



The AMA History Project Presents: Autobiography of DAVE A. THORNBURG

Born April 28, 1942 Started modeling in 1947
AMA #11713



Written & Submitted by DAT (02/1997); Transcribed by NR (05/1997); Edited by SS (2002), Reformatted by JS (02/2010)

Career:

- June 1973: Became an AMA Contest Director
 - 1978-1982: wrote 48 consecutive columns for *Model Builder* magazine
 - 1990: Published *Old Buzzard's Soaring Book*; second edition published in 1993
 - 1992: Published *Do You Speak Model Airplane?* – An informal history of aeromodeling in the U.S.
 - 1995: Wrote/acted 45-minute video based on Buzzard book
 - In *Model Builder* columns, introduced and popularized Radio Control hand launch glider competition; published April 1980
 - Presently (February 1997) hold Class A Radio Control Sailplane duration record
 - Serving on AMA History Program board (which was later renamed the AMA History Project)
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I was born five months after Pearl Harbor and my modeling interest goes back beyond memory.

On farm east of Cincinnati, summer 1947, age five: while cutting balsa parts for ideal ship model, I sliced the tip of my right index finger off clean, using single edge razor. Suddenly I became conscious, maybe for first time. I stared hard at my finger and had two thoughts: 1. it looks like sliced ham, and 2. lucky it's not bleeding, because the folks would get upset and maybe take my razor. Milliseconds later blood gushed, I yowled, and my arthritic dad came up the stairs on JATO. Who knows when I got my razor back? My fingernail was misshapen well into my 20s.

Before farm was sold in 1951, (age 9), I had my own self-created model room in barn, where I attempted every Comet kit I could acquire. Supplies came from Shillitoe's Department Store, Cincinnati; from Milford Hardware in Milford, Ohio; plus a small drugstore in Fayetteville, and the Woolworth's in nearby Lynchburg.

I recall especially a Comet P40 that nearly flew, and a silver-doped B-26 that emphatically didn't. I also remember a HUGE (36"?) parasol Heinkel observation, a rubber kit of unknown origin, possibly prewar, because I seem to recall little corked bottles of glue and/or dope. And Strombeck-Becker solids: a high-wing on floats and a low-wing (Globe Swift?) on wheels, for holding out the car window. A few antique car and train kits, too - the cars (plastics) were by Hudson Miniatures.

In this timeframe, Popsicle Pete would mail you free Cleveland Quickies in return for red-polka

dot Popsicle bags. And Buster Brown provided an aluminum (or maybe tin) army pursuit kit for buying BB shoes and getting your feet X-rayed.

Around age 10, I got on a flying wing-and-saucer kick. Cleveland's 2-in-1 saucers (39cents) taught me about ogee airfoils (though not the term), and Zaic's Thermic Trio introduced flying wings. I built dozens of original wings and saucers. Some even flew. My dad encouraged these oddities – thinking, I suppose, that they might lead to aero engineering. Or maybe he was just a sucker for anything odd; he had just lost \$200 down on a Tucker.

The standards for flight were set early, during winters in Texas and/or California, by Jim Walker's 74 Fighter and A-J Hornet. Also a Guillow's (I believe) biplane glider that cost a dime. I discovered, or maybe read, that the 74 Fighter could be improved by slicing off the cockpit, gluing the wing on top with polyhedral, sanding the color off everything. This created mountains of blue sawdust in the winter of 1962 in Los Angeles.

Most supplies came from Colonel Bob's in Long Beach because I didn't know about Sweeney's. I also built my aunt a Gollywock from a kit we picked out together at Reginald Denny's in Hollywood.

Economics continued to dictate rubber and glider models, even though my first engine-powered Free Flight model had arrived the previous Christmas in 1951. With the Korean War spooling up and everyone talking shortages, my dad conspired with Billy Maxwell at Maxwell's Hobby House in Galveston to convince me that no engines were available. Like, none. Zero. For the duration. By Christmas Eve I was one sick pup – so miserable that mom made pop fork over the Berkeley Yank and K&B .035 that evening, instead of waiting for morning. Oh, joy! We flew it together the next Sunday. This eliminated the Santa Claus nonsense forever.

Later I built a Profile Powerhouse for the K&B, and lost it in a cornfield near future stunt champ Lou McFarland's house just south of Georgetown, Kentucky.

Around age 12, I discovered that widows would overpay young boys who sweated hard while mowing their lawn. This knowledge exploded my modeling horizons. I bought Wasps and Cubs and even a water-cooled Atwood .049, for boats. I flew Scientific Ukies, Berkeley Free Flights, plus at least three of Harry Williamson's 36-inch Aeronca Champs (Nov. 1954 issue of *Model Airplane News*). But mostly I designed my own sad little creations, probably, because they escape memory. I lost a Wasp on a rude homemade biplane, then another Wasp on a grass-green flying saucer. I loved new designs and studied every construction article in all three magazines every month.

In 1956, to distract me from cars, my folks surprised me with a Super Aerotrol rig. It didn't work. I wheedled a driver's license at age 14 anyway. I used it to get to hand launch glider contests in Houston.

For the Aerotrol, I designed a small, conventional Cox-powered job and promptly shorted the XFGI tube trying to shoehorn everything inside. Next, a flying saucer for a Cub .09. Saucer

performed better than radio did.

At this point two experienced adult modelers from Texas City, my first and only mentors, adopted me.

They converted the Aerotrol to Lorenz circuitry, and tried hard to steer me toward an Esquire or Mambo. It was excellent advice, but largely wasted. Though one of them, a master modeler, named Bob Osburn, did manage to teach me to silk. But I'd been on my own for too many years by then and I could learn from magazines and from experience, but not from mentors.

I think we moved around so much when I was young that I had long since learned to do without people. If another kid showed interest in the hobby that was fine – I helped him all I could. But if not, I flew alone. And that was fine, too. Still is.

Fellow modelers have always been scarce. In 13 school systems in five states, only Monrovia and Compton (both in California) had model magazines in their libraries. And in those 12 years and 13 schools, I met exactly three other builders.

Radio Control was exciting, but electronics left me cold. It was all much too exotic for everyday fare; I continued to build and fly Free Flight and U-Control through high school.

When Sputnik went up in October of 1957, a buddy came by that very evening and we fantasized a Radio Control saucer to buzz the local football field at halftime: flashing lights, odd muffler – a little something to put the fear of God in the local Baptists. I designed and framed the thing the following weekend, but before I could cover it and install the Cub .14, every idiot in America was seeing flying saucers. I quit in disgust. The framework hung in garage shop until college.

My roommate at the University of Texas in 1963 pushed me seriously into radio. Together we got our first really satisfactory Radio Control flights ever, using Ace/Kraft K3VK receiver and World Engines Mule. I designed a number of small models for Cox .049's and sent the best one to McGovern at *Flying Models*, with return postage, but he black holed it. I didn't submit anything else until after I got married and moved to California.

In late 1966, I sent Bill Winter a six-foot all-balsa glider called the Zephyr; he published it in *American Modeler* magazine. It was a big thrill to have my name in print, of course, plus a fat check for the balsa fund.

By then I was narrowing toward Radio Control sailplanes, especially after moving to Albuquerque in 1969 and discovering a handful of guys who had all built Zephyrs and were sloping them over lava cliffs. 1970 was a prolific year. My photo album shows 18 different Radio Control Soarers, both slope and thermal. I sent a J-3 Cub sloper to *RC Modeler* magazine but it was heavy and tricky and Dewey sent it back – my only reject. Eight or 10 articles turned out in summer of 1970, mostly for *Model Airplane News* and Winter's short-lived *Sport Modeler*, but also for *Flying* and *Boys' Life*.

Became a solid member of the Albuquerque Radio Soaring Enthusiasts for next three or four years – it is the only “club” (no sanction, no officers, no rules) I’ve ever really belonged to. The group was called ASSERS when I arrived; I personally upgraded the name to ARSE.

I sold an ancient Bonner 4RS in 1970 and bought Orbit 4, and then after months of scrimping, added a Kraft 4. This taught me at age 28 a lesson that any bright kid of 10 might have gleaned: two radios are NOT twice as much fun as one. At this point, my basic American acquisitiveness drained away with a whoosh, and I gave up forever the silly sportscar-and-swimming pool chase.

I dropped out of doctoral program in 1972 to found Southwestern Sailplanes, a small kitting concern that pretended to be dedicated to gliders but made its money from power planes: Honker, Honker Bipe, Li'l Gypsy, and Gypsy Lady. Don Dewey at *RC Modeler* gave me wonderful support, advice, and publicity. The company sponsored New Mexico's first glider contest in June of 1973. I have been AMA Contest Director (CD) since then.

I began competing heavily in Radio Control soaring. Won a few, lost a lot. I joined LSF and was first to complete Level V goal-and-return task, then considered (like all things yet undone) impossible. Used Graupner Cumulus for task.

I assisted the U.S. team as tow man at first two World Champs for FAI Soaring in 1977 (Pretoria, S.A.) and 1979 (Amay, Belgium).

I designed (1975) and kitted (1979) Bird of Time, a 3-meter Radio Control sailplane.

In 1978, I was roped into a regular column for Bill Northrop's *Model Builder* magazine. I turned in 48 straight pieces without missing a deadline.

In *Model Builder* columns, I introduced and popularized Radio Control hand launch glider competition. In April 1980, I published 54 Sunbird, the world's first Radio Control hand launch glider. I organized the first hand launch only contest in Los Angeles in 1980. I wrote basic rules that were ultimately adopted by AMA.

I sold Southwestern Sailplanes to Mark Smith at Mark's Models in August 1980, and returned to my first love, sport Free Flight and OHLG.

In 1990, I put together 13 of the *Model Builder* pieces into *Old Buzzard's Soaring Book*, a handbook for thermal flying that sold 5,000 copies. In 1992, I published *Do You Speak Model Airplane?*, a history of modeling in America. It went out of print in 1996 with 2,000 copies sold. I wrote/acted 45-minute video based on Buzzard book in 1995.

I entered the 1977 and 1990 Nationals (Nats) and spent three of four days at the 1996 Nats as contest help.

Presently (February 1997), I hold the Class A Radio Control Sailplane duration record and serve on the AMA History Program board. I still fly Free Flight, U-Control, and Radio Control – sometimes all three in a weekend. I seldom compete.

I gave up CA glue because it poisons me. I rarely build with composites. Like Charlie Grant, I've returned to the basics. I have simple test for a new model: hold it up to the sun and if you can't see through it, to hell with it.

Bibliography of publications

April 1967	<i>American Modeler</i>	Zephyr, 72" Radio Control ~sailplane
November 1968	<i>Model Airplane News</i>	Ryan ST, profile .02 free flight
May 1970	<i>Model Airplane News</i>	Swinch - glider winch made from bicycle
January 1971	<i>American Modeler</i>	Bonanza/Mustang ~hand launch gliders
November-1971	<i>American Modeler</i>	Schweitzer 1-2~9, firefight glider
January-1972	<i>RC Modeler</i>	Article: Slope soaring in Colorado Rockies
May-1972	<i>Junior American Modeler</i>	Apple Box ~Bipe, for whip control
December-1972	<i>Model Builder</i>	Don Quixote, a Radio Control sailplane
December-1972	<i>Model Builder</i>	49er, Free Flight rubber
June-1973	<i>RC Modeler</i>	Honker, .049 radio plane
March-1974	<i>RC Modeler</i>	Honker Bipe, .15-.19 radio plane
October-1974	<i>Model Airplane News</i>	Phoebe, a Radio Control sailplane
January-1975	<i>Model Airplane News</i>	Thomas-Morse Scout, .02 Free Flight
July-1977	<i>RC Modeler</i>	Report: first F3B world soaring champs
January-1979	<i>RC Modeler</i>	Bird of Time, a Radio Control sailplane
August-1980	<i>RC Modeler</i>	Article: So You Want to be a Manufacturer?
April-1981	<i>RC Modeler</i>	Honker Rocket, a .049 Radio Control racer
September-1983	<i>RC Modeler</i>	Balsaholic - a confessional
October-1994	<i>Flying Models</i>	Li'l ~Roc, an .02 Free Flight
July-1996	<i>Model Aviation</i>	Flat Albert, an .02 Free Flight bipe
November-1996	<i>Model Aviation</i>	Report: AMA Celebration of Eagles

Monthly columns

1978-1982: Beginning in September 1978, wrote 48 consecutive columns for *Model Builder* magazine, ending with August 1982 issue.

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1992: Published *Do You Speak Model Airplane?*, an informal history of aeromodeling in the U.S.
Dave Thornburg 02/1997

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