



The AMA History Project Presents: Biography of HOWARD "HI" JOHNSON



October 15, 1908 - May 2, 1981

Transcribed and Edited by SS (07/2002), Updated by JS (12/2005, 10/2008, 03/2012), Reformatted by JS (09/2009)

Career:

- Manufactured model airplane kits, engines and components starting in the 1940s
- Built a real glider as a teenager
- Served as vice president of Henry Engineering Company
- Became a partner of Kenhi Model Products around 1952
- Acquired the tooling and license for Orwick engines in 1956
- Started his own company, Hi Johnson Model Products, in the late 1960s; it would later become known as Dynamic Models

Honors:

- 2002: Model Aviation Hall of Fame

The following ran in the September 1981 issue of Model Aviation magazine after the death of Hi Johnson. It was written by Roger B. Wildman.

On May 2, 1981, we lost "Hi" doing one of the things he loved most – soaring. His glider went down near Pearblossom, California and a doctor hiking in the vicinity confirmed that Hi died instantly in the crash. Hi was unique among the Old Timers in our industry. He explored every facet of design and manufacturing. His excitement with understanding the secrets of natural laws, particularly as related to flight, never wavered. His contributions to modeling in every interest category through his manufactured kits, engines, and components were, in many cases, ahead of their time.

His last enterprise was with Radio Control gliders and again he was attempting to forge ahead in our understanding and to provide the modeler with a unique and better way to build and fly. Hi was a fountain bursting with energy, enthusiasm, and humor, always ready to give a hand to all.

His interest in soaring, "the purest form of flight," was begun early in his career, for while a teenager he constructed a real glider which he and his friends flew from a hill near Brigham City, Utah. Hi had little formal education as he never completed high school, yet he mastered many fields of endeavor. He entered the model airplane business in the 1940s with Burbank Manufacturing Company and later moved to Henry Engineering Company as vice president. There he worked as co-designer on the classic Brave, Warrior, Squaw, and Chief Control Line model kits. He was also involved in the design of Control Line hardware, such as ball cranks, control horns, fuel tanks, spinners and wheels that became the standard of the model world. Around 1952, he became a partner in Kenhi Model Products and designed a new line of kits that included the Bobcat and Cougar. At the same time, he developed a new method for die cutting balsa wood, which was unparalleled. In 1956, he acquired the tooling and license for the Orwick

engines. Many changes and improvements created what was to become the Johnson Engine, which became the best Rat Racing and combat engine of the 1960s. During this time, he created a better glow plug, a new throttle, a controllable pitch propeller, fuel tanks, fuel filters, and a line of precision wood propellers and various hardware items that advanced model aviation. In addition, during his tenure at Dynamic Models he created the die cast aluminum chassis for slot racing. This, along with every imaginable accessory, helped set new track records around the country and further advanced the slot racing technology. In the late 1960s, Hi finally started Hi Johnson Model Products, first in partnership and later by himself. Slot car accessories and gas-powered RC cars were developed. After the company moved to Pacoima, California, these products were dropped and his present line of products was created. He felt that plastics and foam were the best for creating a hi-performance glider and so plastic fuselages, foam wings, vacuum formed canopies and hardware was developed. Hi's research included new and old in his quest into the mysteries of lift and drag of airfoils. He developed his own foam cutting machines to give a core for the truest and straightest wing possible. His catalog was a virtual paradise of information on building and construction to help the modeler build the best airplane possible.

His love of the sport of soaring finally led him back into the full size gliders and so over a span of 30 years and at the age of 71, he passed his requirements for a glider rating and resumed flying.

His natural exuberance and love for model aviation led him into contact with thousands of modelers and his products and tireless support helped create many champions in our sport. Hi leaves a fine family, his wife, Midge, sons Lynn and Mark, and daughters, Lori Ann and Jill. He also leaves a model airplane industry with a void that cannot be filled.

The following is taken from the Model Aviation Hall of Fame application form submitted by Clarence F. Lee on behalf of Hi on February 7, 2002. Hi was inducted into the 2002 Hall of Fame posthumously in 2002 as a result.

Hi worked for various manufacturing companies including the following:

He worked for Burbank Manufacturing for four years. Burbank produced aircraft kits and Hi was in charge of production.

For another four years, he worked for Henry Engineering Company. Henry Engineering produced kits, engines, and related products. Hi was the vice president in charge of kit production.

He was in charge of production of aircraft kits at Kenhi Model Products for four years.

Finally, he spent 26 years as the owner of Dynamic Models, which produced model engines and accessories.

Below is the letter that accompanied the brief application for Hi.

*C.F. Lee Manufacturing Co.
10112 Woodward Avenue
Sunland, CA 91040*

February 7, 2002

*AMA Headquarters
Hall of Fame Nomination
5151 E. Memorial Drive
Muncie, Indiana 47302*

Dear Sirs:

I would like to nominate Howard "Hi" Johnson for the Hall of Fame. Hi Johnson is a man that should have been inducted years ago due to his many contributions to the model industry. Hi was a model builder, kit manufacturer, engine manufacturer, and inventor. I imagine that many of the members of the nominating committee have at one time built or flown a Hi Johnson design or used a Johnson engine including Model Aviation Aeromodeler editor, Bob Hunt. According to the March issue of Model Aviation, Bob won a trophy at the 1950 Millville Airport contest for being the youngest contestant. Bob's aircraft was a Hi Johnson-designed Veco Sioux.

Although I first met Hi in 1947 and we became good friends, I do not know where he was born or the date of his birth, nor his accomplishments as far as record holding, etc. For this reason, only pages four and six of the nomination form have been completed. Hi's wife, Midge, passed away last year and his only son, I am told, now lives in Oregon, but with the address unknown. The attached advertisement [not reproduced in this biography] by Hi appeared in the March 1961 issue of Model Airplane News magazine and covers only a small part of his contributions to the hobby.

At the time of his death, Hi was the oldest licensed glider pilot in the U.S. Hi died May 1981 at Crystalair Glider Port in the California Mojave Desert doing what he loved most – flying his full-scale glider – when the wing collapsed shorting after tow release.

I believe it is about time that Hi Johnson was inducted into the Model Aviation Hall of Fame and hope the nominating committee agrees.

*Respectfully,
Clarence F. Lee
AMA 2579*

Hall of Fame 1983

The following was printed in Model Aviation's AMA News column about the 2002 Model Aviation Hall of Fame winner. (February 2003)

“Howard Johnson, who passed away on May 2, 1981, ran his own model airplane company starting in the 1960s. Originally called Hi Johnson Model Products, he later changed his company name to Dynamic Models. He first produced slot car accessories and gas-powered RC cars.

Eventually, Hi (as he was called) produced plastics and foam products for model airplanes. To help his business, Hi developed his own foam-cutting machines that would produce the truest and straightest wing possible. Dynamic Models also produced model engines. Hi conducted research about the lift and drag of airfoils.

Though Hi did not start his own business until the 1960s, he began manufacturing airplane kits, engines, and components in the 1940s. He worked for various manufacturers including Burbank Manufacturing, the Henry Engineering Company, and Kehnhil Model Products. In 1956, Hi acquired tooling and license for Orwick engines.

Hi was killed in a soaring accident in 1981 when his glider went down near Pearblossom, Calif.”

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