



# The AMA History Project Presents: Autobiography of GENE W. SIDWELL

Born May, 15, 1921      Started modeling in 1928  
AMA #59212



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Written & Submitted by GWS (01/2002); Transcribed & Edited by SS (11/2002), Reformatted by JS (01/2010)

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## Career:

- Was heavily involved with model aviation by 1938; flew gas engine Free Flight models
- Served as an aviation cadet in the U.S. Army Air Corp (which later became the U.S. Air Force) during World War II; flew P-38s, P-39s, P-40s and P-63s
- Worked for a bit as a test pilot at Air Research Company
- Got back into model aviation in the early 1960s
- Became involved with Formula One pylon racing; set a U.S. speed record in August 1987 of 203.613 mph
- Member of the San Fernando Valley Flyers

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In 1928, when I was 7-years-old, I had my introduction into model aviation. I was living in Los Angeles, California, which at that time was a much smaller city. It was then that I saw a teenaged neighbor boy flying a wind-up stick model. I was intrigued by it and decided I had to have one. My neighbor became a friend and showed me how to build one out of balsa wood and tissue paper. By 10 years later, I was deeply involved in the hobby, flying gas engine Free Flight models at Dicer Airport and at the Gardena Midget Race Track, both of which have long since disappeared.

When World War II came along, with my interest in aviation, I was drawn to the Army Air Corp, which became the U.S. Air Force. I became an aviation cadet. During and after I graduated, I flew many World War II fighters such as the P-39, P-40 and P-63. I wound up in Europe flying P-38s in combat. While I was in Italy, I was injured in a truck wreck and could hardly walk, but I continued flying until the war ended.

When I got back to the States, I spent the next two and a half years in and out of hospitals for treatment of a ruptured disk in my lower back. While in the hospital in San Francisco, California, I met a fellow patient who was interested in radio. At that time, radio control of airplanes was just beginning to get started – it was about 1946. After kicking the idea around, we decided to try to build a Radio Control model airplane. I was to design and build the airplane and he was to make the radio for it. Just at that time, I was moved to a hospital in Central California, and, although we were separated, we continued the project.

I had my airplane fairly well along with a four-foot wingspan, but the radio he designed had a vacuum tube about four-inches tall and it would have taken a giant scale plane to fit the tube into it. To build a giant scale plane in the hospital could not be done. The upshot of it all was when I finished the airplane it was a Free Flight and the radio was never completed.

When I finally got out of the hospital and the Air Force, I got a commercial pilot's license. The twin-engine P-38 qualified me for it. I tried to get an airline job, but the bomber pilots with four-

engine time seemed more qualified. I did get a job at Air Research Company as a test pilot, but my wife became pregnant and I decided no more of that.

It was not until the early 1960s that I got back to model aviation. It was along about that time that Radio Control was getting started. I still had two Free Flight airplanes that I thought about converting to Radio Control. So, I switched them from the old ignition system to glow plugs and flew them Free Flight a time or two. I decided not to convert them to radio, and they survived to this day. The oldest was built in 1938, and the other was the hospital-time bird.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, pylon racing got started. Formula One was the largest challenge, so I went for it. I believe it was in the 1980s that Q500 became popular, and later with the advent of the Nelson Engine they could go nearly as fast as the early Formula Ones.

Speed for me became an obsession, so I decided to go for a world speed record. On August 8, 1987, at Edwards Air Force Base using the same method as the Russians used to set a world record of 212 mph, I was able to do 203.613 mph. I did not beat the Russians, but it was a U.S. record. But, since the AMA did not have a U.S. record established, it is not recognized. The speed record was the high time in my career, but since then I have continued racing and once in a while, I beat someone.

Most of my Radio Control model flying has been as a member of the San Fernando Valley Flyers, whose field is at the Sepulveda Basin in Southern California. Recently, the field has needed re-paving because in the winter it is sometimes flooded. Although the field is under the control of the Los Angeles Park Department and the Corporation of Engineers, they were not interested in parting with any money for the project. The San Fernando Valley Flyers and the Giant Scale Squadron, as well as other clubs that use the field, got together along with the hobby shops in the area to fund the project. The Valley Flyers have a foundation and it was possible to donate money to the foundation, which was tax deductible; and was a way to entice some sizable contributions. After a period of six to eight months, enough money was collected and the field was re-paved. I believe it is one of the best flying sites in the country.

My next project is to fly my giant scale P-38, which I recently completed and have not flown, yet.

*(signed) Gene W. Sidwell, Capt. U.S. Air Force ATD  
January 2002*

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