

Pilot Profile: Bill O'Dell

by Russell Knetzger

Bill and his wife, Joanne, have lived the life of art and design. Following that path eventually brought them and their children from their Chicago area roots to Milwaukee, and here they have stayed for 42 years, still living in the only home they ever bought. It is on W. Georgia Avenue in the unique planned subdivision "Wedgewood," east of S.76th St., between Howard & Morgan Avenues. Fellow modeler Art Schmidt also lives in Wedgewood.

GE Medical Systems brought the O'Dells here in 1965. Medical was then a small operation within the Hotpoint Appliances plant on S. 43rd & Lincoln Ave.



**GE Medical Systems
Milwaukee and
Waukesha, Wisconsin**

There Bill worked, as did fellow aero modeler Floyd Katz, on patient monitoring devices such as ultrasound, and then the famous CAT X-ray scanner, until Bill's 1992 GE retirement. Bill is now age 80.

Bill joined GE as an industrial designer, in which he had a degree and 10 years experience including at Precision Scientific lab apparatus, and on Vanguard rocket thrusters at Martin Aircraft. His degree study began at the prestigious private *Institute of Design* on Chicago's south side, formed by emigres from Germany, led by Moholy-Nagy. They were of the influential Bauhaus design philosophy of unadorned simplicity, applied to all fields, from architecture to products. Mies van der Rohe's many downtown Chicago skyscrapers are Bauhaus inspired, as was his famous Barcelona chair.

In 1950 Bill financed the first part of his studies under the GI Bill, earned after two years in the US Navy at the close of WWII, 1944-1946. He was in the Amphibious Corps, manning LSTs, the large 350 ft. version capable of carrying and landing battle tanks on a Pacific shoreline. In the middle of his study Bill married Joanne. Later his school was absorbed by ITT, the *Illinois Institute of Technology*.

Joanne, herself an art major at *School of the Art Institute of Chicago*, financially supported Bill's study by waitressing, including at upscale Morton's Restaurant on S. Lake Shore Dr. at 53rd St. Starting in Chicago they reared 2 sons and 2 daughters, now having 4 grandchildren and 1 great grandchild. Joanne finished her degree here in Milwaukee at *Alverno College*, in art education.



Above: Bill O'Dell with his 1978 Sig Kavalier, 54" span, .35 Enya engine, to be converted to electric. Backdrop: Wife Joanne's latest painting project.

The aeromodeling aspect of Bill's life started in the mid-1930s at the family home in Waukegan, Illinois. His father was a watchmaker, and for his own hobby chose model airplanes, another chance to use his hands in a precise way.

Bill emulated his dad, but was not micro-managed by his father in aero modeling. Bill was free to pursue the building and flying aspects that appealed to him. This included membership in a Waukegan free-flight club, called the Strato Hawks. That expanded his activity from rubber power to engine power. He bought an Olson .23 engine from soda-jerk earnings in a drug store. He watched some club members experiment with early radio control.

Both Bill's elementary and high school education encompassed manual skills, such as wood and metal working in grade school, adding drafting in high school. That formed the basis for Bill's later college interest to pursue industrial design, with its focus on practical applications, such as human factors, controls, repairability, appearance, and safety.

The war, college, jobs and marriage put modeling on hold until the 1965 move to Milwaukee. Bill got into u-control with the CircleMasters, and back into free flight with the Bong Eagles, where he still belongs. At Garman's hobby shop at 80th & National Ave. in West Allis he met Don Klapstein, who became his flight instructor in R/C at a Hales Corners field. Bill soloed on a .40 Andrews H-Ray. Bill was an early user of the County Field on Oakwood Rd. when it opened in 1979. Bill now teaches two courses downtown in industrial design at MIAD, the *Milwaukee Institute of Art & Design*.

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