



The AMA History Project Presents: Biography of JAMES ROBERT SMURTHWAITE



August 5, 1921 – 1992 Started modeling in the 1930s
AMA #233261

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The following biography was written and compiled by Frank Macy as part of an application packet to the Model Aviation Hall of Fame in March 2004.

This is the biography of James Robert Smurthwaite, model airplane designer and manufacturer, written and compiled by Frank Macy.

James Robert Smurthwaite was born and raised in Baker, Oregon, the heart of what was known as Oregon Gold country. To this day old covered wagon tracks can still be seen in some areas of the county. Baker was also famous for logging and had several large lumber mills in the valley. Some of the finest old growth timber was harvested and milled in this area. Bob grew up here during the depression years of the 1930s. His father was a millwright employed by the local mills and as Bob grew into his teen years started working summers in the mills. He developed a great love for this choice lumber and for the machinery and tooling required to produce it.

During this period, he also became interested in aviation and began building model airplanes. In the mid-thirties gas powered model airplane engines became available and soon were popular with the hobbyist. This type of model flying was called “Free Flight” and is still enjoyed by modelers today.

This was the modeling world of a young Robert Smurthwaite at the time of his graduation from high school in 1939. He soon discovered one of the drawbacks of flying models free flight is they would often fly away. After experiencing this loss a few times, he was determined to figure out some way to control the flight of his models. After all, the cost of losing an expensive model airplane engine in those days was much more than a poor country boy could afford, let alone considering the tremendous amount of time expended in building the model in the first place.

This prompted Bob to design a system of control of a flying model so as to retain possession of his model at the conclusion of the flight. The date of this endeavor was the summer of 1939. After much experimentation and rebuilding, he finally succeeded with a very smooth control system for his first scale model built exclusively for his control system. The model was the new German experimental fighter known as the Heinkel He 122B and was powered with a new Ohlsson .60 Custom engine.

The design of the control mechanism for his airplane required two lines extending from the mechanism in the plane out to the operator (pilot) 30 to 40 feet to a control handle held by the pilot and maneuvered by him to get the up, down or neutral position of the flight controls. Bob

developed this system of control at a time when others had either perfected their own system and were manufacturing it, or still experimenting with it.

For example, the Stanzel brothers had introduced their beautiful “Shark” models to the world in January 1939, as the “first in control line flying” with what they called “G-Line Control” with a single control. At the same time, Jim Walker, of Portland, Oregon, began manufacturing some of his new planes after years of experimenting and development with what he called “U-Control” using two lines, one for up and one for down. The September 1940 issue of *Model Airplane News* carried a full-page ad introducing the A-J Fireball nationally. None of the information in this paragraph was known at the time by a young country kid named Bob Smurthwaite.

Bob was so pleased with the control line mechanism, which operated flawlessly, in the Heinkel that he decided to build another airplane model of the new British Supermarine Spitfire, and powered it with another Ohlsson engine. This all happened before the war started, but things were already brewing.

After Pearl Harbor and with America now in the war, Bob took the train to Portland to enlist in the Army Air Corps. He had taken the Heinkel with him to fly and to show his friend with whom he would be staying. After enlisting, he was told it would be a few months before he would be called, but decided to stay a few days with his friend and then head home.

Meanwhile, he was anxious to fly his plane, so he and his friend headed over to Grant Park, where he flew the airplane. Of course, this attracted a crowd, among who was a gentleman with an airplane and an engine in it. He told Bob he lives close by and heard the noise and recognized it, and came over to see what it was all about. Bob was astonished at all of this of course, but the man was friendly and genuinely interested, and soon suggested they fly together in a race. He could hardly believe what he was hearing. For one thing, this fellow had his own control system, which was two lines to a handle, like his. Bob didn't know it at the time, but he had just been challenged to race Jim Walker. Jim's plane was the Fireball, and they raced, and Bob won the race, to Jim's utter astonishment.

During the war, Bob served in the CBI Theater as a radio operator flying C-46 and C-47 cargo supply planes into China.

After World War II, Bob went back to his prewar job at American Junior Aircraft Co., in Portland. He was very instrumental in developing new aircraft models at A-J. For example, Jim wanted to update several of the prewar planes and bring them into the “JET” age. The first to be designed was the “74” Fighter Glider which was styled like the Lockheed P-80 Shooting Star, which replaced the prewar A-J Bomber Glider (Martin B-10).

The second project for him to tackle was to update the now famous folding wing Army Interceptor, the same model used by the Army Air Corps for anti-aircraft gunnery practice during the war. This turned out to be more challenging because Jim wanted to use the same hardware tooling for the folding wing mechanism on the new JET design. The old one styled after the old Bell P-39 Airacobra, long gone by now (1946).

One of the things Bob liked was being able to get things done and into production at A-J. He said Jim always treated him like royalty and never put him under stress or pressure, but gave him free reign in the plant and its facility. However, Bob always discussed objectives, ideas and design matters with Jim, and sought his approval before proceeding.

The new folding wing glider that emerged was the jet styled “404 A-J Interceptor, with a little shorter wing span and a smooth, round edged fuselage called “sleek-curve.” Both the model “74” Fighter Glider and the “404” Interceptor were introduced on the market in 1947. The “74” was 10 cents and the “404” was 50 cents at the local hobby shop.

Bob never liked the Portland environment and finally discussed this matter with Jim. It boiled down to going home for Bob, and though they got along together famously, Bob didn’t feel comfortable working for someone else as an employee. On the other hand, Jim recognized the genius and creative skills of Bob and understood where he was coming from. Basically, he makes Bob an offer he couldn’t refuse, which in reality was a win/win situation.

Jim offered to set him up with a production shop of his own in Baker, and contract with him to develop and manufacture new U-Control airplane kits under the American Junior Aircraft Company label. Bingo, it worked.

Following are the airplanes designed and kitted by Bob Smurthwaite for American Junior:

1. Firecat, U-Control Sport, Stunt
2. Bonanza 1/2A U-Control
3. FireBee (T-28) 1/2A U-Control, first with engine speed control
4. Firekitten 1/2A U-Control

Included in Bob’s achievements was a three-line flight system, accomplished by using a floating bell crank in the model. He had designed several U-Control models which were very successful as experimentals, and of which Jim heartily approved. A completely new concept of controlled flight was eagerly perfected and about to be introduced to the public.

Suddenly, on March 12, 1958, at 10 a.m., Jim Walker died in his attorney’s office. The medical examiner’s report said he had a massive heart attack. He was only 53 years of age. This of course changed everything.

The name of a new model manufacturing company “J. Roberts” derived from the initials of one individual named James Robert Smurthwaite, the “J” from James, “Robert” (middle), and “S” from his last name. Not many people know that. Bob was a close friend of mine. In all the time I knew him, he was never one to blow his own horn, although many times I thought he should have. He was a mild, modest gentleman.

The name officially became “J. Roberts Model Manufacturing Company,” Baker Oregon. Some of its products were “Flight Control” 3 line system, “Vari-Speed” Engine Exhaust Control and synchronized “Control Handle” which regulates engine speed setting.

Here were some of their kits for Navy Carrier/Scale:

1. F4U Corsair
2. AM-1 Mauler
3. Skyraider
4. F8F Bearcat
5. an experimental Jet-styled Crusader (note: the prototype of this model is in my collection)

After a few years, he sold the company to Sturdi-Built Models, owned by Bert Quenzer, of Caldwell, Idaho.

He then formed a company called “G-S Products International” to manufacture Navy Carrier kits and a new line of Radio Control Sport planes of his own design, i.e. Firecat, mid-wing LazerCat, Top Cat and the B-cat. He also produced his new Radio Control Scale model kits that were the Howard DGA and Stinson SR6 with floats.

Due to some legal problems, he was forced to rename the company “Jim Roberts Flying Models” and continued producing the above line of models. This continued until his death in July 1992.

Thus concluding a fascinating lifetime journey.

Bob was made an AMA Fellow in 1987, in recognition of his years of manufacturing.

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