



# The AMA History Project Presents: Autobiography of ROBERT C. MIKESH

Born 1928      Started modeling in 1938



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Written & Submitted by RCM (07/1999); Transcribed by NR (07/1999); Edited by SS (2002), Reformatted by JS (10/2009)

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## Career:

- Built more than 800 models
  - Considered to be an expert on Pre-War Japanese Air Force
  - Earned two Air Force Distinguished Flying Cross and 11 Air Medals
  - Wrote dozens of articles and two books
  - 20 year Air Force Pilot with at least 5,100 hours flying time
  - His models are on exhibit and treasured by the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum
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*In 1999, the Smithsonian Institution created a traveling exhibit on model aviation, called "On Miniature Wings." It traveled the entire country, giving the average citizen the history of model aviation and its importance in the development of many skills and concepts derived thereof. It chronicles the biography of a number of famous modelers that made all of this possible.*

*This is a sample of the text that was used by the Smithsonian in that exhibit. The following was sent to Norm Rosenstock by Ms. Gail Spilsbury, editor in charge, who put this exhibit together.*

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*The following was published in the Chicago Tribune on June 2, 1946.*

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## Tops Among Teens

A high school boy literally with his feet on the ground and his head in the clouds is Airplane Expert Robert Mikesh of Ottumwa I (IA.) High school. This 18-year-old senior with a mechanical skill and knowledge that borders on genius has his own pilot's license, his own weekly radio show, writes for aeronautical magazines, taught airplane recognition and airplane information courses at 14, built model planes during the war for use at the Ottumwa air base and has one of his recent models on display at the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago.

Robert's amazing talents began as a hobby when he put together his first model plane from a model kit when he was 10-years-old. Since then he has constructed 350 complete models, all accurate and detailed reproductions of full sized planes. Mikesh prides himself on the tiny detail which goes into his models. The finest pen point he can buy requires additional grinding before he can print letters 1/32 inch tall on, some of his planes. After building an aircraft carrier about 15 inches long, he built a model of a Navy plane to the same scale with a wingspread of about half an inch. His latest piece of work is an 8-foot 6-inch model, a sailplane launched by towing into the air with a cord.

Since Robert's favorite high school subject is mechanical drawing, he doesn't mind doing his homework, and next year he hopes to study aeronautical engineering in college. Serious and hard

working, taking his successes lightly, Robert can look forward to an interesting Aeronautical future, for he has already hitched his talents to a star - or was that new Lockheed 14 that just whizzed by . . . Robert? (Copyright. 1946- The Chicago Tribune)

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*The following was published in the Ottumwa Daily Courier, Ottumwa, Iowa on Sept. 21, 1846.*

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***Taking Grandmother for first ride – Mrs. J.J. Smith, 78, is pictured at the municipal airport Friday after she had taken her first ride. The event was even more unusual in that she was taken aloft by her 18-year-old grandson, Bob Mikesh of 306 Oakwood Avenue, to see from the air for the first time the city in which she was born and has always lived.***



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*The following was published in the Ambassador-Beam on July 13, 1962.*

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### **Model of Early Plane is a Miniature Masterpiece**

(AAFB) CAPL Robert C. Mikesh, a pilot in the 1001st Operations Group, is a man who just can't keep his hands off airplanes. When he is not tooling around in a T-39 or a B-57, he more than likely can be found bent over a model plane.

But his miniatures of the real thing are far removed from the quick-mix plastic jobs so popular with modelers eager to view the finished product.

Captain Mikesh builds his from the raw materials, scorning prefabricated parts and the other niceties that make ordinary model-making child's play.

His most recent a model of a Consolidated NY-2, is typical of the kind of work he turns out. Built to a scale of 1:16, the historic biplane has a 30-inch wingspan with other components in

strict scale – the carved figure of the pilot in the front seat was whittled by Captain Mikesh only after he closely scrutinized photos of the actual.

To create his intricate models Captain Mikesh employs remarkably few tools and these are of a very simple nature. The mainstay of his tool kit is the X-Acto knife set, backed up by an assortment of tweezers and numbered drills ranging from hair-sized ones to the more commonly used sizes.

In building the NY-2, which won \$25 prize from a model magazine, and is now on permanent exhibit in the Smithsonian Institute, the captain started by researching the original plans and all the historical data concerning the craft he could lay his hands on – an undertaking which turned out to be a painstaking chore but nonetheless a labor of love.

Since airplanes were largely handcrafted in the heyday of the NY-2, he journeyed near and far to get as much accurate detail as possible. He made close-up photos of hardware fittings of a near relative of the plane at the Air Force Museum – the original plane had just simply vanished over the years. The problem of making authentic turnbuckles produced a flood of correspondence between Captain Mikesh and other model craftsmen but in the end, he wound up by devising his own method. Similarly other small hardware items were made by hand and a close eye on scale.

This particular NY-2 tail number NX 7918 – figured prominently in early instrument flying experiments. It was in this plane that then lieutenants Benjamin S. Kelsey and James H. Doolittle, demonstrated the first “entirely-under-the hood” takeoff, flight and landing of an airplane. Both men are now retired Air Force Generals and each made enormous contributions to aviation in their distinguished careers.

With Kelsey riding up front as a safety pilot, Doolittle took off from Mitchell Field, Long Island, on Sept. 24, 1929, flew a 15-mile predetermined course, and landed without once looking out of the plane. This was the first time a plane had been flown with the pilot relying entirely on instruments. Aside from being a technical achievement of impressive stature, the flight was a demonstration of iron nerve and discipline on the part of the two men.

Starting, in the same fashion as the original builders, Captain Mikesh constructed the frame, for the most part, of spruce and bass woods too difficult for the amateur to work with. The assembly procedure was much like that followed by the builders of the original. With the exception of metal parts the model is covered with silk (unlike original, which was clothed with linen) and treated with five coats of dope. Its color is silver.

The rigging, right down to control surfaces actuated from the cockpit, is rigidly authentic. (For exhibit purposes, however, the controls are locked.)

Captain Mikesh, with some 3,800 flying hours, has been building models since 1937. In that time, he estimates he has made some 800, a figure that includes a few ships and other miniatures.

He has on hand both here and at his home in Iowa about 350 models.

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*The following article was published in The Afterburner on October 11, 1963.*

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### **Veteran B 57 Pilot, Smithsonian Model Builder, Aeronautical Archivist and...**

Two months ago, a quiet, unassuming, scholarly looking gentleman, dressed in civilian attire walked into the Afterburner editorial office seeking historical information about Yokota Air Base. With what little help we could give, he appeared quite satisfied with the results, and happy with his visit.

However, little did he know that we were doubly so, for our staff had received prior information about the arrival to Yokota of this individual, Maj. Robert C. Mikesh, a 14 year Air Force veteran now serving his second tour with the 8th Bomb Sq.

For the past 18 years, the 35-year-old B-57 pilot has been busily carving a name for himself in military aviation and associated activities.

It has been said by many leading journalists that, "Few men in the aviation business know more about historical aviation than Bob Mikesh."

His relatively short adult life reads like something out of Ripley's "Believe it or Not." For with only 12 years of formal schooling behind him, Mikesh has already blossomed into a proficient pilot, successful author and photographer, one of the country's top "exact scale" model builders of military and civilian planes and an expert in the field of Japanese military aviation.

Mikesh has amassed over 5,100 hours of flying time since 1950 including, some 1,600 hours in B-57 aircraft.

He's penned many works about the aviation industry and its activities, the latest appearing in the August 1963 issue of the American Aviation Historical Society's Journal. For this, he produced the lead story on "Presidential Aircraft," taking up 18 pages in the magazine. One of his pictures – that of a new long range Boeing VC-137C jet transport recently delivered for the President's use – adorns the cover.

This illustrated story about airplanes in which our presidents have flown – beginning with a Pan American flying boat used by Franklin Roosevelt on his trip to Casablanca in 1943 – was a natural for Mikesh, an authority on aviation history. Critics have labeled the story, "an interesting report."

The major's old boyhood room in the home of his parents in Ottumwa, Iowa is still filled with scores of exact scale models of planes he built through the years. He estimates he has built some 800.

Reports have it that Mikesh was too young to serve in uniform in World War II, but he served just the same. He was commissioned by the United States Navy to build models of training planes flown at the Ottumwa Air Station. These models were used by the instructors and students.

Prior to his arrival here Mikesh was stationed at Andrews AFB located in the Country's capitol where he flew T-39 transports mostly on VIP flights.

Top government and military officials were his passengers on hops to all parts of the nation and beyond. In his spare time, he built a dozen models of historical aircraft for the National Air Museum and the Smithsonian Institute.

His miniature replicas are far removed from the quick mix plastic jobs so popular with modelers eager to view the finished product. He builds his own from the raw materials, scorning prefabricated parts and the other niceties that make ordinary model-making child's play.

His most recent model of a Consolidated NY-2, is typical of the kind of work he turns out. Built to a scale of 1:16, the historic biplane has a 30-inch wingspan with other components in strict scale – the carved figure of the pilot in the front seat was whittled by Mikesh only after he closely scrutinized photos of the actual pilot Lt. Benjamin S. Kelsey, now a retired Air Force general.

The NY-2 is now on permanent exhibit in the Smithsonian Institute and officials there value it at \$400. In building the airplane, the major started by researching the original plane and all the historical data concerning the craft he could lay his hands on – an undertaking which turned out to be a painstaking chore but nonetheless a labor of love.

He journeyed near and far to get as much accurate detail as possible and made close-up photos of hardware fittings of a near relative of the plane at the Air Force Museum – the original plane has just simply vanished over the years.

Overcoming many other barriers such as making his own authentic turnbuckles and other small hardware items by hand with a close eye on scale the NY-2 was completed.

The silver coated plane has rigging right down to control surfaces actuated from the cockpit and rigidly authentic. (For exhibit purposes however, the controls are locked.)

Now that Mikesh is back in Japan again, he's continuing his research and study on Japanese military aviation, including both planes and airfields.

The wealth of information on this subject stored in his photogenic mind would astonish the greatest of Japanese historians on the subject.

But Mikesh feels there is lots to be learned and is spending every hour he can spare in search of this information.

Through the years, Mikesh has received many compliments from distinguished aviators and high government officials. However, he treasures most the signatures of retired Air Force General James H. Doolittle who flew the historic flight in the NY-2 in 1929 and General Kelsey, his observer. Both generals commented on the unbelievable exactness of the replica-and General Kelsey was amazed at the likeness to himself of the whittled pilot in the model.

We asked Major Mikesh what he eventually hoped all this would lead too? Very simply he said, "After my retirement from the Air Force my efforts will be directed towards obtaining an assignment as an Administrative Historical Curator with the National Air Museum of Washington, D.C."

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*The following article was published in the Mohawk Flyer on April 1, 1970.*

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### **Pilot/Model Builder Retires**

"My first airplane was a wood model powered by a rubber band. If that one had crashed, maybe I never would have gotten into this businesses."

Thinking back on his first "powered" flight, Maj. Robert C. Mikesh smiled. A B-57 Canberra pilot with RADC, Mikesh retired yesterday with 20 years of service behind him.

The love of flight and model planes that led to an Air Force career didn't stop with that first model. Since then, he has built more than 800 model planes, 12 of which are good enough to hang in the Smithsonian Museum in Washington.

As a 16-year-old high school student in Ottumwa, Iowa, Mikesh sold one of his early creations to a Navy Lieutenant Commander stationed at Ottumwa Naval Air Station. A model of a Navy trainer, it was built on special order. The buyer? A fellow by the name of Richard M. Nixon.

"I remember another naval officer who lived at my aunt's rooming house saying, 'He's going places,'" Mikesh recalls.

Mikesh entered the Air Force in March 1949 and won his wings and a commission as a second lieutenant a year later. He was stationed in the United States until July 1952 when he was sent to Korea.

He flew B-26 Invaders on night missions over North Korea until he won the Distinguished Flying Cross and completed the required 50 missions five months and seven days later. "I never saw a North Korean in the daylight," he says.

Back in the United States, he became a B-26 instructor at Langley AFB, Va., until his unit converted to the new twin-jet B-57s in 1955. From there he went to Japan with the Third Bomb Wing, towing practice targets for American planes in the Far East.

After another tour in the United States, he returned to Japan, becoming chief of the 41st Air Division Command Center until the day after Christmas 1966 when he was sent to Vietnam. Flying a O-2 light observation plane as a forward air controller, he earned his second Distinguished Flying Cross and 11 Air Medals.

Mikesh is considered to be one of a handful of experts on the pre-war Japanese Air Force. He has written dozens of articles including two on little-known World War II Japanese exploits: the balloon bombing of the West Coast and the fleet of B-17s patched together in Japan for research into American bombing capabilities.

He is considering job offers from both the Smithsonian Museum and the Air Force Museum at Wright Patterson AFB, Ohio. He is also working on a book about the Japanese Air Force prior to 1945.

Mikesh will stay in Rome at least until June while his sons Mike, 15, and Chris, 13, finish their school terms at Rome Catholic High and Transfiguration.

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*The following article was published in the Ottumwa Daily Courier from April 1, 1970.*

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### **Maj. Bob Mikesh looks to new career as an aviation historian**

An Ottumwa lad who turned out models of enemy warplanes to be studied by ground school classes at the Ottumwa Naval Air Station during World War II retired Tuesday from the U.S. Air Force as a major and pilot.

Many Ottumwans will remember Robert C. Mikesh, not only for his youthful enthusiasm at model building, but for his record as a flyer of military aircraft during the past 20 years.

He has flown B-26 "night intruders" in Korea, has served as a combat crew instructor pilot in both B-26s and the B-57 twin jet tactical bomber, served in Japan as flight commander of a tow-target unit, returned to Japan as a B-57 bomber pilot and, later as chief Division Command Center for the Pacific tactical forces and then to Vietnam in 1967 and 1968 to fly spotter aircraft in the northern sector of that country and in Laos.

## 14 crossings

Recently, returning from a short stay in Japan, Mikesh completed his 14th crossing of the Pacific. As, yet he has not crossed the Atlantic.

He has been stationed at the Air Force base in Rome, N.Y. the past two years, as a B-57 pilot in the Flight Test Division, using aircraft as test vehicles for new electronic equipment. Mikesh is the son of the late Mr. and Mrs. C. L. Mikesh, longtime Ottawans. The father, who operated the Ottumwa Sand Co., was a volunteer observer for the U.S. Weather Bureau for many years.

As a grade and high school student here, Bob turned out excellent models of most types of aircraft. They were so excellent, in fact, that the Navy gave him the assignment of turning out models of enemy planes so that Air Station flight students would be able to recognize the real things when they flew off to the worldwide fronts during the war.

Mikesh is much more than model builder hobbyist, however. He is an aviation historian. He has done considerable serious writing in this field, aviation publications and for the Smithsonian in Washington and he expects to do much more now. He also is considering full-time employment, either with the National Air Museum in Washington or with the Air I Force Museum at Wright-Patterson AFB, in Dayton, Ohio.

## Unhappy departure

But he admits he is not too eager to leave the Air Force. "Frankly, it is a bad time for a career man to leave the service I under the conditions of defeatism as exist today," he wrote to an Ottumwa friend. "I recall men getting out of the service following WW II with a well won victory...I depart under quite different conditions."

Mrs. Mikesh also is from Ottumwa, the former Ramona Barton. They have two sons, Mike, 15, and Christ, 13. Bob's aunt is Miss Lillian G. Smith of 614 N. Court.

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*The following is an excerpt from a letter to Ms. Gail Spillsbury, (dated February 17, 1999) on his contribution to the "On Miniature Wings" exhibit.*

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*Temple Hills, MD 20757  
February 17, 1999*

*Gail Spillsbury  
Smithsonian Institute  
Washington, DC 20560-0706*

*Dear Ms. Spillsbury,*



*You have an excellent choice of four model builders for your biographies. These are diverse and a good cross section of builders and time periods in this fascinating field.*

*As I mentioned to you on the telephone, when I would be talking to any group of young people visiting the museum and it was appropriate to tell them something about my background, I always included that I based 80 percent of the knowledge I used in my position as Senior Curator of Aeronautics upon what I had learned through my experiences in model building. I can think of no better way of obtaining such a background of knowledge. I was hoping to influence these young people to recognize what all could be learned through this fascination hobby that has led so many into the aviation career field.*

*Let me elaborate briefly upon that point that may give you a slant upon which to include. When involved with model building, this exposes the person to so many facets of aviation, too many on which to elaborate. The doors and different avenues continue to expose themselves until ultimately one tends to specialize and often leads to an aviation career because of certain interests.*

*When building a model, which is really your subject, to the builder this becomes the real thing. Every detail on the model seems becomes as important as it is on the real airplane. To make that detail correct and accurate, the builder must have an extensive knowledge on where to look or how to find this information. What a valuable asset this becomes in museum work when the primary purpose of a curator is detail and a broad knowledge of different airplanes of many countries of the world, their unique markings and an understanding of their history that goes with this hobby. All this is part of model building. While at NASM for 21 years, I was responsible for the restoration of over 67 of these historic aircraft. The same skills used in model building in seeking out details in perfecting a restoration were basically the same as building the model – only larger. Many aircraft related questions are addressed to the Aeronautics Department. Because of this knowledge of aircraft attained mostly through model building, I was able to answer these questions. This would have held true for Paul Garber as well. But, I am sure that you have already gathered this from Tom Dietz's excellent book about the NASM collection.*

*You asked for an outline about my model building experiences and I will try to keep this as succinct as I can.*

*This all began when building my first model at age eight, simply because this is what boys did back then (1936). It flew, and from that point on I never had to ask my mother for something to do. It seemed that I would never stop building one after another and did so through most of my 21 years in the Air Force. The enclosed articles will mention that when in eighth grade, I was invited to familiarize young men applying for military flying a basic knowledge of current aircraft through the use of my models for demonstration and the associated knowledge I had gained.*

*When the wartime Naval Air Station was located in my home town, my model building talents*

were heard about, and my mother found an endless stream of Naval pilots and cadets coming to my home to see my bedroom collection of models and to order a model of their favorite airplane. Since this was a training base, I mass produced Stearman trainer models in groups of 10 in my basement workshop until that number reached 135 all of this one type. There were special orders of other kinds as well.

Through the sale of these models and the money I saved allowed me to begin private flying lessons soon after the war, which started my active aviation career. This became too expensive at my young age, so I joined the Air Force, intending this to be a short timer, but it turned into a 21 year career. It seemed that my continued model building captivated Public Affairs Officers at the bases at which I was stationed, and the enclosed are some of those articles.

While in the Air Force, I made myself known to Paul Garber if for no other reason than a passion to talk with this man about airplanes. He learned of my model building appetite, saw a few of my examples, and contracted with me to do one, then another, etc. models for the museum. It was during this period that he invited me to join the staff of the museum, but at that time, I was too engrossed with the Air Force and flying. I did not forget the interest he showed in me, and above all, the offer that he made. What would be more fulfilling to me with the background that I had developed than to work at the National Air Museum, as it was called back then. To stay in touch and to keep that door open as a second career, I continued model building for the museum as well as research for them, primarily with Japanese aircraft, to be of benefit when the actual aircraft would be restored. Later when at NASM, I used that same material when responsible for these restorations.

The rest is obvious to you as to my 21 years at NASM, but I would like to close with one more point. While at NASM, I became responsible for the model collection as well. When needing models for new galleries being created, I could easily have contracted with one or two modelers, like Dan Tracy and John Alcorn, but I preferred to utilize as many of these extraordinary hobbyist model builders as I could muster. My purpose was to exhibit the work of as many talented builders as I could in each gallery, making this a place to house products of the nations' best craftsmen. With all the plastic model kits on the market, it would have been easy to have used these as the basic form. But I preferred each builder to express himself with his own technique in model building that others, like myself in earlier years had learned from seeing a variety of museum models. I wanted to keep alive that creativeness of the individual that scratch model builder could do and avoid the manufactured reproduction. I believe this has had its benefits for the very reason that you are planning to write about these individual master craftsmen for what they created.

I might mention that the bulk of my model building efforts, which counted up to over 800 hand built models, resides in the Air power Museum of the Antique Airplane Association at Blakesburg, Iowa. About 15 of my models are at NASM.

You can tell that I am proud of these efforts and I am sure that I have carried on far too long

*with more material that you actually wanted. Perhaps little will be useful, but do not hesitate to call me if I can be of further help. If I can help you with the biographies of the others that I knew personally, I would be privileged to do so.*

*Sincerely,*

*Robert C. Mikesh*

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