

Pilot Profile: Russell Retzack

by Russell Knetzger

Farm boys seldom have time for personal hobbies. And by age 12 Russell Retzack, now 72, was also working in his father's excavating business, learning to run the various equipment on jobs in and around Omro, Wisconsin, just west of Oshkosh.

Midway through his junior year in high school, boredom prompted him to quit. After a few dead-end jobs, in 1951 at 17 he joined the Navy to attend its construction equipment school. The Korean Conflict was raging. That class was filled as he was going to "Basic" at Great Lakes, IL, so he was sent to air traffic controller school, first in Jacksonville, FL, then in Olathe, Kansas. While at Great Lakes he passed the GED exam to earn his HS diploma.

After three weeks in the ideal climate of Hickam Field near Honolulu, Hawaii, he was assigned to the jungle climate of Guam in the west Pacific. Air traffic there was SNJs & C-47s with other Marshall Islands such as Tinian and Saipan. Islands are boring. The base shop offered control line flying kits, and using Anderson.60 engines, and a few pulse jet engines, that is how Russ got into model aviation. Uncleared jungle made Free Flight impossible.

At his next Navy assignments back in Hickam and then Alameda Air Station in Oakland, California, it was not boring, so modeling stopped.

Between his release in 1955, and 1967, Russ's life changed a lot. He moved to Milwaukee where his father now worked as an Operating Engineer of heavy equipment. Russ took on his father's kind of work. He married and started his family of 2 boys and 1 girl. He learned to fly full-scale aircraft. And under the tutelage of famed Milwaukee labor leader Jacob Friedrich, he became a labor representative. As Friedrich gained even higher prominence, such as the first labor leader to become a member, then



Above, Russell Retzack in a 230 ton capacity crane at the Oak Creek power plant job site, January 2006



Below: Russ Retzack with his .72 4-C Saito powered Funtana 3-D ARF, 56 inch wingspan.

chairman, of the University of Wisconsin Board of Regents, Russ took over some of "Jake's" tasks.

Those were the heady days of Pres. Johnson's War on Poverty, and the labor movement was called to serve on many steering committees. Russ's family was seeing him less and less. So in 1967 they bought him a Goldberg Senior Falcon R/C kit to tempt him to stay home more.

Living on 83rd & Oklahoma Ave., Russ's first flights were at an informal field near S. 60th & Ryan in Franklin, where the industrial park now stands. While in the Instructor's hands, the Falcon smither-eened. A receiver flaw, uncovered by Milwaukee area radio tech John Lorbiecki (sr.), was repaired and over the '67-68 winter Russ built two Midwest kits – a SportMaster and a TrainerMaster. He also invested in the new Kraft proportional radio, which launched the huge R/C hobby we enjoy to this day.

Russ saw the vulnerability of R/C models, never having a secure field to fly over. He was among those in 1970 advocating a stockholder owned site. That group became the Pebble Creek Flyers, still in existence at the City of Waukesha's SW corner. Russ in 1971 was the first to pay off his \$3000 purchase. That entitled him to "Share #1." While helping build the field, he had no time to use it, in 1977 returning to crane work, selling his share by 1985.

Retirement#1 in 1992 did not bring Russ time to get back into R/C. Finally in 2002 he became active at Milwaukee County's Oakwood Rd. field. A special waiver brought Russ back to work at age 70 to help build the Oak Creek Power Plant units #3 and #4. But last month Russ claimed Retirement #2, and hopes to fly more. He is a RAMS Assoc. delegate.

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