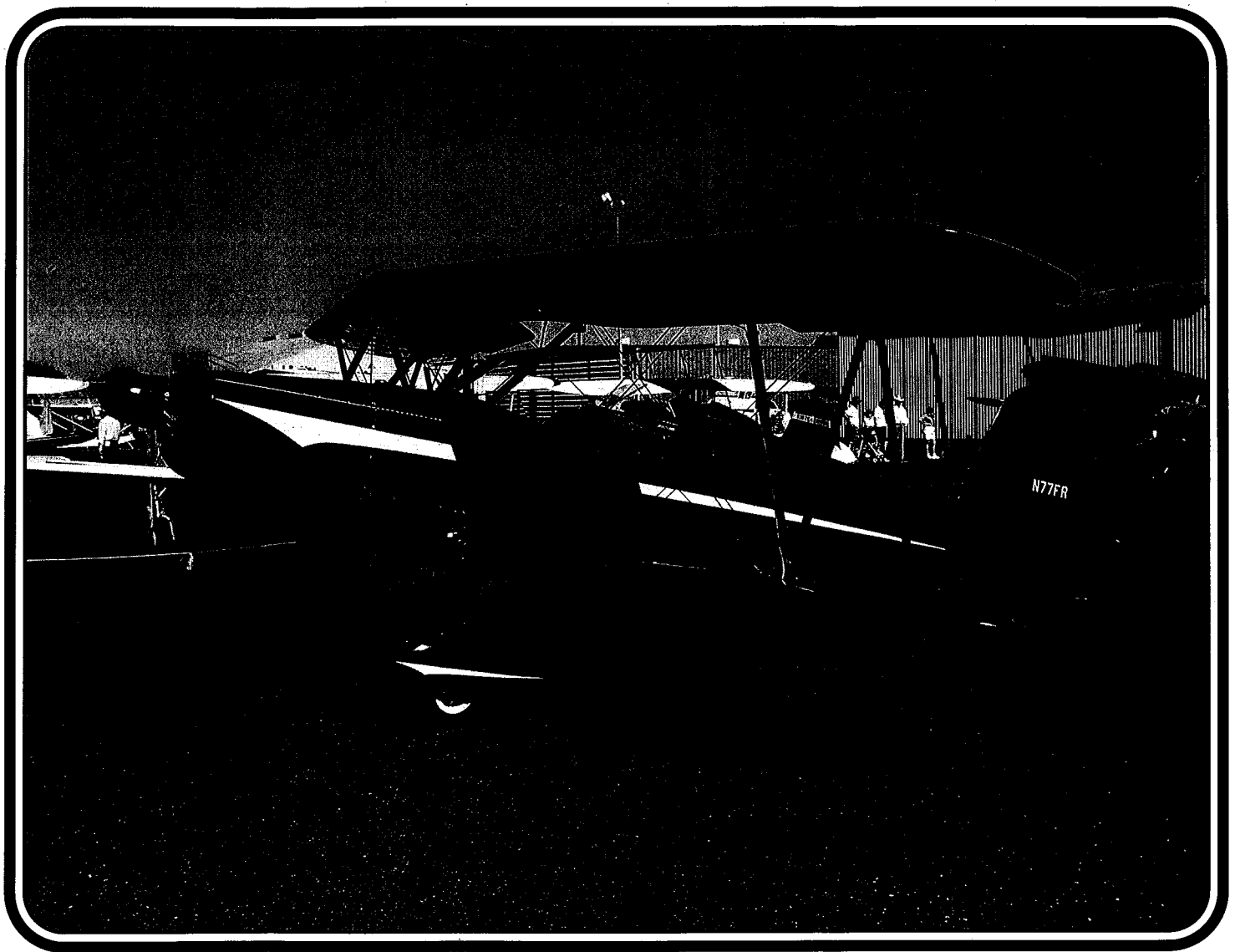


Sportsman PilotTM



Summer  ***1996***



SPORTSMAN PILOT PROFILE

FERNANDO RAMOS

Fernando Ramos is all smiles these days. He retired in June of 1995 after a 37 year career as a teacher in Anaheim, California and now, at long last, is able to devote almost all his time to his hobbies: building and flying airplanes. In Fernando's case, "airplanes" needs some elaboration. He is an internationally known modeler, has built two Marquart Chargers and is currently restoring his 1949 Bellanca Cruisair.

There are modelers, there are modeling fanatics . . . and then there is Fernando! Most of us start a model, work on it until it's finished, crash it and start another. Fernando has no idea how many models he has in one stage of construction or another. He's like an alcoholic who has booze stashed everywhere he normally goes so there is no chance he will be caught without a drink. He has models in his home, in the barn he has converted to a workshop and even in his hangar. Each location has a workbench littered with the appropriate tools and materials, and on each of them are a bunch of models that are perhaps 10 to 20 percent completed. Depending on whatever strikes his fancy on a given day, he can sit down and begin cutting or gluing balsa without a moment's hesitation - on all sorts of airplanes. Fernando's fa-

vorites are scale models of World War I military types and civilian lightplanes of the 1920s and 1930s, so if on Tuesday afternoon at 3:00 p.m. he's in an Active Arrow mood, he'll work on one . . . and then on Wednesday at 10:00 a.m. if he is out at his hangar polishing his Marquart Charger and he gets an urge to cut out a few ribs for the upper wing of a Sopwith Triplane, then he'll just do it.

Talk about living in hog heaven! Now, don't think for a moment that I'm exaggerating here. Look closely at the photo of Fernando and Ken Brock I took in Fernando's barn/workshop. As you can see, there are models hanging from the ceiling and the walls, they are all over his work benches, they are on the floor . . . and, yes, they are all over and inside his Bellanca fuselage! His T-hangar is the same way. There's just enough room to ease the Charger in and out, if you're very careful where you step.

Remarkably, most of Fernando's models are scratch-built, which, of course, takes more time and cogitation than building from kits. That means a lot of research, so when he is not building, he often has his nose in an aviation book or magazine scoping out dimensions, paint schemes, markings, etc.

Also remarkable is the fact that unlike most of us, when Fernando has one of his models crash, he rebuilds it. One of the reasons he has so many models is that he still has almost every one he ever built - and every one of them has a story behind it. Fernando can literally tell you the story of his life through his models - this one was built the year he graduated from high school; that one the year he and his wife, Kay, were married; and those two the years his sons were born, etc.

Fernando was born in Orange, CA in November of 1934, grew up in Anaheim and has lived there all his life. He graduated from Whittier College in 1957 and began teaching junior high science that fall. After 17 years he switched to teaching chemistry and biology on the high school level and completed 20 years in that position before retiring last year.

Fernando's aviation affliction was contracted at the tender age of four while on a family trip to San Diego. By chance, his father cruised his 1938 Pontiac by Lindbergh Field and, as fate would have it, there happened to be three pristine Ryan STAs sitting on the ramp with their noses turned toward the street. It was infection at first sight, with the incurable disease instantly invading

every fiber of his being, then and forever more.

Models sufficed until Fernando was 16, but shortly after reaching the legal age, he had a friend with a 1928 Chevy drive him to a little dirt strip nearby where he took his first flying lesson - in a Luscombe.

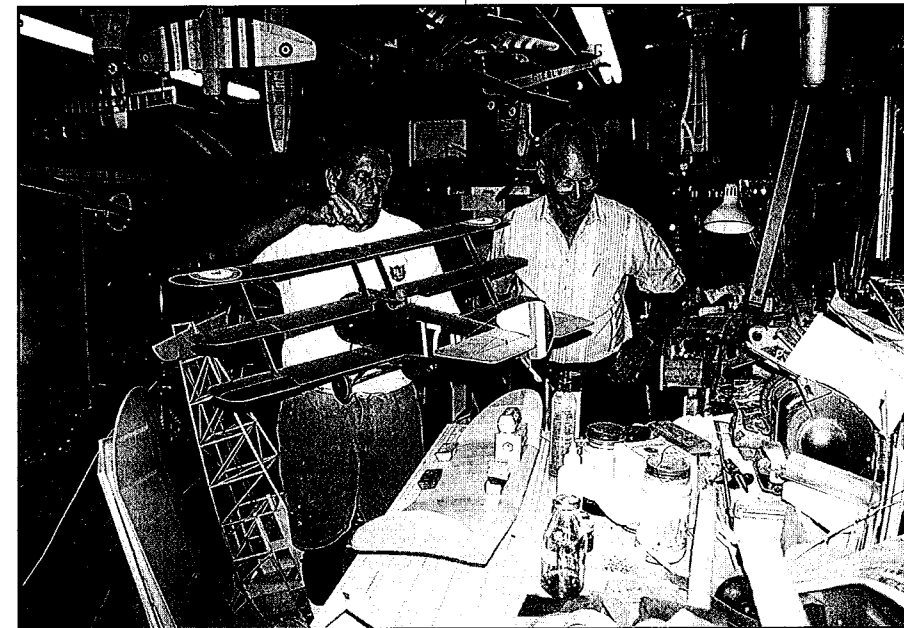
A little later he began taking lessons on a regular basis at the Fullerton Airport and soloed there in 1951 in a Luscombe. He also worked for a time at Fullerton as a "prop boy" - in the days when line personnel still propped airplanes.

Meanwhile, Fernando's modeling continued, growing more sophisticated as time went by and he gained experience - but only to a point. Although he built and flew both diesel and gasoline powered radio controlled models, he found that free flight intrigued and challenged him most. Modern RC is so highly developed that control

in the model airplane world for those who have had the pleasure of making his acquaintance or reading his long-running column in **Model Builder** magazine.

In retrospect it may have been because Fernando has also been a pilot and builder/restorer of full size airplanes that he has remained so devoted to free flight modeling over the years - sort of enjoying the best of both worlds - but, in any case, his van's license plate tells you where his heart is today.

For many years Fernando's modeling was limited to his workbench and neighborhood fields and vacant lots . . . in those halcyon days before the Los Angeles basin became a relentless sea of urban sprawl. In the 1960s, however, he began to get involved in model competition and had his horizons widened considerably. Eventually, he became a judge for the Academy of



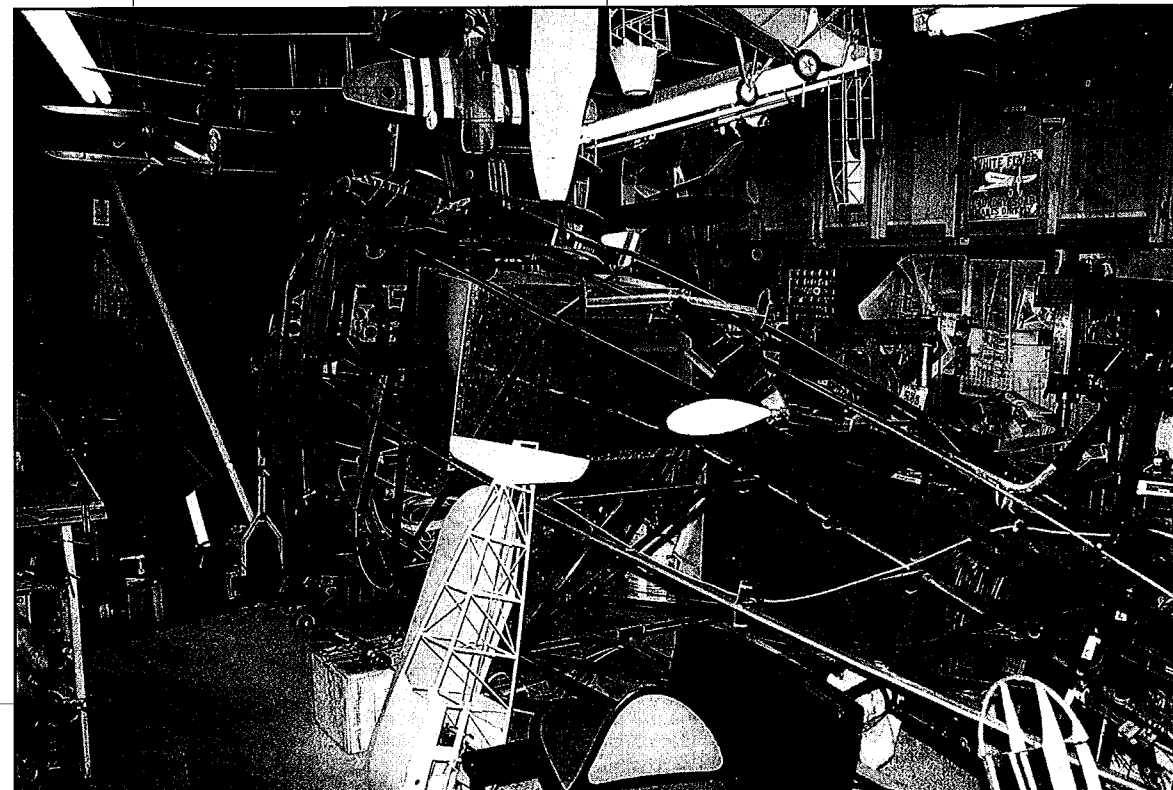
Above. Your first look through the door of Fernando's shop reveals a part of his Bellanca fuselage - festooned with model airplanes.

Left. A turn to the right and you see Fernando, left, and Ken Brock - and scads more models.

Below. From the other end of the shop, a long view of the Bellanca fuselage - decorated like a Christmas tree with airplane "ornaments."

Model Aeronautics (AMA) and began traveling to the NATS (the national contests). For many years the NATS were sponsored by the U.S. Navy and held at the Glenview NAS in Chicago. As a judge, this gave Fernando the opportunity to ride from Los Angeles to Chicago (and, later, Lake

is essentially as complete as that enjoyed by a pilot in a full size airplane . . . and, perhaps, that was the problem for Fernando. There is no greater sense of wonderment, no thrill so fascinating for a young person afflicted with the airplane disease than having that first successful rubber band model go throbbing from his or her hand . . . and actually FLY! With free flight there is always the element of unpredictability - almost like setting a pet bird free and wondering if it will return to you. Fernando missed that elemental wonderment when he progressed to the more sophisticated level of modeling and he periodically found himself returning to free flight in an attempt to recapture it. Finally, he realized he had discovered the niche that gave him the greatest satisfaction and sense of accomplishment, and he has literally become Mr. Free Flight





Charles, Louisiana) aboard Navy transports. Usually the pilots were weekend warriors who would allow him to climb into the right seat and wrestle the big four engine Douglas across the desolate reaches of West Texas or endless wheat fields of the Great Plains. Except for the chain smoking of the pilots and passengers that was common then, those were exciting adventures for a lightplane pilot like Fernando.

It was also during this period that Bill Northrop founded **Model Builder** magazine and asked Fernando to write a column on scale modeling. He accepted the invitation and would become a part of the lives of thousands of modelers from all over the world for the next 17 years.

In 1967 Fernando participated in the NATS, competing with a Bücker Jungmann model he had built. After returning home, he drove out to the FlaBob Airport and had his first look at the prototype Marquart Charger, which Ed Marquart had assembled to check for fit of the various airframe components before covering.

"I'm a sucker for swept wings on anything," Fernando laughs, "including old time rubber models, and when I saw that Charger, it was just love at first sight. I thought, my gosh, that's like a big model airplane. I could build that. Well, one thing led to another and, eventually, I started building a Marquart Charger. That was in 1973."

Ironically, the push that Fernando needed to get the project under way was a grass fire that raged through his neighborhood, destroying some 50 homes. Fortunately, his home was spared, but he and his family did lose some outbuildings. Afterwards, he rebuilt a barn, which was actually sized and configured to serve as a shop for his model building and the home-built project he wanted to start. As it turned out, the Marquart Charger was the first pro-

ject to be built there.

"Probably the greatest thing about building the Charger was the education I got out of it. I had to learn how to weld, work with aluminum, do riveting and, of course, covering. That was the easiest part of the whole project. It was like covering a giant model airplane."

Initially, Fernando cut and fitted the tubes for the fuselage, tack welded it, then hauled it off to Ed Marquart's shop to have him do the finish welding. Eventually, he gained enough experience and confidence to do the last of the finish welding himself. The wood wings were quite literally just big model airplane structures to Fernando and posed no real challenge or even much in the way of education. He was very much at home working with wood and glues.

At the start of the project, he intended to install a converted Lycoming GPU in his Charger, but one day a friend and fellow Charger builder offered him an alternate deal he could not refuse - a six-cylinder, 125 h.p. Continental and an Aeromatic variable pitch propeller for \$1,100. The prototype Charger was powered with the same type engine, so the engine mount, cowlings and hook-up details had already been worked out and proven in service - thus, Fernando ended up buying the Continental and installing it in his Charger.

It's interesting for Fernando to look back on his mid-1970s project and consider how inflation has increased prices. He bought the MacWhyte flying and landing wires through Ken Brock Manufacturing for around \$700. Today, MacWhyte charges about three times as much for the same set of wires. At the time, Fernando had the option of buying Gerdes wheels and brakes for \$90.00 or Clevelands for \$150, so he opted for the Gerdes. 16 or 17 years later, he had to replace one of the brake discs and found that Gerdes had been bought out

by Cleveland and the old parts were no longer available. He had no choice but to buy a new set of Clevelands for about \$400. His Lang tailwheel was purchased from Aircraft Spruce for \$65.00, but that has turned out to be a great buy. The tailwheel assembly has proven to be an excellent choice for the Charger and parts are still available. The prices are many times greater today, of course, but, then, he hasn't needed many along the way.

Fernando's one-piece Plexiglas™ windshields, bent into three flat segments, give the Charger the vintage look he wanted to achieve. He built up a plywood form, took it to a company that made windshields for conversion vans and had his two Charger windshields drape-formed over it. The mid-70s charge for the service was just \$10.00. Years later, he had a second set made, and the charge was a case of beer.

The Stits process was used to cover the airplane and was perhaps the only area where Fernando purposely accepted a modest weight gain. Experienced modeler that he was, he had been very conscious of weight throughout the course of the project and resisted such temptations as IFR panels, fully upholstered cockpits, etc. When it came to applying the color coats of paint, he did compromise a bit, however. He wanted to paint the airplane red overall, but he knew the red would darken toward maroon if he applied the final coats over silver. Consequently, he initially sprayed on a light coat of white paint, then applied the red. Just as he had hoped, the underlying white made the red remain red - as it has to this day.

It took Fernando five and a half years of evenings and weekends to complete his Charger, but, finally, the big day came when it was time to load it up and haul it to the FlaBob Airport. He had a hangar at the Corona Airport by this time, but wanted to

have designer Ed Marquart make a final inspection and rigging check before his biplane was committed to flight.

"After we got it put together, we rolled it over to Ed's hangar and put it up in the level flight attitude. In less than half an hour, Ed tweaked this, that and the other - and that's all it took."

On the day of the first flight, Fernando was in no condition to play test pilot. After five and a half years of blood, sweat and tears, he was a nervous wreck, and was grateful (and smart) to be able to turn over the task to his good friend, Walt Mooney. Walt was a fellow modeler, an aeronautical engineer and an experienced pilot, so Fernando knew his airplane could not be in better hands.

"When he landed after the first flight, I asked him if I had to change anything and he said, 'No, leave it the way it is. It's perfect.' That was good enough for me."

That Thanksgiving weekend of 1978 was quite eventful at little ol' FlaBob Airport. It was the same weekend Bill Turner made the first flight of his Gee Bee Z. The day after its first flight, Fernando's Charger was flown to the nearby Corona Airport where it has been based ever since.

After making his own first flight in the Charger, Fernando built up his time and confidence and flew it to Oshkosh in 1979. It was quite an adventure, as well as a test of personal endurance, to fly an open cockpit biplane that far, but among the rewards for the effort was a Best Continental Engine Installation award and an accompanying check for \$100. He made the trip to Oshkosh again in 1981, this time by the northern route through Utah and Wyoming, but decided that was enough long distance touring for a while. Since then, he has been content to fly the Charger locally and to take it to area and regional fly-ins, such as Merced where the Charger pictures you see here were taken. Although it has been completed for nearly 18 years, Fernando has flown his Charger just 415 hours, which is an average of 23 hours per year. The fact that he has had another airplane to fly has cut into the time the Charger might have otherwise been flown, but even so, 23 hours per year of day VFR is not far off the typical annual utilization for homebuilts flown purely for fun. That goes against the grain of the FAA's regulatory assumption that lightplanes are principally used as all-weather vehicles for revenue-producing business travel. For the vast majority of individual aircraft owner/pilots, that has never been the case and never will be. Unfortunately, the current 15 year decline in general aviation activity is the price being paid for those erroneous FAA (and industry) assumptions. To its credit, the FAA is finally recognizing its past errors and is making changes in the form of the Recreational pilot's license and the various new simplified certification procedures for small training and sport aircraft. It may be a case of too little too late for the lightplane industry, but homebuilders and restorers like Fernando will always be around to keep the dream of personal flight alive.

About the time the Charger was completed, Fernando entered still another phase of his model airplane activity. The

Flying Aces Association was created in the late 1970s and its focus on World War I and other old-time free-flight models was right up his alley. He builds a new model specifically for the Flying Aces nationals each year and has been quite successful with them. Some time ago, Fernando developed his own version of a pendulum actuated wing leveler for his free flight models, and, as a result, nice big smooth circles have become something of a trademark of his airplanes.

Then there was the second Marquart Charger. One day Fernando took a former student for a ride in his Charger and the younger man became so enthralled with the airplane that he started building one himself. After completing the ribs, however, the enormity of the task became all too apparent, and, eventually, Fernando was asked if he would be interested in completing the project. By chance, that very day a 1949 Bellanca Cruisair landed at Corona for fuel, and since it had always been one of Fernando's favorite airplanes, he had to stroll out to the gas pumps and look it over. To his pleasant surprise, it was for sale at an altogether acceptable price - so, that night he lay awake dreaming up creative ways of financing a second airplane. In the end, he made a deal in which his former student would buy him the Bellanca in exchange for building the Charger - and with remarkable suddenness, Fernando found himself the owner of a fine old cross country airplane, as well as an open cockpit, strictly fun machine.

With two airplanes to fly and all those models to build, not to mention his full-time teaching job, it took Fernando eight years to complete the second Charger, even though a lot of the components were now available from Ken Brock Manufacturing. Fortunately, his former student was patient, and was really pleased with the Charger once it was finally completed.

A few years ago, Fernando pulled out the Bellanca's 165 Franklin and overhauled it, but then the airframe began sending him messages that indicated it, too, was in need of rejuvenation. Two years ago he finally bit the bullet and dismantled the Bellanca for a frame-up restoration. So far, the fuselage has been sandblasted and powdercoated, all the wood has been replaced and a new windshield and instrument panel have been made. At the time of my visit this past June, the fuselage was still in Fernando's barn/shop behind his home - and, as previously noted, was serving as a convenient storage rack for scores of

model airplanes! He admitted that he had been goofing off a bit since his retirement, but vowed to get back on the Bellanca this summer and get it completed. He will put the 165 Franklin back into the airplane initially, but hopes to eventually replace it with one of the new 220 Franklins available from Poland.

Looking back over the aviation phase of his life, Fernando says it has been a truly wonderful stream of experiences. In both the model airplane and full size airplane worlds, the greatest thing has been the like-minded people he has met.

"Everywhere I go, to the model airplane Nationals, to Oshkosh and other fly-ins, it's always the same. It's like visiting family. Everyone is interested in the same things you are, and they are all positive, enthusiastic types of people. Although I love them both, modeling has been a bigger part of my life than full size airplanes and as I grow older, that will probably be even more the case. It's like the old bumper sticker that says, 'So many women, so little time!' For me, there are so many models I want to build. We all have a certain amount of time here and I'm just trying to make hay while the sun shines. I just build, build, build, and now I have the time to take them out and fly them, which I didn't have when I was still teaching. It has been a tremendous amount of fun for me all my lifetime, and I'm really enjoying it to the max right now."

Many, many happy returns, Fernando . . . but let's get that Bellanca back into the air soon. You can build models when you are 102 - and you probably will!

