

For radio-control plane enthusiasts-the sky's the limit

By Cathy Alter, Published: September 20, 2012

Even though my husband and I have been happily married for only six years — newlyweds, practically — we have a “War of the Roses” situation going on in our bedroom.

My side is dominated by a mid-century modern wall unit upon which I’ve displayed my collection of Danish art pottery. His side, Karl would argue, showcases an equally prized assemblage: a fleet of battery-operated airplanes that he has hung on the walls like fine art. What hasn’t been featured on the walls — random propellers, a wheel or two — lies scattered on the floor like bread crumbs. Hard, chunky bread crumbs. And what isn’t decorating the floor has been shoved into the open shelf space above our bedroom closet, which would have been the perfect place to display my collection of vintage wedding cake toppers.

Recently, while we were reading in bed one night, I looked over at my wall unit and noticed a winged migration: A balsa wood skeleton of a plane had landed unaesthetically close to my Bjørn Wiinblad bud vase. It was time for “the talk.”

“How many planes do you have?” I asked Karl, who was absorbed in a model aviation magazine.

The look on his face held the same mixture of panic and shame as it did the time I asked how old he was when he lost his virginity.

“Fixed-wing?” he said, knowing that would immediately lower the count. Hedging some more, he asked, “The ones that I’m flying or the ones in storage that could fly?”

He spent an agonizing few minutes ticking off numbers on his fingers like a Dickens character at his ledger. “Including tiny ones?” he asked.

Finally, he came clean. “Ten that can fly,” he said, sounding as if a weight had been lifted. “Okay. Eleven. I forgot about one of the tiny ones.”

When I didn’t react (an old reporter’s trick), he continued his confession. “This is not counting all the boxes and random wings, or the two backups that can fly.”

Then, he delivered the final blow. “And I have at least 10 more waiting in the wings.” No pun intended.

Welcome to the world of the radio-control — or remote-control — plane enthusiast, of which Karl happens to be a card-carrying member. He belongs to the D.C. Radio Control Club (DCRC), which flies at the Walt Good Field in Boyds. A quick online search turns up 32 other clubs within a 50-mile radius of our nation’s capital, with names such as the Skylancers (Washington) and the Mavericks (Frederick).

The clubs share one thing: Members must belong to the Academy of Model Aeronautics, a nonprofit association that ensures the special interests of these hobbyists. It also insures, should any of the ground-based pilots crash their planes into something or someone they shouldn’t.

RC piloting is a pastime that makes a cameo appearance whenever drones are mentioned — including in a recent cover story in Wired magazine (“Here Come the Drones!”). It has been a lead item on the news, such as last September, when the FBI nabbed Rezwan Ferdaus as he plotted to fly remote-control model planes packed with explosives into the Pentagon and U.S. Capitol. The hobby has even appeared on “Keeping Up With the Kardashians” (stepfather Bruce Jenner is a noted enthusiast).

It has also become a regular weekend activity for Karl. Two years ago, when he started coming home from the field with stories about the guys he was meeting — retired aeronautical engineers from NASA, former commercial pilots, highly decorated military personnel — and speaking this foreign language marked by words such as “Moki” and “Fowler flaps,” I knew there was something in the air.

One of the first people I reach out to in my quest to learn about RC planes is Andy Kane, the veritable consigliere of the DCRC who joined when he was 11 and has served as its secretary and president and editor of the club’s monthly newsletter.

“Every airplane has the potential of crashing,” Kane tells me when I call him in May. “That’s what keeps things exciting.”

Well, that’s one way to look at things, considering that Kane has spent \$18,000 and 1,000 hours over nine months building a quarter-scale model of a World War II-era warbird in his basement. The 92-inch-long, 51-pound P-47G Thunderbolt (AAF Ser. No. 42-25068) is nicknamed Little Demon.

Andy, 54, has spent all this time and money to compete in one of the most prestigious scale competitions, the Top Gun air show (there are also competitions in categories such as aerobatics or racing). The contest, in which the winner takes home only a trophy, will take place May 1 through 5, 2013, in Lakeland, Fla. Like a bride planning a wedding, Kane started so early because, as I was about to learn, there is a whole rigmarole involved in getting a plane ready for the big day — including not crashing it.

At Top Gun, the judges will look at documents and paint swatches to determine how closely Kane’s Little Demon resembles its full-scale counterpart (currently on display in a museum in England), and will watch Kane execute five mandatory and optional maneuvers. “I’ll do the prototypical maneuvers for a warbird,” he’ll explain later. “Like dropping a bomb.” Yes, he will actually drop a scale model of a bomb onto the field.

Before heading to Florida, however, he must perform a number of test flights to make minor adjustments to the engine, landing gear and fuel mixture. “It’s called trimming,” he explains. “Engines can be finicky.”

That turns out to be a prophetic statement. Many of my attempts to see Kane’s plane in action will fail because of unfavorable weather, loose bolts, a crash landing and missing hardware. It will be months before I have a chance to watch his warbird, whose very existence I will begin to doubt, take to the air.

To the uninitiated, the RC world most closely approaches the realm of the dog show. There are categories and subcategories based on type of plane and what that plane does in the air (partial list: 3-D, aerobatic, sport, pattern, slope soaring, scale, combat, pylon racer), construction type (balsa; plastic foam, or “foamies”; composite, such as fiberglass or Kevlar) and level of completion (there are guys who “scratch build,” drawing up their own plans and cutting their own wood, and those less industrious types who buy kits with precut parts or planes that are ARF, “almost ready to fly”).

“This has been invented by people who are crazy about classifying and specializing what they do,” my husband explains. “Especially because the hobby is infested with scientists and engineers.”

Marv Levenson, whom I meet at one of my first visits to the field, studied aerodynamics as a high-schooler at Brooklyn Tech and worked on satellites as an electrical engineer. But he’s not here to talk about his job, he says. He’s here to visit his Ultra Stick, a boxy-looking sport plane with a four-foot wingspan, which is currently resting 80 feet up in a tree.

“You gotta admit,” he says slyly, “it dresses up the landscape.”

Levenson, who lives in Rockville and is 72, has been a DCRC member since 1978. He and another member discuss contacting Jose the Tree Climber, who, for \$100, will don tree spikes and retrieve the Ultra Stick. Considering the plane costs almost \$500, it’s not a bad deal.

“When you’re old, you can’t always tell if the plane is coming toward you or going away,” Levenson says, explaining his current predicament. Because it is an expensive hobby, many RC enthusiasts are older. At 36, Karl is a real anomaly.

When I try flying, I myself experience Levenson’s directional confusion. After a brief lesson, DCRC member and instructor Rick Steffey, 42, an IT support manager, gets a training plane airborne. Then he turns the controls over to me, and the plane immediately makes a nosedive near the tree that claimed Levenson’s Ultra Stick. Like Levenson, I can’t tell if I’m coming or going. I tell Steffey to take the controls back.

Later, my husband wants to know why I was flying with my pinkies up. “It’s like you were holding the radio like a big cup of tea,” he says.

When I attend the monthly DCRC meeting, in the auditorium of the Montgomery County Council Building in Rockville, club president Jim McDaniel asks if there are any newcomers. I stand and wave (my presence will even warrant a mention in the club’s next newsletter). Earlier, I had asked a few members if I was the first woman to show my face at a meeting. “Oh, a pair of older gals showed up a few years ago,” says one, “but I think they were just trolling for dates.”

According to membership secretary Jose Sanchez, the club has 184 members. Tonight, 18 of them sit amphitheater-style, most wearing their official DCRC polo shirts with their first names embroidered over the left breast. In the row in front of me, a member has neatly spread out a line of eight VHS tapes with titles such as “Secrets of Great Covering With Top Flite Monokote.”

“Flying porn,” I whisper to my husband, who gives me his patented “be nice” look.

During a break, I go up to the front of the theater and examine the 86-inch red plane that is awaiting the show-and-tell portion of the meeting, or “Model Shop,” as the guys call it.

A hawk of a man approaches and sizes me up, not with affection. He appears to be well into his 80s.

“What’s so impressive about this plane?” I ask him.

He looks disgusted. “Let me tell you something about this Corsair,” he begins, pointing a finger at me. “This is a five-cylinder engine.”

“Is that good?” The expression on his face tells me I’ve asked the wrong question.

“What are you hoping to learn about this plane?” I continue, pressing my luck.

“What am I hoping to learn?” He is so stunned by the question he repeats it a few times. “Well, for one, most of these planes are painted blue, because they are Navy planes. This one is painted red, and I want to know why. There is a number 57 painted on the side. Does that stand for Heinz 57, and is that why the plane is painted red?”

Turns out Mark Goldsman, the owner of the \$12,000 Corsair, and, like Kane, a contractor who specializes in air conditioning, was not paying homage to ketchup. Goldsman stands by his plane looking like a kid about to give a class presentation.

“I thought they were supposed to be blue!” someone calls out.

“Start it up!” someone else cries.

Goldsman, who is 52 and grew up in Russia, but now lives in Olney, explains the color. “It is an impersonator of a 1950 flier. The color absolutely matches, including the oil company sticker.”

“It’s fun,” he says at the end, about model-building. “It’s nothing but fun to do.”

So far, Kane has not been having fun. His attempts to test-fly the P-47 he built from a kit have been met by too-hot or too-wet weather. And when he finally does get the plane up, he has to make an emergency landing that results in the loss of an \$800 propeller. So, when I arrive for his demo during Montgomery County’s Heritage Days, a two-day affair featuring events with a focus on history, the P-47 sits grounded under a tent.

But Kane has brought other planes from his fleet, including a Tutor, which, he tells me, is the same thing the Canadian Snowbirds fly. When I present a blank face, he says, “They’re like our Blue Angels.”

While Kane does a flight check on the Tutor, I am approached by Tom Pfarr, 60, DCRC’s official club photographer.

“As a kid, I flew control-line planes,” he tells me. “I could never afford radio control. In the ’60s, they were \$1,000.”

When I ask him what line of work he's in, he just says, "NASA." Is he an astronaut, I ask. "I do the Hubble Space Telescope and the James Webb Space Telescope," he says.

I have noticed a real sense of modesty among these men. Their egos are on display only in the form of their aircraft.

Pfarr and I watch the Tutor rip across the sky. Kane, who is well over six feet tall and built like a linebacker, stands almost motionless, calmly flying his streamlined creature in a graceful ballet of turns. "You watch Andy and think, how the hell does he do it?" Pfarr says.

Then Giuseppe "Beppe" Fascione comes along with his 1962 Taurus and vintage Orbit radio, and Pfarr is even more impressed. If Kane represents the advances in flying technology, Fascione is the old master. A bearded, perpetually smiling native of Pisa, Italy, and recently retired aeronautical engineer, Fascione builds and flies antique model planes from the '50s and '60s using original plans and period radios. He has 30 aircraft in flying condition and five more in various stages of completion. "I fiddle and play with them," he says with a wink.

"This is the pinnacle of the hobby," Pfarr says. "From a piloting view, these planes are way harder to fly. A vintage plane employs vintage technology. They can heat up and become unpredictable."

I move closer to look at the wings of Fascione's balsa wood plane, which are covered in orange and red tissue paper and give the appearance of stained glass. I hadn't thought any of these planes were particularly beautiful until now.

"I am fond of this time period, because at that time I was 15 and it was when I got the bug," explains Fascione, who is 66. It took him a year to build the Taurus, spending \$300 for materials, \$100 for the engine and \$600 for the radio, and he finished just a week before Heritage Days. As he begins to fuel the plane, I return to the tent to watch.

Once airborne, the Taurus looks slower and more wobbly than the jet Kane flew. "Come on!" yells Doug Harper, 67, club treasurer and retired IBM sales executive. "My grandmother can fly lower!" This, it turns out, is the ultimate insult, although Harper has lobbed it good-naturedly.

Then, the mood turns dark. "It's not going to make it," Pfarr says.

A moment later, the Taurus goes down in a patch of tall grass that Harper optimistically calls "real fluffy."

"The engine just quit," Pfarr explains to me. "We call it dead stick."

Fascione emerges from the grass holding his plane like a game bird he's just bagged.

"The engine is still in front, and the wheels are still on," Harper observes brightly. "He's lucky."

Others haven't been as fortunate. Talk under the tent turns to a pair of crashes in May, when retired Gen. Tom Hobbins, former commander of the U.S. Air Forces in Europe visited the field. Nir Schweizer, the DCRC member who brought Hobbins as his special guest, built a scale copy of the F-16C that Hobbins piloted in the Air Force. But Schweizer, himself a former airline transport pilot for Northwest, crashed the model upon landing. Next, Hobbins tried flying a \$5,500 Boomerang belonging to Hobby Hangar, a store in Chantilly. He, too, crashed upon landing. The F-16C was salvageable; the Boomerang was not (AMA insurance covers personal liability, but not damage to the planes). The ironies of two real-life pilots crashing two toy aircraft would be delicious (Schweizer, 45, is also the director of safety for the club) if Schweizer's history weren't so sad. After more than 20,000 hours in the air as a pilot, a benign brain tumor grounded him five years ago. "That's when I lost my dream," says the Germantown father of two daughters, when I reach him on the telephone. "Now, when I come to the field and look up and see a real airplane flying around, I can't take it, and sometimes I cry like a baby." These days, he demos model jets for a company based in China. He also runs Nirly Built, a Web site where he sells planes he has assembled for what he calls the "discerning" RC pilot. "I'm kinda lucky," he says. "My hobby became my lifestyle."

At this point you might be wondering about the wives. All the guys I meet have them, and when I ask if their wives enjoy the hobby, each responds with something along the lines of, "It keeps us out of their hair," or, "At least we're not drinking liquor and chasing women."

Kane has been married for 36 years and has known his wife, Toni, since he was 12. "And that's how long he's been flying," she says when I phone her at the landscaping company where she is a bookkeeper.

They grew up in Silver Spring three doors away from each other. "He was the grass cutter guy for the neighborhood," she tells me. "He was real cute."

When they married and moved into their first apartment, Kane built and hung little model airplanes from the ceiling. "They were in formation," she says with a laugh. When she was pregnant with her second child and looking to move to a larger home, her husband had three requirements: gas heat, a two-car garage and a walk-out basement so he could easily carry his planes to the van.

She says the secret to her marriage is "letting him do what he wants." Even if that includes him loading up that van and traveling for up to 15 weekends a year. Between the months of August and October, she figures, he'll be home for just one.

"He loves what he does," she says thoughtfully. "I wish to heck I had that kind of passion. I went through a knitting phase once, but that wasn't a passion."

In July, Karl, our 10-month-old son, Leo, and I make the two-hour drive to see Kane fly his P-47 as part of the Warbirds Over Delaware weekend event.

“It’s really stupid,” is the first thing Kane says when I find him next to a tent with a huge American flag on top. “The bag of hardware never made the trip.”

Inside the bag, I learn, are the bolts that hold the wings on the plane. And by “never made the trip,” Kane means he forgot to toss them into his seven-passenger Ford Club Wagon (back seats removed) before leaving home. Planes such as Kane’s are too big to transport fully assembled, and in this world, you can’t just borrow another guy’s bolts since, like a fingerprint, Andy’s bolts are specific to his P-47.

I’m beginning to wonder if I’ll ever witness this plane in action and start to think of the P-47 as Mr. Snuffleupagus and Kane as Big Bird, once the only character on “Sesame Street” who could see the giant puppet.

We stick around long enough to watch Kane fly his backup: an orange one-third scale model of an Italian air force plane called a Marchetti. “This is a sweet ride,” says the show’s announcer, who goes by the name Fast Eddie.

As we head back to the parking lot, I notice a bumper sticker on one of the cars. “No plane no gain,” it reads.

I am reminded of this bumper sticker the day I wander over to a tent on the outskirts of the Walt Good parking lot, next to the field’s single Porta-John. It’s the helicopter tent, manned by a guy called Big Mike, who is, in fact, rather big. Instead of the canvas director’s chairs or fold-out camping seats complete with drink holders that I’ve seen under plane guys’ tents, here I view a ragtag collection of swivel-style office chairs. There is a real Sharks and Jets divide between those who fly fixed-wing planes and those who fly helicopters, and it’s not just a difference in form.

“We call the guys across the parking lot ‘the doctors and lawyers tent,’ ” says Big Mike, 51, whose real name is Michael Young and who owns an auto body shop in Kensington.

To him, flying helicopters requires far more finesse. “It’s like trying to balance a marble on top of a basketball,” he explains with just a touch of bravado. “When you can hover an airplane, you’ve reached the pinnacle of the hobby,” he continues. “When you can hover a helicopter, you’re just getting started.”

To prove his point, Big Mike performs Olympics-style gymnastics with his helicopter, which he figures cost him about \$2,500. He shoots it straight up like a firework and then yo-yos it up and down. At one point, when the helicopter spews smoke and nose-dives to the ground, I prepare to witness a major crash. But it’s all part of the performance. Just when it looks headed for the scrap heap, the helicopter pops back up in the air and continues about its business.

“I don’t care if and how I crash it,” says Big Mike after the demo. “I can have it back together in two hours — unlike planes, which crash and burn.”

It’s an ideal day to fly in August, a cloudless sky with only a slight breeze. I’m back at the DCRC field along with Karl and a few of Kane’s flying buddies, watching Kane polish

a piece of his P-47 called the elevator, a half-moon-shaped panel that is part of the tail. He jokes that he wants his plane to look pretty for the pictures, but he's actually making sure he has cleaned off the exhaust residue. The rest of the P-47 warbird model lies belly-up, nestled in a wooden structure that resembles a giant wine rack.

"It's called a cradle," Kane says.

It's an appropriate term, since, in many ways, Kane is a proud papa: He wears a T-shirt with a head-on image of the P-47 splashed across the front. His new credit card has been customized with a photograph of him and his plane.

After he's done polishing, Kane checks the batteries in the plane's service panel, where a heart might be.

"Can you hold me for a second?" Kane asks another club member.

He's not asking for a hug. He and the fellow pilot gently put their arms around the P-47 and flip it right side up, revealing a G.I. Joe-looking doll dressed in a flight suit in the cockpit.

"What's your pilot's name?" asks Karl.

"Willy," answers Kane, who waits a beat before adding, "As in: Willy fly or not?"

We gather around and watch Kane spin the propeller with an index finger. It takes him about a half-dozen tries before the engine finally catches; it sounds as if I've got my ear next to a Mack truck. The tall grass behind the tail blows back until it's horizontal. Soon, the air smells like a giant barbecue.

Kane maneuvers the plane to the runway, and in an instant the P-47 ascends into the scrubbed blue sky [see photograph on Contents page]. Kane takes root, feet apart; the only thing moving are his two thumbs, which he uses to make his plane circle and roll and whiz by low enough for me to worry.

"It's so impressive," I hear Karl say.

"It's so realistic," gushes Hank Jacob, 68, a DCRC member and vice president at a realty company in Bethesda. "It's so awesome."

It's also all over in eight minutes. Instead of landing the plane on the paved runway, Kane touches down on the grass alongside it. "It's softer," Karl explains. Kane is still taking care of his baby.

And his baby, he says, did great. "Today I was testing the engine, and I'm happy with it," he says.

His goal now is to get in 10 or 15 more flights before Top Gun, making sure the engine is broken in, maybe adjusting the elevator so it's less sensitive, perhaps adding more scale details. After that, he says, he'll button it all up and head to Florida. "Then," he says, taking a seat next to his friends, "I'll fly it again and say, 'Wow, that was really cool.'"

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