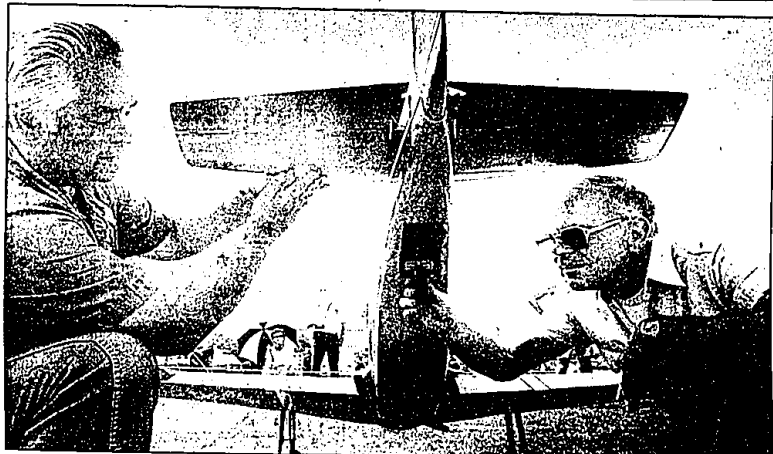




Above, Steve McClain (with radio-control device) and Vito Palazzo, members of the Golden Arrows club, are preparing for the takeoff of their model Ciba-brin during a recent air show in Canton Township. The third annual air show, with proceeds benefitting muscular dystrophy, was sponsored by the Ribcrackers, a Livonia-based flying club. At the photo at right, Dick DeMonte (left) and John Straub inspect their P-51-D Mustang after a flight at the Ribcrackers air show.



## focus on hobbies

# These airmen don't leave earth

By Bill Casper  
staff writer

A slight wind was blowing just strong enough to make flying a little tricky, forcing demonstration team airplane pilots to scratch some of their more difficult aerial maneuvers for safety sake.

Since the pilots of radio-controlled model airplanes never left the good earth, they were not too worried about their safety.

They feared, however, that an ill-advised gambit could result in an out-of-control craft, which could endanger the safety of the large audience gathered in the hot afternoon sun at Canton Township's Maxwell Field to view the airshow staged to benefit Muscular Dystrophy.

But a little wind was not about to stop these devoted pilots from doing what they love to do, particularly when they have an opportunity to show off their flying skills before an audience.

Most of the time, these pilots fly in relative solitude, alone on a deserted field with only their model aircraft as companions. All fly for the fun of it as a hobby.

But some, the more experienced and more accomplished pilots, love to show off the flying skills that for hours and hours alone they have practiced and perfected.

At 59 years of age, Joe Hass of Westland has been flying model and full-size airplanes for 30 years. He demonstrated his radio-controlled airplane flying skills at the Canton benefit airshow.

Hass is a member of two area radio-controlled model airplane clubs, the Golden Arrows, based in the downriver area, and Livonia-based Rib Cracker, which for the third successive year sponsored the MD benefit airshow July 24.

"I enjoy the companionship that forms among the club members. I love flying any kind of plane from the rubber-band powered models to real planes," said Hass, an instrumented rated pilot.

THE MAJORITY of radio-controlled plane pilots say they fly their

craft because it is just as exhilarating as flying a real plane, minus the prohibitive expense.

"You must understand that once one of these (radio-controlled) planes leaves the ground, you're the pilot flying it and you've got to bring it down sometime, somewhere," said Hass, who builds, repairs and sells these model planes at his Wayne Hobby Shop.

Flying before a crowd adds the elements of tension and precaution that the leisure radio-control plane pilot does not necessarily experience to the same degree.

"I'm nervous everytime I fly because that's my baby up there," Hass said. "I put a lot of time, money and love in building it and there's always the chance that something could go wrong in flight, like a mechanical malfunction."

"My heart pumps faster when I'm flying and there's even more tension when you're flying before a crowd. You feel a little wobbly in the knees and your hands tremble a little because you want to give the audience the best flying demonstration with as many maneuvers as is possible."

THE ELEMENT of crowd safety is a concern of all demonstration pilots and no one knows the potential dangers of an out-of-control plane better than 30-year-old Steve McClain of Southgate.

"I'm scared to death of the potential danger these planes pose if not flown safely," said McClain, who has been piloting radio-controlled aircraft since he was 13-years-old. "Last year at an air show, I was standing in a parking lot near the field looking at a friend's plane and a runaway plane hit me in the face at full throttle at about 100 mph."

"I was lucky because I got hit by the wing of the plane and not the engine, but it was bad enough," McClain said. "The impact knocked me unconscious and I had two black eyes and required several stitches to close a cut on my face. But the accident turned around my entire way of thinking about this hobby."

"I still love the hobby, but now I realize that safety comes first," he said.

## Flying model airplanes is next best to real thing

By Mary Rodrigue  
staff writer

THEIR planes soar through the air with the greatest of ease: here a World War II trainer jet, there an AT6 Texan, and beyond a full gamut of jets, seaplanes and just about every model historical and current.

Unlike other air shows, the pilots of these crafts are stationed on the ground. Their model aircraft fly at their command via radio control.

Collectively, the group of 175 flying enthusiasts are known as the Livonia Rib Cracker, although they draw membership from several suburban communities.

"We're open to anyone. We've had members as young as 11 up to age 70 and above," said Rick Lewandowski, club spokesman.

"It's a hobby that attracts people interested in aircraft. The cost of flying is so expensive, this is as close as you can get to the real thing."

Another club member, Don McLean, likes the satisfaction that comes from building his own aircraft.

"All the principles involved in real aircraft are copied in models," said McLean, who builds to 1/4 scale. "We use the same laws of physics: power to weight ratio, high lift wing, symmetrical wing."

Members can build from kits or from scratch. Size of the aircraft range from 30-inch wing span to 10-foot wing span, according to McLean. The bigger models may cost thousands of dollars and take 100 hours or more to build.

"SOME members prefer to fly rather than build," he added. "There are hobby shops which sell ready-to-fly aircraft and there are club-sponsored auctions each spring."

The cost of the initial investment requires two basic items: a radio control set and an engine.

"It costs about \$400 to get an airplane into the air," Lewandowski said. "If you're a competent builder and lucky, it will last a long time. We try to be careful and preserve them for as long as possible."

"My oldest model is from 1972 and it still works fine on the same batteries," said Lewandowski, owner of 14 models.

His friend, McLean, has a 12-foot cub, 10-foot biplane, 9-foot AT6 Texan and a World War II trainer among his collection.

"Any aircraft ever built can be duplicated," McLean said.

Just about any type of engine can be used, including modified chain saw engines and go-cart engines.

**'All the principles involved in real aircraft are copied in models. We use the same laws of physics.'**

— Don McLean  
pilot

"The average size radio-controlled aircraft has a 60-inch wing span and is powered by a .35 cubic inch engine," McLean said.

THE CLUB has an instructors program for members who want to learn to fly. A high quality radio, four channels or more, is recommended.

Once a new member has purchased equipment and started building, he or she is encouraged to bring the project to club meetings for advice.

"When the airplane has been test flown and is in safe flying condition, we'll begin to teach the new member to fly," Lewandowski said.

The Rib Cracker meet the first and third Monday of the month at 7 p.m. at Power Junior High School in Farmington. Members fly at three fields: Maxwell Field in Canton, the Childs Lake and Froid Lake recreation areas near Milford.

The Rib Cracker sponsor two static displays each year at the Livonia and Westland malls to generate interest in the hobby, which they say has 86,000 enthusiasts nationwide.

"In this area alone, there are the Detroit Radio Controllers who fly at Rouge Park, the Indian City group downriver, and the Plymouth Pilgrims," Lewandowski said.

Although the group has an open membership policy, there is just one woman active flyer among the Rib Cracker. She was recently club secretary and her husband was club president.

"Our hobby is quite seasonal," Lewandowski said. "Obviously we can only fly when we have good weather."

Radio controlled model aircraft are often used in the film industry when scripts require crashes, McLean noted.

Model planes were used in the films *Battle of Britain* and *Capricorn One* and also in TV programs like *Hawaii Five-O*, he said. "It's cheaper to blow up a model than an actual plane."

The model aircraft can also be viewed at the Academy of Model Aeronautics in Washington D.C. and the Smithsonian Institution wing dedicated to model aircraft.

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Staff photos by Margene Johnston

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