

MR. ELECTRIC: INTERVIEW OF MR. TOM KELLER BY PAT CHANT

On January 11, of this year, 2018, I had the privilege of interviewing Tom Keller, who is now 96 years old. Tom was known as “Mr. Electric” as he was a pioneer in early electric RC flight.

Tom was married in 1943 and enjoyed 70 years of marriage to his beloved wife, Nancy. Tom and Nancy had four children.

Before World War II, Tom learned to fly full scale. He flew a Cub and achieved 32 hours solo. Then World War II shut everything down and Tom never got his pilot license.

Tom Keller is a graduate of the University of Minnesota in 1943. He completed his Masters Degree in Applied Math in 1947. He worked for Grumman in Long Island, New York for 40 years beginning in 1948. At Grumman, Tom did research on military weapons including surface to air missiles.

During The War, Tom worked at NACA (National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics). NACA was key in developing airplane systems for the military which was instrumental in the winning war effort. During his time with the NACA Tom worked on the following planes: Mustangs, Flying Fortresses, Mitchells and others.

Tom started building rubber powered balsa models around age 12. This was circa 1934. He built a model with a 40” wingspan and tried to power it with a gas engine built from a kit called a GHQ, but he could never get it started. During those years Tom did have success with an engine called a Baby Cyclone.

After retiring from Grumman, the Kellers moved to Fort Collins in 1986. Tom joined the Rocky Mountain Modeleers in 1989. This was his first experience with RC flight. Tom gravitated towards wanting to fly RC with electric not nitro powered flight.

He found a company called Astro Flight. This company produced electric flight components starting in the 1980's. They made brushed motors up to 30 volts in size! So Tom started to build RC plane models powered by electric motors. He built a Kadet Senior in 1990-1991. It was powered by nickel cadmium batteries. It had flight times of around 3 minutes. Tom then built a Telemaster Senior. This plane has a 7' wing span and was powered by 32 nickel cadmium batteries! It had flight times of around 5 minutes.

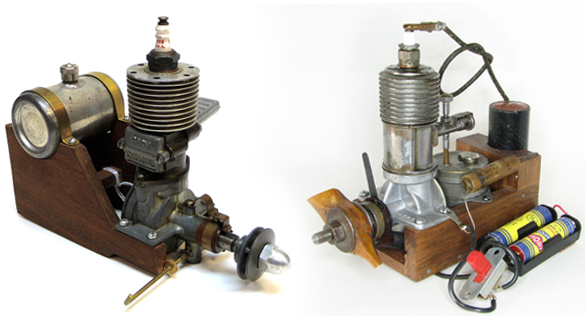
In the 1990's, Tom was the first in the Fort Collins area to fly with electric powered

systems. Apparently, Tom got a lot of quizzical looks from traditional RC pilots of that era. Around 2000, the first lithium polymer batteries and brushless motors appeared on the RC scene. At that time they were both very expensive. Tom continued to fly his brushed powered planes as Tom claims that the high end brushed motors of that era were as powerful as the brushless motors.

In 2005 Tom also began to look for computer programs that could help with combining the right components for RC electric systems. He has always felt that electric powered RC flight has a very important place in the modeling world. When Tom began flying electric in the early 1990's, people looked at this technology with trepidation and skepticism. Now, electric flight is the new normal in RC. In 30 years, electric RC flight has gone from bulky NiCad batteries and brushed motors to powerful LiPos with large brushless motors.

Thank you, Tom Keller, for foreseeing the future.

Pat Chant
March, 2018



BABY CYCLONE ENGINE



NACA WIND TUNNEL