



The AMA History Program Presents: Biography of KEN WILLARD

February 18, 1912 - 1993

Started modeling in 1916

AMA #1124



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Career:

- 1927: Set a world's indoor record for seaplanes at the age of 15
- 1932: His first design article was published in *Model Airplane News* magazine; since then had had hundreds of articles published and many models kitted
- 1940: Created a Control Line patent
- Developed a "kick-up" elevator and quick blip motor control for Radio Control
- 1957: Made the first Radio Control cross-channel flight from California to the Catalina Islands using sport Radio Control equipment
- 1959: Won the National Aerobatic Championship in the intermediate class
- 1962: Built and flew the world's smallest Radio Control model in 1962
- 1963: Started writing the "Sunday Flying" column in *Radio Control Modeler* magazine; continued for about 20 years.
- 1972: Built and flew the largest Radio Control model using sport Radio Control equipment
- 1974: Member of the U.S. Aerolympic team
- 1980: Took over as editor of *Radio Control Sportsman* magazine
- Designed many Radio Control airplanes, including the *School* series, the *Roaring 20*, *Top Dawg*, *Wavemaster* and *Santa Anna*
- Helped organize the League of Silent Flight and the South Bay (California) Soaring Society
- Contributed to the design and layout of the Los Angeles model airport

Honors:

- 1977: Model Aviation Hall of Fame
- 1984: National Free Flight Society Hall of Fame

The following information on Ken Willard ran in the April 1978 issue of Model Aviation magazine after Ken's induction into the 1977 Model Aviation Hall of Fame.

Ken Willard, age 64, is nationally known for his Radio Control designs through the years along with his "Sunday Flying" column in *Radio Control Modeler* magazine. Some of his designs that were kitted include the *School* series (*School Boy*, *Girl*, *Master*, etc.), the *Roaring 20*, *Top Dawg*, *Wavemaster* and *Santa Anna*.

He also holds a 1940 Control Line patent, developed a “kick-up” elevator and quick-blip motor control for Radio Control, and has done extensive research in Free Flight and Radio Control seaplane step locations, as well as experiments in sailplane wing efficiency.

Willard helped organize the League of Silent Flight and the South Bay Soaring Society (California). He was president of the Los Angeles LARKS and chairman of the LARKS’ Fund Drive for the Los Angeles Model Airport. He also contributed to the design and layout of the model airport working with the Los Angeles Department of Recreation and Parks and the L.A. Model Hobby Association.

Some of his other contributions include: an unofficial AMA world endurance record for indoor seaplanes (1927), world’s smallest Radio Control model (1962), first cross-channel Radio Control model flight from California to Catalina Islands using sport Radio Control equipment (1957) and the world’s largest Radio Control plane using sport Radio Control equipment (1972). He was a pilot for two U.S. Department of Defense contractors for RPV’s from 1972 to 1976, providing one with a basic design used for airborne real time TV transmission.

Ken, like his fellow Hall of Famer Maynard Hill, is one of those who have been instrumental in gaining appreciation from aeronautical scientists and engineers for the capability of model aircraft in research programs. He has thus done much to gain professional respect for model aviation as an adult activity. And the Hall of Fame gains respect from his addition to the roster.

The following information about Ken ran in the May 1980 issue of Radio Control Modeler magazine as part of Don Dewey’s column “From the Shop.” Bill Foster suggested this article to the AMA History Program (at the time called the AMA History Project).

In November 1963, Ken Willard, former Nationals winner and world-renowned Radio Control modeler, wrote his first column for *RCM (Radio Control Modeler magazine)* and has appeared monthly ever since that time. Ken’s column has been one of the most popular among *RCM* readers and, from that first issue, Ken has been affectionately known as the Chief Sunday Flyer – his monthly columns and his aircraft designs are geared to the sport fliers who constituted 95% of *RCM*’s readership.

It is with regret that we must announce that effective with our next issue Ken Willard’s Sunday Flyer will no longer appear in the pages of *RCM*. We will all sorely miss Ken, but on the other hand, we are both happy and excited for him as he takes over the reins as editor of *Radio Control Sportsman* magazine.

Ken was born in Ionia, Michigan, on February 18, 1912. His entire life has been devoted to aviation and aerospace, having been the manager of administration missile systems division at Lockheed Aircraft in Sunnyvale, California. This lifelong dedication to aviation was due in large measure to the inspiration and encouragement that he always had from his father and mother. “Chet” Willard, his father, was a rigging instructor at the Air Service Mechanics School at Kelly Field, Texas, during the last year of World War I. He crashed while learning to fly, but survived

and guided Ken through the formative years as Ken pursued the fascination of flying – both with model airplanes and full-scale aircraft.

Ken Willard is a graduate of Northwestern University, class of 1933, and his academic record won him a fellowship in aeronautics at Caltech in 1934. After one year and an M.S. in mechanical engineering, he switched to meteorology and earned an M.S. in that field.

Ken designed and built his first model airplane at the age of four. In 1927, at age 15, he set a world's indoor record for seaplanes. In 1932, *Model Airplane News* magazine published his first design article. Since then he has been a regular contributor to model magazines with hundreds of articles and designs, many of them kitted for others to build.

In 1957, Ken's Big Breathless design successfully accomplished the first crossing of the Catalina channel and the following year set the world's endurance record of five hours and 29 minutes – a mark that stood for five years. In 1959, he won the National Aerobatic Championship in the intermediate class scoring more points than many of the entrants in the unlimited class. In 1962, he flew the world's smallest Radio Control airplane, which had a wingspan of only 7-½ inches. In addition, in 1972 he flew the world's largest Radio Control airplane that used sport Radio Control equipment – a 12-foot monster that weighed 340 pounds! In 1974, he was a member of the U.S. Aerolympic team in soaring competitions at Lakehurst. Ken Willard was voted into the Model Aviation Hall of Fame in 1977 – an honor well deserved. While we at *RCM* will miss Ken's monthly column, there is no doubt in our minds that his contributions to model aviation will continue in the years to come as they have throughout his entire lifetime. On behalf of the entire staff of *RCM* and its readers, we wish this outstanding gentleman of model aviation the very best in his new position as editor of *Radio Control Sportsman* magazine.

The following information about Ken ran in the September 1980 issue of Radio Control Modeler magazine in Ken's "Sunday Flier" column. Bill Foster suggested this article to the AMA History Program (at the time called the AMA History Project).

We all make mistakes.

Maybe the late Fiorello La Guardia, one-time mayor of New York City, said it best - - "I don't make many mistakes, but when I do, it's a beaut!"

That's just about the way I feel as I resume the Sunday Flier column as your old Chief Sunday Flier. As most of you know, earlier this year I took on the job as editor on a competing magazine. It was a challenge that, at the time, I couldn't resist. The publisher assured me he was well aware of financial requirements, and was amply prepared to meet them. Also, the conversation to a "slick" was to be made in such a way that the timely news event could still be covered well in advance of the competition.

It didn't turn out that way. For many reasons, some simple, some complex, the planned program for the magazine disintegrated. I don't know why, exactly, although I can only surmise that it was primarily inadequate funding. You see, I was to review editorial input and approve it, and

that was all. The rest of the intricate process of putting out a magazine was to be handled by the office staff.

After a couple of trips to Reno to do my job as editor, plus trips to the WRAMS show, the Weak Signals Toledo show, and the MACS show, and still no magazine, I naturally began to wonder. Then, as the saying goes, the policy difference began to emerge. It has always been m policy that I should get paid according to an agreement. Well, I wasn't. So, I resigned. And I am sincerely sorry if, in the meantime, any of you got "burned" because you wanted to support me in the effort to provide a news magazine about R/C.

There was one nice thing about the whole deal, though. Wasn't that a great "obituary" that Don wrote about me in the May *RCM*? But, as Mark Twain once said, "The reports of my demise were greatly exaggerated!"

Enough about that episode in the life of a Sunday Flier. Live and learn. Fall back and regroup. And get on with the job at hand.

The following obituary ran in the May 1993 issue of Radio Control Modeler magazine.

In Memorial

Ken Willard
1912-1993

No words can adequately express our feelings on the loss of Ken Willard, "Chief Sunday Flier."

The following is an excerpt from Ken Willard's book, "Mission to Gibraltar."

Ken Willard was voted into the [Model Aviation] Hall of Fame in 1977. Ken was born in Ionia, Michigan, on February 18, 1912. His entire life had been devoted to aviation and aerospace. This was due, in large measure, to the inspiration and encouragement which he always had from his father and his mother. "Chet" Willard, his father, was a rigging instructor at the Air Service Mechanics School at Kelly Field, Texas, during the last year of World War I, and crashed while learning to fly, but survived and guided Ken through the formative years as Ken pursued the fascination of flying, both with model airplanes and full scale aircraft.

His association with full scale aircraft began at the Ionia Free Fair in the early 20s. Barnstormers always came there to "pick up a few C-notes," as they put it. One of them was Eyer Sloniger – later to be immortalized by Ernie Gann in his book, "Fate is The Hunter." Ken, at twelve years of age, sold tickets for joyrides. He'd go up with "Slonny" and they'd do a few stunts, then, on landing, Ken would do a series of handsprings and back flips and shout, "That's the way it makes you feel folks! Take a ride with Slonny!"

In 1927, Ken worked as a "grease monkey" at a small field in Morton Grove, just northwest of Chicago. He was fifteen; his pay was two 15-minute lessons a week in flying. After 2 hours and 15 minutes of dual instruction, he soloed. The rules weren't as strict then.

Money was hard to come by in those days. It was eight years later he got his private pilot's license. And it wasn't until 1946 that he achieved commercial rating. Of course, the war did delay his training; he never was able to qualify as a military pilot because he wore glasses. Following the war, he sold light aircraft until 1948, when he moved to California and went to work for Lockheed, where except for a couple of brief interludes with Marquardt Aircraft and the University of Southern California, he worked as a sales engineer, sales promotion manager, administration manager, and special assistant to the general manager of the Missile Systems Division. As a "sideline" he also was chief test pilot for the remote piloted vehicle program.

Willard was a graduate of Northwestern University in 1933. He participated in sports as a springboard diver – won the Big Ten Medal for proficiency in academics and athletics at NU, was twice selected for All-American in swimming in 1932 and 1933.

His academic record won him a fellowship in aeronautics at Caltech in 1934. After one year, and an M.S. in Mechanical Engineering (aero Option), he switched to meteorology – aeronautical engineers were "a dime a dozen" at the time – and took an M.S. in Meteorology. He was immediately hired by American Airlines, and given free airline passage to Chicago. As he boarded the plane from Fort Worth, following a flight from Los Angeles, he noted the name of the pilot on the Vultee single engine transport – E.L. Sloniger! It was quite a reunion!

As a meteorologist for American Airlines, he forecast the airline weather for flights from Chicago to New York, Washington, and Fort Worth. He liked to tell of the time C. R. Smith, President of the line, who liked to fly, flew one of the open cockpit Pitcairn "Mailwing" route check planes to St. Louis, and was advised of "snow squalls" at Midway on his return. They turned out to be a virtual blizzard, but he landed safely. He came into the operation's office, looked at Willard and said, "snow flurries, eh! Bah!"

Willard left American Airlines in 1938 to become instructor in meteorology at Parks Air College in East St. Louis, Illinois. It was while he was there that the war in Europe, and the war with Japan began, and the events leading to the following documentary took place.

Ken was internationally known in modeling as the "Chief Sunday Flier." He built his first model airplane at the age of four; he designed it himself. His mother gently pointed out that, in addition to a wing and stabilizer, it needed a rudder. But even then, it didn't fly – since the wing was a 1 x 6 x 36 board, the fuselage a 2 x 4, and the stabilizer a 1 x 6 x 12 board.

As time went on, his designs became more efficient. In 1927, at age fifteen, he set a world's indoor record for seaplanes.

In 1957, Ken's "Big Breathless" design successfully accomplished the first crossing of the Catalina Channel, and, the following year, set the world's endurance record of five hours and twenty nine minutes, which stood for five years. In 1959, he won the National Aeronautic Championship in the intermediate class, scoring more points than many of the entrants in unlimited. In 1962 he flew the world's smallest radio controlled airplane, 7 ½" wingspan. And in 1973 he flew the world's largest radio controlled airplane that used sport R/C equipment – a 12 foot monster that weighed 340 pounds! In 1974, he was a member of the U.S. Aerolympics

Team in the soaring competitions at Lakehurst. Bill Winter, Editor of the Academy of Model Aeronautics publication, "Model Aviation," wrote: "Ken Willard, through the years, probably has done more for fun flying than any other individual."

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