



# The AMA History Project Presents: Biography of LARRY LEONARD

AMA # L11911



Written by PL (2022), BS (2022), CS (2022), & OD (2022); Edited & Reformatted by JS (12/2022-01/2023)

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*Larry Leonard was inducted into the AMA Model Aviation Hall of Fame in 2022. The following was provided by Peggy Leonard in January 2022 for Larry's 2022 AMA Model Aviation Hall of Fame award nomination, with additional information submitted in September 2022 to the AMA History Project. Peggy and Larry gave permission for the AMA History Project to include it here.*

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I am honored to nominate my husband Larry Leonard to the AMA Hall of Fame. I've been trying to keep this a secret from him. It's been challenging. Below is some of the timeline I was able to put together. This is through years of talking with Larry and other RC hobbyists and flying friends. This is not everything by any means.

- Member of Aero Design U-Control Club in Lincoln, Nebraska when he was growing up.
- 1962-1973: Larry's Hobby Center
- He lived at the flying field (Sepulveda Basin) every weekend to promote RC and help flyers. At this time he also helped reestablish San Fernando Valley R/C Flyers
- June 1969: Became Contest Director for the San Fernando Valley R/C Flyers
- 1973-1981: Established A&L Distributors to make it easier for hobby shops to have access to RC parts in one place instead of hunting and pecking businesses
- Nationals:
  - 1969 Grand National Champion in Radio Control
  - Won 2 individual events. A record that still stands.
  - Open Pattern Flying and Formula 1 Racing
- Swept the Nats, 1969 San Fernando Valley Flyers, Larry Leonard, Open Class, Bob Smith, Senior Class, Paul Whit Stockwell, Junior Class
- 1970: 2<sup>nd</sup> Grand National Champion in Radio Control, 1st FAI Racing, 5th Pattern Flying
- Competed in:
  - FAI Racing
  - Pattern flying
  - Formula 1 Racing
- 1969: Wonderful World of Disney film Varda, the Peregrine Falcon. He shot camera footage mounted in the nose of the plane. Filmed in Alaska from the point of view of a Falcon.
- 1970: Lockheed contacted Larry to see if it was possible to fly while watching a TV screen. Larry contacted Kraft to engineer a buddy box system. Kraft was the first to offer this with their radios after that. With Bob Smith they were able to successfully accomplish the flight. Lockheed presented this footage to the Pentagon. Lockheed won the contract for the first RPV. Don Lowe called Larry to confirm that it was really done.
- 1971: Original captain (then Bob Violet) of the USA FAI Team World competition; championships held in England

- 1972: Des Bartlett, Emmy award winning movie, Survival: Flight of the Snow Geese. Shooting the footage from the birds point of view as in the [previous] Disney film.
- Traveled through Mexico with Phil Kraft doing demonstration flights, promoting RC airplanes and the hobby.
- Designed Das Little Stik, kitted by Midwest
- Mentor to Bob Smith, Hall of Famer
- In the RC magazines, 1969 to about 1975
- Even today, 50 years later, people know who Larry Leonard is. He occasionally gets what I call a “fan” letter, past flyers telling Larry how much of an impact and influence he had in their flying.

At 80 years old he still flies; visits flying fields and helps whoever needs help. At times, again, people have heard of Larry and his accomplishments. When we go to RC hobby shops most of the owners have heard of Larry. On Facebook groups he is mentioned when “those days” are mentioned.

Since those days, he has built several RC cars. We set up a course in the desert and raced them with friends. Larry has built and flown at least 10 helicopters. He was diagnosed with benign essential tremors. He felt that with the concentration it took to fly the helicopter, it was beneficial to his shakes. Eventually it got too bad. He now has a Traxxas Revo 3.3 Nitro truck that he zips around with. He is also enjoying his Phantom 4 drone. In addition, he flies several smaller planes, two being 24” mini stick planes. We travel in a coach during the winter. Larry has at one time had five helicopters and four planes (one plane, a gift from Bob Smith, had a four-foot fuselage) hanging from the valances in the bedroom. It shows you where I fit in, hahaha. So he definitely has had a lifetime passion for the RC industry. I have always enjoyed watching him fly his planes, patterns and stunts. But his passion is so much more. He has always wanted the RC industry to grow and prosper. It has been his life.

I believe in my heart that Larry truly deserves to be in the Hall of Fame. Thank you for your consideration.

Peggy Leonard

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*The following was provided by Bob Smith in January 2022 for Larry Leonard’s 2022 AMA Model Aviation Hall of Fame award nomination. Bob gave permission for the AMA History Project to include it here.*

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Dear Academy of Model Aeronautics Hall of Fame

I would like to nominate Larry Leonard to the AMA Hall of Fame. I first met Larry when I was 13, in 1965, and I was struggling to learn to fly RC. Larry, who was owner of Larry’s Hobby Center in Northridge, CA, was very friendly and helpful on setting me up with the proper trainer and equipment. Within a few months Larry taught me fly got me to solo and I

got interested to compete in RC competition. Larry was one of the best pattern flyers in the country and when I was 14, Larry took me to my first pattern contest in Madera, CA. Madera was over a 3 hour drive; Larry drove me, and I stayed in his room. Try that today! I got second place in class B pattern, and I was hooked on RC competition.

Larry also competed on Formula 1 racing and that is where my interest really grew. In 1968, with the help of Larry again setting me up with the right airplane and motor, I competed in my first Formula 1 race in Las Vegas and got 3rd place.

Larry was the top RC pilot in 1969, winning 1st place in Pattern and Formula 1 at the Nationals, a record that still stands today - winning both Pattern and Formula! Larry really took me under his wing over the next few years, not only in Formula 1 but in business, too. I can tell you that Larry is the biggest reason I am where I am today, being such a great role model not only in RC but in life and business. In 1970, I started manufacturing Formula 1 kits, again Larry guiding me with great business advice and work ethics - always work hard and pursue your dreams, and have fun along the way. As luck would have it, I won Formula 1 at the 1970 Nationals in Chicago, all because of Larry taking me under his wing. Larry is the most special person to me after my Mom and Dad. I was so lucky to have met him at an early age being such a great role model for my whole life. Please consider Larry to be inducted into the AMA Hall of Fame. No one is more deserving than Larry to be inducted into the Hall of Fame.

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*The following was provided by Charlee Smith for Larry Leonard's 2022 AMA Model Aviation Hall of Fame award nomination. Charlee gave permission for the AMA History Project to include it here.*

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Larry Leonard is one of the most influential players in the story of model aviation in Southern California. As the owner of Larry's Hobby Center in Northridge, he taught many dozens of modelers how to fly RC aircraft, some of whom went on to national championships, others as leaders in the hobby industry. Larry helped to establish the San Fernando Valley R/C Flyers, which is still one of the AMA's largest sanctioned clubs. He worked with Hollywood studios in their first use of RC models for their special effects, and with Lockheed during their initial development of UAVs.

With Bud Anders, he established A&L Distributors, which became the dominate West Coast source for model hobby products. Larry created a smaller version of Phil Kraft's Das Ugly Stik that was made into the popular Midwest Products kit Das Little Stik, a design that still exists in many iterations today. Larry's flying skills are second to none and he won many championships in RC Pattern and Racing. He has had a tremendous influence on a generation of modelers.

Charlee Smith  
Templeton, CA

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*The following was provided by Otto Dieffenbach for Larry Leonard's 2022 AMA Model Aviation Hall of Fame award nomination. Otto gave permission for the AMA History Project to include it here.*

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AMA Hall of Fame Letter of Support for Larry Leonard  
Submission by Otto Dieffenbach, AMA 50113

I am honored to nominate Larry Leonard to the AMA Hall of Fame. Larry has made huge positive impacts to the hobby as a mentor, competitor and business man. Please allow me to cover a few examples.

I have been involved in the Radio Control (RC) hobby since my first flight at the age of 12 in 1966. At a young age, the competition and technical disciplines I mastered inspired me to reach executive positions in both aerospace and communications.

My first Nats was in 1969. It was at Willow Grove that a 15-year-old kid first introduced himself to Larry. Larry had just won the Grand Champion trophy [in Radio Control] but was willing to take 5 minutes to discuss his Kwik Fly IV in detail. This impressed me and became an example I applied throughout my career. Larry taught me the importance of mentorship over self-indulgence.

Prior to the Nats, I had never heard of Larry Leonard, but as I followed his accomplishments I realized I was only one of hundreds of flyers Larry mentored. The list includes Hall of Famer Bob Smith, who won the Senior category in 1969, and Whit Stockwell, who beat me in the last two rounds to take Junior, a West Coast clean sweep.

I moved to the West Coast in 1975. I flew Masters Pattern in the late '70s and competed with many Valley and Southern California flyers. Each had a story similar to mine of how Larry had mentored their development.

Larry's competition accomplishments were many, to include back-to-back Nats Grand Champion trophies [in Radio Control] in 1969 and 1970. In 1969, he won Unlimited Pattern and Formula 1 Pylon. This was incredible due to the number of entrants. My memory is that we had over 130 contestants in Pattern and 70-plus in Pylon. 1970 was almost identical, with a rain soaked Pattern 5th place with a damaged plane and a FAI Pylon Racing 1st place. Larry went on to lead and captain the 1971 FAI World USA Team to 1st place. In addition, Larry dominated regional and local AMA competition events, actually beating Phil Kraft in his hay day.

After achieving these heights, Larry backed off competing and focused on his business interests. His business involvement began in 1962 with the opening of Larry's Hobby Center in Northridge, California. During the golden age of Radio Control, Larry's operation and his evaluation skills made his Hobby Center the primary business development and market assessment arm of Kraft Systems and many other manufacturers.

Larry's relationship with Hall of Famer Phil Kraft started when Phil was working out of his

garage making single channel transmitters and receivers. Larry was very active in RC with Deltron, Orbit, Babcock and Bonner equipment. Kraft's single channel radios were winners in price and quality. Larry sold a bunch. Then came a 6-12 channel reed system, followed by Phil's proportional digital systems.

On Tuesdays, Larry would take his motorcycle down to El Monte, pick up radios, and deliver any repairs. On one trip, Phil asked if Larry wanted to join him and his mother for lunch. Phil's mother asked Larry if he thought this RC stuff would last. Larry replied that he "could sell all Phil could make and had people waiting for systems."

Phil informed Larry his mom was very impressed, and that Phil would be expanding his operations. Larry found out later that Mrs. Kraft loaned Phil \$10,000 to start the ball rolling. Roll it did. Phil moved to a small building, bigger than his garage, and he was on his way. Kraft became the RC system to own and fly. Phil would call Larry from time to time and ask if he would like to try out a new system and provide feedback. On Phil's behalf, Larry attended trade shows and marketed to many people.

At the 1977 Riverside Nats, I competed in Masters with a Kraft System. I was in the Air Force at the time, developing planes at Edwards Air Force Base. Phil approached me, an unknown to him, and asked me to collect 20 of my friends and he'd take us to dinner. I sat shoulder to shoulder with Phil for 4 hours, and among his many stories was the one Larry related to me above. Phil believed Larry's market assessment help was key to Kraft's success.

Larry also helped Lockheed transform the Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV). In 1970, working for Lockheed (under a DARPA contract), Larry became the world's first First Person Video (FPV) pilot. Larry, with the assistance of Hall of Famer, Bob Smith, built a Lanier Comet and attached a one-of-a-kind Skunk Works video camera in the nose of the plane. He mounted the engine above on a tripod. The plane also carried an analog video downlink transmitter that transmitted video to a monitor positioned in front of Larry, at the pilot's ground station. Larry had Phil Kraft build the world's first Buddy Box system so Bob Smith could serve as safety pilot. This Buddy Box feature became standard on all later Kraft radios.

Larry's task was to fly the plane through a 6-foot by 6-foot target. On the first pass, Larry successfully hit the target's center and the video recording was rushed to the Pentagon. Hall of Famer Don Lowe sat on the Pentagon board that received the flight video. Don was unaware of the actual pilot's name but on a hunch called Larry; Larry confirmed that the video was real and that he had performed the flight.

In 1973, Larry sold Larry's Hobby Center to the Smith brothers, Charlee and Bob. He focused on his distribution center, A&L Distributors. Behind the scenes, Larry became owner of one of the largest hobby parts distributors. He continued his leadership of this business until 1981.

Larry's impact as a mentor, competitor, and business man are significant and more than worthy of induction to the AMA Hall of Fame. He should join his students, fellow competitors, and fellow business man.

Sincerely,  
Otto Dieffenbach, AMA 50113

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*The following images were provided by Larry and Peggy Leonard to the AMA History Project for this biography.*

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*1969: At the Nats, Larry won 1st place Formula 1 racing and was Grand National Champion in Radio Control. Image provided by Larry and Peggy Leonard. Photographer unknown.*



*1969: (Left to right) Bob Smith (Senior), Whit Stockwell (Junior), and Larry Leonard (Open), all members of the San Fernando Valley Flyers, swept the Nationals in Radio Control Pattern Flying. Larry won the Grand National Championship in Radio Control in 1969 and 1970. Image provided by Larry and Peggy Leonard. Photograph taken by Mr. Stockwell.*



*1970: Larry Leonard's 2nd Grand National Championship in Radio Control. Larry flew his Liberty Belle. He won Formula 11 also. Image provided by Larry and Peggy Leonard. Photographer unknown.*

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

