



The AMA History Project Presents: Autobiography of **CHARLES (CHARLIE) THORNTON NELSON**

August 28, 1941 - July 12, 2025

AMA# 95972



Written by CN (circa 2024/2025); Original autobiography transcribed by SA (2025); Addendum by SA (2025); Submitted by CN & SA (08/2025); Edited and reformatted for AMA History Project by JS (08/2025)

The following autobiography was submitted to the AMA History Project by Charlie's son, Glenn Nelson, and Stan Alexander in August 2025. Stan Alexander transcribed Charlie's autobiography and wrote the addendum. HP editing note: Minor edits have been made for clarification.

Charlie Nelson - an Autobiography

It all started in 1953, when I was 12. I'm told I had a life-threatening illness for a couple of weeks. We lived in a small rural Massachusetts town. There was a town nurse, and the family doctor for many folks was in the next town. He often visited our home in his big old Buick. To keep me busy, my mother got me a model airplane, a rubber band-powered, wind-up Free Flight model that you cut out with a razor blade, a balsa kit. A tube of Duco Cement or some similar glue, wax paper, and a board to use as a work surface on my sick bed! My father thought I was "G** d****d fool" for fiddling around with that stuff! So, I hid it, only to bring it out and work on it when he was not around.

I survived the illness and finished building the airplane too. Trying to fly it was frustrating to say the least. I only had myself, my 6-year-old brother, and my mother's encouragement, but this was something that held my interest.

I made it through Grammar school, then was entered in agricultural high school. I got a job on a local dairy farm, and there I met a neighbor, Jon Andrews. We got into building and attempted to fly Control Line airplanes. Back in the late 1950s, I paid big bucks, \$22.95 for a Forester 35 glow engine. There were no starters then, so we both got fingers chopped many times by spinning props. I still have some scars to show for it. The worst injury was in winter. I was starting my engine and the plane slid out of my left hand, crashing into my right hand. I was able to stem severe bleeding by burying my right hand in a cold snowbank. The doctor came to our house and sewed me back together.

When I was a freshman in college, I met a fine girl and have been married to her for almost 64 years now. I built her a small SIG Piper Tri-Pacer powered by a Cox Pee Wee .020 glow engine. Kids never found out what that awful stink was as I covered and doped that plane in my dorm room. I graduated from a two-year college and married Lynda. Then our kitchen table became the airplane building area. I'm still using Ambroid glue, razor blades, a piece of plywood for a building board, and silk and SIG dope for covering. I had upgraded to a Merco 35 with throttle control but still flew on Control Line!

I had a chance and bought a used Heathkit GD-19 5-channel Radio Control unit on 27 MHz - yup, the CB channels, one radio/one plane back then. I taught myself to fly in a very active cow

pasture. Pretty soon I had several Heathkit RC radios and powered planes. I was also getting very good at repairing badly damaged/smashed airplanes.

There came a day when I heard about a group of same-minded folks locally who were modelers. We got together and formed the Central Mass RC Modelers Club in Westboro, Massachusetts, not too far from my hometown. However, my name didn't appear on the club papers because I was a Master Mechanic for a construction company and was out of town the day the club was formally formed. I have been an active member of the Central Massachusetts Radio Control Modelers (CMRCM) since its inception in 1970. Several times I have been the club's President, Chief Field Officer, and most importantly serving as the club's Chief Flight Instructor and Scale Flight Instructor. I've had the opportunity to teach several hundred folks through my teachings.

I got interested in Radio Control Scale competition and entered my first competition in Ridgefield, Connecticut. I couldn't stay to the end of the first meet because, as a master mechanic on railroad locomotives, I was working on second shift at a small New England railroad and had to leave early so I could get home and go to work.

A few years later, I entered my first AMA Nats in 1976, held at Wright Patterson Air Force base in Ohio. This was my first long distance competition, and I took my wife and three kids with a pop-up camper. I competed with a scratch-built Pepsi-Cola Travel Air D4D biplane. I designed and built it from my own hand-drawn plans at 1/6th scale. I still have that plane, and it could still have a radio and engine put in and flown. I think there were about 80 contestants in standoff scale that year and I finished 62nd.

Long before I retired, I started flying in many years of Nats competitions around the country and in the Midwest. This resulted in getting invited to the Scale Masters Championships by Harris Lee, attending his and many other competitions for many years.

My local friend, Jack Buckley, and I ran the New England Scale Masters Qualifier for about 20 years. We both also competed in the U.S. Scale Masters Championships. During all those years, I had been teaching scale modeling and competition as well. A club up in Maine started a large annual scale competition, The State of Maine Championships. This was an annual event not to be missed, and I didn't!

Then out of the blue, I was invited to a new contest in Florida called the Top Gun Invitational, run by Frank Tiano of West Palm Beach. I was a fierce competitor, winning it in 1992 with a 1/5th scale Waco cabin biplane. They gave me the name "Mr. Waco", the guy with 2 wings and a round engine. I'm credited with breaking the military plane grip by winning all the big contests with a civilian Scale biplane. My successes opened the major contests to more WWI planes, Cubs, and other light planes to success.

My wife requested that if I ever won any money at this, she wanted some. For the Top Gun Invitational win in 1992, I was awarded the winners' check for \$2000. I invested \$1995 on a Seidel 7-cylinder radial engine and gave my faithful wife the change, all \$5 of it. If memory serves me correctly, I competed in 20 Top Gun Invitationals and for many of those years my Wacos had that 7-cylinder radial for power.

Through all the long years, I taught many folks to fly. I always had somebody at my shop teaching how to build or repair, and never a flying session went past without teaching scale flight to somebody. Both of my sons were Junior and Senior National Champions a long time ago. I did a trophy count recently, and I have 135 personal trophies that I can put on display as winnings in scale contests since 1976. My crowning effort was taking a rank beginner, and in the last seven winter seasons of retirement, turned it into 2024's 8th place winner on the USA's team at the FAI World Championships. That fellow is Tim Dickey of Chandler, Arizona, and I am very proud of that!

Typing this story has been one of the hardest undertakings I have ever tested myself with. I'm not a paperwork person, but I'm wicked good at building, flying, and teaching others the hobby/sport and competition flying of Radio Control model airplanes. - Charlie Nelson

***Addendum by Stan Alexander:** We contacted Charlie early this year (2025) to let him know he had been selected to become a member of the NASA RC Scale Hall of Fame. The presentation was to be held at the Saturday night banquet at this year's National Championships on July 12th. Charlie and his wife Lynda had made reservations and plans to attend with Tim Dickey and compete in Team Scale with Charlie's 1/4 scale Waco Cabin model. He came down sick about a month before and passed away on Saturday morning, July 12th. It was a somber group of friends and modelers there at the banquet that night. Jack Buckley accepted the personal plaque for Lynda and delivered it to her the next week. Charlie will be sorely missed by all who knew him - very much.*



***Charlie's Waco Cabin model flown by Tim Dickey at the 2025 Nats.
Photo by Stan Alexander.***

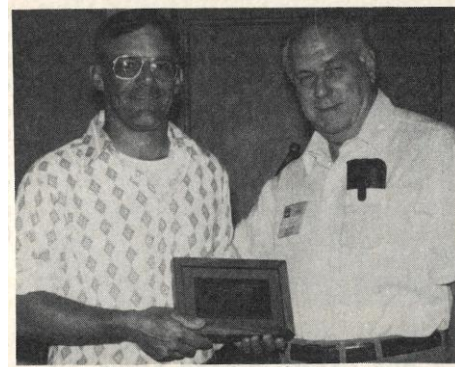
The following information about Charlie is pulled from the AMA News section of Model Aviation magazine, March 1986 issue, from the article titled "More Vital People Awards Made at the 1985 Nats". Below is the first, second, and 16th paragraphs of that article. The full article can be read in the Model Aviation Digital Library at <https://library.modelaviation.com/edition/model-aviation-198603#&gid=1&pid=96>.

More Vital People Awards Made at the 1985 Nats

"In 1984, the first of six Carl and Beth Goldberg Vital People Awards were presented. This was the start of a recognition program for vital people in the background of the modelling movement – the newsletter editors, contest organizers and judges, club officers, and others whose efforts enhance the enjoyment of the hobby and whose accomplishments are seldom formally acknowledged. This recognition is in the form of annual cash awards, together with appropriate plaques, for up to six people per year. The Academy of Model Aeronautics administers these awards.

"For 1985, four additional awards were approved and three were presented at the National Championships. The fourth will be presented in the near future.

...**Charles Nelson**, left, of Berlin, Massachusetts, President and Chief Instructor of the Central Massachusetts RC Modelers, was also Vice-President for two years and on the Board of Directors three years; also, a Contest Director for six years. He devoted many weekends and weekdays to teach students how to fly models, including special efforts concerning teaching the technique of scale building and model flying. Charles is known as one who does not keep "secrets" but rather enjoys telling all he knows from his wealth of modeling knowledge. His biggest contribution is the gift of time to help others."



John Worth (right) presenting Charles Nelson (left) with a Carl and Beth Goldberg Vital People Award plaque during the 1985 Nats.

Photo published in Model Aviation magazine, March 1986, page 96.

This PDF is property of the Academy of Model Aeronautics. Permission must be granted by the AMA History Project for any reprint or duplication for public use.

AMA History Project
National Model Aviation Museum
5151 E. Memorial Dr.
Muncie IN 47302
(765) 287-1256, ext. 511
historyproject@modelaircraft.org

