

Do You Remember?

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Livermore's "Little" Airport



Warbird (Photo by Bill Copeland)

The Hal Chesnutt Memorial Field is on the north edge of the Livermore city limits at 4455 Raymond Road. A sign announces the field with its long shade structure. This is the home field of the 130-member Livermore Flying Electrons radio control flying club; it is open every day from 8 am to sunset for the 130 members to fly their airplane models. Visitors are welcome. The club leases the field from the City of Livermore through the Livermore Area Recreation and Park District (LARPD).

Earl Thompson and a group of Lab employees formed the Flying Electrons under the lab's recreation program in the early 1960s. Earl left for a while and came back to the club in 1973. He wrote to me, "At that time it (the club) was a mess, so I became an officer and did my best to set the course to recovery." In the late 70s the club pulled out of the lab, thus allowing them to open up their membership to the public. By doing this, however, they lost their lab sponsorship money. The field near the lab where they flew models was also used by another group who flew full scale gliders, and, because of air space conflicts, the model fliers were limited to flying between 7 and 9:30 am on the weekends.

As the Flying Electrons' membership list grew, the complaints grew. They began a search for another site. They started leasing the current field from Livermore through LARPD in 1983. It was an old city dump in the 1960s, so no one is pressuring the city to develop the land. The club knows that they are lucky to have found such an open space for flying. After securing the site,

many tasks had to be done, including fencing, creating the shade structure and tables, and the laying out of the runway. "All of the membership had to pitch in to cover the unending list of jobs as they came up," Earl recalled. "Usually first in line to volunteer was Hal Chesnutt. He and his brother did the surveying for grading the runway. . . . Hal became the club president in 1986, and the new field opened in July 1986, with the official ribbon cutting by Mayor Cathie Brown. Hal passed away in February 1989, a huge loss to our members and his many friends. In June 1990 the club voted to name the field in his honor." He had flown as a turret gunner on the big bombers in World War II.

The paved east-west runway for the field was completed in April 1988 at a cost of \$16,000, and the power pole was installed six months later. The first fly-in was held in May 1989 and was well covered by Channel 7 News. Jim Perry towed an aircraft

banner around town to advertise the event. The old runway had to be redone in June 2004; it was replaced at a cost of \$36,000. It is asphalt, 400 feet by 40 feet.

I have visited the field three times; each visit was a delight—to witness the expertise of the fliers and their colorful planes' gyrations against the blue sky and to sit under the shade structure shooting the breeze with the men. (So far there are no women fliers in the club.) One of the club members told me, "Why do I do this? Because I'm no good at golf, and these are pretty good guys to hang out with." The current president of the club, Lenny Farin, said that there are four different types of flying—the most common is just for the sport of "punching holes in the sky;" 3D is for very light planes that do incredible stunts; racing is done between two pylons at the ends of the runway ("an event that ends up with some carnage" as the planes fly so close

together); and IMAC, in which the planes follow a set routine, similar to the required steps in ice skating competition. Still another type of flying is done by the "old timers." The plane is sent up high and the engine is switched off—the competition is about endurance—how long the flier can keep his plane in the air by catching thermals, by circling into the wind and making shallow turns. Two fliers of old timer models are Dr. Joe Poco and Bill Copeland.

In all these flights, the model planes have either a gas engine or electric motor for power, and the flier has a radio transmitter with maneuvering sticks. I saw one bad crash in which the plane was demolished. Lenny told me that you have to keep from becoming too attached to your plane. Of course, that is easy to say, but not so easy to do when you might have spent nine months or more building it and several thousands of dollars. Everyone who wants to fly at the field has to pass a check flight; for those who need to learn more, the club has a flight instructor. Two common questions asked are "How high can a model plane fly?" and "How far can it go?" The answer to both is: "As long as you can see the plane." Another typical inquiry is "How much does it cost?" For a beginner, about \$300.

The club members vary from young to old. The club encourages young fliers by giving them a break on their dues and initiation fees. One of their fliers is nine-year-old Michael Lewis. The club offers fun-fly events on some Fridays and Saturdays; you can check their web site at www.lferc.com. The public is always invited, and the barbecue is free.

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