI

April 5, 1920 – December 2012 Started modeling in 1933  
AMA #3255



Written & Submitted by RST (05/1996); Transcribed by NR (06/1996); Edited by SS (07/2002), Updated by JS (10/2008, 09/2013) and JK (08/2013),  
Reformatted by JS (02/2010)

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## Career:

- In September 1938, he designed the *Powerhouse*
- In April 1939, set a national record with a Bay Ridge *Diamond Demon* with an Ohlsson .23
- Met Joe Raspante in 1937; in 1939, designed a 12-foot Radio Control model for him
- In 1940, the *Powerhouse* model won contests and the plans were published in *Model Airplane News*
- Designed the *Brooklyn Dodger* in 1941
- Went to work for the N.A.C.A at Langley Field, Virginia in 1941
- Won a first at the National Model Airplane Championships at Chicago, Illinois in 1941
- In 1958 designed another model called *The Starduster*
- Has been flying Old-Timer and modern Free Flight since retiring in June 1970
- Served as president of the Society of Antique Modelers (SAM) in the mid-1980s for four years and as secretary/treasurer for two years
- Attended every National Championship (Nats) from 1939 to 1994, except in 1946 when he was still in Germany
- Attended every SAM Champs since 1966
- A member of AMA since 1936

## Honors:

- 1974: Model Aviation Hall of Fame
- 1975: AMA Fellow
- 1978: National Free Flight Society Hall of Fame
- 1989: SAM Hall of Fame

## Lifetime Membership in the following organizations:

- AMA
- SAM
- The Fresno Club
- The Scamps club
- The Thermal Thumbers Club

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*The following was written by Sal Taibi in 1996.*

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## As a teenager

In 1934, I met Louis Cannava who was in the same class that I was. Louis was to have quite an influence in my life. Not directly, but through the manner of introducing me to the hobby of

building model airplanes.

Louis and I were inseparable chums. We walked to school together, played after school, and generally enjoyed each other's company, as young boys will. Louis was a model builder, while I had no interest in it. I would just watch.

One day, Louis' mother sat on one of his models. I guess at that point, Louis had it. He offered me what was left the model and kit. I said yes, and Louis gave me everything – the kit, glue, pins and a small work board. It was that simple, I was a model builder.

I got so interested in model building that I spent less and less time with Louis and lost even more interest in my schooling. My all-consuming interest seemed to be in building models.

This eventually led to dropping out of school. I had an argument with my civics teacher, and that was my last day at school. I was motivated with building models and not toward schooling. My parents were not hard to convince. They needed the money.

So I left school and got my first job in the fur industry. I worked downtown in the manufacturing district in New York. I worked eight hours a day for six days a week and was paid \$12 a week. I don't remember how much money my parents gave me, but I had enough for model building, so I was content.

In 1938, I met another model builder named Leon Shulman. Leon was a good influence on me as he believed in competition, and flew in local contests. So I was off to making a name for myself in the field of model aeronautics.

Leon had introduced me to the Tambe Club. I belonged to it for a while until people like Leon, Scotty Murray, Mickey Beitchman, Pinky Fruchtman, Carl Cecil, Maurice Shoenbrun, and I broke away from Tambe in 1936 and formed the Brooklyn Skyscrapers Club.

We went to all the meets in New Jersey and Pennsylvania. I went for two years and did not win even a measly 10th place. In September 1938, I designed the Powerhouse. I won my first prize – first place in cabin. Then in April 1939, I set a national record with a Bay Ridge *Diamond Demon* with an Ohlsson .23. I won first place at Lake Hopatchong in September 1939, setting a class C Rise-off-Water (R.O.W.) record at that meet.

I met Joe Raspante sometime in 1937. He was flying a *Buccaneer* standard and was just finishing Snow White. We flew together in all the New Jersey and Pennsylvania meets. Sometime in 1939, I designed a 12-foot Radio Control model for Joe. It really looked like an enlarged *Buccaneer*. We would go out to Hicksville to fly it. It weighed in at 17 pounds, ready to fly and had an O.K. Twin in the nose. This airplane was so heavy that the O.K. Twin would just barely fly it. I would get the engine running, pick it up, run as fast as I could run and throw it.

It would settle down to about two or three feet off the ground and then start a very slow climb. Joe would kill the engine at about 200 feet and gently fly it back to earth.

We flew it in the 1939 and 1940 Nationals (Nats), always second to the Good boys. They were the first ones to complete the ½-mile upwind and return. It only took about four or five minutes, but seemed like an hour – what a struggle.

Joe went to work for Sperry Gyroscope and was so involved with the Bombsight work that he missed the 1941 Nats. In September of 1941, I went to work at N.A.C.A., and did not see Joe again until about 1948 or 1949. I visited with him at his home on Long Island.

In 1941, I designed the *Brooklyn Dodger* for H&F Models in Brooklyn. I ran the Berkeley Models saw room (cutting balsa) from 1938 to 1941 when I went to work for the N.A.C.A at Langley Field, Virginia.

The *Powerhouse* model won quite a few contests for me and early in 1940, the plans were published in *Model Airplane News*. This was the first of about a dozen model designs that I had published in various model magazines. As my reputation as a serious contest flyer and designer grew, it seemed to spur me on, and in 1941, I was fortunate to win a first at the National Model Airplane Championships at Chicago, Illinois.

At this point, I might say that winning in a contest requires much preparation, almost perfection in flying, plus a little break in many other factors, which I will attempt to place in their proper order.

First, a well-trimmed and sturdy model can be flown when there are thermals in the flying area. As Free Flight models are judged for endurance of flight, only the second reason is apparent. Get into a thermal and get a good flight.

Third, the judge who does the timing should have good eyesight. The models drift with the wind and if the timer has poor eyesight, he will lose contact with it and the flight ceases when that happens.

Fourth, the model must be retrieved for another flight. The winner is determined by the highest total time accumulated for the three flights.

Well, I was fortunate to get all of my flights in at the Chicago Nats. All were thermal flights and I was very careful about picking my timer for good vision.

At that time I thought that I had reached my highest achievement, but 48 years (1996) have gone by since Chicago, and I still keep bringing home the trophies.

## **The Adult**

My fame as a model builder led to a job with the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics at Langley Field, Virginia. I had been there for only three months when Japan hit Pearl Harbor.

The programs at Langley Field changed from a casual research effort, to an all out effort for the design, modification, and flight proofing of our military aircraft.

At this time in 1942, I was offered an apprenticeship in tool making, which I accepted. All the draft age men at Langley Field were placed in the Army Reserves on an inactive status. This would keep us out of the draft and also discourage voluntary enlistments. We were needed for the research effort at Langley Field. Many tried to enlist, but were sent back when it was learned that they were employed at Langley Field.

The area around Langley Field was a real hotbed for model aviation, also. Most of the fellows employed at Langley were model builders like me. Of the 500 employed at Langley, about 150 were avid modelers. In 1941, I met Frank Vollrath. Frank worked with me in the Machine Shop. We were good friends and fellow modelers. Frank was married in late 1943, and brought his bride to Copeland Park, Virginia, to live. In a few months, his wife's sister came to visit for a few weeks. Her name was Nathalie Mary Snavely, and she was a gorgeous woman and lots of fun. After a whirlwind courtship, we were married in Copeland Park, Virginia.

We lived quite happily for about a year, when we got the bad news. The reserves were being called to active duty. I was called in April 1945. While I was in basic training, Germany surrendered. I was sent to Lowery Field, Denver, Colorado, for training as a B-29 Machine Gun Turret Mechanic. My wife had joined me just prior to leaving Basic Training Camp, so we journeyed together to Denver.

I went to school during the day, and because I was on separate rations, was home every night at 5 p.m. My wife worked during the stay in Denver for a sugar company. Between her salary and my allowance for separate rations, we lived quite comfortably. I often look back and think of our three months in Denver as our second honeymoon.

About three or four months later Japan surrendered, and I was given orders to report to Camp Patrick Henry, in Newport News, Virginia, about 10 miles from where we were married. A few weeks later, I left for overseas duty with the Occupation Forces in Europe. We were the first boatload of replacements for the homecoming fighting forces.

We landed in Le Harve, France on the coldest night I can remember. Prior to landing, the officer of the day came into our compartment and told everyone to get his or her long underwear on. It was an order.

I had on my long underwear, two pairs of socks, O.D. wool pants, tucked into my combat boots, O.D. shirt, a sweater, an Eisenhower jacket, and an overcoat. I was clothed for cold weather, and I do not know when I have been colder. I shook from the cold, of course, standing on the dock for an hour while the Red Cross served coffee and donuts, and it did not help a darn bit.

We boarded a train to Paris and upon arrival, the officer in charge said, "Get one case of C Rations for each car." By that time, I knew how the Army worked, so I got a case for myself. It was a wise decision. As it worked out, our overnight ride turned out to be a week's ride to never-never land. Everywhere we went, the officer was told, and "Your division doesn't belong here." After a tour of France, and part of Germany, we finally arrived in Furstenfeldbruck, home, at least for a few days. We were then transferred to the air base at Landsburg, a town that had

become famous because it was in that town that Hitler had written, "Mein Kampf."

During the day, it was my job at the Landsburg Air Base to do the necessary machinist operations in the base motor pool. I built model airplanes in the evenings and flew them whenever I found the opportunity. I would say that my only problem was sex or the lack of it. Leaving the U.S.A. after being married for only 19 months, and being in my middle 20s, I missed the normal sex relations.

My moral standards would not let me fraternize, so I stayed away from women. I would say that this was my toughest adjustment that I had to make while overseas. I did the normal sightseeing, Munich Beer Gardens, went to a few operas, spent two days at Berchtesgarden (Hitler's retreat), and visited my brother-in-law a few times. Frank Vollrath was stationed about 100 miles away and it was pretty easy distance to cover in a day and visit for a while.

I think my first sergeant had as happy a reaction as I did when my shipping orders came through, for my return to States. I needed that poor guy with the same question, every time I saw him, "When am I going home?" He was almost as happy as I was to be going home.

We arrived in New York and the Statue of Liberty never looked so good. I remember sailing past Coney Island, and thinking how many happy days I had spent there. It sure was good to see the city again. It may sound corny, but for two cents, I'd have gotten down and kissed the soil of the good ol' USA.

I was discharged in Chicago and decided to settle in Indianapolis, Indiana. Before going overseas, enroute from Denver to Virginia, we had stopped in Indianapolis for a two weeks stay. While there, I had fixed a home for my wife to live in. It was just two doors north of her parents' home. It seemed very comfortable, so I got a job at the Naval Ordnance Plant, and we lived in Indianapolis for the next five years.

Again, the influence of modeling enters into the picture. We had heard and read about the California climate, and the no down payment homes that could be purchased by veterans. We had been trying to purchase a home in Indianapolis. We saved \$500, we got that amount, and by that time, the down payment had gone up to \$800. When we saved the \$800, the down payment had risen to \$1200. It appeared that the real estate people were always out of reach. We were discouraged and decided to see if the easy housing was really available in California. My wife wanted a home and I had heard about the excellent modeling sites in California. In addition, flying went on there all year round.

So we made a quickie trip to California and while out here, I arranged for a transfer to the Naval Ordnance Test Station in Pasadena and purchased a home in Lakewood.

We arrived in California to stay in April of 1951. I met many friends in the next two years. One in particular Bill Baker owned a company that manufactured model airplane kits.

One day Bill asked to accompany me to the flying field to watch a model fly. He was contemplating the production of a model kit and wanted my opinion concerning its design,

flyability, etc. The model was not a good design. The designer was flying it under low power because of its instability, so I recommended him to bypass this model.



At that point, Bill Baker asked me if I would design a model for him to manufacture. We came to terms on the royalty rates and in 30 days, I presented him with the finished working drawings for a model called the *Spacer*. We both made out very well on this one. It sold very well in the States and also in foreign countries. It was by far my best design, and netted me a little over a \$1,000 in royalties.

In 1958, I designed another model called *The Starduster*. This model was a better model than the *Spacer*, and it showed such promise that I decided to make some money myself instead of settling for royalties. In 1959 two modeling friends, R.A. Van De Walker and Curtis Stevens, and myself formed our own company called Competition Models.

We each invested \$550 and started manufacturing the *Starduster* series of Free Flight model airplane kits. In time, we added two other items to our line. All this effort has been on a spare time basis. The wives do some of the packing and make trips to the post office and the bank.

The first year this was easy to accomplish, but it has grown to be quite a task. We are at the point where I feel that we will have to hire at least one full-time employee. Our investment has paid off quite well, but we are at a point now where we must expand further or sell the company to someone who can operate it on a full-time basis.

In 1963, I was interviewed for a position at the Downey branch of the Bureau of Weapons. The interviewer stated he liked my qualifications but did not know if I could be hired for lack of education. At this time, he was shocked that I had made no effort to complete my high school education. Up until this interview, most of the people that had hired me knew my past experience, and had hired me for the job that I could do for them without the need for the educational requirements.

A few weeks later, I had my wife make the necessary inquiries to the local school in regards to enrollment for study to earn my high school diploma.

The first week in January 1963, I took the GED tests. I took psychology, US government, and history. Upon completion, I was eligible to receive my diploma.

I graduated in 1964 from Lakewood High School. I retired in June 1970 from my government job, and have spent the ensuing years helping my son, Mike, at Superior Aircraft. I do all the die cutting for Mike. I now fly both Old-Timers and modern Free Flight. I have three Old-timer models.

Since retiring, I have been active flying Old-Time models, such as modern AMA and Nostalgia. I have dabbled with Radio Control and actually placed third in Radio Control Old-Timer Antique. I still go flying at least twice a week.

I made my first trip to England in 1986 and loved the people and the flying. Nan went with me in 1994, and thoroughly enjoyed the country and the people.

I served as president of SAM in the mid 1980s for four years, and as secretary/treasurer for two years.

At age 75, I was lucky enough to win the Free Flight Power championship, in 1995. I still enjoy building and flying and my wife Nan keeps saying, "Keep flying. It's keeping you young."

### **Addendum**

I have attended every Nats from 1939 to 1994, except the 1946 Nats as I was still in Germany.

Have attended every SAM Champs since 1966 and have been a member of AMA since 1936. I hold a lifetime membership in the following:

- (AMA) Academy of Model Aeronautics
- (SAM) Society of Antique Modelers
- The Fresno Model Club
- The Scamps Club
- The Thermal Thumbers Club

*Sal, 05/1996*

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*The following was published in the March 2013 issue of Model Aviation magazine, in the In the Air section, written by MA staff.*

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Sal Taibi, 91, passed away in December 2012. He was one of the best-known modelers in the history of the hobby. Involved in aeromodeling nearly his entire life, he was a competitor, a creator of many classic designs, and considered a mentor to many.

"Calling Sal Taibi a 'legend' is almost an understatement," wrote AMA Executive Director Dave Mathewson. "He's arguably one of the most significant members AMA has ever had. His influence is as far reaching as anyone I can think of."

Sal first became involved in building model airplanes in 1934. The hobby soon evolved into his passion and he lost interest in all else, including school. He dropped out of school, took a job, and earned enough to keep building models, so he was content.

Sal met Leon Shulman and became more involved in the competition aspect of modeling. He, Leon, and several others formed the Brooklyn Skyscrapers club in 1936, one of the oldest model airplane clubs in the country.

Sal designed the classic Powerhouse in 1938, a model that would later be published in Model

Airplane News. The Powerhouse was the first of roughly a dozen published designs. He designed the Brooklyn Dodger in 1941 for H&F Models, the company where he was then working. His first win at the National Model Airplane Championships came in 1941 in Chicago. His reputation as a serious contest flier and designer grew.

That same year, he began working for the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics (NACA, predecessor to NASA) at Langley Field in Virginia. He had only been there for three months when World War II began.

“The programs at Langley Field changed from a casual research effort, to an all-out effort for the design, modification, and flight proofing of our military aircraft,” Sal wrote in his AMA biography. “All the draft-age men at Langley Field were placed in the Army Reserves on an inactive status. This would keep us out of the draft and also discourage voluntary enlistment. We were needed for the research effort at Langley Field.”

Eventually the reserves were called up and Sal left for basic training in 1945. Germany surrendered while he was in basic training, and he received orders to report to Camp Patrick Henry, in Newport News, Virginia, where he was sent to serve with the Occupation Forces in Europe. Upon his return to the US, Sal and his wife eventually made their way to California where housing was readily available, as were excellent modeling venues and year-round flying. He met Bill Baker, owner of a model airplane kit manufacturer, and began designing models for him.

A few years later, Sal and two friends formed their own company, Competition Model, and started manufacturing the Starduster series of FF model airplane kits in their spare time. The initial investment paid off well, but the company grew to the point where they needed to sell it to someone who could operate it full time. Sal took a government job that required him to have a high school education, so he took his GED test, completed the necessary classes, and graduated from Lakewood High School in 1964.

Sal’s many honors include being inducted into the Model Aviation Hall of Fame in 1974, becoming an AMA Fellow in 1975, induction into the National Free Flight Society Hall of Fame in 1978, and the Society of Antique Modelers Hall of Fame in 1989. He belonged to the Fresno Model Club, the Southern California Antique Model Plane Society (SCAMPS), and the Thermal Thumbers. The SCAMPS club planned to hold its ninth annual Sal Taibi Commemorative Fun-Fly at its field in Perris, California, in January.

Dave reflected on Sal’s life and all that he has given to the hobby by saying, “His influence on aeromodeling over a span of nearly eighty years is recognized worldwide and is virtually unmatched.”

Sal’s biography is available on the AMA website at <https://www.modelaircraft.org/files/TaibiRSal.pdf>.



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*This following was published in the Model Aviation magazine website at <http://www.modelaviation.com/saltaibifunfly> as an Online and tablet app bonus interview with Sal. Photos and article are by Kevin Sherman.*

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*Memorial event draws more than 60 Taibi-designed models.*

Aeromodeling legend Sal Taibi passed away in late December 2012. With only a small family service planned, two members of Sal's former club, the Southern California Antique Model Plane Society (SCAMPS), thought it would be a good idea to have an event in his honor for his modeling friends. The SCAMPS club holds an annual contest in March in Sal's honor called the Taibi Annual, but Kevin Sherman and Daniel Heinrich wanted to hold an event that would allow modelers to honor Sal the way he would have liked and not have to wait for his traditional contest. Having a fun-fly in his honor seemed like the perfect idea and the event was scheduled for January 12, 2013. Sal's son, Mike Taibi, and Sally Moke, Sal's girlfriend, sent word that they would attend. Sal Taibi started test flying at a field in Perris, California, in the 1960s. He used his test sessions to prepare for contests. A few SCAMPS asked if they could tag along. In time, Sal had a group of fliers joining him each week and flying at Perris every Wednesday became a SCAMPS tradition. Eventually the field was named Taibi Field after Sal. It was decided that a perfect way to honor Sal would be to have a fun-fly in his honor at Taibi Field and the date January 12 was chosen. People were invited to bring their Taibi-designed models for a group picture—and, of course, donuts. If Sal's first love was model airplanes, his second may have been eating! His stomach was like an alarm clock, telling him when it was time to take a donut break. In time, that alarm clock would go off earlier and earlier until he would call for a donut break at 9 a.m. January 12 approached with



*Mike Taibi and Betty Moke stand before the gathering of Taibi-designed models.*

conflicting weather forecasts. Some called for strong winds and others predicted winds between 3 and 5 mph. Not in question were the cold temperatures because of an arctic flow. In any case, neither the cold nor the winds that didn't materialize kept anyone away.



*Roughly 70 Taibi models and 45 modelers braved the cold at the Taibi Fun-Fly.*



*Ray Peel displays his 1/2 A Texaco Powerhouse. The SCAMPS club started the 1/2 A Texaco event and the Powerhouse is one of its most popular models.*



*Gary Sherman holding Kevin Sherman's Veco 19-powered, 510-inch Spacer.*

Daniel Heinrich was first on the field and the Shermans were second. At 7 a.m. it was 27° and the ground was frozen. Walking was a chore because of the ice on the ground. Daniel supplied coffee, purchasing a large coffee pot and carafes, and the hot coffee was a big hit.

Kevin brought donuts and somehow more donuts and fruit materialized. There was a photo board collage of Sal and a sign-in sheet made to commemorate the occasion. The photo board will be put out at every Taibi Annual in the future, and the sign-up sheet will be given to Sal's son, Mike.

Approximately 40 people signed in and a large number of Taibi-designed models were in attendance. Kevin, Gary, and Don Sherman all reported having 11 Taibi-designed models in their stables, which seemed like a lot until Joe Jones announced that he had 18!



*Kevin Sherman launched his father Gary's Jett .40-powered Starduster 900 during the cold morning at the Sal Taibi Fun-Fly*

The Shermans managed to load nine of their models into their truck and Joe managed to bring eight. Others including Ted Firster, Jeff Carman, Ken and Don Kaiser, and Ray Peel, had multiples, too.

Thanks to social media—in particular the SCAMPS Facebook page—we were able to spread the word about the Taibi fun-fly beyond our membership. Some people who had never built a model, but knew of Sal or had met him attended. A few others came out to the field for the first time, bringing their vintage Taibi models to be included in the group photo.

The Facebook page carried event updates. One person even made a photo board from Sal Taibi photos posted on the Facebook page and presented it to Mike Taibi. It was great to see so many of the people Sal touched during his life get behind the event.

Flying got off to a late start because of cold weather. One of the first flights was Sal's own Starduster 900. Sal was known for getting his flights in early in the thick morning air, so it was neat to see the tradition continue with this early morning flight. In Taibi fashion, it made an easy max and DTed from good altitude!

After that flight, flying began in earnest. What a joy to see all the Taibi models flying. There were many Stardusters, Spacers, Powerhouses, Brooklyn Dodgers, and Perris Specials tearing up the sky! Ken Kaiser even had an Eaglet cruising around. Sal must have been looking down on us with a big smile on his face!

Don Sherman flew two Forster 99-powered Powerhouses. It was fun to see them rise off the ground and climb out. The Forester is a quiet engine, but it puts out a surprising amount of thrust.

Jeff Carman also flew a big Powerhouse with a Super Cyke. On his first flight he forgot a rubber

band that aided the DT and it failed to pop the tail properly. The model could not decide if it wanted to fly or stall. Eventually it flew into a light spiral, and Jeff was able to get to it, catch it, and get a round of applause for saving the model from any damage. He later stuck it in a nice piece of air and got it up there—at least at least twice as high as before—and this time the DT deployed properly.

Because of the late flying start, the schedule was pushed back. Gathering the Taibi models for the group picture began at approximately 9:30 a.m. Sal's traditional donut break was scheduled for 9 a.m., but people didn't begin flying until 8, so the donut break never materialized.

Food was set out early in the morning, and people ate as they socialized. By 10 a.m. there was a nice group of models present. Don Kaiser reported counting 62, but a few late arrivals and a few who did not make it into the picture put the total of Taibi designs at roughly 70.



*Mike Taibi holds the Starduster 900 Sal built and gave to Kevin Sherman. Sal said the Starduster 900 was his best design of all time.*



*Don Sherman fuels his Forrester .99-powered Taibi Powerhouse.*



*Vic Cunnynggham Jr. displays his contest-winning vintage A/B Taibi Spacer.*



*Daniel Heinrich VTOs his 1,000-square-inch Starduster.*

After we took pictures, Mike Taibi addressed everyone, thanking them for coming and conveyed some nice, touching thoughts. Mike walked around at the end of the day and individually thanked each person who attended. The day was made so much better by his presence and that of Betty Moke, who also thanked everyone. Betty is a wonderful person who had been Sal's partner for several years.

Ted Firster presented Mike and Betty each with shirts from the SAM Champs a few years ago when Sal was also honored. The shirts were imprinted with a picture of Sal launching and Las Vegas in the background.

After the group photo shoot, it was back to flying. Everyone was asked to sign in, but several forgot to do so because they were having too much fun flying! After 10 a.m., the weather improved. The temperature rose to the 50s and winds were light and variable.

If you judge an event such as this by how much fun people had, then it was a rousing success. Many people talked about what a great time it was and were appreciative that Kevin and Daniel thought to organize the fun-fly. Only Sal could draw a group this large on a freezing day, with a questionable forecast.

Sal was a special person, and it was nice to see so many come to honor him. He had an infectious laugh and willingness to help anyone and everyone he could. Although modeling has lost one of its great pioneers, Sal lives on in every Taibi design that is built and flown.

Special thanks to the Shermans, Daniel Heinrich, Mark Williams, and everyone else who helped put the event on and all the many others who came out to support it.

People are already looking forward to the Taibi Annual at Perris on March 17, 2013.

—Kevin Sherman  
[julykevin@aol.com](mailto:julykevin@aol.com)

SOURCES:

SCAMPS  
<http://scamps.homestead.com>

## **Sal Taibi's 70 Years of Competition** by Kevin Sherman

In 2006, Sal Taibi celebrated a great milestone: 70 years of competing in Free Flight. The Southern California Model Plane Society (SCAMPS), a club Sal cofounded, recognized the accomplishment by presenting him with a custom plaque.

I took the opportunity to interview Sal and cover some of his modeling history. We met at our SCAMPS' Perris flying field, affectionately known as "Taibi International," to discuss some of his experiences throughout those years. The following interview gives some insight into the man

and the flier, Sal Taibi

*KS: How were you first introduced to model airplanes?*

**ST:** A friend of mine, Louis, had taken me home to show me his airplane. His mother had knocked it off the piano and broke a couple longerons. He was about to throw it in the trash can and I remember saying, “Louis, don’t do that; give it to me and I’ll take it home and finish it.” It was a Bellanca. I took the model home and I repaired it and flew it until I built my next model which was a 36-inch Rubber ship. I flew the Rubber model, but then decided to go into gas.

*KS: When did you get real enthused about your modeling?*

**ST:** I would say about 1934 or ’35 is when I really got into it with the 36-inch Rubber model. Louis gave me the Bellanca in 1933, and by 1935, I had built a slab-sided Buccaneer, with a Brown Junior. I wasn’t competing with it, but really enjoyed flying it just for fun. At that time, I really didn’t understand everything I was doing. I remember I had to go back to the designer because I couldn’t understand the engine mount. From then on, I designed my own airplanes and that was easy.

*KS: When did you join the Brooklyn Skyscrapers and how did you find out about them?*

**ST:** We originally belonged to a club called TAMBE, which stood for The Airplane Model Builder Exchange. We had a Senior Director who was very dictatorial, with everything having to be done his way. Finally in ’36, four or five of us who were starting to be experienced model builders, broke off from TAMBE and formed the Brooklyn Skyscrapers.

*KS: You finished your first model airplane in 1933. When did you enter your first contest?*

**ST:** It was 1936, when a friend of mine took me to Hadley field in New Jersey. I flew the slab-sided Buccaneer with the Brown and did not place—didn’t even come close. I flew for a few years at several other contests without winning. That is when I decided I wanted to design my own models.

*KS: How were you introduced to contest flying?*

**ST:** The club started to going to contests and they asked me to go along. At the time, I was just flying for fun at a place called the Diker Heights Golf Course in Brooklyn, New York, and I would go there to fly my Buccaneer. I never thought about going to a contest until they had a contest at Hadley Field, New Jersey and they said, “Why don’t you go along.” So I went with them and I enjoyed it and that is when I started building for contests.

*KS: Were you still with TAMBE, or had you already formed the Skyscrapers.*

**ST:** We had already formed the Skyscrapers.

*KS: Who were your mentors during those early years?*

**ST:** Leon Shulman was a big push. He liked to go to contests and I had never been to one, so I went to my first contest with Leon. Of course, there weren’t too many guys in our club who were contest builders or liked to go to contests. We all did it for our own enjoyment. But, Leon liked to go to contests and that is when I got started.

*KS: What led you to design your own models? Did you have any help and how did you learn to*

*design?*

**ST:** I wasn't excited about any of the models that were out there, and thought I could just design my own. Of course, I used Zaic's Yearbook which gave all the parameters for things like tail moment and stabilizer area versus wing area and so on. So, you might say that Zaic's Yearbook was my manual from which I designed out of including the Powerhouse, the Dodger, and the Pacer. Of course, after you design half a dozen, everything is in your head and you don't have to refer back to the book anymore.

**KS:** *When did you win your first contest?*

**ST:** That was February 12, 1939. I won the Class C endurance contest with a Powerhouse powered by a Forster .99; that was my very first win. I narrowly squeaked past Henry Struck, who was trying to catch me, but his friend drove too fast when they retrieved his model (with a car) and folded the wing. Henry was in a rumble seat holding his Record Hound, and John just drove too fast. We had a field you could drive a car across, and he drove fast enough to snap the wing on Henry's airplane.

**KS:** *You set several records during your 70 years of competition. What was your first and what did you set it with?*

**ST:** The first one was August 20th, 1939. I established an ROW [rise-off-water] record at Lake Hopatchong, New Jersey, with a 1 minute, 7 second flight average, flying a Powerhouse with 42-inch-long gondolier floats or pontoons. One other flyer got off the water, but crashed in a few seconds. The only difference from flying off land was that I had to trim my prop to 16 inches. Power was the Forster .99. We had about 20 contestants at the Frank Zaic contest. Frank spent most of the day retrieving models that did not lift off the water!

**KS:** *Your late wife Nan was a part of your contest flying. Can you discuss the role she played?*

**ST:** She did a lot of timing and a lot of backup timing. As a backup, she would stand there with the timer and when he would punch his watch, she would punch hers. On only one occasion did it really work to have her backing up the timer. I was flying at a Nationals in Kansas and I had made the longest flight of the day, which was only 3½ minutes; the wind was blowing like hell. The timer dropped his watch on the ground and luckily, Nan had her watch going and she gave the timer her watch. It had a loop on it and Nan just looped it around his neck. With 3½ minutes being the longest flight of the day, you can guess how hard the wind was blowing.

**KS:** *Did Nan encourage your building?*

**ST:** I don't think she really encouraged me to build. She wasn't against it either, but sometimes didn't like the amount of time I was devoting to modeling instead of her (Taibi laughs). In fact, one time I was sanding on a model and she had been watching me out the kitchen window. I had this kind of a model which was planked and I was sanding it and she came out and said, "How come you don't hold me like that?" So, I put the airplane down, put her on my lap, and I started stoking her. She was then very happy (Taibi laughs again).

**KS:** *I know your son, Michael, competed with you at the Nats. Can you discuss the time you guys shared competing?*

**ST:** Michael was the 1969 Junior National Champion. We had all of his models ready. Believe it or not, he flew a Starduster 900 at 14 years old and he was good at Towline, and he was good in

Rubber. He had a Bilgri stick that would do 5 minutes first thing in the morning without help. I remember telling him before the contest started that I was going to do all the worrying for him. "Now you don't have to worry about nothing. I'll do all the worrying, you just fly the airplanes." That's what he did. He got a good run in ½A Speed and ½A Proto, good runs in A Speed, flew his Nordic Glider well, and then put in his flights with his Rubber and power ships, and he wound up Champion. He scored more points than any Junior had ever scored in a national competition. He had right around 750 points out of a possible 900. Nobody had ever made more than about 550 points before that. Watching Michael win was as fun and gratifying for me as if I had done it myself. I really enjoyed it.

*KS: I know you were a past SAM [Society of Antique Modelers] Grand Champion. Do you consider that one of your greatest accomplishments in modeling?*

**ST:** Oh yes. It was nice being the SAM Champion. I enjoyed it, but mostly, I enjoyed the guys. The camaraderie and interaction is the fun of it.

*KS: You designed many airplanes. Which do you consider to be your best?*

**ST:** Without a doubt, the Starduster. It just did phenomenal in competition. At one of the early 1960s Nationals, out of 15 places (they placed from first to fifth in those days in Junior, Senior, and Open) the Starduster took 14 out of the 15 places. I think it was the 1961 or '62 Nationals.

*KS: You are an accomplished competitor, designer, and have taught hundreds if not thousands to fly Free Flight. What do you consider your greatest accomplishment?*

**ST:** Teaching my good friend, Kevin Sherman, to fly (laughing). I don't know, I guess I would have to say designing the Starduster was the best thing I ever did because it flies in anybody's hands, novice or an expert.

*KS: You spent your career as a machinist. Did that help you in modeling?*

**ST:** I don't know if it helped me in modeling, it just helped me to do things that I wanted to do that were impractical as just a model builder. Doing stuff on a lathe or a milling machine to make a model more airworthy, I don't know. I have made thousands of tanks and tank mounts, and things like that which helped.

*KS: What was your favorite era to compete in?*

**ST:** I would say the 1950s when we went there with a whole bunch of Starduster 900s and wiped out the contest.

*KS: What is your favorite part of competing?*

**ST:** Just watching my airplane up there nice and high, with good altitude and gliding smoothly and maxing out. I enjoy watching the airplanes fly. I really do enjoy that. It is a challenge to make those 5-minute maxes.

*KS: You developed a strategy of flying early in the morning, as soon as a contest starts. How did that evolve?*

**ST:** Especially in California because in California, the air is very good in the mornings and I found this out after living here for a year or two. I found out that the morning air in California was great. Now in Indiana, we never flew officials until maybe 10 a.m. or 11 a.m. until the



ground warmed up. Now in California, the morning air may not have lift, but it has good density and the airplane glides better and will max. If you have a reasonably good airplane, you can fly early, make your maxes, and most of the time, without having to chase it a long way because the wind is usually calm in the mornings.

**KS:** *Other than your own designs, what is your favorite Old-Timer gas model?*

**ST:** The Comet Sailplane, Carl's Sailplane. It had such a beautiful outline, and that gorgeous elliptical wing.

**KS:** *Other than flying model airplanes, did you have any other hobbies?*

**ST:** No, I never did anything other than modeling. I just stuck with modeling and never tried anything else. I guess you could say I had a one-track mind.

**KS:** *Can you talk about what SAM has meant to you and to the Old-Timer hobby?*

**ST:** SAM introduced all the old models back in again and it has allowed many of us to go back to our youth and fly the models we flew in the '40s. It's enjoyable, a low-key contest compared to these modern contests where you are flying these airplanes with two and three hp motors and 7-second engine runs. The SAM contests are much more casual and much more enjoyable whether you win or not. SAM has created a contest environment which allows us to just have fun.

**KS:** *Why do you think the SAM movement evolved? Were guys unhappy with the direction modeling was going?*

**ST:** Yeah, because I went to a couple contests where I was down to 4-second engine runs and that's not any fun. You start out with 11, you go to 9, you go to 7, you go to 5, then you go to 4. It is challenging, but it's not fun. SAM modeling is fun.

**KS:** *You have obviously won your fair share, and maybe a few other's fair share (ha, ha) of contests. Is there one piece of advice you could give on what it takes to win?*

**ST:** Yes, be prepared. I found out after going to five or six contests and not winning because my timer didn't work right, or I didn't bring enough rubber bands, or I didn't bring enough fuel or the right fuel, or I had weak batteries. All these little things that amount to a win I filed away in my head and I tried to never repeat them again. After eliminating all the mistakes, I started winning.

**KS:** *Is that how you came up with your famous toolbox that has everything in it? It seems to be almost magical to me. I have four flight boxes, and still don't seem to have as much as you have in your one flight box.*

**ST:** Yes, eventually I began to have everything I needed in there.

**KS:** *I am one of the many you taught to fly Free Flight. Does it give you pleasure to see your pupils succeed?*

**ST:** Oh, definitely, definitely. I am always watching and suggesting things if I can to help them including my famous cutting the rudder tab in half and moving only half of it instead of the entire tab, like a vernier tab. It gives enough adjustment without over-adjusting.

**KS:** *Is there any goal you set in competing you never achieved?*

**ST:** No, I always seemed to get what I wanted. I am very happy with my modeling career and at 86, I am still enjoying it.

**KS:** *What is the best prize you ever won at an airplane contest?*

**ST:** Believe it or not, at the 1941 Nats, I won \$100 cash. That was quite a prize considering I was making \$16 a week as the foreman of Mercury Models saw room. I had three guys working for me and I was the head man in the saw room. There were four of us cutting balsawood for the kits for resale. When I won the \$100 at the Nats, I was just, well, I felt so rich (laughing)!

**KS:** *What was the largest contest you ever flew in? Do you remember how many competitors there may have been?*

**ST:** I would say the largest contest I ever flew in was a contest in Chicago in 1941 where there were 1,200 contestants. The Nats started to deteriorate downward after the war started. Now, you get 300-400 and it is a big contest. There was much more participation before World War II. A lot of the guys didn't come back to modeling after the war, but there were always those few dozen diehards who were going to be flying models for the rest of their lives. They were always there.

**KS:** *I know you flew in many consecutive Nationals. When was that streak?*

**ST:** I flew my first Nationals in 1939, and went to every one of them until 1989. I put a lot of miles on the Chevy making the annual trips.

**KS:** *Do you have a particular contest experience that stands out?*

**ST:** Nan and I were at a contest and I was flying a modified 7-foot Pacer. It had the Pacer body and tail, but a different wing—more like the Spacer. I had a McCoy .60 in it. I must have chased it for three to four hours. It was so big. The body was about 5 feet long, and about 1-foot high. It was like chasing a J-3. I made my flight about 3 p.m. and when I got back, it was dark and Nan was still on the model field, sitting on my tool box, waiting for me to come back.

**KS:** *What did you chase it with?*

**ST:** I chased it in my car, and luckily the roads went the way I needed to go. In fact, I went through one town, Lebanon, Indiana, and I would guess I hadn't seen the model for about 20 minutes.

I drove the direction the model was going which was north and west and I went through town in a zigzag, north-west pattern, trying to follow the flight path of the model even though I couldn't see it. After a half hour of this, I got out on a country road and thought to myself, "I am going to go 2 miles and get out and look for the model."

I went two miles on the odometer, and when I got out and looked, it was right over my head. It had lost some altitude and looked like it was coming down in a corn field. I had to leave the car and said to myself, "God, don't let it go up again!" It didn't and when it hit the corn, I was only about 10 or 15 feet from it.

It was about a three hour flight, but because it was so big, it was easy to chase. The roads in Indiana are laid out in one mile squares, so I could go up and over, up and over and stay with the model. When I got back to the field, Nan was waiting for me with the first place trophy.

*KS: Do you still enjoy to participating in contests?*

**ST:** Yes, I still enjoy watching my model ROG and watching it climb out. It still gives a thrill and gets the jollies out.

*KS: Thanks, Sal.*

Sal Taibi went on to compete another two years, for a total of an incredible and most likely unduplicated 72 years. Although he passed away in December 2012, the mark he left on the modeling community is indelible.

If he didn't touch your life personally with his kindness and friendship, he most likely did with one of his many successful designs like the Powerhouse, Spacer, or Starduster. Except for FAI fliers, I think one would be hard-pressed to find a Free Flighter out there who has not built one of Sal's designs.

Since the 1960s, Sal was a member of the SCAMPS. He was one of the founding members of that club as well as the Brooklyn Skyscrapers.

Sal served as SAM president and was a past SAM champion. He also served as an officer of the SCAMPS for many years. He and Jim Adams seemed as though they swapped being editor and president back and forth for many years.

My dad, Gary Sherman, had been an inactive SCAMPS' member since the 1970s. When I joined the SCAMPS in 1994, my father and I began flying regularly at the field in Perris, California, and have been active since.

The reason the SCAMPS fly weekly at Perris is also attributed to Sal. He started practicing and trimming there in the 1960s, and people started to tag along. Flying Wednesdays at Perris is still a SCAMPS tradition.

Part of the Wednesday flying experience is the donut break. If Sal's first love was model airplanes, his second was food! We always knew when it was time for the donut break when Sal's stomach alarm would go off!

My dad and I were lucky enough to have Sal take us under his wing and show us the ropes. It was our first real success in FF and it sure was a lot more fun than crashing everything. During our early experience with the SCAMPS, he helped me trim my 1/2A Starduster and helped my dad trim a Forster 99-powered Powerhouse.

I feel one of Sal's greatest contributions to FF was his willingness to share his knowledge. I have seen him help hundreds of modelers trim airplanes. If he thought you were a casual flier, he would help get the model to a safe flyable state, and if he knew you were a competitive flier, he would help trim models to a competitive level of maximum performance.

As a way of honoring Sal, I have tried to help anyone and everyone who needs help in FF, after

his health kept him from that familiar role. It was the best way I knew to honor his legacy.

As noted in the interview, Sal enjoyed seeing the success of those he helped. I was lucky enough to win the SAM Champs FF Power grand championship a couple times, and it is a reflection of Sal's help. When we were at the banquet for my first win, Sal said, "Last year, Walt Huhn thanked me for his win when he got his award."

I was not given the chance to speak, but certainly would have done the same. "Thanks Sal." It is never too late to say thank you!

Sal was active with us until 2008, competing for the last time in March 2008. He flew his final design, the Perris Special. On his last flight ever, the Perris Special got hung up in some power lines and we were unable to retrieve it. We called the power company, but they could not come out until the next day.

Daniel Heinrich and I spent a while throwing things at it, but had no luck knocking it down. The next day, we went out to try again, and the model was gone. It had probably fallen down right next to the road and a passerby picked it up and ignored the reward signs Sal had on all his models.

My dad and I felt bad and put together a kit for the PS, a Veco 19, a Taibi tank-mount, and a new timer to replace his lost model. A few weeks later, Sal returned everything and said, "I have been out to the shop a few times and just don't want to build it." That was the end of his building and flying.

Sal lost his wife, Nan, in 2004. She suffered from a variety of health issues. At that time, Sal's health was extraordinary. He told me he had never even had a surgery and he was in his late 80s.

Several years after Nan passed away, Sal's health also took a downward turn and he was forced to slow down. Unfortunately, the culprit turned out to be a combination of medications he took that did not work well together and dropped his oxygen saturation. After that, he was never quite the same.

In late 2005, Sal met his companion, Betty Moke. They travelled to several SAM Champs together and she would drive him to Perris for every Taibi Annual Contest. She took good care of Sal and was a godsend. Everyone appreciates everything she did for him.

Also in 2005, I called the Press Telegram, the local newspaper in Sal's area of Lakewood. I talked to the human interest section editor and told them the most famous modeler in the world lived in her area.

I gave her the details and a nice story about Sal was published in the Tuesday, November 1, 2005, issue. Sal said they treated him great, and even left 100 copies on his porch. From what I heard, his children did not know about it until they read it.



*Sal brought copies to Perris and thanked me for setting up the story. I had him sign a copy of the paper for me.*

In 2008, he gave me his Starduster 900 with a nice note he wrote on the wing. The 900 was probably his most prized model, and I was honored and surprised he gave it to me. When I knew he was coming out to Perris to watch us fly, I would bring his Duster and put it in the air for him. He said it always gave him a thrill.

Hal Wightman and I started a SCAMPS-sponsored contest called the Taibi Annual in 2005. We felt it was past due to have something to honor Sal in the club.

The first few contests, we had events like Powerhouse Only, Brooklyn Dodger Only, and Perris Special. Since then, we have featured an All Taibi event, where all of his designs compete against each other.

Modern AMA models such as the Starduster, Perris Special, and Orbiteer will fly to current Cat II rules, 9 seconds HL, then 7 in flyoff; Nostalgia-legal designs will fly to currently used SCAMPS Nostalgia rules, 10 seconds HL, 13 VTO, then 7 HL, 9 VTO in flyoff.

Old-Timer designs will get a 20 second HL, then 15 in flyoff. All fly to a 3-minute max. The event has proven fun and where else will you see a Powerhouse competing with a Starduster?

The 2013 Taibi Annual was March 17 and we kicked off the contest with a flight of Sal's Starduster 900.

Sal became noted as the first in the air at a lot of contests. He liked the buoyant morning air, and we wanted him to be first in the air one more time. I will also fly it as a team with him in the All-Taibi event.

Among Sal's model designs are the Powerhouse, Brooklyn Dodger, Pacer, Winged Yankee, Spacer, Racer, Starduster, Starbuster, Hydrostar, and the Perris Special. Sal kitted several of his models when he owned and operated Competition Models.

He also contributed to the hobby in other ways. He formed a large balsawood company called

Superior Balsa, based near his home in Lakewood. He designed and manufactured tank mounts for the Cox .020 Tee Dee and the .049/.051 Tee Dee which were made by the thousands. He also designed a simple but effective tank mount for larger engines, and would custom make them for a variety of engines.

Sal was an accomplished flier, as evidenced by his trophy room at his modest Lakewood, California, home. The walls were full of records, first-place awards, and of course his SAM Grand Championship trophy. He amassed an amazing number of awards during his 72 years of competition.

Sal Taibi was one of the most famous modelers of all time, and the FF community will miss him forever. A small part of Sal will live on as long as a Powerhouse, Brooklyn Dodger, Spacer, or Starduster tears into the sky!

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