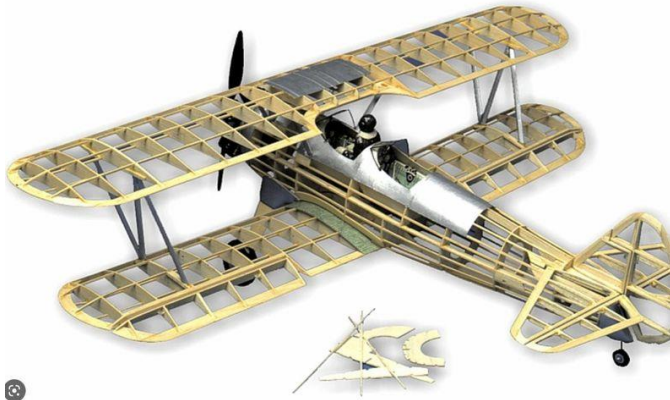


#TBT. The Model Plane

February 10, 2023

As a boy, I wasn't into model kits. Even a school class project with Steve Dungan building a balsa wood model of the Eiffel Tower didn't interest me much beyond getting a passing grade. We got an "A."



Stearman PT - 17: Wood Airplane Model Kit by Guillow's

My main experience was with those cheap balsa wood airplanes with the rubber band and bright red propeller that could be bought in the Five and Dime store. How easy could it get? You slid in the main wing and the tail wing, turned the red plastic propeller until the rubber band got twisted tight, then let it go. If you were lucky, it might fly for five seconds, then nosedive into the

ground, where it often broke a wing. So, you taped it back together and tried flying it again...and again.

For some unknown reason, my interest changed in 1995 when I bought a balsa wood Stearman PT-17 Biplane model airplane. I spent hours cutting, gluing, and sanding the wood pieces, almost like putting a puzzle together. After a time, the wings and fuselage framework were done. Then, according to the instructions, I was supposed to apply aircraft dope solvent to seal the balsa wood and stretch the tissue paper that goes over the wood frame before it gets painted. Dope is a solvent used on model aircraft. It is very flammable and smelly, definitely not something I was going to use inside the house. My interest starting to wane, I put the unfinished project on hold until I decided my next step.

Fast forward to 2023. Stuck away on the top shelf in one of our closets is a clear plastic tote—perhaps a little dusty—containing the Biplane model airplane parts. In 1999, the kit was packed up and moved with us from Maryland to Minnesota where it's been sitting in the closet for an additional 23 years. This year, while taking out some Christmas decorations from the closet, I pulled the tote off the shelf and examined the plane. As I ran my hands over the wood, I was reminded of those days back in the 1950s, when I was a kid watching the older guys fly their model airplanes in the field at the

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Washington Avenue Elementary School. Maybe that was why I bought the kit; memories have a powerful pull.

Back then, there were two types of flying model airplanes. The sleek, aerodynamic, plastic, wire-controlled gas engine planes, which the operator controlled with two handles attached to the plane by long wires. The person would turn around in circles, guiding the plane, flying at a very high rate of speed, occasionally doing loop-de-loops until the engine sputtered and ran out of gas or whatever fuel source such as nitro was used.

Then there were the free flying balsa wood and tissue paper planes with gas engines that the flyer started up, then tossed up into the air. Unlike radio control planes that wouldn't become common for another fifteen years, these planes took off in one direction and continued on until they ran out of gas. My plane—still sitting on the shelf—was never intended or designed to fly, so there is no motor, just a propeller.

Bates Stoddard (Susan's older brother) who lived on Oliver Street built and flew the free flying planes. I'm not sure if his engine had a glow plug and used the nitro fuel or a spark plug, which used gasoline. I didn't pay attention to details like that. I saw a big plane with a wingspan of two feet, maybe longer. He fired up the engine, grabbed the fuselage with one hand, and threw it up into the air. How simple was that. He always aimed it in the general direction of his house on Oliver Street or the general area of the high school (at the time) athletic field on Lum Avenue. Once it cleared the trees lining Washington Avenue, he jumped on his bike and took off—me on my bike furiously pedaling after him—following the plane either by sight or by the sound of the motor.

Finally, when the engine sputtered as the fuel ran out, it fell to earth. It was not a gentle landing. It crashed nose first into the ground in someone's yard or on the street; once in a while getting caught up in the branches of a tree. After searching high and low, Bates, with a little help from his friend—me—would find the plane.

Maybe, I'll check out my local hobby store to get some new balsa wood, tissue paper, polyethylene (a substitute for dope), and paint to finish my plane. Or, maybe, I'll wait and give it to my granddaughter to finish the build when she gets older.