

# ***AEROMODELLING B.P. (BEFORE PLASTICS)***

By Geoff Hine

I suppose in the "tween-war" years aeromodelling was natural for boys growing up, in my case at Regent, then the outer northern suburb of Melbourne, because in those days the aeroplanes were growing up too. Even the most modern ones, like Smithy's lovely "Altair", still rocked gently as they flew over on long final to Essendon, in the '30s, and the "Moths" etc. crabbed distinctly in Melbourne's strong northerlies. (I don't think they flew in the southerlies). One of my earliest recollections is of about eight silver Wapitis climbing away eastwards in the morning sunlight to look for the lost mail-plane "Southern Cloud"; a vain search, but a haunting mystery for some twenty seven years. These were days when we would rush outside at the sound of an aeroplane.

The Great War was little more than a decade past then, and there must have been thousands of ex-soldiers about, but they didn't talk about The War, I now know why, and my early knowledge of it came from the few books that were about the High Street three penny library, etc. We did have a well-used copy of Gibbons' "Red Knight of Germany", ex Victorian Railways Institute Library and stamped on the fly-leaf "Romance", which I still have. Then there was "Biggles", and "Arnold Adair", and a few others that you will see advertised on the inside covers of Johns' "Popular Flying" in the '30s. That, and the American "Popular Aviation" magazines, usually bought by uncles, kept us informed, more or less accurately, on wartime flying and contemporary advances like the H.P.42. We certainly knew of McCudden, Ball, Mannock, Boelcke, and Richthofen, even if those overseas sources overlooked Hobby and Co. on our doorstep.

Model-wise, I suppose I should start with that wonderfully simple, once learned, schoolboy flyer, the 'paper aeroplane'. A favourite uncle, some years later to be killed by a Stuka on Crete with the 2/2 A.F.A., taught me at a very early school age to make these in the traditional way using the quarto exercise book page which gave no waste at all; you can't do it with the modern A4. But nowadays I wonder just how old was that tradition? Did it pre-date the Wright brothers, or was it still young in the early '30s? And what Aero Museum has an example of that probably dying art?

Then there were a few "flying model aeroplanes", usually an easily assembled 'stick' type, given as a Christmas present by an uncle who usually did most of the flying and rubber winding anyway. These flew well enough, but needed more room than a suburban backyard; luckily there were plenty of open paddocks around the outer suburbs then, all the way to Reservoir if needed. The most robust, yet still good flyer, was a 'Made in Japan' in the '30s, with a wire frame and wing structure covered with taut silk material; rubber powered of course. It lasted quite well, but if I remember alright it ended up straddling our pole to peak power line, and being metal wire framed, no one was game to retrieve it. I suppose someone did, or it blew down, I don't recall a major power failure.

Then the Second World War broke out, gently at first, and we had all those sleek monoplanes with no top wings and struts. I had been making very rudimentary 'solid' models for years, from such bases as 'dolly' clothes pegs, which had good a cowled radial at their top, and even Mum's soup strainer handle, with cardboard wings and empennage. Wheels were often glass beads, on bent pin struts. But my first year at Preston Tech gave an insight into the art of woodwork, and fellow enthusiasts; also the "phoney" War had ended and that great Battle of Britain was on.

At the end of that year, 1940, our family moved to Hobart, Dad having joined the P.M.G. as a Radio Technician with the A.B.C. 7ZL/7ZR. There were very few aeroplanes around Hobart, two "Tiger Moths" were up each night on searchlight practice, and a Jap seaplane flew over about 5 am one morning, and of course the U.S. Carriers and "Liberty" ships were loaded with aircraft, Hobart being their first port of call out from America. But Hobartians were, naturally, all Navy and boat minded; they had the second-best natural Civil harbour in the world, with not a Tug in sight.

Second year Tech there, and "Aircraft Identification" was becoming almost a school subject, certainly during Sports Sessions and after school hours. We in the Woodwork Classes were also

digging slit-trenches and putting wide gateways in paling fences. I joined the newly-formed 83 Squadron A.T.C., but only lasted until the eyesight test. By then I was buying the essential English magazines each week, "*The Aeroplane*" and "*Flight*". "*The Aeroplane*" was "the" authority of things aviation, apart from "*Jane's All The World's Aircraft*" which was beyond my finances anyway, and often snapped up by foreign Governments to bring their files up to date, while "*Flight*" was more technical in content.

The main proprietary Flying Model in the '30s was the Frog "Interceptor" a rubber-powered monoplane of no specific type, and it had a winding handle incorporated in its packing box, but I never saw one, only the ads. I did once, however, buy, about 1945, a very old-stock cardboard kit flying model, about one foot span, of a "Tiger Moth", the 1920s monoplane predecessor of the later biplane, of which monoplane I fancy one or two came out here (and no doubt crashed as most light-planes did before the De H. 82a appeared). This glued cardboard model did fly, as far as the wash-house wall anyway, on its first and last flight. My brother and I had a fairly brief period of building flying scale models; hours, days, of painstaking construction, they were building the real ones quicker over at Fishermans Bend, from printed Balsa sheets, the 'flying' Balsa was softer, lighter, than used for solids. Then paper covering, with rice-paper, spraying with water to tauten the rice-paper. Do you remember those thin tin-tube venturi-type sprayers that you blew through to suck the water, or mainly fly spray, from a bottle? They were simpler than the hand-pump fly sprays. Anyway, this tightening of the rice-paper usually pulled everything out of shape, which doesn't make any decent aeroplane happy; then came the winding up of the rubber, usually several strands of pure 'Para' rubber, by manually (or 'fingerly') turning the propeller. The first wind would invariably be found to be backwards so the thing skittered along in reverse, the next would slip your finger off the prop blade and receive a very sharp clout. After much winding, to 'triple-knotted' rubber, the tension would pull the rear rubber out of its bulkhead and completely gut the fuselage. If it escaped that, the model usually crashed on its first solo, quite as terminally as their real brothers.



A collection of the author's models in the late 1940s.

I might add that Balsa wood was still available here until about 1942, and then we had to go onto Pine, so flying models and kits were out. Tassie had a couple of fine modelling Pines though, "*King Billv*" the lightest, but "*Huon*", one of the best carving woods about. 'Solids' were in though, and these were made just as easily with Pine as with Balsa.  $\frac{1}{72}$  scale,  $\frac{1}{6}$  inch to a foot, was the usual scale, good for Fighters, etc. but a bit big for Bombers, so we didn't make many Bombers; I think a "*Heyford*" was the biggest I made. There were no kits, and no  $\frac{1}{72}$  scale plans. But "*The Aeroplane*" always had an "*Aircraft Identification*" feature each week, with two similar looking aeroplanes shown in photo and in plan elevation, and side elevation, silhouette, so we used to scale these up to  $\frac{1}{72}$

scale to make our models from. One great example which I built from "The Aeroplane" silhouettes was the Heinkel 113 fighter. This we now know was merely a production version, limited to a dozen or so machines, of the pre-war He.100 Record Breaker, however "The Aeroplane" included it, with flying photos, silhouettes, and specifications, in their magazine Identification series, and their booklets, and after the War Harborough Publishing Co. included it in their  $1/72$  scale sheet plans.

The glue we used was the clear "Tarzan's Grip"; there was another, "Secotine", available too; both took a while to set firm enough to release finger grip. Paint was cellulose-base "Model Aeroplane Dope". Fillets were "Plastic Wood", wheels we made by curling resin-core solder into a circular tyre and filling the centre with Plastic Wood, they were of course only about  $3/8$  inch diameter o.a. Splined brass gear shafts/pinions from clock work toys made good Vickers guns. "Dope" usually came from Central Aircraft, in Melbourne by the Yarra River side. Canopies were usually Cellophane clear wrap from food packets. All this may sound pretty primitive, but remember that the Hawker "Fury", at least of that tribe, had a lifting airfoil fin/rudder to counter prop torque, and this sort of little nicety was faithfully followed in our models. The "Aeromodeller" Plans came from Central Aircraft, but that was about all apart from the "Dope", except for a lead radial engine, which I still have anyway. We got "cockade" gummed sheets there too, but this was probably just after the War. None of these models survived the ensuing half century alas.

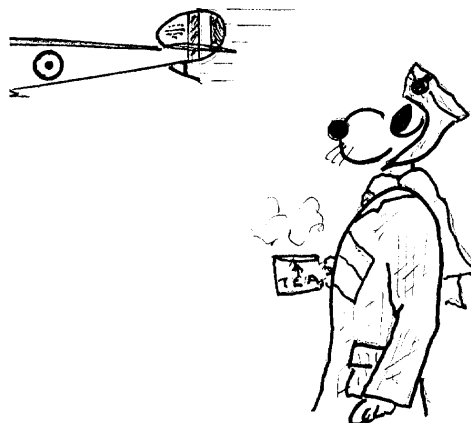
Post-Plastic advent, while hands were still steady, brought another spell of Modelling, but just a few selected examples to sit in my model-cabinet with the 'Matchbox' "Models of Yesteryear", etc. motorcars; the fine, Australian-checked 'Airfix' "Southern Cross", Amy Johnson's Gypsy-engined Cirrus Moth 'Jason', Avro 504K, SPAD VII, and that ballerina of the skies the little Nieuport "Bebe". All in Plastic, from kits this time though - how easy the "moderns" have it these days; but what fine replicas result. I didn't make much in the way of Great War examples in the wooden days; until the "Aeromodeller" plans came out there were just no plans or silhouettes about for early types.

Our propellers were usually carved from Bryant and Mays match sticks, but stiff celluloid discs were more common on the monoplanes with retracted undercars.

## *F/Sgt Dogzbody*

By John Barfoot

F/Sgt Dogzbody remembers  
Harry Hawker



This new 'Bus' of yours Harry looks like a young Strutter.  
Say, how about calling it a Pup?

*John B.*