

# FORGOTTEN SPOTTER MODELS OF WORLD WAR TWO

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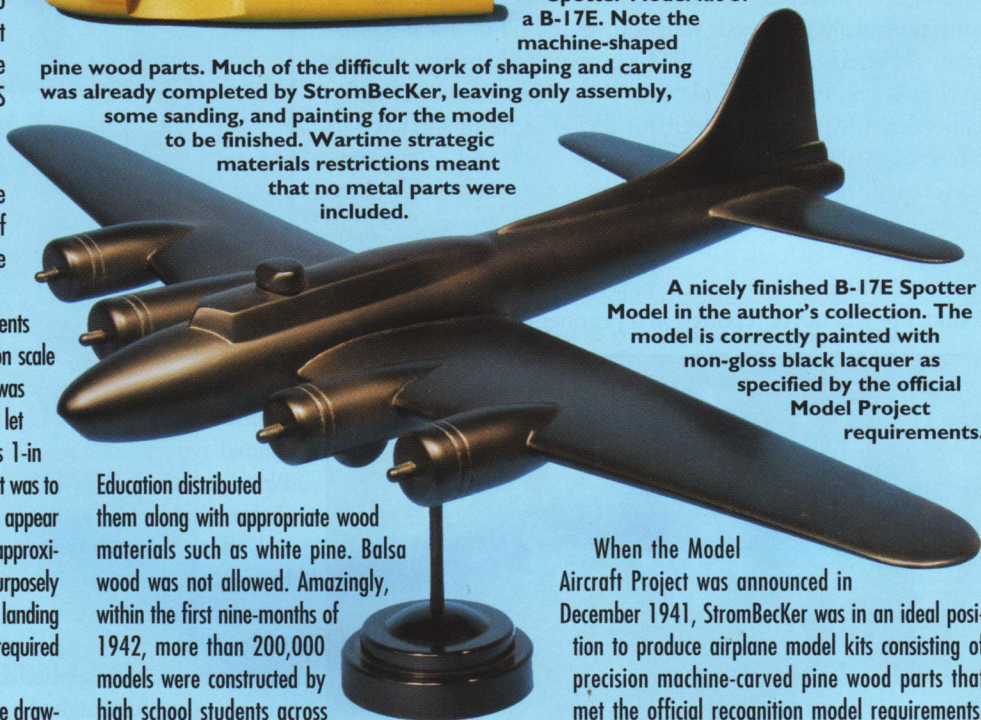
Immediately following the devastating attack on Pearl Harbor, 7 December 1941, by Japanese Naval planes and the subsequent declaration of war by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, the US Navy Department Bureau of Aeronautics instituted a program to produce scale model airplanes to teach military and civilian personnel aircraft recognition and range estimation. The Secretary of the Navy asked the US Commissioner of Education to work with the nation's schools to produce at least 500,000 scale models as soon as possible. The US Office of Education and the Navy Bureau of Aeronautics cooperatively established the Model Aircraft Project.

The concept was to have high school students across the nation construct models to a common scale using only wood components. The scale chosen was 1:72 based on the rather arbitrary decision to let one inch equal the height of a 6-ft man, thus 1-in model dimension equal 72-in full size. The effect was to cause a model viewed at a distance of 35-ft to appear the same size as the actual airplane would at approximately a half-mile distance. The models were purposely devoid of details such as propellers, extended landing gear, and control surface outlines. They were required to be finished with "non-gloss" black paint.

The Navy printed plans with 1:72 template drawings on a heavy cardstock paper and the Office of



An original StromBecker Spotter Model kit of a B-17E. Note the machine-shaped pine wood parts. Much of the difficult work of shaping and carving was already completed by StromBecker, leaving only assembly, some sanding, and painting for the model to be finished. Wartime strategic materials restrictions meant that no metal parts were included.



A nicely finished B-17E Spotter Model in the author's collection. The model is correctly painted with non-gloss black lacquer as specified by the official Model Project requirements.

Education distributed them along with appropriate wood materials such as white pine. Balsa wood was not allowed. Amazingly, within the first nine-months of 1942, more than 200,000 models were constructed by high school students across the country.

Prior to WWII, Strombeck-Becker Manufacturing Company specialized in making tool handles from wood. The wood turning machinery required to produce the handles also provided an ideal means for making toy trains and toy airplanes. In 1936 Strombeck-Becker made and sold its first toy-like model airplane kit consisting of pre-shaped western pine wood parts. By 1941, the company had several airplane kits in various approximate scales chosen to fit convenient box sizes. The kits marketed under the trade name StromBecker, included powdered glue, sandpaper, crude stamped metal propellers and wire landing gear legs.

When the Model Aircraft Project was announced in December 1941, StromBecker was in an ideal position to produce airplane model kits consisting of precision machine-carved pine wood parts that met the official recognition model requirements. During the war, StromBecker produced kits of six different airplanes and packaged them under the product label "Spotter Model." Wartime strategic materials restrictions meant that no metal parts were included. The Spotter series included a B-17E, B-26C, P-40E, A-20A, B-24D, and SBC-4. Oddly, StromBecker did not make the kits directly for the government, but sold them through wholesale distributors. Production quantities of these kits were limited as Strombeck-Becker was heavily involved with war production of critical wood items such as gun stocks and handles.

Today, relatively few Spotter Models survive — mostly in the hands of personal collectors. The insatiable demand for recognition models during the war eventually led to them being manufactured in large quantities from injection-molded cellulose acetate. The age of wood recognition models was short lived and their history is nearly forgotten.

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A finished Martin B-26C and its original Spotter Model box from 1942.