

Rich “von” Lopez, AMA #L7 (life member)
April 7, 1948 - October 5, 2015

This biography of Rich “von” Lopez was compiled by Chuck Rudner, based on his close friendship with Rich since 1980 and from personal interviews with his wife Joanne and numerous aeromodelers who have known Rich at various phases of his life, including, Pete Athans, Gary Buffon, Phil Cartier, Gordon Delaney, Bob Hunt, Charlie Johnson, Robert Kerr, Paul Klahn, Steve Lilves, and Norm McFadden.

Rich grew up in San Francisco. As a young child, he built plastic static models of planes and cars. He started flying ½ A control line models in the street in front of his house at 12-years-old. He joined a flying club at a local hobby shop and competed in combat, stunt, and balloon bust events. He went on to join at least three clubs in the Bay area, including the Piston Poppers, The Flying Tigers, and Komita. The clubs competed against clubs from neighboring areas.

Eventually, Rich focused on control line combat where the competition scene in the San Francisco Bay area was dominated by Western Associated Modelers (WAM). In 1964, Rich adopted his persona as Rich von Lopez, after winning his first, first place win in combat.

According to the current WAM historian Gary Buffon, Rich was “loved and feared” at the combat field (loved for his affable and helpful manner and feared when you had to fly against him). In 1969, Rich was the senior combat champion. Between 1970 and 1980, in the Bay area, he was “the man to beat in control line combat.” In 1970, he was the WAM ½ A, A, and B-C combat champion and the overall combat champion. In 1980, he had the combat high score in WAM. In those days, the WAM contests were large, at times having up to 400 entries in all events combined. Rich joined the AMA in the 1970s, while maintaining his WAM membership.

After Rich moved to Los Angeles circa 1978, he continued competing in AMA competitions. He was a regular winner at local competitions in the various categories of control line combat. He also began traveling to competitions out of state and eventually internationally. He won the famous Bladder Grabber in Seattle with the prize of \$10,000 worth of Carver stereo equipment. He competed in the AMA Nationals many times. Rich competed in the F2D Control Line Combat U.S. Team Trials during almost every cycle. He won the 1989 U.S. Team Trials and represented the U.S., as a control line combat pilot in the 1990 World Championships in France. In 1976, Rich traveled to Utrecht, Holland for the Control Line World Championships, when combat was a demonstration event and attended every World Championships since 1982 and was a member of the U.S. Combat Team as a mechanic for Chuck Rudner three times. He met with combat flyers from around the world and brought back many new ideas to the

American combat community. He traveled to Europe to fly in World Cup combat events in Spain three times, and in Germany, Sweden, and Denmark.

During his years of flying models, Rich was interested in the design of models and had a desire to always perfect the best equipment possible. He modified engines for better performance. He designed many control line combat models.

Rich designed four 1/2A combat models which were published: Li'l Snip, Li'l Matador, 1/2A Samurai, and 1/2A SlySir. Two of his FAI designs, Firefly and SlySir, and one of his fast combat designs, Matador, also were published. In the mid 1970s, the Midwest Products Company produced Li'l Snip, Firefly, and Matador kits.

In addition to being a fierce competitor, early on, Rich began a lifelong practice of giving back to the sport by organizing competitions and helping newcomers as well as other flyers returning to the sport after a layoff.

In 1976, 1977, and 1978, Rich and Paul Klahn organized and ran combat competitions in Redwood City, CA. In 1977, Rich and Paul co-directed WAM combat for the whole year, including getting trophies for all competitions, setting up the fields, doing pull testing and matching, scoring, and record keeping. Rich continued with organizing and working at local AMA competitions when he moved to Southern California. He was the 1984 AMA Nats combat director, and that same year also served as a member of the official FAI jury at the Control Line World Championships in Chicopee, MA. In 2004, Rich organized and ran a combat event following the Control Line World Championships in Muncie so that many U.S. flyers and the best competitors from around the world could meet and compete against each other. He judged combat in the World Championships in Hungary in 2010 and the World Cup preceding the 2012 World Championships in Bulgaria. He was the F2D Control Line Combat Team Selection Committee representative for AMA District X for many years, until his death. As a promoter of 1/2 A combat, Rich obtained donations from manufacturers for many years and put on an unofficial 1/2 A combat competition at the AMA Nats until it became an official event.

One of Rich's favorite competitions was the 1/2 A combat Last Kill of the Year contest that he sponsored on New Years Eve day for over 20 years. After the first few years, the contest evolved to include a sumptuous brunch at the Lopez house prior to the actual flying. Rich had a great sense of humor and always took pictures of the competitors in shorts and T-shirts on the beautiful Southern California grass site adjacent to the beach with the Pacific Ocean in the background. He relished sharing these with friends from not so mild climates.

Rich was the Assistant Team Manager for the U.S. Control Line World Championship Team in 2006 in Spain and the Team Manager in 2008 in France.

Rich was a combat columnist for Flying Models for a couple of years beginning around 1982. Rich became the control line combat columnist for Model Aviation in August 1993 and continuing until his death in October 2015.

Whenever Rich bought equipment for himself, he bought extra to have on hand for newcomers and other competitors who had taken time off from combat and needed the latest in technology to get going in competition. He regularly mentored those who needed help with the equipment and flying skills. He performed demonstrations at air shows in California.

Rich was the consummate people person, always traveling and meeting fliers all over the country and the world. He reveled in learning how they did their modeling as well as experiencing the local sights, foods, and customs. He had a huge array of friends within the national and international control line modeling community. Rich spoke fluent Spanish and additionally learned a little Russian, Chinese, Czech, Hungarian, French and German to better communicate with his new friends.

Rich with his "Firefly" FAI design which was kitted by Midwest
Circa 1975



Rich's "Matador" fast combat design kitted by Midwest in 1975



Rich's "Lil Snip" 1/2A design also kitted by Midwest





1984 combat team.jpg -- Winners at the 1983 US Team Trials (L-R): Ed Brzys, Ron Colombo, Paul Smith, Charlie Johnson, Howard Rush, Rich Lopez, Kit Gerhardt, George Cleveland and Richard Stubblefield.

Rich flying against Chris Renton from New Zealand in Phoenix



Rich in journalist mode, taking photos at a contest in Phoenix





Always a great supporter of the US team, here is Rich at the opening ceremonies of the 2014 World Championships in Wloclawek, Poland. There he also helped pit for the New Zealand team of Doug and James Palmer.

Source: biographical info and photos supplied by Chuck and Mark Rudner