



# The AMA History Project Presents: Autobiography of WALTER P. VANGORDER

Born May 16, 1938      Started modeling in 1944  
AMA #19912



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## Career:

- Attended his first Nationals in 1953 and competed in ½-A Free Flight and tow line glider
- Served as president of the Southwest Ohio Free Flyers club from 1982 to 1986
- Established 66 national indoor records in all four ceiling categories – 26 in the Manhattan cabin event, 18 in limited penny plane, 12 in min-stick, seven in EZB and three in penny plane
- Competed in F1D rubber for eight years and won a few local and one regional contest
- The National Free Flight Society named his Manhattan Cabin Pieces Model as Model of the Year in 1988 and his EZB Pieces received the same award in 1993
- His Pieces Mini-Stick model was the International Mini-Stick Postal contest from 1994 to 1999
- A co-signer to establish the Manhattan Cabin as an official AMA event
- Reacquired the West Baden (Indiana) Atrium as an indoor flying site in 2001
- Established Walt's Model Works in February of 1981; modified, kitted and sold the AMA Cub
- Instructs Cub Scouts and Boy Scouts in model aviation
- Has been the AMA District III member of the indoor contest board from its inception after coming up with the idea to form the board

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*The following is an edited interview with Walter VanGorder conducted over the phone by Stacey Shannon on July 14, 2003. A full transcript of the interview can be found in his AMA History Project file.*

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## Background Information

### 1. How many years total have you been modeling?

I've been actually modeling off and on since I was 6-years-old. There was a span of probably 10 or 15 years where I was raising the family and stuff and just kind of got out of it. I raced drag racing cars for several years during that time. Then my son got kind of interested in model aviation through me and in June of 1977, we rejoined the AMA and that's how the whole indoor thing started. My son actually got me into that part of it.

Years ago when I was a kid – probably 12- or 13-years-old – we went to the Nats. I worked at a hobby shop called Hobby Haven here in Cincinnati and we went to the Nats at Willow Grove, Pennsylvania, Naval Air Station. It was actually the first time that I had gone to really a huge model airplane meet. And I signed up to go over to Lakehurst, New Jersey, where they were having the indoor part of the Nationals, because I had never seen any rubber-powered indoor models. I didn't really know very much about it at all. I was flying outdoor ½-A Free Flight and

some tow line gliders and some things of that nature. And I overslept and missed it. I've often wondered if I had got up that morning and made the bus and went over to see it if I would have got interested in indoor then or, as it was, later in 1977. So, there was a long time period there.

I guess if you don't see something, you don't pay that much attention to it. Indoor is such a very minute part of the overall hobby, I guess, in numbers. That's how we really got started – my son got me in it. In the middle of the June 1977 issue, this Bob Meuser fellow had a two-page spread with a model plane – an indoor model – that he called Bob Meuser's No Nonsense Limited Penny Plane. And that kind of started the whole ball rolling with the indoor through my son.

## **2. When you started modeling at age 6, what kind of models were you building and how did you first get interested in building them?**

Well, why I first got interested in modeling in any particular form was the fact that my neighbor – a fellow by the name of Bill Gerhart – worked on full-sized aircraft. He restored them there in his garage at home. So when the door was open I was over there looking around and seeing what was going on. As I got a little older and got in school and stuff, in the summertime I stayed down at my grandma's house quite a bit. It was in the woods and all that stuff, which young kids like to do. And there was a fellow that lived next door to my grandmother there. Buddy Shermer was his name and they had a very large family with like eight or nine kids and he was interested in model planes. And I used to see him in the yard with them and different things and one thing led to another. He actually walked me up to the grocery store and we bought a Comet kit. It was actually called a Blackburn Skua. I still remember the name of the model and stuff.

Naturally, at 6-years-old, I was incapable of sitting there and building this whole thing, but I did what I could and he kind of instructed me along the way. And that was actually the first model plane that was put together in my behalf. I guess Buddy was 12 or 13 himself and, you know, little guys always look up to the big guy. That's how I actually started my first plane and how I got interested in it.

Later on, I studied aviation in Central Vocational High School in the program there and was going to go in the service and into the Air Force. I had gone down and talked to the recruiters. I told my mom and dad, "I think I'm just going to sit around and mill this over a little bit. This is a pretty serious step for me."

I picked up the Enquirer [newspaper] here in Cincinnati while I was thinking all this over and was looking through the job section. I called about this no-experience-needed, looking for someone to do a silkscreen classified ad. I had no idea what silkscreen printing was about. It's like throwing a dart at the stock market board. So, I called this gentleman and he said, "Oh, I wish you'd have called earlier. I'll put your name on the list. I already got a guy that is going to come in for an interview. If it doesn't work out, I'll call you back."

So, that was on a Friday morning. That evening when I went out to get Dave Voker, a friend of mine whose father owned an engraving shop. It was a Friday evening and the guys were going out. His father, Austin, walked through the living room and I said to him, "Austin, what in the world is silk screen printing?"

I still remember, he said, “I thought you were a fly-boy, Walt.”

And I said, “Yeah, I am, but I’m just curious.” He said, “Are you looking for a job?”

I said, “Heck, I don’t know.”

I ended up being a photo engraver stripper for 44 years. You just never know what kind of turn things are going to take, but I’ve always been interested in aviation. Although I’m really not interested in actually flying a plane, I enjoy being around them. I enjoy the mechanical part of construction and tearing engines down and things of that nature, which we did in school. I loved that. I had prior experience as I got older living there next to Mr. Gerhart to build. I worked along with him and worked on planes. We did the covering and he did the welding. Whenever the door was open, my mom didn’t have to worry about where I was at, because I was over in the garage next door working with Bill on the planes. It’s convenient. It’s something I was interested in and I just really enjoyed it.

I flew Control Line stuff and was in the Control Line club here, which was called the Cincinnati Aeromodelers. It is still in existence today [2003]. It’s a Radio Control club now, naturally, because that’s the way about everything is going. But I did do a lot of Control Line flying, also, and the Free Flight and rubber-powered outside. I just was kind of into the general thing and really got specialized, like I say, in 1977 with my son, Mike, with this limited penny plane thing. That’s how I really got started in the actual indoor itself.

### **3. Tell me some details on your first model kit.**

I did a little research on the background of that plane over the years; it’s kind of an obscure aircraft. How it actually got its name was from the Blackburn Corporation – an aviation corporation. It was a British reconnaissance plane. Blackburn Company was the company that built the plane. And a Skua – since it was an observation type plane – a skua is a bird that was common over there in England around the beaches and stuff. That’s how it became the Blackburn Skua.

It’s just a little sidebar on how that plane actually got its name. Later on during the war with Germany, they converted some of these planes over, armed up, and used them for little bombing runs and things of that nature, plus the reconnaissance operations. So they actually got moved up from what their original intent was and got pressed into service as a fighter plane also.

I thought that was kind of interesting when I found out. For years, I couldn’t remember what in the heck the plane was. And the club that I belong to here in town, called the – now I’m stretching my memory here. I’ve been in it for so darn long and the president for so many years. The Southern Ohio Free Flight Club, that’s not the exact – Southwestern Ohio Free Flighters, SWOFF.

Anyway, one of the fellows in the club was kind of a collector of stuff, we got to talking, and I said to him, “John, I’m trying to remember a plane I built when I was a kid. It was the first model plane I ever worked on with a neighbor.” I relayed the story to him and I said, “Somewhere, I’ve

got a picture of that thing out in front of my mom's house over at 1672 First Avenue and, if I ever find that picture, maybe we can figure out what the thing was."

So, I finally found the picture and I took it to the meeting. And he said, "That's the Blackburn Skua." And he told me the whole story about it. That's how that all came about.

We were talking about this yesterday at the glider field; I still remember different things we did when we were kids. I was relaying to them my little story about my little Blackburn Skua and I said, "I still remember going out into the front yard of my grandmother's home down there on Claypool Avenue and catching lightning bugs and smearing the lightning part of the bug on the wingtips for lights at night time. How is that for a recall?"

It was a pretty messy airplane, but it was together. You don't start out with a Cadillac; you start out with a junker and work your way up.

#### **4. What was the first club you joined?**

The first club that I joined, actually it was called the Cincinnati Aeromodelers. And that is a club that is still in existence today. In fact, I was one of the charter members. It was composed of my father, myself, Russ Brown and Bud Voke – the people who owned the hobby shop, Hobby Haven, where I worked but it's since out of existence – and a fellow named Don Daywar, who owns Daywar Equipment and Company still has a hobby shop. He also handles all kind of mowing equipment and things of that nature. Don is 87- or 88-years-old. I frequent his place over there and buy product from him at this late stage.

That club is still, like I say in existence as an RC club today, but it started out a Control Line club. There were probably 10 or 15 original guys in it to start and it probably ballooned up to a membership of probably 40 or so. I got out of it as I got older and got into cars and stuff and got away from the modeling. I got married and settled down and raised my family. And, like I said, my son got me back into it.

#### **5. What year did that club form?**

I was probably 12 years old at the time, so that would be around 1950.

#### **6. You were a member until when?**

I was probably a member of that until I was 17- or 18-years-old and then got out of it. I can't tell you when the demise of the club was as far as the Control Line part. It kind of went from Control Line and as the RC stuff came out and got more available, people started phasing from Control Line to RC. The club never really went belly up; it just turned from a Control Line club into an RC club.

#### **7. When you were first learning to build models, what do you think was the hardest part for you? Was there anything in particular?**

I guess it was more of an overall general thing. There were so many kits available back then. When we were kids I'd go out and cut grass. When you got done cutting grass, the fair for cutting a lawn was \$1, a glass of lemonade or a pop and a couple of cookies. That's how we earned our money. I got very little allowance. I would also go out and shovel snow.

I even unloaded boxcars with sawdust in them in the middle of the summertime down on Guest Street to make money. People had sawdust businesses where they would bag this stuff up and sell it. Like all the butcher shops had sawdust on the floor and they also used them in some of the facilities where people were in bad shape in the hospitals and stuff. They actually laid them in sawdust. The mattresses and stuff actually had sawdust in them. A lot of people don't realize that and I would have never known that other than the fact that a lady up the street from where I lived had a company that did that. And she approached me one time about how it was tough to get people to work in the summertime when the box cars would come in loaded with sawdust.

I'll tell you what, being a little kid – I don't know I was probably about 10 – I would go down in the middle of July and August and they opened the doors on the boxcars. You had to shovel it up off the ground to get it into the back of the truck then they would take it to their warehouse and dump it. They would eventually fill up the burlap bags and had a regular delivery route. I would say that's pretty much a dying industry today. But, back then that's how we made our money.

I delivered papers, shoveled snow, anything I could do to make a buck. In fact, once I got older and got into the cars, we waxed people's cars to make money. We did tune-ups; anything we could do to make a buck to support our hobby. That's what I did to get the money to do what I did.

Comet models were everywhere. I remember when they were probably maybe 15- or 20-cents. They went up to a quarter and then it was 35-cents. Comet's out of business today. I found two old Comet kits up at the RC show this past spring and a kit that was worth \$4 or \$5 when it was new is worth \$30 now. So, it's kind of a little bit of a collector thing. And really, the kits aren't all that hot, but it's something you can't get any more.

Anyway, we would take the plans and, as we got smarter, we would buy balsa wood at the hobby shop, which was a better grade of wood. We would just use the plans and make a better model. There was nothing wrong with the designs; it was just the quality of the kits or lack thereof.

## **8. What, especially in your early days, did you enjoy most about modeling?**

I enjoyed the creativity of the thing – that you could take a box of wood with the plan and kind of see this thing unfold in front of you. It was always a very exciting thing. You'd cut out the parts, lay them down on a plan, and glue them together. Then you had a structure and you would sand it down. I just enjoyed the whole thing of it. When you were done, you had something you could compare to the picture on the box, whether you did as good a job or not.

They even had little contests for static scale back then. There was a company called Monogram Speedy Built. Some of their models used machine balsa. They were just gorgeous little planes and they had a whole fleet of probably seven or eight models in this particular line that they called the Speedy Built models.

There was so much of this stuff going on. When the Speedy Built models came out, they were another step up to a little better quality model and the stores started carrying them. They were scale models, not flying models. They were just static scale models. The stores and model companies would have little contests around.

I remember the Warnford Music Shop is the one place I went because my dad collected records, made recordings, and different things like that and he would play them at the old folks' home and stuff. So when he would go up to Warnford's to the music store, instead of me having to walk or pedal my bicycle up, I'd get in the car and go up there with dad. While he was looking at the records, I was over pawing through the model airplane kits.

They had a contest at the Warnford music store where anybody who built a Speedy Built model could bring it in. They would enter it in some kind of a judging situation and then if you won at the local in a store in a region, you would eventually go to the city of Cincinnati. They had an overall contest where all the different parts of the city, if they won at the neighborhood level, their models would go to the next thing in the city. Then there was the big finale, which consisted of all the planes from all the areas. They were all put up against each other in one competition at the end.

The first one of those I entered was actually the first contest I ever won with anything to do with model planes. I entered a Spad; it's a British fighter bi-plane. I had all the camouflage painted on it and all that. It had all the rigging with the wires and used thread. That plane was the overall winner. I got a little trophy and they had a little presentation. I went to the competition at the end and everybody that was at that level was responsible for bringing their model over. And they had a little movie and demonstrations. Then at the end, after they judged the models, they awarded the prizes. And I did come in first in that, which was the first real model airplane competition. I was just overjoyed. I thought, "Wow, this is pretty neat." The thing just kept feeding on itself.

I've always been a competitive person. I like competitions. Through the model plane stuff that was another area for me to compete. That Monogram Speedy Built contest was the first. I won it at two levels. The one level to get to the next level and was fortunate enough to win at the next level.

I don't know what happened to the trophy from it. I know my mom had that stuff all put away, and you know how stuff disappears. My father's already been passed away since 1996 and my mother's in a nursing home with dementia, so she doesn't remember it. Things like that you don't realize that you would appreciate it later; it's just something that happened. But as you get older and look back and try to recall things, you say, "Gee, I wonder what the heck happened to that."

I do remember that it fell off of where it was sitting and it got broke at the feet. It was one of those normal trophies where you've got like the Olympian standing up and he's holding a wreath or something. The trophy fell over and got busted off. It was made out of pot metal, so I couldn't glue it back together. It was in pieces, but it was still mine. One of my little treasures, so to speak. It would be nice to have it as a memento today, but Lord only knows where it went. Who knows? The Goodwill might have gotten it. I don't know.

## **9. That's it as far as early experiences. Do you have anything else to add?**

Well, I guess one of the other things that we did when we flew the Control Line stuff was take a plane called the Ringmaster, which are still made today, use what we call a 35 displacement engine on them. I liked the Fox engines back then, because they were very reliable, very sturdy and they could take some punishment of crashes and stuff, which we did our share of naturally. I remember they started to have what we called local rat races. I think they still have the rat races in Control Line.

But anyway, there was a plane made by the Thimble Drone Company that was called a TD3, I think. It had an aluminum wing and a plastic fuselage and just flew on a little 49 engine, which is very small 1/2-A engine. We would take that aluminum wing off of that little 049 1/2-A model and put it into this Ringmaster body. We took a 1/2-A engine and put it into a 35 Control Line body and we raced those things.

You'd have like three or four guys in a circle flying them together. It was restricted to a certain size tank capacity of fuel, so that everybody was fighting the same thing. You had the guy who flew and you had a pitman. The pitman carried the battery and the fuel can. We would all start off staggered around the circle and we flew on a 70- or 75-foot steel lines, braided cable lines.

And we would have three or four guys in what we called a heat, which was a competition between the three or four guys that were in the circle together flying at the same time. You tried to make your fuel last as long as you could to get in as many laps as you could and I can't remember how many laps you had to have to win the thing. I don't remember how many times you had to refuel – it might have been once, it might have been twice, I just can't remember.

But, anyway, the bottom line was these planes really took off with this little bitty skinny wing in them and they would go pretty fast. We had the three or four guys in a circle flying and then when your gas would run out, the thing would come down. You'd try to get the thing to land as close to the pitman as you could so you didn't have to run after it. That was your pit stop and the faster you got back in the air, the better off it was.

I had one of those Fox engines with a high compression head on it. I found out that this Fox engine, when I was breaking it in without even flying it, that when it was hot, if you would flip it over fast enough and get it refueled fast enough it would kind of start up again without putting the battery on it. It was kind of dieseling a little bit because of this tremendous heat that was generated by the engine running, although it was a glow plug engine, it made a lot of heat. If you got the fuel to it right away and started flipping the prop before it had a chance to cool down much, you could actually start it without putting the battery back on it because it was what they call dieseling, because of the heat that was in this thing because of the high compression head. That's why I would try to land as close to my pitman as possible.

So, I won several of those events locally at the club. It wasn't something that we went out and competed with other clubs, it was just an internal club thing. And being a kid, I was pretty excited to beat some of the adults with that set-up. There were a lot of guys that went and bought

the Fox engine, but for some reason even with the high compression head, this particular engine just had this dieseling thing into it and we never figured out what it was; it just worked that way.

I bought a couple of them after that that had the high compression heads and they wouldn't do that, but this particular engine for whatever reason, something was going on there and nobody was able to figure it out. I didn't send it back to Fox and we didn't get into some big thing. As long as it wasn't illegal or something, it just worked. And sometimes it would work and sometimes you didn't get to it fast enough depending on where I landed on the circle and you just couldn't do it that way.

Once I had the plane on the ground, I had to put the handle down and run in while the guy was pumping the thing up. We required the pilot to come out of the middle of the circle and I had to flip the prop. He was fueling it while I was running down these 70-foot lines to get to it. And, boy, I'll tell you, I was hustling my little buns down there as fast as I could to see if I could get this little guy going and get back in the air because that was all part of it.

It was kind of a team event type of thing. But, like everything else, it was a fad that we did for a couple of years in the club until somebody thought of something else. Then they started putting the streamers on the back and flying combat. I didn't like that, because a lot of the times, the planes would get mashed together and I wasn't into breaking airplanes. I just enjoyed flying them and painting them up real pretty and tried to build them as nice as I could.

My father worked in the building industry and his father, my grandfather, was a contractor, so I don't know, maybe it was something in the genes about working with wood. My son is pretty good with working with wood.

Other than that, as far as being a kid, that's what we did and how we arranged to get our finances to do our hobby and but really like most of the kids were out playing baseball and I did that, too, but when I came home from school and got my bookwork done, I spent my free time down in the basement building airplanes. That's where everybody knew where I was at. I was down in the basement. And right now, you know where I'm talking to you from? My basement.

My modeling is still a very important part of my life. I really love it.

## **Competition**

### **10. Do you remember how old you were when you did the music store competition?**

I would say I was probably 10- to 12-years-old.

### **11. Have you ever competed in Nationals?**

Sure. In 1953, I went up there to the Nats and I didn't win anything there, but I did compete. I had a glider that flew several miles and landed in a person's home in their backyard. It went from Willow Grove, Pennsylvania, to Hatbrough, Pennsylvania. I still remember that because the Navy, at one time, was involved with AMA very heavily. They would have the National Model Airplane Meets at different Naval Air Stations and I remember that there was upwards, someone



said, of 2,000 contestants at this thing in all the age groups – junior, senior, and open or ever how they ran that back then. That was a real happening to go to one of those things. Now the Nats is split up in several sections. These other places were large enough where they could have it all going at one time. The Navy people helped with the AMA to accomplish that and they would rotate around the country.

They had chase trucks. When we would do the Free Flight part, it wasn't uncommon for one of these things to get in a thermal, which we were trying to get it in to do our time. They had a thing on the plane called a dethermalizer, which was a contraption with a little fuse, actually like a little wick. We called it a DT Fuse and DT stands for dethermalizer. And the way that would work is you would launch a plane that had a timer on it that the engine could only run so long and it would pinch the fuel line off as the model was going up. You did 10 or 15 seconds – whatever we were allowed on that. They used two stopwatches, one for the engine run and one for the timing of the flight. And the bottom line was that if the engine was an overrun you lost a flight.

Dethermalizers could actually carry a plane away. They would be going off of the base in the various areas around there. It was always in the newspapers what was going on out at the base so the general public was alerted, that they may have a plane come flying over their house.

We always put our name and AMA number on our models as an ID thing – and we still do today. If someone would find it, I always put a little note on mine “If you find this, please call” my phone number. Because some of these planes we're flying now, like gliders, can get hit with interference. We might have a glider that is out maybe a quarter of a mile in a long flight and it gets hit or something and something goes wrong. We pray to God that it doesn't happen, because these can be dangerous; they're heavy. We have models come back from people who found them and called.

With the Free Flight, I was just doing a trim flight on this particular glider, because when I got it to the Nats it was a little bit light. I had to cut the fuselage open. I took a little tube of cement that was used up and wound the thing up and put it on the center of gravity and covered it back up then covered the model over where you couldn't see it. I had to get the thing reweighed. When I went out to test the model, the additional weight threw off the balance. I didn't have the DT wick and the DT hooked up on the plane to bring it down and the thing was stalling pretty badly. It stalled right into a thermal over the runway and flew off the base. It wasn't even an official flight; I was just trimming the thing. By the time I got it back, which was a couple of days later, the competition was already over. But, at least I got the plane back.

The way a dethermalizer works is you have the stabilizer (stab) of the plane pulled down with rubber bands and a rubber band goes across the back of the surface and down to the bottom of the plane at the rear fuselage. Where that rubber band goes, we have a little aluminum tube, and you stick this fuse through the rubber band into this snuffer tube. You light that as you're letting the model go. You take a little pump can or a cigarette lighter or something and you light this fuse in the back and it smolders and it will burn like maybe a minute an inch or something – it's all calibrated. And you launch the model. And while the plane is going up, this little fuse is smoldering in the back.

Well, when it smolders down, no matter where it's at, when this fuse hits the rubber band it burns it through and allows the stabilizer, instead of being level on a model in the Decalogue angle to make the model fly, the stabilizer will pop up and bring the plane down. It's kind of like an elevator that brings the planes down and they won't lift any more because of the stab being up. The planes just kind of wobble a little bit and come down to earth, which is the way we save our planes from flying away.

But, if you have a failure with a fuse or something like that and you don't have your name on it, you may never see the thing again. They fly that way up there at the field up there in Muncie. I've seen them. Sometimes a thermal can get so strong that even if the DT pops, if the thermal is strong enough, it will still carry it a ways distance before a pop throws the thing out.

## **12. So the 1953 Nats, was that your only Nats?**

Oh, no. I've been to the Nats several times since. I've gone up to the Westover Naval Air Station in Westover and flew. And, naturally, I don't fly any outdoor any more, but I do fly in the indoor part of the Nats. For a long time the indoor Nats was just where we had the outdoor Nats if they had a hangar or something we could use we would have them right there. Now all our national competitions, what we called the United States Indoor Championships, are all held down at East Tennessee State University. I've been a national champion in certain classes several times in the indoor part of it.

I guess, you could say every year since 1977 I haven't missed an indoor Nationals. I've gone to all of those, whether they were held at West Baden or whether they were held at the Niagara Falls convention center. They had them in Tennessee, they had them in Westover. Wherever they were, that's where I went. Any time since 1977 on, I don't think I've missed one.

## **13. Have you ever competed in FAI competition?**

Yes. I did compete in several programs in the F1D models, which is the indoor part of that. And I won a couple local contests in the qualifying and I think I won one regional at one time. Quite honestly, I never enjoyed the models. They were so, so delicate and it was pretty much of a chore, so I just never really enjoyed that particular plane. I flew them and I did OK with them, but I never did qualify for the team. I was never in an international competition at all with that.

The closest to international competition that I would come is sometimes the British and some of the Germans would come to fly with us in our indoor meets if it piggybacked alongside the international competition. One year, in particular, I guess maybe it was 1978, they had had the world championships at West Baden, Indiana, at the atrium there. And I couldn't wait to get there because I knew all the guys that would be coming from all the foreign countries would stay over and fly in various parts of our competition of the indoor championships along with that. That was when I got into international flight.

The first time that I flew against guys on a world level that were caliber competitors, I flew in the EZB class there at West Baden and actually was leading the thing in the EZB ranks until the last flight. I had a 19:10, which was the high time all the way up until the last 15 or 20 minutes of

that particular part of the competition. I was dancing; I was thinking to myself, “Boy, I’m as good as these guys in the world in EZB. I’m flying right with these guys.”

There were several of them who were behind me. Being in first place I thought, “Boy, if I could just hang onto this.” And finally, Otto Rottenberg from the Netherlands got 19 minutes and 38 second flight on his last flight. We only get five flights when we fly in our competitions in indoor, so, I had a total of five scores. My highest one was the 19:10, which was actually my first flight. Everything just worked out for me.

Like I said, I led it until the end and then this Otto beat me. He was well respected in the Netherlands and he made his team and stuff.

All these teams are compiled of three people and then the fourth guy who comes in at the finals. When they have that competition for the F1D stuff, the fourth guy is usually the team manager. So the top three flyers go as the team members, the then fourth person is the alternate flyer and also the fellow that they call the team manager. His duties at the competitions are to go to all of the meetings about the way things are going to be handled at the site and various things. He arranges the travel and different things of that nature.

In the international competition there is an individual overall champion and a team champion. So, a team can win as a country and then some individual from one of those teams ends up having the highest flight score. The fellow who ends up doing that comes back the next time (like two or three years later) to qualify to go to the finals to try to make your country’s team. The next year, they have the actual championships themselves. The past few years they’ve been held in Romania in a salt mine over there down in the ground, which is another whole trip. That’s a whole different type of flying because the conditions there are different than they would be above ground. So they build special models for those facilities.

But the bottom line is that it’s quite possible that a team can win and someone on his team can end up being the world champion. They can re-qualify again to go back, the team members have to qualify, but the guy that ends up being the reigning world champion goes back to the championships again as the reigning world champion to defend his championship.

So that gives an advantage to the country. They end up going with four people instead of three. Because the one guy can go and fly as the individual world champion and you still have a team of three guys. And that’s happened several times – I don’t know exactly how many – with the United States, that the reigning world champion went there to defend his championship and some of them have defended and some of them haven’t.

But, it’s just an interesting sidebar to the indoor part of the thing. I’ve competed at a local level at the FAI competition and we have to have our FAI stamp and I was on the board for that and I’ve worked at several world championships that were here in the United States as a timer.

They’ll have a group of timers and each team will have a set of two timers designated per day. Then they take all the names of the timers and put them in the hat again and draw them the next day, so however many days they fly, each team will have a completely different set of timers. They want to keep it mixed up, so that there’s no chance for any hanky panky to go on. At that

level, it's a very prestigious thing. I'm sure they've had some rhubarbs over the years, but the championships I've been involved in, to my knowledge, there haven't been any rhubarbs.

They actually have a committee, an FAI jury they call it, who attends the meets. If there is any hassle at all, it's presented by the team manager, along with the timers. They approach FAI jury who sits down and straightens it out then makes a ruling. At that level, it's a pretty big deal.

### **It's pretty serious.**

At my level it's pretty serious for me. But there's one thing about the indoor, well everything we do with our hobby – indoor, outdoor, speed or whatever, all the different facets of model aviation – I've met a lot of people. I've gone a lot of places that I wouldn't have gone. This is something that you can take to any degree. You can just go out and be a sport flyer and compete in a competition and get as serious or non-serious with it – that's the individual's thing, whether he wants to get that serious or not.

When I started out in it I didn't know how serious I was going to get. I still remember down there at West Baden, the first major meet that my son and I went to, my son Mike ended up winning the whole thing – actually beat the world champion!

They flew everything on an index. And his record in the junior division was low enough that by the time he got done flying he had gone all the way up from maybe three and a half minutes to nine and a half minutes. So, on the index, a junior record is always lower the majority of time than what a senior or open record is. The chances of you eclipsing your record in the senior or open division by that amount of percentage on what the original record was is pretty much unheard of; it's very hard to do. Can you imagine a kid – don't ask me how old he was, because I can't remember, but he was in the junior division – can you imagine a kid maybe 9- or 10-years-old going to meet like this and walking out beating everybody in the building?

I tell you, I had to take his head and put a band on it to get him through the doorway. He handled it pretty well.

We ended up going to this Jim Miller, who we're still great friends with today. Jim Miller was a teacher here in Cincinnati. He's retired now. He was a retired Army guy, he went into teaching; he has a master's degree in education, etc., etc., etc.

We didn't know anybody when we went to this meet and it ended up that Jim Miller came out and saw my son flying. Jim did a lot of work at his school with the kids, so naturally he just gravitated to us. He showed Mike a couple of things that I didn't know anything about because, like I say, we had built these two planes from a plan.

I ordered some wood from a gentleman by the name of Ron Plotsky, with whom I am still close. In indoor back then you had to get wood from an indoor supply place to build a model and Ron was a wood cutter. When I had read the article, it had different suppliers to order from. For whatever reason, I just picked Plotsky and called him on the phone and ordered all this stuff. I thought what he was going to send me was like a little kit to do this thing then here comes a

whole bunch of slabs of wood with marks on them! This is for the spars and this is for the motor stick and this is for this and this is for that. I had to sit there and hand cut all that stuff to get the size off of the wood that I needed to do the construction on the model itself.

But, anyway, Jim Miller and Mike got to talking then we got introduced. Jim said, “Well, we’ve got a little club here in town. Maybe when you guys get back you’d like to come over. It’s a very small, informal group.”

He told us about it, so we went over to the meeting. Naturally, Mike was like the guest of honor since he won so much. We got to the meeting and, since Jim Miller had done a lot of speaking work with the Kiwanis and things like that, he started introducing Mike and me. Then he started talking about all the accolades Mike got down there and what he did. And finally he said to me – and I’ll never forget this as long as I live, it’s funny how some things stick in your mind; I can’t remember my wife’s birthday, but I can remember this – he said to me, “Well, hot shot, what are you going to do with all this?”

And I told him, “Mr. Miller. I walked around down there and looked around all the different things and the different things I flew I came in last and all this and I heard these guys talking about these AMA national records.”

“Oh,” he said. “You’re going to set some records.”

I said, “Yeah, I’m going to set 50 of them.”

Well, that, naturally, got everybody kind of hooting and hollering. Here’s a guy who can’t do anything and he’s going to go out and set 50 national records. Twenty-four years later I set my 50<sup>th</sup> record. I went all around the United States to do that. I think at this particular point, I may be the leading national record holder in the open division.

In fact, I just got bad news last night. Jim Miller suggested maybe since all my things that I’ve done that maybe I would get into the Hall of Fame with the AMA, so he submitted me for the hall. I really thought when he did this that I might have a pretty good chance and he got a letter in the mail that he called me about last night.

He said, “Well, Wally, got some bad news for you. I’ve got bad news; I’ve got good news. The bad news is you didn’t make it into the Hall of Fame. There were 51 different candidates. They had 51 people apply this year.”

I thought to myself, “Boy, oh, boy, I was starting to think maybe I was a little somebody in this thing.” I thought, “I’ve done pretty well and sort of earned my dues so to speak.”

I said, “I can’t believe out of 50 people that I didn’t even get – wow, I’m nothing.”

So, we didn’t make it in, but they said that they will hold it over for another year and re-examine it again. Maybe someday I might make it and maybe I won’t. I don’t know. I didn’t think much about it when he told me about doing it, so I looked through the magazine and saw some of the little things about the guys in the magazine. From looking at that I told Jim, “Heck, there are

some guys in there that seem like they haven't done as much as I've done. Maybe I'll get a shot." I'm a little disappointed, but we'll try it again and see what happens.

I keep thinking to myself and I said to Jim, "Look at these guys who've been trying to make it in the baseball hall of fame all these years and they haven't made it, yet."

#### **14. Do you have anything else as far as competitions and contests go to add?**

I set the 66 records and, like I said, I traveled all around the United States doing that. I had a lot of help along the way for that. You just don't up and do that. You do it, but you have to have a place to stay while you go and do it.

A gentleman by the name of Gary Underwood and his wife, Kit, invited me to come out and stay with them. They're close to the big hangar in Lakehurst. So, through that I got introduced to Gary several years before I started on my record chase through a fellow by the name of Ed Whitten, who has worked in the commodities exchange in New York.

Ed called me on the phone and said, "I have a guy up here who really wants to get in the hobby and I'd really like him to talk to somebody who knows what's going on and will give him the straight stuff." [*More information on his stay with Gary Underwood can be found later in this answer.*]

A lot of this stuff is kind of cloistered. Years ago, people who figured out how to do something in the competition wouldn't share anything because they wanted to be number one. And I had different criteria about that.

My idea was kind of instilled in me through a gentleman by the name of Al Rorbaugh who lives in Fort Wayne, Indiana. Al's competed in indoors for years and years and years. Al actually saw me at a local contest in Anderson, Indiana. I was down there beating my brains out and could absolutely not get anything done.

Al came over to me after the contest and said, "Boy, oh boy, oh boy. Sonny," – he calls me sonny – "Sonny, you know what? I've been watching you all day. You know what? You're going to do well on this."

I said, "Oh, when does that start?"

He said, "It starts as of now." And I said, "Oh? How is that?"

He said, "Here's the deal. I'm going to show you how to trim one of these things that you can get it to fly in a circle like you're trying to do and explain to you what's been going wrong all day." (I had thought for a while I was getting close, but I just didn't quite get it all the way.) He said, "I'm going to show you how to do it the rest of the way to get this thing to really fly."

I said, "Oh, boy. That's pretty good."

So, he showed me a few things that I had wrong. Al's kind of a comedic guy, he tells a lot of jokes. He's a fun guy; he's a very intelligent guy. He's a mechanical draftsman, engineer type. He used to design a lot of packing equipment. That's what he did for a living.

He said, "What did you say your name is?" I said, "You can call me Wally."

He said, "I'll either call you Wally or I'll call you sonny. Whatever comes out that's the way it is. You've got to take your two fingers and your thumb and go around this wood and pinch it to bend it to get it to stay where you want it to put the trim in the plane."

He showed me how to do that and he called that the "Rorbaugh pitch." So, when all this stuff was done, he showed me how to do it. He told me, "You have a nice model; you do a very nice job. We'll just see if we can get it flying."

He showed me how to wind the motor up a little better and things like that. The contest that day was won with a 10-minute flight in EZB and after he went and put my model through his little routine, wound the thing up, went out and launched it after the contest, the thing did 10 minutes and 15 seconds. That would have been good enough to win the contest, but I wasn't smart enough to understand how to do it.

He told me, "When you put the model in the box and you go next time you're going to fly, most of that is going to go away and you're going to have to go back and redo all that."

I said, "Oh, my, gosh."

He said, "Yeah, you've got to learn how to do it. That's the way it works because the wood is so flimsy that you pinch it and put it in place and a lot of times it won't stay because the humidity gets into it and the stuff just kind of goes back the way it was and you've got to redo all these trim things on it."

So, I said, "Would you draw me a little picture? Mark what I'm trying to do, so I don't forget what I'm doing."

He said, "Well, heck, sonny, as young as you are and you need a picture already? I can't imagine what's going to happen to you by the time you're about 50." So we had a little joke about that.

Al and I still talk to each other and call back and forth. He's not active any more as much as he was, but we stay in contact. I also appreciate what he did for me. That started me in learning how to do things. I had the technique to build, but I didn't understand the trim techniques on how to make them fly.

He always told me, "This is something you want to always remember. I came up and I picked you out and saw you were having trouble. I helped you straighten your model out. This is my creed and I would appreciate it if you would preach it wherever you go. You see somebody having trouble, you might go up to somebody and offer them help and they'll say, 'No, I don't want your help, no thank you.' And that's OK. If you go up and approach somebody at least you

can offer something to them to help them that enjoy this hobby. Look around. There's not that many of us and we're all getting older."

And that's where we're at today. The indoor thing is getting where we used to pull maybe 100 people or better down at Tennessee for our big meet of the year – our United States Indoor Championships, for crying out loud – there was about maybe 45 people here this year. Now, it's going to come down to dollars and cents. We can't have the Academy of Model Aeronautics expect to pay \$1,000 a day for five days for this building for 40 guys to fly model airplanes. It's going to come down to a dollars and cents bottom line issue, which we understand, but what do we do to get people into this hobby? This is the tough part of this hobby. This is very delicate stuff.

Even the scale models, as heavy as they are, they're still pretty delicate, too. We fly that mini-stick; that thing weighs under half of a gram. That's half the weight of a dollar bill! So, it's just delicate and everybody doesn't have that touch to be able to do that. Although there are enough classes in there you can pick out something you can do indoor wise, but maybe the class you really want to do, you just don't have the dexterity to do it.

The thing today is everybody's doing computer games and this and that. The kids have got so many things pulling on them that it's just tough. And if the parents are not interested that makes it even harder. It's very rare that's it a reverse situation. With me, my son just happened to see a picture and got enthused about it and actually got me to do it. I'm going to tell you, I still wonder today if I'd have went over there and seen that thing, if I'd have took off on it right then. Or I might not have liked it and never went back. Who knows? So, it's just the way things unfold. You never know what's going to happen.

There were several people who had influence on me. Russ Brown and Bud Vote helped me over the years. My dad started building planes. He built the Control Line and really enjoyed doing that, but that lighter stuff, you know, my dad didn't have the finesse for the lighter stuff. We got into that years later when he wasn't really interested in doing it at all. He came and watched a few times, but he was at the age where he wasn't going to build them. When I quit flying the Control Line he got out of it because we weren't doing it together.

Ron Plotsky was a great help to me. Al Rorbaugh was a great help to me. Jim Miller. I don't recall them all at this time. But, you have to have a little help along the way. When people see that you're really working hard and trying to do something, people who are smarter than you, a lot of times, will have something to offer to you. And they may mention to you in casual. They may just come over and say, "What do you think would happen if you did it this way?" They just put some seeds of thought into your process.

And after a while, guys who are interested, like Ron Plotsky doesn't fly any more, but he was always a very good flyer and has given me good advice. A lot of times I have had an idea about something called Ron and said, "How do you think this might work?"

And he would say, "Well, I don't know. I guess we're just going to have to try it and see."



So, I would go out and try it. Sometimes things were successful, sometimes it was a bust, but that's how it works. In indoor you've got to keep experimenting about how you're going to get things done the way you need it. And every time you go somewhere, it's a different building. There are different conditions in each building.

We have different batches of rubber that we use. And sometimes the rubber will work from one place to the next and sometimes not. People kid me about it all the time, but I carry two shopping bags full of rubber. There's eight one-pound coffee cans in there and each one of those cans has got another variety of rubber – different batches, different sizes.

Also, when I go to a place, I make a little sheet. I have a little book on each building that I fly in. I keep record of what the humidity is, what time of day I put my flight up, what the conditions were inside, what the conditions were outside – because a lot of people don't realize, the conditions outside have a lot to do with the conditions inside.

We fly in the thermal indoors, where the guy outdoors looks for the big thermal outside. All the heat in the buildings we fly in goes to the top, so we're really flying in the thermal inside. The better the air is and the better we learn to take control of that air and get the right set-up going in that air is when those records are set. You just can't go into a building and say, "Well, I'm going to set a record right now." It doesn't work like that. It takes a lot of time and preparation.

Different models fly at different places and in different conditions better, too. We've got different air flows, different propeller pitches, different designs of propellers – and you've got to get that all going together to have one of these records happen. You can't predict when that's going to happen. You think you can, but you can't. You're at the mercy of the weather conditions. You know as you're going along and getting your time up and getting the plane up, but you've got to have good air when you're doing this in order to get a record, too. We watch it all. We're watching the weather patterns and stuff.

That was the thing with Gary Underwood and his wife, Kit, in New Jersey. I was really working on my category four records, because I had more availability to a high ceiling site than I had to the low and mid ceiling sites. And so, I'd call Gary up and say, "What does it look like out there this weekend?" He said, "Well, call me Friday." Then he'd give me the weather report.

It's a 635 mile drive to his place – 10-1/2 hours with one stop in the middle to get fuel. Otherwise it takes 10 or 12 hours to get there. So, it's a day out, but I had a place to stay. He was kind enough to invite me to stay in his home. He kept asking, "Well, when are you going to come out and fly?"

And I would say, "Oh, my, gosh, Gary, I got take off of work" – I was working then – "and this and that and when I get out there I got a find a place to stay." I didn't mean that as me saying to him, "You got an extra bed, so to speak?"

And at that time, Gary was really quite instrumental in the club out there. He procured the site there and kept it going and pulled the things out of the ashes because it was going that way. There were only really a couple remaining category four sites – big buildings – that we could get in to fly. So, it was really nice when Gary said, "Well, heck, just come out and stay with us.

Guys come from up on the East Coast, they come down and they stay with us. You'll have to walk over the bodies."

That's the way it was. It was really cooking and there was a place to stay and the guys were interested.

Doing this stuff, you meet a lot of people, you hear a lot of things, you get a lot of new ideas, you see how people do things differently. That's one thing about most of the guys in the indoor as it's gone on over to later years, most of the guys are older in it and people are willing to share things.

I always tell people when I share something, "That's the way it works for me and even though it sounds a little funny to you, try it and see if it works. It's no guarantee."

Everybody winds their rubber band a little different. There are just so many things that can go wrong. It's not like taking two pieces of steel and bolting them together with a nut and a bolt. Everybody's got a different way of getting from point A to point B. And I've tried different things that other people have told me and I just can't make it work. Or I might be able to get it to work once in a while. But my own system that I've developed works for me consistently.

And that's how I've remained where I can go to a contest and finish usually no worse than fourth. Most of the competitions I'll be up in the top three if I don't win it. But that's tough to do. You've got to work at that. Nobody gives you that. And if you're the guy who's doing pretty well, when you come into the facility you kind of have a target on your back. You're the guy they want to beat. And that's good really, because that keeps the thing going, because if nobody was interested in the competition, this thing wouldn't be at the level that it's at.

Some of the records now, I mean, they're just really, really tough to break. And Lord knows if they'll ever get broken. The air was just perfect.

I've chased one record for 17 years to get it back. 17 years! This was a record that was set at West Baden in 1981 or 1982. It was with the limited penny plane class. Caesar Banks was there and Caesar's a noted flyer. He's very good in the F1D stuff. He was just good at everything he did. He was a very, very smart gentleman. And the first time I beat him down there, I actually beat him with his own airplane. So he came over and we talked about different things and we got a friendship kind of going – in fact we still call back and forth kind of off and on.

The bottom line was, he finally came back the second or third year and he broke the record down there. He got a 13:05 in unlimited penny plane the last time we flew in West Baden, which is noted as being the best category three site in the world.

In fact, we're back in it now. I chased that site for 20 years when it was shut down. I stayed on top of it, where it was at in the bankruptcy courts and who owned it for a while and they sold it. I stayed in contact. I chased this building because I always knew it was the best category three site in the world and I thought that somewhere along the line someone would restore this facility and use it for something and we might get a chance to get back in there and fly.

We're going down this summer for our third go around. I stuck with it and stayed with it. I got in with the Historical Society in Indianapolis and they put me on to the people who were the final purchasers of the thing. I made an appointment with them and went and talked with them and that's how we got back into flying there again. They allow us to come once a year.

The first year we went for two days, then we went two days the second year and now I've got them up to three days, so we're going to have a nice competition there for three days.

I guess, as far as me doing something for the hobby, that was one of the best things I ever pulled off as far as, here's a facility, the best cat three site in the world. Here it is guys. We got it. We can fly here again.

But, a lot of the guys who used to fly there – the older guys – most of them have died off. So, you know, that's another thing. The attrition is getting up there where the guys are getting old.

Also I was very instrumental in forming the indoor contest board. I suggested it to Don Lindley, who has passed away. The indoor stuff was handled inside the Free Flight board. And there were a few rhubarbs that had come up. When I first got in it, I noticed a few things that I didn't particularly care for and Don Lindley was kind of a special assistant to the president, to different presidents over the years. It was a voluntary job. He attended different meetings for the FAI and things like that. He was very knowledgeable, very astute person in the hobby.

His son, David, Jim Clem's son, Mike, and my son were the three hottest juniors and they were the three hottest seniors in the United States. They were the three tigers. They'd go and war against each other at the meets and the dads would all sit there and work with the kids and throw another little fat on the fire, so to speak and get them going. We had a lot of fun with that. It was really a nice time between the fathers and sons and when the thing was over we'd go out and get a watermelon or go out and eat or something. It was a great thing.

But anyway, that's how I got to know Don Lindley – through our sons. When they flew in Chicago, Don would invite me to come up. He'd call and say, "Well, are you coming up?" And I'd say, "Yeah." And he'd say, "If you want, you can come over and stay at the house."

So, several times Jim Clem, who was a close friend to Don, would come in from Texas. Jim's now deceased. And Jim Miller and I would go up and we'd stay with them and go out for the evening and then come back and go fly our contest and leave. So there is a little bit of camaraderie and friendship involved, too, as you get to know the competitors.

Anyway, I asked Don, "How come the indoor guys don't have our own board and we have to go through all this stuff with the Free Flight guys? Most of those guys don't fly indoor any more than I fly outdoor. Do you think maybe we could do a better job at this if we had an indoor board?"

He said, "Oh, you want to have a board?" I said, "Well, I don't know. What do you think?" Just like that.

He said, "Well, I'll approach them down there at the council at AMA and see what they think."

So, a while went by and he called me about a few things about it and said, “How do you think this and that, so and so?”

I said, “My, gosh, Don, I haven’t been in this. I’m just an idea guy. I don’t know how to do all this. I’m just an idea guy. I guess we would fashion our stuff after the way the rest of the boards are run with procedures. Do they have a list of procedures?”

He said, “Oh, yeah, they have all that.” I said, “Well, I guess we would fall under that and have to tweak it to fit what we need to do our stuff, but let’s try it and see.”

He approached them and they OK’ed the thing and he came here to Cincinnati on business and he wanted me to be the chairman of that thing.

And I told him, “My, gosh, Don, I’m honored, but let me tell you this, I’ve only been in this a couple of years. Can you imagine somebody’s whose been flying” – and I flew with people who had flown in this hobby for over 50 years – “Can you imagine some young upstart as myself running a new ‘indoor board?’ Don’t you think those guys would feel a little snubbed? I think the way to go about that would be to have representatives from each district. I’d like to be a representative on the thing for my district, which is District III, but I don’t think I’ve got enough knowledge; I don’t know all these rules and stuff. And I just don’t think that would be a wise way to do this.”

He said, “Well, maybe you’re right.”

I said, “The way I would suggest to do it, you just need to have the guys in their areas talk to the leading indoor guys in their areas and see what they think. I’ll be honest, even if I had the opportunity to be the representative from District III, I would still go to Dave Brown, who at that time was our district vice president, and would say, ‘Dave, this is the deal. These are the guys that I think might be interested in this position.’ I’d like to do this, but I wouldn’t do it unless these guys OK’ed it that they’d be willing to work with me.”

And he said, “OK, that sounds pretty good.”

That’s how the thing came about. Bud Tenney ended up as the chairman of the board, and to this day [2003], he is still the chairman of this board. He’s done a pretty decent job at it and I just happened to be the District III representative. Because when they asked all the guys that I submitted to Dave, he called me back and said, “They all said, ‘Hey, if you want to do it, go for it.’”

I said, “That’s fine. I thought it was smarter to do it upfront than to have some chit-chatting going in the background: ‘This kid doesn’t know his such and such from so and so, how did he ever get this job?’ So, I thought it was the smart way to approach it.”

I don’t know whether it was smart or dumb, but it worked out and I’m still doing it. I’m very active on the board. I wrote several different rule changes and things of that nature and tried to straighten out some things. If I see something going on, it doesn’t take me but about 10 seconds

to get on the phone and see what's going on, why it's going on. You know, let's not mess up our hobby here. Let's handle this thing in a right and proper manner and see if we can't keep all these rhubarbs to a minimum and write rules that are as bullet-proof as we can.

You know, when you have 10 or 11 guys involved, everybody's got a different idea. It takes a lot of time in the old smoke-filled room, as I always call it, to get things settled and get them done. I will say this: I've never, ever taken anything to the board on any kind of proposal that didn't get passed. I had to spend a lot of time in the smoke-filled room trying to persuade people and telling them, "Well this is the reason behind this. Here's the alternative. What do you think is the best?" And in the end, you know, most of the time I've had unanimous votes.

We've had some real rhubarbs on this board where it got to the point with me that I was about ready to get out of the hobby. That's how bad it got on a couple of them. I thought it was pretty much kid's stuff in the sandbox, but you know, everybody has different opinions and that was my opinion.

### **When was the board created?**

I don't really remember, but it was several years ago. AMA might have that on file.

## **Experiments and Publications**

### **15. Have you done any experimenting with models? Like making different kinds of models? Like out of the ordinary?**

No, not really and I'll give you the reason why for that. I make very small, subdued changes on models. Basically all the models I fly are all called Pieces. The reason for that is, why would I want to start out with something that I know absolutely nothing about that has a history to it and a performance basis to start with?

So, my idea was – and I just got into that starting out not knowing anything – I looked to the guys like Jim Richmond, who was great in the F1D and he's still great and still winning the championships and stuff. He's regarded as probably the best F1D guy in the world. So, when I build an F1D airplane, it was a no brainer about whose design I was going to use. And, quite honestly, I never did as good with it as Jim did and maybe there's a few little secrets there that he never shared with folks and I never bothered to ask him. I just went by the three-view plan, but that's probably the only plane I ever built that I built it pretty much exactly like Jim Richmond's plan.

I've had three articles in the Model Aviation magazine that I did over the years on my Pieces models. Two of them were my Pieces EZB model and the other one was my Manhattan Pieces. I set 25 national records with the Manhattan Pieces. And I don't know that anybody ever had one airplane – this is the same model – that set 25 national records. So, that's a bit of a thing. I always loved flying Manhattan cabin.

I like the scale models, but I would never sit there to do that. It just takes so much time and as fussy as I am by the time I got the thing done, it might be "museum quality," but it's going to go

sit in a box on the mantel where you can look at it, but can't touch it. There's no way I'm going to fly it and wreck it! So, that's why I don't fly scale.

But, the Manhattan cabin was an endurance plane that was capable of still kind of looking like some kind of a plane, because it had a windshield and a little cabin and that type of stuff, but it was still capable of doing times of 10 minutes, so that was my answer to the scale stuff.

Anyway, how my Pieces thing came into existence was I would see different models and I'd say, "Hhhmmm, you know, I like that guy's wing, but I like that guy's tail better and I like this part of that and this and that. And, you know what? I think this guy's propeller is better than what that guy's propeller is."

So, the first thing you know, that's how Pieces came into existence. I had some guy's wing. I had another guy's prop. I had some guy's stab. I said, "Well this is the way the rudder is going to look." I did that my way and I did the motor stick this way and the tail boom this way. It was part of me, part of this guy, part of that guy. When I wrote the articles, I always put in there whose pieces I used to get the Pieces.

And that's how my models became Pieces. Consequently, all the planes I've ever built were pieces, except for the microfilm ship I was flying of Jim Richmond's design. I changed very little on that. I finally experimented with different props, but I never really got that good with it. part of my problem was I didn't have as good as quality rubber.

My models finally got to be pretty good, close to what everybody else's were who I was competing with – other than maybe two or three guys at the top – but I never could get my hands on the super duper pearly rubber that those guys were using to do the thing. So, consequently I got out of it. That was one of the reasons.

The other thing, I didn't really particularly care for the models and the way they had to be built. I just never really enjoyed building the things. And guys are still after me today since they changed the rules to come back and fly F1D. I guess if I really applied myself to it, I could be up there in the top four or five, but I just don't have any desire to build those models. It just doesn't do anything for me.

As far as unusual models, I guess the Pieces would be my only claim to unusual.

The other thing I was going to say is a lot of guys are just experimenters. They continually like to try different things. And when I find out something works, I stick with it until something passes me up or I figure out something on my own. Like I said, I might make little minute changes, but a lot of guys who could be a lot better than they are, get off into experimentation to the point where they get away from what the original situation is about, which was about getting a model to perform well enough to win a contest and possibly set a record. And everybody's not interested in that facet.

Jim Clem is an example. Jim won his share of events and was always a high echelon competitor, but he was the experimenter of experimenters. He was always trying crazy stuff. I call it crazy,

but I don't mean it in a bad vein. It was just really off-the-wall type of stuff. Some of it worked and some of it didn't. Some of it worked for a while and then it didn't work for a while.

**16. As far as club leadership goes, you mentioned you were president of your current club, have you held any other positions?**

No, I just held the president thing and then I was the secretary. When I wasn't the president I was the secretary for several years. But when I sent in my stuff [to apply for the 2003 Model Aviation Hall of Fame], I just told them I was president. Just put the years I was president of it. I was president for five years [from 1982 to 1986].

**17. What are some other things you've been involved with in the hobby?**

I have my own little business that I do here in the basement. It's a legal business and I've been doing it for like 20-some years.

I got permission in writing from Frank Ehling, who is a past president of the AMA who has passed away. Frank was very active in the AMA. I asked Frank about using his Cub model and making some modifications to it. But, I said, "I'd like to have it in writing, because I'm going to sell these things. I want to do some work with the Cub Scouts."

And we just ran with that. My son was in the Cub Scouts at the time he did this thing with the limited penny plane and when he got back and went to the meeting, naturally, he couldn't wait to tell these kids he had a model airplane that flew for nine and a half minutes inside a building. They made such a fuss and a ruckus with him that he came home crying. Nobody would believe that he had a rubber band airplane that would fly that long. He was so mad, he didn't want to go back to the meeting the next time because of it.

The Cub leader, Bob Myers, call me about it. I told him, "Bob, what he told you is exactly what went on." And he said, "There is no way." And I said, "Well, there is a way."

He said, "Are you kidding me?" I said, "No I'm not kidding you. This is what went on."

And he said, "Is there a way you might come up and show some of the models to the kids?" And I said, "Sure. We can do that."

We put a bunch of stuff together and I did a demonstration and Mike flew his limited penny plane in the church hall. Right away, when we flew the little Delta Dart thing, Bob said, "Oh my, gosh. This would be great for the kids. You know they've got an aviation badge in the Cub Scouts." And I said, "Oh? This'll work." He said, "What are the chances of making up a bunch of kits for the kids?" Well, they had like 40 kids in this thing. I had never done anything like that.

So, I called Jim Miller, because I knew he worked with the school and he said, "Yeah, I'll figure out how we can do that." And in a quick hurry, he said, "Let me think about that a little ways." I said, "Well, I'll think about it and you think about it; we'll get our heads together and see."

We devised a little jig that you could cut the motor sticks with. He started doing those with the kids at his school and I started making them with the Cub Scouts. By a word of mouth, I created a little cottage industry here.

What I do now is go to the Cub Scouts when I'm invited, or I go out and fly in the schools. I've done some schools here where I run a program for the whole school. The whole junior high school came through my program. They have days at the school where places like Cincinnati Gas and Electric will come in and display and somebody from the hospital will come over. Somebody from the fire department comes. Everybody's got their place in the school where they're running their little deal. Everybody in the school comes through my thing the same as they do everybody else's. We're there like three-quarters or a whole day. We take a little lunch break.

So, I run everybody through and sell a few kits. The Cub Scouts get involved, too. What I do when the Cub Scouts come in is get out the Cub Scout thing. I'll bring my models; I'll do some flying – especially with the mini-stick, because you can fly that in a room. It doesn't take a very big area to fly that. They can get a feel for what's going on. Then I explain to them how you start out with something that's very simple and work your way up.

I figure at least I'm getting them exposed to model aviation. And I charge them a few bucks for me to come and do the talk. I sell the kits for three dollars a kit, which I'm not making a whole lot of money here by the time you sit here and order the parts and put them together. All that wood is all hand-stripped. There are very few kits out there on the market today that are hand-stripped. Most of these kits are made out of scrap that's left from the RC kits that makes them very heavy. I actually grade wood and make a kit.

I do everything I can to guarantee the kit will fly. There's no guarantee, but if I'm there when they're flying them, nobody goes out of there with something that hasn't flown. So, when they have the contest, I go back. The kids love it. I've got one group that's been doing it for 18 years now. They don't even do the Pinewood Derby any more, they do my planes. So, I know that order is coming in every year.

As far as going out in the public and working with the public, I have done that. I've done some mall shows, where they'll have an RC show. Gail Roushing, who's not doing it any more, used to be the guy who really had the mall shows around here. And Gail knew that I was big in indoor, so he said, "You want to come out and set up a little thing with us?"

"Sure."

So, then he'd have me go around and do that. When I wasn't doing that, I would help judge the RC planes and scale planes.

Flying indoor is different. When guys fly a Free Flight or an RC model outside, you can see that. I'm locked in the building. I've got the doors locked, because I don't want anybody to disturb my air. So, unless they see indoor models in Model Aviation and come to it or it's close to them, people don't know much about it.



We don't draw a lot of spectators, either, unless we have a big national meet. Like we'll have several spectators come down in Tennessee, because we get it in the newspaper down there. But, generally speaking, that doesn't happen. So, we really don't get a chance to be in the public eye.

In fact, when I go to Florida, I go to the children's museum down there. I just stumbled into it in Tampa, Florida. When I go to Florida to fly in a contest, I make contact with the lady in the museum who runs the gift shop. She gets it fixed up that I get into the atrium there. I do demonstration flying then they sell the kits in the store while I'm there. They've got a science store there, because this thing is all about science stuff. They've got all kinds of hands-on things for the kids to do and it's really a very nice museum there.

So, I go in there and I do that and I've got to split the profit with them. But, I love doing it, because I know the hobby, I know what I'm talking about; I enjoy going out and talking with the folks, showing them what to do. I let the kids fly the Delta Dart in a demonstration model. If nothing else, at least the parents are with the children. They've seen it. They may or may not ever do it. Most of the time, it's the fathers that get the kids into it.

In my case, though, it was funny how the situation was reversed and my son got me interested. And, I'll be honest, I kind of fought it. I told him, "Mike, this is pretty delicate stuff. We're building these gliders that have got quarter inch and half inch squares in them. You see what that is? Some of that stuff is a 32<sup>nd</sup> of an inch. You know, you're a little guy. You know how fussy I am about stuff."

"Aw, dad, dad," he said. "We gotta do this, we gotta do this."

He cut about maybe 15 or 20 set of ribs before I allowed him a set of ribs. Many times he walked from the basement and stomped upstairs and told his mother, "Dad's too hard. I can't do this." But, when he got it done, it was a good model and it worked and it was well worth it.

## **Leadership**

**18. As far as leadership goes, I know you were talking about the one contest that you kind of coordinated in West Baden, are you a contest director? Do you coordinate contests?**

No, I'm not a contest director (CD) and the reason I'm not is because I am really a hard-nosed flying kind of guy. I'm a competitor. I want to go out there and kick butt. I want to go out win. I want to talk to the people. I want to share my ideas. I want to have fun.

But, being a CD, most of the guys who are CDs, don't do a lot of flying. Like the National Indoor Championships in Tennessee. They actually run by Abram VanDover and he's mainly an RC guy. And I didn't even realize that. I thought he was an indoor guy. I got to talking to Abram and he said, "What do you do to fly indoor?"

I said, "What the heck do you do to fly indoor?"

He said, "I'm not an indoor guy. I just fly a little bit. I'm an outdoor guy. I'm an RC guy and Free Flight stuff."

I said, “Oh, really? I fly a little outdoor rubber once in a while – not so much any more, but I did.” I flew the Embryos and P-30s and stuff. My son and I both did that. I said, “Mainly, I like to fly the RC gliders since I got out of drag racing, I got back into the gliders. Now that I’m retired I’ve got more time with the glider clubs. In fact, I used to do talks with them with indoor. They used to fly indoor stuff. The first thing they did early in spring they had a little deal at Moore High School and I got out and got involved with that, so I know all the guys. I got back in the glider club.”

Abram does some outdoor CD work, too, but that’s a whole different crop of guys who are CDs. They’re into a different thing. I’m a competitor guy and that’s where my niche is at and maybe someday I might be a CD, I don’t know, but I’m not right now.

## Honors and Awards

### **19. Do you have any honors or awards like from clubs or anything that you’d like to mention?**

I would say probably the biggest honor I’ve got in this thing is winning model of the year from the NFFS on two different occasions on two different models. One was my Pieces Manhattan Cabin, which was also a feature article in the AMA magazine.

And then I also had my EZB. In the magazine first was Pieces EZB and then a few years later we had Pieces Revisited. I don’t know that anybody else has ever had their same model back in the magazine for revisions that were made to it. How cool is that?

I didn’t think about that until later on. Jim Miller said to me, “Gosh, I can’t believe you persuaded those people to put that thing back in for the second time. That piece of crap.” He’s always giving me the business, you know?

I said, “Well, you know over the years, I’ve learned to make changes on that thing and I’ve set a lot of EZB records” – I don’t know how many, that’s on my Hall of Fame application – “You know, I kept making little changes, little incremental changes.”

A lot of guys really shoot themselves in the foot and I’ve watched this go on and I always tell somebody if I suggest something to them or if they come and ask me about something, I’ll say, “Well, I think this might be wrong, too, but only do one thing at a time, because if you change two of them, you’re not going to know what one if it does better or whatever it does, you’re not going to know which one did what.”

Guys overlook that. They get in a hurry like at a contest or something. It happens. And I’ve done it myself. I know better, but you just think you’re smarter than what you are, but really you’re not. This thing is only going to give you what you’re getting out of it, you know?

Those would be the only honors, I guess, the two models of the year awards. I don’t know if there’s any guys who did that either. I shouldn’t say that because I really don’t know. But that was kind of interesting. I enjoyed being nominated and winning that on two different occasions.

It was kind of a big kick for me. And I enjoyed setting all the records. I guess that's my reasoning or excuse for not being a CD.

Being a CD takes a lot of work and I really appreciate what they do. Really, if it wouldn't have been for guys like Dave Thompson and Bill Cosak – who's passed away – helping me, I wouldn't have made it.

Like we won the mini-stick contest. We started flying that thing. At the time I was working the night shift and those guys were already retired and they said, "Well, why don't we find a place to do the mini-stick? You want to fly the mini-stick in international competition?"

I said, "Oh, I guess. Yeah, we'll do that."

I won that sucker five times in a row. And out of those five times in a row, I set, I believe, two or three national records. Right away, I thought, "Well, if we're getting times here, why don't we just get a sanction when we do this?" – since Dave and Bill were always there when I was flying – "Why don't we just send in for a sanction?"

So, they would take turns being the main CD and the back-up CD and they would get a sanction. When we flew, we had a sanction to try to break a record if we got that lucky. And that's always flown from like January 1 to March 31, so the chance of setting a record in the Midwest is low. You've usually got some pretty foul weather those times of the year. And, for some reason, we always got a couple of days at the end that were really, really nice and that's when the air would be good in the building.

What are the chances of somebody starting out flying a mini-stick thing and winning that thing five times in a row? And I broke a lot of models. That's tough on equipment, because you wind it up like you're flying in a 200-foot building and let this thing go in a 17-foot place. It takes it about seven seconds to get to the ceiling. From there on in, it's banging around, beating, looking for a place to either break itself or get hung up on a light. It's a witch, but we struggled through it and they kept encouraging me.

I was going to quit after we won it for times in a row. I could see less and less people were flying the thing and I told them, "You know, we're hurting this thing more than we're helping it. I see some of these guys are dropping out. Maybe they figure they just are not ever going to be able to compete in this thing. Maybe we ought to quit."

They said, "What would you quit for? You're on top. Keep going."

And I said, "Well, you've heard the old adage that you want to go out on top of your game. Well, here's what we'll do. I'll keep flying this until we lose. When we lose, we're done."

And, the sixth year, I came in second or third, and that was the end of the ballgame. I haven't flown it since.

Bill Cosak passed away, so we don't have him to help us any more. But, what I'm getting at, I really appreciate the effort that guys like Bill Cosak, and all these guys that I mentioned earlier –

Dave Thompson, Van Dover, gosh, I could go on and on – all these guys who helped me over the years. They gave me little hints and saw things that I missed. And that's what it takes. You don't get to the level I'm at by yourself. You have to have a lot of help along the way. And it has to be good help and you've got to have people that are dedicated to helping you. I always appreciated that. I really do. I tell these guys all the time, "Boy, I'm really thankful you guys will help me." You can't do it by yourself. It's just too much.

The biggest thank-you goes to my wife for putting up with all of this. But, I always tell her, "You know where I'm at. I'm in the basement. I'm not out in a bar." I don't even drink!

I've been fortunate enough to have been married for 44 years now – to one woman, by the way. A lot of guys will say, "Well, I've been married for 30 years and I was married to three different women."

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*The following brief biography was submitted with Walter VanGorder's application for the 2003 Model Aviation Hall of Fame. It was submitted by James Miller on February 5, 2003.*

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Walter P. VanGorder, 65, began building model airplanes at the age of 7. His first model, a Comet kitted Blackburn Skua, was followed by many more scale models. He became interested in Control Line models and was a member of the Cincinnati [Ohio] Aeromodelers, a local Control Line club. He attended his first Nationals (Nats) in 1953 and competed in 1/2-A Free Flight and tow line glider.

Walt was absent from the hobby for almost 20 years. In that time, he was devoted to raising a family and establishing a career as a photo-engraver for two Cincinnati newspapers.

He joined the Southwest Ohio Free Flighters (SWOFF) in 1977. He served as president from 1982 to 1986 and is still an active member.

Walt has established 66 national indoor records in all four ceiling categories. He has 26 records in the Manhattan cabin event, 18 in limited penny plane, 12 in mini-stick, seven in EZB and three in penny plane.

He competed in F1D rubber for approximately eight years, winning a few local contests and one regional contest.

The National Free Flight Society (NFFS) awarded his Manhattan Cabin Pieces Model of the Year for indoor in 1988. His EZB Pieces received the same prestigious award in 1993.

His Pieces Mini-Stick model won the International Mini-Stick Postal contest five years in a row starting in 1994.

Walt was a co-signer with Ed Whitten in establishing Manhattan Cabin as an official AMA event. His suggestion that the stabilizer be increased to 12 inches has produced a model that flies extremely well producing flights of long duration.

Walt has worked tirelessly for 20 years to gain permission to fly at the West Baden (Indiana) Atrium. His personal contact with the Cook Group Incorporated and the National Historic

Landmark Foundation of Indiana has resulted in indoor model flying in this magnificent building in 2001, 2002, and 2003. The atrium is considered the best category III site in the world.

Walt established Walt's Model Works in February 1981. With permission from Frank Ehling, the designer, he has modified the AMA Cub and kitted it. He demonstrates the flying ability of this basic model and assists students, Cub Scouts and Boy Scouts to construct a model and fly it, usually the same day. This is a repeat activity, especially for science teachers creating interest in aeronautics.

Walt has been AMA District III member of the indoor contest board from its inception. He also has authored several rule changes. He is a Leader Member-Administration for the AMA.

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