



The AMA History Project Presents: Biography of ANDY PANONCILLO



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Meet pilot Andy Panoncillo **By Mark Fadely** **MDKJA@aol.com**

Hello, everyone. Thanks for taking the time to check out the "RC Helicopters" column. Heli pilots are often defined by their helpful nature. It takes more effort to master a whirlybird, so seasoned fliers are empathetic to the challenges newcomers face in this hobby. Most experienced pilots are more than willing to help others learn.

Occasionally you meet someone who really gives that extra effort and stands out from the crowd. This month I want to introduce you to one such pilot. His name is Andy Panoncillo. Many of you may already know him. He is the team manager and public face of the Gauji brand of helicopters.

Andy was born in the Philippines and moved to the U.S. in 1994 to become a physical therapist. He and his wife, Lorena, have an eight-year-old son named Aidan, and a daughter, Alyx, who is 10.

His expert piloting skills earned him a spot in the prestigious Extreme Flight Championships (XFC) and caught the eye of industry insiders. Hobby distributor Jack Burnside offered Andy a team management position to work with Empire Hobbies and the Gauji brand of helicopters. Jack was impressed with Andy's friendly enthusiasm for the hobby and still is.

I will let Andy tell you more about his involvement in RC helis.

Andy's Story

Thank you for allowing me to speak to the *Model Aviation* readers. I started out with airplanes and then got very competitive with (RC) Combat models. I would travel across the United States going to Combat events. I loved the competition, but I also really enjoyed the camaraderie among the pilots.

Combat events became less popular over the years and in 1996 I tried helicopters for the first time. The helicopter fliers were just as friendly and helpful as the Combat pilots I had known. I found out I really like helicopters because you could do so much more with them compared with airplanes. They are an outlet for your creative thinking.

One day a good friend of mine, Ray Stacy, called and asked if I would be interested in flying for the Empire/Gauji team. I jumped at the chance and he introduced me to Empire's owner, Jack Burnside. Jack is a great person who gives back to others. I feel the entire Empire team is like family to me now.

Jack and I have shared many ideas about how to improve the hobby for all pilots. We sat down over a cup of coffee a while back and scribbled out the format for what would eventually become

the One contest. The idea was to add more spectator appeal to the noon demonstration time at the International Radio Controlled Helicopter Association (IRCHA) Jamboree. Over the years, the noon demos had become too long, causing spectators to lose interest after seeing so many similar flying displays.

The concept came to me one early morning at 3 when I could not sleep. I am always thinking about how to make something better, so I thought about how the IRCHA show could be more fun for the pilots and spectators. Because the world's top pilots are already there, it just made sense that a dramatic contest between them [would] make for a great show.

Jack and I talked a lot about it, finally settling on the idea of seven top pilots flying one 7-minute flight for a prize of \$7,000. Also, we wanted to have top-tier judges who could give a decision on the spot in front of the huge IRCHA crowd. The contest was and is a huge success and I want to thank the IRCHA staff for working with us to make it happen.

Another concept Jack and I developed with the International Amateur Nationals (IAN), which is a contest open to non-sponsored pilots who attend IRCHA. This event was enacted to give unknown pilots a chance to fly in front of the large IRCHA center stage and earn a one-year sponsorship with Empire Hobbies, as well as an automatic invitation to the XFC contest. A good example of an IAN success story is Mitch Marozas. He flew to a fifth-place finish in the 2013 XFC.

I have really enjoyed my time in this hobby and one way I've given my thanks to everyone is [by putting on] a cookout at IRCHA each year where our friends can come and have a fun time.

Anybody is welcome to stop by our party and I love hearing the stories and experiences from all the people whom I only get to see a few times a year at certain events.

I would invite anyone to give this hobby a try. You may just make some lifelong friends like I have.

Thanks for sharing your story with us, Andy. You are truly one of the great pilots in the hobby.

SOURCES:

IRCHA

www.ircha.org

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