

DANIEL J. PRUSS

(January 24, 1932 – June 28, 1986)

S.O.A.R. Biography by Dan Fritz



Author's note: Nearly a quarter century has lapsed since Dan Pruss' death, and an entire generation of radio controlled sailplane enthusiasts has never known him. This biography would not have been possible without assistance from those who did. The responses to my inquiries for information were remarkable and spanned the country. The outpouring of respect, admiration and genuine warmth those who knew Dan still hold says far more about the man than anything I could add. I would like to thank everyone who assisted with this biography. I would like to especially thank the children of Daniel and Patricia Pruss, Jack Hiner, Stephen Moskal, Neil Liptak, Ray Hayes, Gordon Pearson, Tom Kallevang, and Jackie Shalberg of the National Model Aviation Museum.

Daniel J. Pruss was born on January 24, 1932 in Joliet, Illinois. He developed a love of aviation early and was actively involved in model aviation by the time he was a teenager. His early modeling included free flight and control line. In 1954 he entered the U.S. Navy where he received flight instruction and became a pilot. He eventually became a naval flight instructor. Dan served on active duty until 1957 and continued to serve in the Re-

serves until the mid 1980s. He retired with the rank of Commander. Following his active duty service Dan found employment with North Central Airlines. He remained with North Central as a commercial airline pilot until it was renamed Republic Airlines following a merger with Southern Airways in 1979. During that time he flew four of the five aircraft types ever operated by North Central: the Douglas DC-3, Convair CV-340, Convair CV-580 and Douglas DC-9. Dan continued to fly the DC-9 with Republic after the merger. Republic was ultimately purchased by Northwest Orient in 1986 and it is now part of Delta Airlines. In July 1953 Dan married Patricia and together they had five children, all of whom were raised in Plainfield, Illinois.

Jack Hiner relates he moved to the Joliet area in 1959 and joined the Joliet Electronic Modeling Society (J.E.M.S.). Dan was already a member. Jack recalls being welcomed into that club by Dan and how Dan worked with him to improve his flying skills. A warm welcome and enthusiastic mentoring were common memories among those who knew Dan. Dan often invited modelers to his home to discuss, build and set up their models followed by flight instruction.

Dan's friendship with Jack in the early 1960s provided the foundation that would eventually result in the founding of the Silent Order of Aeromodeling by Radio. Like many early R/C modelers Dan and Jack were frustrated by the limitations of the radio equipment at that time, which was based on vacuum tubes ("reeds") and clockwork escapements and not suited for higher performance models. This pushed them toward R/C soaring. Little was known about that side of the hobby. Early attempts at launching had the tow line in the model's nose as with full sized sailplanes. Dan's son, also named Dan, recalls marathon tows where he would run great distances pulling a model only to hand the tow line to Jack who would continue to tow it until they were both exhausted. Eventually they discovered

the advantages of placing the tow hook near the center of gravity but that was pioneering stuff at the time. Dan quickly developed a love for R/C soaring that would last the rest of his life.

During the mid-1960s two developments allowed for the widespread development of R/C soaring: The electric winch for launching and solid state, proportional radio gear. Dan was an early adopter of both. As R/C soaring began to grow, Dan was a tireless organizer, motivator, and promoter. By all accounts, his enthusiasm was infectious. One of the keys to his success was that he was supportive, accommodating, and never critical. Steve Moskal summed up what many people intimated by writing "I always remember he never ever criticized me or anyone – always calmly making suggestions for improvement." A modeler from California competing in the 1974 S.O.A.R. Nats remembers to this day the gratitude he felt when his receiver failed on the flight line and Dan not only lent him a replacement but held up the flight group so he could install it.

Jack Hiner relates that Dan and Dave Burt founded S.O.A.R. Dan was flying in the Joliet/Plainfield area while Dave was flying in the Chicago area. S.O.A.R. was chartered with the A.M.A. in 1967. In its early days the club flew on fields located in Skokie, Maywood, Joliet and Plainfield. Both Dan and Dave flew with others who formed the core of the initial membership. As with most of the early members, Dan served on the S.O.A.R. Board of Directors and held various offices on the Board over the years.

The 1970 A.M.A. Nats were held in Chicago; at that time R/C soaring was not included. The early members decided to host a soaring Nats in conjunction with the A.M.A. Nats and the first of what would eventually be seven "S.O.A.R. Nats" was held that year. The entire club pulled together for these events, which were influential in promoting the hobby at the national level. The number of entrants grew each year to nearly 200 participants at the last event in 1976. Dan was deeply involved in the organization of these events. He acted as Contest Director for all of them. The contests were run using a public address system and Dan acted both as emcee and C.D. Many people still remember Dan's voice calling out flight groups. Dan also

presided over the awards ceremony following each event. He was very much the face and voice of S.O.A.R. for many years. All relate that he was firm, efficient and fair. Due largely to the success of the S.O.A.R. Nats, R/C soaring became part the A.M.A. Nats from 1977.

The League of Silent Flight was established in 1969. It soon gained prominence among R/C soaring enthusiasts by establishing goals and recognizing achievements. Dan joined the LSF and supported its efforts. Today the League acts as the official Special Interest Group to the A.M.A. for soaring. The first LSF president was Bob Andris, LSF No. 4, who served from 1969 to 1971. Dan Pruss was LSF No. 60 and he served as the third LSF president from 1974 to 1977. During the time he was president Dan's daughter Laura acted as the LSF treasurer.

Dan was a prolific writer on the topic of R/C soaring. He wrote a column for *Model Aviation* magazine entitled *Radio Control: Soaring* from 1975 until the year of his death in 1986. He also contributed additional articles about specific events.

As R/C soaring gained popularity Dan became involved at the international level. Dan was named one of the A.M.A.'s delegates to the Federation Aeronautique Internationale in Paris, France. The FAI is the world governing body for air sports and aeronautical records, including all aspects of manned and unmanned flight. Dan served on the FAI's aeromodeling commission, the Commission Internationale d'Aero-Modelisme, from the early 1970s until the year of his death. Review of the C.I.A.M. meeting minutes shows that no later than 1973 Dan was part of its working group on R/C soaring. In 1974 that working group was transformed into a separate subcommittee and Dan was elected its chairman. He remained chairman of the R/C soaring subcommittee until 1976 and he would hold that position again in later years. That subcommittee produced the rules, which were adopted by the FAI under category F3B, for the first ever soaring world championships held the following year in South Africa. Dan Pruss' name last appears in the C.I.A.M. meeting minutes in 1986 when it was recorded that his position as chairman of the R/C soaring subcommittee was being assumed by

another U.S. delegate due to Dan being “seriously ill.”

Perhaps due to his intricate knowledge of the rules as well as his leadership abilities, Dan was asked to be the Team Manager for U.S. F3B Team for the 1977 soaring world championships. Dan agreed. He is remembered for being a serious and focused manager who never lost sight of the fact that R/C sailplane competition is also supposed to be fun. Dan was elated when his young, previously unknown pilot Skip Miller won the overall world championship. Dan ordered a batch of bright red T-shirts with “Who is Skip Miller?” printed in bold black letters across the front, which he enjoyed wearing and passing out as souvenirs.

To commemorate the U.S. bicentennial in 1976 and promote cross-country flying S.O.A.R. created “The Great Race,” which was first held in conjunction with the last of the S.O.A.R. Nats that year. The event was one lap around a 76 kilometer course set up on country roads outside the Joliet/Plainfield area. In part due to the limited number of available frequencies at the time, the Race was a team event with participating clubs being allowed to enter only one model. Dan was the Contest Director. The first Race was well received and the event continued on after the S.O.A.R. Nats ended. It drew teams from across the country. Dan continued to act as Contest Director for all of the Great Race events up to the time of his death.

In addition to his contributions as an organizer and contest director Dan was a serious R/C sailplane pilot and competitor. He flew in many of the contests he directed and he competed in regional events throughout the Midwest. Dan was a personal friend with Lee Renaud, who designed many of the popular R/C model sailplanes of the 1970s and 1980s. Dan was known to campaign an Aquila or a Grand Esprit.

Together with his back yard neighbor, an American Airlines pilot named Sullivan, Dan started a business called Supr-Line Products. It marketed plastic push-rods. Dan’s children and others remember cutting lengths of tubing from large drums in Dan’s garage and packaging them with threaded rod and clevises. The company and its push-rods still exist as Sullivan Products. In part because of his push-

rod business Dan attended many model expos where he met and was able to interact with most of the leading figures in model aviation. Dan’s modeling interests also included a model sailboat that he enjoyed sailing with his sons.

By all accounts Dan Pruss was a true gentleman who was famous for having a sometimes coarse but never vulgar sense of humor, which more than one person described as “wicked.” He kept a personal stationary printed with “From the Desk of Dan Pruss” from which he sent a multitude of personal letters expressing his gratitude, humor and general camaraderie far and wide. His letters often included photographs and Dan was an avid photographer. He took particular joy in creating captions for the more intriguing of his shots. Dan clearly formed strong friendships and many have retained his letters and photos to this day. He is remembered as a very genuine man who took as much joy from the success of a friend and fellow competitor as he did of his own.

Dan Pruss died on June 28, 1986 following a battle with cancer. His loving wife Patricia died two years later. Both are buried in the Saint Mary Immaculate Cemetery in Plainfield, Will County, Illinois under a common headstone. As a lasting tribute to the club he helped create, an image of the bald eagle taken from the “Soaring Flight” masthead used for the S.O.A.R. newsletter appears on the headstone with the caption “And He will raise you up on eagle’s wings.”

In memory of Dan Pruss S.O.A.R. created the Dan Pruss R/C Soaring Team Award in 1987. The award is given each year at the A.M.A. soaring Nats. The Award forms Article VI of the S.O.A.R. By-Laws. As stated therein the award was created “To honor member Dan Pruss by fostering the spirit of team competition at the A.M.A. Nats – a spirit that was the enduring legacy of Dan Pruss in the national soaring contests he created and his guidance of our national teams in international soaring events.”