

EVERYONE IS A LEADER!

By Stephen D. Roberson – 6/1/98

First published to Rocketry Online on 12-17-98

THIS IS THE STORY of a slice of model rocket history, and the small part that I played in it. I submit it as an example of how amazing things can result from an unimportant act, as a tiny pebble starts the avalanche.

I'm not a born-again rocketeer. I never fully left the hobby; at least once a year throughout my life I was involved in a rocket launch. Around 1988, a co-worker noticed some of my postings on rec.models.rockets, and came to introduce himself. His name was Carl Arnold and he got me hooked on high-power by loaning me a North Coast Rocketry catalog. I immediately started using E, F, and G motors and never looked back.

Carl and I joined Tripoli Rocketry Association because of their support for bigger rockets and motors. Newcomers may not know it (and many of us old-timers don't want to be reminded) but for many years Tripoli members were considered outlaws by most of the NAR. Those Large and Dangerous Rocket Ships were definitely taboo at the time, but this was about to change. By sheer chance, I found myself right in the middle of a big part of it.

The main rocket club in Phoenix was the Superstition Spacemodeling Society, a NAR section with some Tripoli members. Carl took me to one of the meetings. There I was introduced to the late G. Harry Stine, the man who largely made model rocketry what it is today. I had no idea he lived in Phoenix, let alone involved himself in a local rocket club. Yet here he was holding court over a bunch of young men and their rockets; no way was I going to walk away from this club.

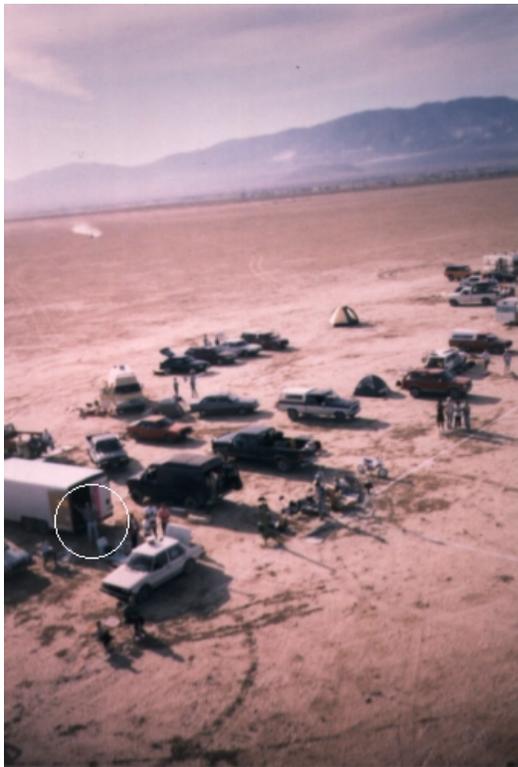
Launches were interesting because Harry provided lots of the ground support equipment. It was weird using things that were right out of the pictures and diagrams in the Handbook. SSS was experimenting with flying larger rockets along side the "under-a-pound" NAR variety. Since Harry was on the NFPA committee and had an inside line direct to NAR, anything that happened at the launches or club meetings had a big influence over the direction of model rocketry. What eventually happened was, through the efforts of this club, Harry became convinced that there was no reason all sizes of rockets could not coexist at launches and in the hobby in general.

While this was going on, my rockets naturally became bigger and more complex. I've always had a thing for photography. Putting a camera in a rocket was a logical thing for me to do. Some articles in the old Tripolitan magazine gave me ideas. In a major leap of faith, I decided that my certification rocket would have a camera in it. I built up a LOC EZI65 and added a boat tail, 4 fins, and a bigger payload section. At the time I called this rocket an EZI65-B, but now I just refer to it and it's successors as the EZ-EYE. My first flight at Lucerne was a success. I got my certification (on an old I95 motor) and a good set of aerial photos.

Which brings us to the photographs in this article. The first photograph is a liftoff shot of my certification flight taken by Carl Arnold. I was actually controlling the button on my own

personal launcher (these were really the old days) and calling out the countdown myself while perhaps 3 people watched. This is really an excellent photo, and it pains me that Carl never got credit for it when it was published. About a half second later, my rocket camera snapped my very first aerial photo from a height of 50 feet or so. This is the second photo. It shows a part of the flight line at Lucerne. Standing at the back of the big white trailer is Steve Buck of West Coast Rocketry, who sold me the motor and was witnessing my certification flight! So I have a confirmation photo of my confirmation.

Back at the SSS meetings, I gladly showed off my photographs and rocket camera. Harry Stine was very impressed in the photographs and the construction techniques. I wasn't a NAR member at the time and thus was not bound by the safety code. It was a good thing because both the rocket and the camera contained (gasp!) METAL PARTS! This was one of the biggest no nos in model rocketry, and here I was showing it off to the man who once led the crusade against metal rockets.



Well, something about me must have stuck a chord with Harry, because when the club began to discuss high power safety codes, Harry was adamant that non-structural metal parts should be allowed. Projects such as mine clearly showed that it was necessary to the advancement of the hobby that the no metal rule be relaxed. I'm sure that there were other factors that influenced Harry, but I can't help but think that it was my rocket camera that spurred him to press for this rule.

My fellow club members suggested I write up the rocket camera. Being a natural showoff I agreed and soon two similar articles were sent out. The magazines had different names then; one article was sent to the Tripolitan, the other to NAR's American Spacemodeling. For various reasons, both articles were delayed quite a while. I did not see them in print until after I had left Phoenix and SSS behind.

This was a difficult time for our hobby. Big “Class B” rockets were becoming more and more popular, Tripoli membership was increasing, reloadable motors were introduced, and the world was beginning to notice highpower rocketry. Lots of NAR old-timers were bent out of shape by this. There was a lot of fear that accidents would happen, legislation would be introduced, and all of hobby rocketry would suffer. There was bad feeling all around; NAR’s attempts to cope with highpower were misunderstood; some Tripoli members began a misguided attempt to “take over” the NAR elections; and a manufacturer of disposable motors started a controversial attempt to outlaw reloadable motors. This was the environment into which I injected my magazine articles.

Bruce Kelly, then editor of the Tripoli magazine, squeezed my article into a great issue dedicated to rocket photography, where it unfortunately was overshadowed by some far more spectacular projects. Spacemodeling editor Larry Shenosky completely blew me away, however, by making my article the main feature of the magazine, giving me the cover and several color pages inside. I was completely surprised and it was a major ego boost to see my big red EZ-EYE blasting off on the cover (3rd photo). Unfortunately, the magazine credited me with the cover photo, so Carl missed his chance at rocket fame.

The significance of this cover photo should not be underestimated. Despite the unfriendly climate, here was a photo of a Class B rocket, launched from that hotbed of Large and Dangerous Rocket Ships, Lucerne, in living color on the cover of the flagship publication of the organization that declared such activities outlawed. Whew! To top it off, in the article, Larry printed a photo of me holding the EZ-EYE, and I was wearing a Tripoli T-shirt, big as life. My hat is off to editor Shenosky. It took real balls to do this and it probably changed model rocketry forever.

It may be cliché, but the rest is history. Soon after, NAR adopted an interim highpower safety code and began certifying members for motors up to size J. The hotheads on both sides of the aisle backed off. There were no takeovers. Many rocketeers now enjoy dual memberships. Relations between Tripoli and NAR have been alot less rocky ever since. That is why I call this cover photo “the one that broke the ice.” I sincerely hope it stays that way.

So you see, it does not matter who you are or where your interest lies. If you are involved in this hobby, people see what you do, however small, and it can have a large effect on all of us. Everyone is a leader. Keep that in mind at your next launch.



Release 2 – September 21, 2002

Copyright © 1998

By Stephen D. Roberson – TRA #1158 – NAR #53741

steve.roberson@winroc.org

All commercial rights reserved.

Free unaltered transmission in cyberspace granted.