

ARF! ARF! ARF!

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From the April 2001 BASS Newsletter
Information Provider for the Glider Guider

Long ago there was a comic strip called Little Orphan Annie. Annie had big ellipsoid eyeballs and a sand-colored dog named Sandy. Sandy was a very intelligent animal who frequently got Annie out of trouble by dint of his exceptional canine insight. However, Sandy, as smart as he was, had a very limited vocabulary. All he could say was ARF! Sandy must have set the standard for comic strip dogs, since ARF is what they say to this day (see Cathy's dogs in her March 7, 2001 strip). In retrospect, Sandy - in addition to all his other virtues - may have been clairvoyant. Because, let's face it, ARF is here, and it has arrived with a vengeance.

At the recent WRAMS show, ARFs were everywhere. Virtually every booth had them hanging for all to see and admire. Kit planes were definitely in the minority. Of course, you could still buy antique-type kits, mostly rubber-powered, but this is a niche in the hobby.

Almost-ready-to-fly has been around for a long time. Lanier had them 25 years ago. But in those days, almost nobody would be found dead with an ARF. Building your own plane was what everybody did; there just never seemed to be a choice in the matter. All the best designs were in kit form. The few ARFs that were available were considered inferior and no self-respecting modeler would even think of using plastic. The very word was synonymous with cheap.

Well, gang, all that has changed. The highest of high-tech now comes already built. Glass and plastic (NOT Cheap) molded wings and fuselages are stronger, smoother and more efficient than anything you can build yourself without much in the way of equipment and technical knowledge. Most are made in Europe, as are the full-scale glass ships. And they are not made in sweatshops by peasants working for 10 cents an hour. But that is not all. Now built-up models are abundant, and these do seem rather inexpensive considering the labor that must go into them. I have bought two of them myself, an SR400 and a Mini-Pleaser 260.

I like to build and I never thought that I would succumb to the ARF mentality. But when you think of the time and effort that you would have to put into these models building them from kits compared to their relatively reasonable pricing, the Siren's call beckons.

One is left to ponder if our hobby will be like so many other leisure activities. There are not many enthusiasts around that make their own sporting or hobby equipment. Who do you know that makes their own tennis rackets or golf clubs? How about model trains? They are mostly built and those that come in a kit are the model railroad hobby's equivalent of ARFs (ARCs? ñ Almost ready to chug?) Full scale sailplanes are virtually all factory made. Can we be far behind?

Looking back sixty years or so one can see certain developments that had major impacts on the model airplane hobby, resulting in significant change. To name a few, the development of small fuel-powered engines in the thirties, the commercial availability of radio control equipment in

the fifties, the continuing development of modern light-weight materials, and for the soaring segment of the hobby, the Selig airfoil investigations.

Are ARFs the next great new direction of the hobby? If the WRAMS show is any indication, the answer is yes. I personally feel that this may not be a good thing, but then people in my age group have a tendency to hang on the past, where they feel more comfortable. So I will leave it to you to decide for yourself. In the meantime, I will fly my recently built Majestic and build my Sovereign, which awaits me in kit form in my workshop. Maybe these are among the last of the breed.