

## Pilot Profile: Alfons DeRidder

by Russell Knetzger

Al was born and grew up in the “UP”—the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. Underground iron-ore mines there attracted his father, a miner near Brussels, Belgium, to emigrate to do deep shaft mining. Then he opened a home-delivery grocery store in Norway, MI, so close to the Wisconsin border that it was easy later for Al to settle in South Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where he still resides 54 years later. Norway, pop. 3,500, is about 8 miles east of border city Iron Mountain, MI, and six miles north of Pembine, WI. Born January 9, 1927, by 1935-36 Al was building rubber-powered, tissue-covered stick model airplanes. Then, when World War II came along in 1942, his aviation interest grew. At age 17 in 1944 Al qualified for the US Navy Aviation Program. But when Al's turn to enroll came, classes were full, so in 1945 he was sent to Navy radio operator's school near Memphis, Tennessee. That became **Link #1** to his 1970s transition to radio remote control model aircraft.

Back from the Navy in 1946, Al used his “GI Bill” funds to major in metallurgy at Michigan Tech, a state engineering college in Houghton, Michigan, 85 miles north of Al's hometown. Formerly the School of Mines, and now a university of 6500 students and 400 faculty, it is noted for three things. First, it continues to rank alongside MIT, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, as a first-rate engineering school. Second, it has a well-known forestry school, and third, it gets **300 inches** of snow some winters. That's because it's 35 miles out on a peninsula that extends 60 miles into Lake Superior—“lake effect snow.”

In 1950 Al graduated from Michigan Tech and went to work for Ladish Co. in Cudahy, WI. Herman Ladish, used to German ways, required training programs where new workers got to see the whole scope of the company's facilities. But after only a few months the Korean Conflict broke out, and Al was called back to active military duty, this time by the Air Force. He was assigned to electronics school in Biloxi, Mississippi. That training established **Link #2** to what would become radio control model aviation in the 1970s.

Back at Ladish in 1953, Al was plunged into the diverse work with metals that Ladish used in its customer parts. While steel of various alloys was the main-stay, such as for airplane landing gear forgings, still produced at Ladish, the new work then was with titanium, needed for insides of jet engines. Pure titanium is a soft, light metal. But if it



**Above: Alfons DeRidder with his original Piper Tri-Pacer and OS.40 engine, now a hanger queen.**

is alloyed up to 10% with such metals as aluminum, molybdenum or tin, titanium becomes fearsomely strong, a hard metal capable of withstanding great heat. To better work with the USA's leading jet engine material research labs at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Dayton, Ohio, Ladish sent Al to take a course at New York University. Although located in downtown Manhattan, it was the leader in titanium work. At times aerospace work has made up to 70% of Ladish business volume. If a turbine is GE, Pratt & Whitney, or Rolls Royce, it probably has Ladish components.

At Ladish, in a department of 600 metallurgists, chemists, x-ray, and ultrasound technicians, the work flow includes testing every incoming batch of metal, and of outgoing finished products, to assure specifications. Tests include alloy composition, strength for tensile, stress-rupture, and fatigue, and internal integrity via xray or ultrasound. Ladish is industry famous for such certifications.

By the 1970s, having made the acquaintance of Art Schmidt, Al DeRidder finally bought a Kraft radio and a Piper Tri-Pacer kit and started into model R/C aviation. The 1979 opening in Franklin of the Milwaukee County RC field provided a site convenient to South Milwaukee. After retirement in 1990, Al has been part of the daytime flyers group, and can be counted on for daytime work parties.

Al and his wife Kathryn reared two daughters and now enjoy six grandchildren, three from each. They also enjoy a summer home on Lake Camelot, one of three artificial lakes created by the developer N.E. Isaacson in northern Adams County, just south of Wisconsin Rapids.

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