



The AMA History Project Presents: Biography of DONALD W. (DON) ANDERSON



Modeler since 1969

Written by AMA Staff (11/2009), JG (04/2008); Reformatted by JS (12/2009, 09/2010)

The following is from the January 2010 issue of Model Aviation magazine. Anderson was inducted into the 2009 Model Aviation Hall of Fame.

Don Anderson began modeling in 1969 while attending the University of Illinois, where he graduated with a degree in mechanical engineering.

He began working toward his MBA and decided to go into the wholesale Radio Control business. Don founded Great Planes Model Distributors, which bought products from Radio Control manufacturers and resold them to hobby stores.

He hired magazine writer Eric Meyers and the two quickly expanded the wholesale operation. The business grew rapidly.

Don enjoyed Bud Nosen's Giant Scale designs as well as Quarter Midget (.15-sized versions) and Pattern. He was an active member of the Champaign Country RC Club and served as president, vice president, and newsletter editor. Don organized and contest directed (CDED) the inaugural Great Planes Fly-In, which was one of the first Giant Scale fly-ins in the Midwest.

In 1981, Don decided to go into manufacturing and purchased Bridi Hobby Enterprises. Don struggled financially with the manufacturing operation, while the distributing company remained profitable. A year later, he purchased Andrews Model Aircraft Company. Bridi and Andrews became the starting point for Great Planes Model Manufacturing Company, a division of Great Planes Model Distributors.

By 1984, Don was making money creating airplane kits, but interest rates and costs continued to drag profits down. He sold the wholesale operation to Clint Atkins and used the proceeds to get the manufacturing division out of debt. Atkins had also purchased Tower Hobbies earlier that same year and combined the two entities to form Hobbico.

Don assembled a team of designers and managers at Great Planes Model Manufacturing, including Steve Ellison, Dave Ribbe, and Jim Schmidt. The accounting and production operations were computerized and the company was the first to utilize CAD drafting in the model airplane business.

Don was instrumental in helping form the Radio Control Hobby Trade Association (RCHTA). That effort ultimately succeeded and the annual Radio Control show in Chicago became one of the world's largest.

Don sold Great Planes Model Manufacturing to Hobbico in 1991 and became a senior vice president in charge of product development. He was involved in all of Hobbico's proprietary product lines. Currently, Don is the president of the company.

Don is a member of AMA's Marketing Committee that drafted a proposal to implement the new Park Pilot membership. For his work, he was awarded AMA's President's Award in February of 2008.

Don Anderson has continually remained an ardent model airplane enthusiast. He attends consumer shows and enjoys talking with customers. He still appreciates a good airplane kit and has an active role in overseeing all of Hobbico's design and development, in addition to having ultimate responsibility for all of its service and support sections.

Don has helped organize and/or sponsor the Extreme Flight Championships (XFC) and E-Fest. He still occasionally flies models for fun and enjoys it most with close friends.

His companies and Hobbico have been directly responsible for producing many of the products available today. Don has had a hand in everything from RealFlight simulators, to airplane kits and accessories, to model engines, Radio Control boats, helicopters, and cars.

Don has been married to his wife, Paula, for 38 years. His family includes their three daughters, two sons-in-law, and two grandchildren.

Don's support of and involvement in model aviation, the hobby industry, and AMA continues to be a constant in his life.

The following was published in the April 2008 issue of Model Aviation magazine, written by John Glezellis.

In the past, we looked at the 2007 Basic International Miniature Aerobatic Club (IMAC) sequence. I described each maneuver and its placement within the aerobatic box, and I wrote briefly about Aresti.

This month I will take a short break from Scale Aerobatics because I would like to share a recent interview I conducted with Mr. Don Anderson. I have had the pleasure of knowing Mr. Anderson for the past few years, and he is someone we can learn from in both a business and family-oriented sense. Throughout this interview, you will see how Don's interest in aviation developed and how he turned that passion into a career.

JG: *What sparked your interest in aviation, and in particular radio-control airplanes?*

DA: I grew up on a farm in East Central Illinois and was the third of four children, all spaced four years apart. Dad was a bank loan officer by day and a cattle and grain farmer by night. I was his helping hand between the time I was about nine and when I started high school.

When growing up, my hobbies included getting to build an occasional plastic model, plus some hunting and fishing on the farm. Mom had a big garden and did lots of canning, sewing, and craft projects. She was a 4-H leader and thus I was in 4-H!

In the summers, when not helping do the garden and cattle chores, I mowed the yard, drove a tractor, built fences to keep the cattle in, cut weeds out of soybean fields, and, in general, worked. Once in the seventh and eighth grades, I got to play one sport at a time, including softball [during the spring and summer] and basketball [fall and winter].

My model building progressed up to the point where I started to build a Guillow's World War II fighter while I was in high school. However, my dad had a heart attack the summer before I started high school.

Resulting, we sold the farm and moved to town on a small lake. I got the Guillow's model framework together, but the project stalled once I found that it was difficult to apply the covering. The only balsa airplanes that I ever owned that flew were rubber-powered gliders.

During my sophomore year in college, I lived in a dorm across the hall from a guy that introduced himself as someone needing help with a computer science class. We studied some together and soon became good friends. I bought some cheap golf clubs and began playing some during high school and he played as well, so we played golf quite a bit.

Over the next summer, I got married and he began building model airplanes. When he returned that fall, he brought me a copy of *Model Airplane News* and told me he thought we should try flying RC airplanes, which resulted in us going to a hobby shop and getting one RC system and two engines and airplane kits. Our first flights got me hooked on the hobby!

It turns out that the guy I started flying with in 1968 was Bruce Holecek, who later founded Tower Hobbies. He initially bought products for himself and me at a distributor in Chicago, and he then sold excess parts to our local RC club members. He began the mail-order company the year that I graduated from college, 1971.

Once I was able to fly on my own, I wanted to learn aerobatics. Even though I had never once dreamed of flying a full-scale airplane, I was intrigued by floatplanes that I saw in outdoor magazines as well as aerobatic barnstormers who put on air shows each summer. I wanted to learn to fly just like they did!

JG: What other hobby interests have you pursued and/or are you currently pursuing?

DA: I have always loved to play golf, fish, and hunt. I think I have gone to either Minnesota or Canada fishing nearly every year since 1973. I may have missed one year along the way, but there were others that I have gone multiple times.

I've fished locally some, but mostly on a small lake that I now live on. I've also hunted regularly since I was young, initially hunting quail and pheasants over a bird dog, but more recently

hunting deer with both a compound bow and a shotgun. I've hunted moose in Canada four different times.

Since being in the hobby business, it seems I pursue these other hobbies mostly while on vacation! Golf has definitely taken a backseat to other interests in recent years; however, I still enjoy playing whenever I get a chance.

My fishing hobby also turned into a business in the late 1980s when I decided to make fishing bobbers as a second balsa-wood product line. I set up Thill Fishing Tackle, a company that was sold to Lindy-Little Joe in 1992. I became part owner of Lindy a couple years later and have since enjoyed multiple fishing trips with numerous outstanding fishermen.

***JG:** What are your primary interests in RC modeling (e.g. Scale aircraft, aerobatic models, etc.)?*

DA: I initially liked Pattern [RC Aerobatics] flying and racing back in the early and mid-1970s. I also got into Giant Scale in the late 1970s. I've always like aerobatic models and still enjoy flying them today, but doing them as a business has made my hobby interest give way to my "business interest."

***JG:** Have you designed many models yourself? If so, what models were they, when were they brought to market, etc.?*

DA: The first designs that I did mostly on my own were back in 1978 and 1979. Both were done initially as airplanes for me to fly, but with hopes that Dub Nosen might make them into kits. The first was the *Nosen Big Stik*, which he did kit and sell.

I later completed a 102-inch Phil Kraft *Super Fli*, which never did go into production. However, I did fly it for several years.

In 1981, I bought Bridi Hobby Enterprises and began manufacturing airplanes on my own. I was involved to a large degree in many of the early Great Planes Model Manufacturing designs; however, my role has become more and more managerial as time has gone by. Today at Hobbico, we have an Engineering/R&D Department who designs, tests, and creates the products that we sell.

***JG:** What was your previous work experience before working at Hobbico?*

DA: I worked my way through high school as a draftsman, working summers and a few evenings after school at a local manufacturing company. I did engineering drawings of truck beds one summer, then inked drawings of highways and road construction for the State Highway Department another summer. One summer I was a survey assistant and helped to survey Interstate 70 through a forest about 75 miles south of Champaign [Illinois].

After I graduated from college in 1971, I went to work at Pontiac Motor Division of GM for two years. I spent my first year testing bumpers on cars. My second year I supervised a dynamometer lab where we tested engines for durability. I was then put in charge of setting up cars for emission tests, and that was what I was doing when I decided to return to Champaign in 1973 and try setting up a model distributing company to supply hobby shops.

I founded Great Planes Model *Distributors Company* in May of 1973 and operated it until I sold it to the owner of Hobbico in 1984. At that point, I retained ownership of Great Planes Model *Manufacturing*, which I had started in 1981, and I continued to own and operate that until 1991 when I also sold it to Hobbico. I have remained an employee, senior VP of product development, since 1991.

JG: How and when did you start Great Planes Model Manufacturing? Did you have any partners in starting this business?

DA: I began Great Planes Model Manufacturing by purchasing a supplier to the distributing company in 1981. I initially purchased Bridi Hobby Enterprises, and then purchased Andrews Aircraft Model Company a year later to form Great Planes Model Manufacturing.

At that time, I still owned Great Planes Model Distributors and had a good staff that helped with the accounting and management for both companies. I was the sole owner and had no partners. I had a good bank that supplied working capital for my operations, and I basically borrowed much of the money needed from the bank in order to allow me to make the purchases.

JG: What departments within Hobbico do you work with on a day-to-day basis?

DA: My role at Hobbico is to oversee all of Hobbico's proprietary brand product lines in terms of product development and after-sale service and support. I am responsible for our R&D Department, where new products are tested, designed, and evaluated.

We have product managers who determine what products we should produce and what products need revisions and/or replacement in our lines. Whenever production difficulties arise with a manufacturer, we determine how to fix the products.

Our service and support groups also report to me. From these groups I hear consumer feedback and then know what needs attention in our product lines.

We interact every day with our Purchasing Department and sales groups. We tell Purchasing where to initially buy our new products, and we coordinate sale estimates with our sales staff so we can project initial order quantities with our suppliers.

As in any larger company, I report to Hobbico's president, who oversees all other divisions within Hobbico. I am responsible for creating budgets yearly and then monitoring my own budget accounts.

For staff issues, I work with our Human Resources Department to maintain staff and search for new staff members. In working with vendors, there are also payment issues and credit issues that require me to work with our Accounting Division.

Lastly, computer needs are addressed with our Data Processing Group (a part of our Accounting Division), and any special new program needs are coordinated directly with the directors of the Data Processing Group.

You have learned a little about one of our hobby's most recognized names. As it has been illustrated here, it is possible to make your "passion" for Radio Control aviation into a business, but it requires time and dedication.

Every now and again, I plan to take a break from the typical "Aerobatics" column and include an interview with someone who is involved in model aviation in both a hobby sense and a business sense. Until then, keep practicing the various IMAC Aresti maneuvers we have covered thus far!

Until next time, fly hard!

Source:

Great Planes Model Manufacturing
(800) 637-7660
www.greatplanes.com

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

