

RC Origins

(How I started)

By Gus Garcia

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30, 35-years ago we didn't have cell phones, iPods, PCs, beepers/pagers, Playstation, internet, TiVo, satellite, CNN, MTV, and many other modern day conveniences. Back then channel surfing meant get one of the kids to turn the channel on the TV until dad found something he wanted to watch, otherwise we would have to hear his ongoing banter on how good we have it. Why back in his day they walked uphill, in the snow, both ways, just to get a piece of bread, and how grateful they were to have that slice of bread (I never heard of it snowing in Cuba, did you?). All I kept thinking was, why not stop eating bread, but we couldn't say anything, there was no timeout then, there was belt and buckle for talking back. You kids now-a-days have it so easy (man, I sound just like my father – scary).

I've always had an interest in arts and crafts early on, and was either making something, painting, drawing, assembling plastic model cars, or finding other creative ways to keep myself busy. At about 12 to 14 I would go to the newsstands (looking for my favorite comic books of course, what else would I be there for), and the model railroad magazines always caught my eye due to all the fine model building involved, but I just didn't have the space for a set-up (let me translate that for you – money). Then I began leafing through the RC model airplane magazines, I found the idea of radio controlled airplanes very appealing, and I began getting more and more of these magazines, and scale was what I really liked.

When I would see a model airplane by Dave Platt in the magazines, I was just amazed at what this man could do with paint, and he's still around building model airplanes. In the November issue of Model Aviation you can see a picture of him on page 104 in the Battery Clinic article. But things turned out differently for me as for my interests in the hobby.

By 16 I bought my first model airplane kit, and quickly went about putting it together. Let me tell you how that went, we were a family of 7 living in a two bedroom house with no space to even change your mind. We were not very affluent, and didn't have many luxuries, so it was the kitchen table I used to build this airplane. I still remember my mother kicking me out of the kitchen when it was time for her to make dinner, and her complaints about the mess, dust, and scratches on the table. Remember this was over thirty years ago, and I didn't know about CA glue (it used to be called crazy glue when it first came out in the late 70's), I didn't know about 5-minute epoxy either, only glue I knew of was Elmer's wood glue – dry overnight. I couldn't pin anything down, didn't have many tools, or even have the experience needed to complete this project, but I persevered to the end, and finished it, that was a feat in itself. Back then I had very little patience (and if you ask my wife today, she still believes I don't).

The wings were warped, the fuselage was bowed, the fin off center, and leaning to one side. The stabilizer was twisted, and the finish was sprayed on paint directly to the wood. I didn't fare any better with my first model engine either. As much as I tried, I couldn't get it started. As for the radio itself, I didn't have the funds to get one, and good thing too. So here I had a badly built airplane that every time I bumped it into something

you would hear a CRACK sound, which of course was something breaking. After looking at it carefully and comparing it to the beautiful scale model airplanes I wanted to build, I even found it trash worthy, so into the trash it went. I was discouraged, disappointed and frustrated, I stopped getting anything model related, and that was the end of modeling of anything for me, I quit!

Didn't last long, at 17 something amazing happened. I got my driver's license, and started driving all over town like any other teenager. I began exploring my surroundings and was relishing in my new found freedom, and guess what I found shortly afterwards? Tropic Aeros RC club at Tamiami Park. Here there were guys flying RC model airplanes, and the interest began once again. I would go to the Park as often as I could, but only looked at them from afar. I started getting the magazines once more, and came to the realization that scale was not something I could just get right into. I got some how to books on building RC model airplanes, and began to understand many of the things I did wrong on my first build.

So by this time we moved into a bigger house, I had more space to work in, and more insight on building model airplanes, I was also working by that time too. So I bought another model airplane kit, and the build went much better that second time around, that is until it was time for the finish/covering. What was available up until that time was dope and tissue, or fiberglass finish. Neither one of which I knew how to work with, so I decided on fiberglass finish and paint. You know what happened once I started working with fiberglass inside a house with 6-other people? I almost got kicked out of the house, made a mess of my second airplane, and failed once more. And once again I was discouraged, disappointed and frustrated, but I got over it quickly.

By this time I began reading more and more how to articles on building and finishing, and at that time something new came into the market that changed how we finish RC model airplanes to this day. It was "MonoKote" and it caught my attention. I thought this would be a better way to finish my next attempt at putting another airplane kit together. So before I started my next build, I set up a better work shop, got some alignment tools, anyone remember the Astro wing jig? Well I got one and my wings came out as true as could be from that point on. I also got better tools and equipment, and was ready for my third build. It went beautify, this third airplane was put together very nicely, and I was happy with the way it came out. That is until it was time to cover it with MonoKote; I think I went through three times as many rolls needed to cover that airplane. If you ever used heat shrink film before, you know it's not as easy to apply as it's portrayed to be, but the good thing about it is you can just peel it off if it went on bad. So after burning holes in the covering, burning my fingers, and trying to keep the wrinkles to a minimum, and several attempts to cover it properly, it was done. It wasn't the best looking finish job, but not too bad for my first time using MonoKote. However I still wasn't satisfied with the finished airplane, so eventually I trashed it too.

So now I'm at three years at trying to build an RC model airplane. I have two failed attempts, and my third one wasn't looking too bad with the new covering material, but I was not satisfied with the end results. Then like any other 18-19 year old, I started dating and lost interest in model airplanes. I was having too much fun with my friends and staying out late nights, I was burning the candle on both ends with the wild times. That came to an end too, I met a very nice girl and married her (almost 25-years now). I settled down, and began getting interested in airplanes again, and got me kit number 4. The build was nice, it came out looking good,

the covering was much better, and I'm satisfied and feeling good about it. I got an engine and radio system (this is actually my first radio, Futaba of course). I found out I needed AMA insurance to fly at Tamiami Park, so I got that too. It's about five years now for my first completed airplane, and I'm going to learn how to fly. Me and my wife head out to the field, I see the guys flying, looks easy to me, and I'm thinking this won't be so hard to do. My wife tells me ask someone for help (these words later turned out to be prophetic, you'll see). I didn't think I needed it, but ok sure way not, I'm really happy with the way this airplane came out, so ok.

Wow, talk about letting the wind out of your sail. I ask one of the older guys helping someone else if maybe he could help me out too. He comes over to inspect my airplane with four other guys, and they tell me everything I did wrong, and none of them would take a chance on flying it. My wife tells me the look of disappointment on my face was the worse she's ever seen to that point, and I'm so upset none of them would even help me out, that I trashed that airplane too, and I'm determine not to ask anyone for help again. Yeah you all know this is a big mistake, but I'll get to that.

I build another airplane with the improvements pointed out, and this attempt was even better. It came out nice, covering was even better, and I wait until the field is empty for my maiden flight. Power up the engine, get some ground speed, break ground, she's airborne, it's banking from side to side, and dipping up and down. I don't know what to do, I'm frozen at the sticks, and finally it happened. I crashed my airplane in less than one minute into the flight, pick up the pieces and go home. Even though it crashed so shortly after takeoff, I got to see my first airplane in the air after so many years and several attempts at putting one together. That short lived flight was the catalyst to enflame my passion for the hobby even more, but I was still determined to do it myself. Another airplane built another attempt at flying alone, and another crash in even less time. That old familiar feeling of disappointment was setting in again, but I'm going to keep trying. I build another airplane, and again I crashed. My wife now tells me to stop being so stubborn and ask for help, I'm so frustrated with the whole thing, but I want to fly, so I listen (the worst part about that was the "I told you so"). This time instead of one airplane, I built two, and I'm especially carefully in putting them together, they were the Sig Kadet MK II, and the Goldberg Eagle. If I'm going to subject myself to the ridicule of those old guys at the field, I want to make sure I did everything right.

Those two airplanes came out magnificent, and beautiful. After building about ten airplanes, wouldn't you get good at it too? And remember there were no ARFs (almost ready to fly) at that time. RC back then was more about modeling and building then about flying. My building skills were honed, I was able to build them in about 2-weeks time each, and my covering ability had improved immensely, I did them right from build to covering. I went to the field, and this time I looked for the right guy to help me out, and sure enough one stood out. Bob was a laid back sort of a guy and it seemed like he enjoyed helping out the new guys. Excuse me sir do you think you could help me out with my airplane? He looked at me and said, let's see what you have, so he looked one of my airplanes over, and told me very nice job (I was ten feet tall at that moment when he said that). Some of the control surfaces were reversed, he corrected that and adjusted the throttle linkage, everything else checked out ok. He adjusted the throttle needle, started the engine, and adjusted it even more until it was revving just right, sounded like music to me. He puts it on the runway and tells me, let's see how she handles. The airplane begins to taxi and starts to gain speed until finally it breaks ground. Into the air it goes, and I see the familiar banking from side to side and dipping up and down. I get this sinking

feeling in my stomach, and in my mind I can almost see it going down for another crash. Then to my surprise I see Bob wrestling with the transmitter and the airplane is beginning to settle down. He's trimming it out, and it's flying better and better to the point that it's as straight as an arrow. YES! My airplane works, it flies, and I'm absolutely overjoyed. Then Bob tells me, let's bring her in for a landing, he lines the airplane up with the runway, and begins the descent, flares just before touchdown, and taxis it in, shuts off the engine, and tells me, go get your airplane. I just could not have been happier that day to finally see one of my airplanes in the air, that's all I wanted at that point, and after so many disappointments I needed something to go my way.

Bob gives me instructions on how we will train, I am not to fight him for the transmitter when he grabs it (we didn't have trainer cables back then either), and I am to listen to his commands at all times (did I tell you Bob was an ex-military man). I tell him yes sir I understand, I still got yelled at when I messed up, and when I wouldn't let go of the transmitter, but if it wasn't for him, I don't think I would have ever learned how to fly. We met at the field for the next two, or three months until I finally soloed, and became a pilot myself, I had done it, and it was great. I never saw Bob again, but I owe him a debt of gratitude for his help.

For the longest time my flights consisted of touch and goes only, until the point I could land my airplane anywhere on the tarmac I wanted to, and it wasn't long afterwards that the new guys were coming to me to teach them. But that rush of emotion I felt for the first time with Bob was never the same for me with the airplanes again.

From that point on I was building one airplane after another, until I burned myself out. I built, repaired, assembled, was commissioned or hired to build airplanes for other guys, so many that I lost track or count. I got to the point I just could not glue two sticks together for the life of me. Then it happened again, something new sparked my interest, helicopters, it was like starting all over again (actually it was). Man was that ever hard. If you think helicopter are difficult today, they were much-much harder back then. But for the guys at the field I was the go to guy for anything airplanes, my skills at building, covering, painting, laying down fiberglass, engine tuning, and radio set-up were impeccable (all that practice made me good at my craft), but it just wasn't doing it for me anymore.

However shortly after I started learning to fly helicopters, I had to hang up the hobby, and put it on hold. Me and my wife were constantly struggling financially, we were raising two kids, and our marriage was getting strained due to the hobby, I was spending more time and resources with that than with them, until one day she pointed out I was neglecting her and the kids, and that I was putting strangers ahead of my own family, that she needed me more than the guys at the field. So for the following ten years I abandoned RC in all of its forms, sold, gave away, or threw away everything I had. Began working more and more, and for a time I was working so much, I had two jobs at one time or another. We were up and down financially, and finally as things began to get better for us, I began to look for activities to keep me occupied, until one day my wife told me, why don't you start flying again. I thought way not, the kids are grown, we bought our house, and I had my garage to work in, so I did.

I built a new Sig Kadet MK II exactly the same way I did my first one (mostly for nostalgic reasons). It doesn't have an engine or radio system, it just sits there reminding me of a moment of triumph in my life, like a big old trophy (take a look, I still think it's beautiful).



I also got get an ARF (almost ready to fly) trainer, put it together, got my AMA insurance, and became a member at AMPS. I asked one of the instructors if he could help me out on my first flight (it was more nervousness than lack of skill). Got hooked up to the trainer cord, went up, flew around for a little, then I see Rey unplug me from the trainer cord and walk away saying, I don't know why you asked for an instructor? You fly great. So he cleared me for flying, and I began flying one airplane or another up until I became an AMPS flight instructor myself for a time. But the airplanes were becoming stale for me again to the point I resigned as a flight instructor, and took up helicopters once more. I become a helicopter flight instructor for a little while, but I stopped doing that too.

Now I just really enjoy getting together with a couple of helicopter buddies, heading out to the field and having some fun flying with the guys, and whenever anyone interested in helicopters comes along needing help, you'll find me helping them out too. And you'd think that would be the end of my story, but a new interest is developing for me.

I never thought this would happen, but it is, and as we get older I guess we somehow get the calling to pass on our experiences, and writing about the highs and lows of what I have amassed throughout the years in the hobby compels me to do so, if for nothing more than to promote further interest in it. I hope you enjoyed my story to this point (the airplane version). I'm certain it's not the most interesting one, but I do know a lot of you guys can relate to some of the things I went through as I was learning and progressing along the way. The more we find out we have similar things in common, the more our differences dissolve, and we come to appreciate the uniqueness of every individual that makes up our flying community, and if you don't think that's true? Why did you read all the way to the end of this long article?

Now tell me your story, I want to hear it – Gus.