

Can modeling be therapeutic? Most definitely! Especially when coupled with a strong friendship, as you will see in this incredible success story from Bob LeBlanc of Fort Myers, FL:

“Enclosed are some pictures of our completed Super Flyin’ King project that my good friend John and I completed together as a group project. I met John at our local field when he became my instructor. We became good friends over time developing a mutual respect for each other. We both share a fascination with flight being veterans even though we are 35 years apart. When he was diagnosed 16 months ago with a rare and aggressive form of inoperable cancer, the doctors gave him a 50% chance. The chemo and radiation started right away.

I talked to John about ordering the kit as a group project, something neither of us had ever done. Bruce was sold out of the new kits but sent his own personal 30 page working copy of the instruction manual for us to look at and mentally prepare for the project while we waited for the kit. When it did come, John worked furiously on the wings while I worked in my garage on the tail and fuselage. Everything seemed to be going good.



John (left) and Bob with their SFK and FK. Quite a pair!

About 6 weeks into the project and 2 months into treatment, the chemo got the better of him and he was hospitalized with pneumonia. It looked like he might not ever be coming home at one point but he kept up the fight like only an old marine would. During that week in the hospital, he designed some different covering schemes in his head but was too weak to put them on paper. His family rented a hospital bed for his home to get him to a better atmosphere. They set it up next to his work bench with the partially constructed panels of the 11-foot wing where he could think about important things like model building rather than medical stuff. He regained the strength to put his covering schemes on paper, then 3 weeks later, was back into the project. It was going pretty slowly but it didn't matter. It was going and he was coming back!

When I finished the fuselage assembly and brought it over, we ended up spending much time working together on the many different challenges that came up since neither of us had ever built a model this big. It was very rewarding to jointly develop the ways to overcome them. This wasn't so much about building a model as it was about having an exciting, fun, giant project for John to think about and look forward to being the test pilot for instead of thinking about cancer.

On December 19th, 2003, he was given the results of his final scan after completing 6 months of chemotherapy and was cancer free. We finished the project in March and John flew its maiden flight on April 1st, 2004. What a great day to see him fly this model in excellent health. The Sky King flew very well and continues to today but this model was all about the journey, not the flying itself. As far as I'm concerned, Bruce's model completed its mission on December 19th, 2003. Thanks Bruce!

Flying this with John makes for a great half day event where we stop at the local airport on the way back for a coke and watch the full scale guys. This has been one fun project and just as fun putting it all together at the field and discussing what the next flight needs to accomplish. We both really get a kick out of having it lined up with the 33%-40% aerobats and everyone asking about the big high-wing airplane. It's just nice to see something different sometimes.

P.S. We had so much fun building the big one that we made the "little" one recently as well. This time, John built the fuselage and tail while I got some experience building wings. The 80" model is about half the size and ¼ the weight. When the hurricanes give us a break, we'll get together and fly that one. John says that it's my turn for the test pilot duties.

Sky King: 3W-75, Ultracote, Hitec 705's, 2-door candy bay (2 retracts), smoke, 2 JR955s, 2 1700 mAh NiCad, 41 lbs.

Flyin King: Magnum 1.08, Ultracote, Hitec 645's, 1 door candy bay (1 retract), JR 955, 1700 mAh NiCad, 10.5 lbs.

What a fantastic story! Bob actually understated his role in this. He came up with the idea and bought the model for his friend. In earlier communications, he told me that both he and John thought it might be John's last model and wanted to build something special. For me, it was both an honor that they chose the SFK, and a heartache that I didn't have kits ready to go. Bob kept me up to date during the whole emotional roller coaster, and to say that we're all pleased with the final outcome is another huge understatement. This one touched me deeply, and I like to think the SFK played a part in John's recovery. However, it's obvious from the story that it was a special friendship that really played the major role.

Bob and John eventually made the difficult decision to sell their SFK, partly because their schedules kept them from flying it much, and partly because they shared the feeling that it had already served its real purpose to them. Bob followed up with the following email...

Can a Model Have a Soul?

Well, the Sky King will be going to another very deserving owner at the end of this month when it is delivered to Top Gun in Lakeland. Here's how it happened...

After putting the Sky King up for sale on RCU, a gentleman from Boston started communicating with us and it was clear that he wanted this airplane. We settled on \$2700 ready to fly. He told me tonight that his three-year old son that just completed 14 months of chemo to treat a tumor on his jaw bone picked it out on RCUniverse because he like the colors and covering scheme so much - the scheme that John had designed in his head while in the hospital dealing with the same kind of issues. He said that he is doing well and passed 7 all-clears already and loves to sit on a blanket and watch his dad fly RC planes every summer weekend. This man is as genuine as they come and had not read about the building history of the Sky King. This was just too coincidental and makes me think that this plane was meant to be up there with him and his son now. My wife said maybe you should just give it to him. He mentioned having 15 airplanes, nice ones, so he doesn't sound like he needs chariy. I'm not a drama person, but thought you would appreciate the interesting second chapter of the Sky King story. Every other plane I've ever had is just a nice, somewhat expendable model that you get over in a few hours if it goes down. Your SFK model felt different from the beginning when it arrived from UPS and has proved to be so. The gentleman in Boston said that it will probably get flown 50-100 times this summer and will be his new airplane of choice as he already has flown the smaller Flyin' King and knows the characteristics. This SFK has found a new perfect home for its second mission, keeping a dad and son entertained this summer, and possibly being his son's first RC plane to fly on a buddy cord.