

## The History of the Tripoli Rocketry Association

In December 1964 a group of high school students in Irwin, Pennsylvania formed a high school science club, with Francis (Glenn) Graham being one of the key founding members. The club was geared to all areas of science, but centered on astronomy and rocketry. Members of the club came from three cities in the area: East Pittsburgh, North Braddock, and Irwin. To help finance experiments and projects, one of the members donated some gold coins he had received from his father. These coins came from Tripoli, Lebanon during World War II. Since the members came from three towns, and Tripoli (roughly) meant "three cities," the name was accepted and they were known as the Tripoli Science Club.

During and after their high school years, the members maintained their "club." Rocket activities dominated the group's interest and the name "Tripoli Rocket Club" soon settled into being. The club went through several name modifications like the "Tripoli Science Federation," which corresponded to a mild national and international expansion of the group in its first decade of existence. Early on, the concept of local "prefectures" had been adopted as a structural method for the organization. At its height, the young Tripoli "Federation" had prefectures in several areas across the country, as well as a small prefecture in Denmark (!), and a mailing list near 1,000. This early growth was ultimately tough for youthful leaders to sustain, and the proto-Tripoli experienced some ebb and flow in size through the '60's and '70's.

In the late 1960's several key western PA rocketeers became Tripoli members and would join Francis Graham in driving the spirit and growth of the group. These members included Art Bower, Ken Good, Curt Hughes, A.J. Reed, and Ernie Scavincky. The Tripoli Rocket Club's interests were diverse, and focused on everything from advanced model rockets through amateur rocket activities. In the latter area, several metal rockets with zinc sulfur motors were built, as well as the ever popular "caramel candy" motors. Several Fort Sills Betas replicas of full and partial scale were built and launched, with notable success (the "Gloria Mundi" of 1969, and the "Spartan" series of the early 1970's). Luckily, for the number of metal rockets and motors built, no one was ever injured - although there were the inevitable catastrophic failures of some of them. It was a testament to their care and attention to safety, even before there was a true safety code, that these high school and college-age students were kept safe and sound while they pushed the envelope of civilian rocketry.

The group continued an active life in all phases of rocketry during the 70's. A.J. had a short-lived, but successful rocket kit company, Catskill Rockets. And in the late 70's, early 80's the group was progressing toward a safer, still "dangerous", larger model rocket, with Curt taking a lead role. Curt was working on original-design composite motors, and Ken was working on multi-staging of newer higher impulse commercial motors, around the time leading up to Chris Pearson's groundbreaking "LDRS-1" event. Curt and Ken both attended the first two LDRS's, linking with Chris, and began to network with a wider group of advanced rocketeers that had been following similar paths to Tripoli, but had been doing so more or less independently. The networking facilitated by the first several LDRS events would pave the way for a renewed effort to unify advanced rocketeers across the country.

One of those who had been following a parallel, independent path was Tom Blazanin, who joined Tripoli in 1984. After years, as a lone ranger, he discovered, as a lot of people have, a group of adults in his own back yard interested in rockets! Independent of the Tripoli activity, Tom had tried to unite the High Powered Rocket Community with an organization called the "Advanced Rocketry Society." While it recruited members, it was not strong enough to survive and like several other organizations that tried to unite, it dissolved. Unlike other organizations that started and failed, all members received their money back.

After Tom joined the group, the members of the Tripoli Rocket Club reorganized with the help of Tom and Francis. Members interested in astronomy separated to form the "American Lunar Society," which would be headed by Francis. The remaining members, about eighteen of them, renamed the group the "Tripoli Rocketry Society," along the lines set by the Advanced Rocketry Society, and geared themselves toward what was becoming the new area of high-powered "model rocketry."

In early 1985 Tom was contacted by Mark Weber (from Cincinnati, Ohio), who had heard of Tom's abortive attempt to form the Advanced Rocketry Society. Mark asked Tom if he would be interested in

starting up a national organization again, only this time there would be backing from the manufacturers. While not being wholly convinced, Tom nonetheless went to Cincinnati for a meeting.

The meeting was held on April 12th, 1985 in Cincinnati Ohio. The purpose was to address the formation of a national organization to perpetuate the safety, advancement, and future of non-professional rocketry, above that described by the National Association of Rocketry. The organizational groundwork was to be laid to work within the National Fire Prevention Association's Rule #1122, and permit its members legal activity, again, above that described by the National Association of Rocketry.

The meeting was a difficult one, lasting until near 3 AM the next morning with very little headway being made. Due to the time and frustration of arguing points, Tom stated that enough was enough. He had a group in Pittsburgh that, in his opinion, met most all of the points argued and that as far as he was concerned he was happy with it and the activities in which they were involved. It was asked by someone that since a group was already formed that had a working membership and "bank account," would the Tripoli Rocket Society be willing to be the springboard into the national organization the community needed?

Thus with a simple word change, the Tripoli Rocketry Association existed. The Pittsburgh membership, and funds, formed the base that began to grow...rather slowly. An Interim Board of Directors was created to write a constitution and set up a governing body on a national basis. J.P. O'Connor, Cincinnati, was President; Mark Weber, Cincinnati, was Vice-President; Tom Blazanin, Pittsburgh, Secretary; and Francis Graham, Pittsburgh, Treasurer.

LDRS-4, in Medina, Ohio, was the launch that introduced the Tripoli Rocketry Association to the country. A lot of people were skeptical about this thing called "Tripoli." Many people did not want to support this "unknown" group until it proved itself. Active enthusiasm of Melodi Rosenfield proved successful and Tripoli left LDRS-4 with a healthy increase in its membership.

But, like many good things, this young organization had problems. The four interim Board members seemed to form two factions. The people in Cincinnati, while having a good grasp of the national scene and long range goals, refused to delegate responsibility and let new people become involved in Tripoli. The Pittsburgh faction had a good rapport with the membership and what the people wanted immediately, and found the others' demands too hard to work with...so they didn't! This created massive strife within the organization which in turn caused three of the interim Board members to resign office. The sole surviving Board member, Francis Graham called an election, and in January 1986 a new Board of Directors was seated. Thus, the Tripoli Rocketry Association was stabilized.

The first Board of Directors consisted of nine members:

- Tom Blazanin Pittsburgh, PA
- Francis Graham Pittsburgh, PA
- Curt Hughes New York, NY
- Bill Barber Woodland Hills, CA
- Ed Tindell Houston, TX
- Gary Fillible Sheridan, OR
- Chuck Mund West Milford, NJ
- Glenn Strickland Knoxville, TN
- Philip Matte Fayetteville, NC

The new Board chose Tom Blazanin to be President. His dedication to the Association and his ideas on its future made the decision easy...in any case, everyone thought he was President all along! Bill Barber became Vice-President, Ed Tindell became Treasurer, and Francis Graham took over as Secretary, a position he had held within Tripoli continuously since 1964.

Good things come slow and steady, and Tripoli grew slowly and steadily. A fellow Tripoli member, Darrel Gardner from Alaska, offered his services as an attorney to incorporate the Association as a non-profit

business for the advancement and operation of non-professional rocketry. On July 18th, 1986 the Tripoli Rocketry Association, Inc. came into existence.

LDRS-5, in Medina, Ohio, saw the first Board of Directors meeting, during which the Board ratified the Articles of Incorporation and Bylaws. That weekend also saw the first Tripoli national general assembly - the membership meeting - during which the Board's actions were approved by the membership. This new national organization of advanced non-professional rocketry was gaining life and momentum. There were fewer "What's a Tripoli?" at this LDRS, and people who, just a year earlier, were skeptics...were now members.

Tripoli introduced, at LDRS-5, its program to enable its members to have legal access to Class B motors. The Consumer Confirmation Membership Cards was well-accepted by the membership - to this day the program remains one of the most positive features of membership. January 1, 1987 saw the Tripoli Advanced Rocketry Safety Code placed in operation. And 1987 saw the Tripoli Rocketry Association, Inc. given rights to the LDRS series of high power launches as their national launch and meeting event. Prefectures, clubs and groups around the country united in support of the national association, and were forming at a steady rate, with membership numbers growing strongly

While the Tripoli Rocketry Association, Inc. of today in no way resembles the old Tripoli Rocketry Society, now just one of its prefectures, hopefully, one can understand its evolution. Someone once said Tripoli exists through default...and in a way they were right. All organizations and groups that had tried to unite in the manner Tripoli did failed. But a key tradition that was the hallmark of the early Tripoli remains alive today - a dedication to advanced rocketry in many forms, to pushing the envelope of civilian rocketry, and to do so in a safe and scientific manner. So while the name of our organization may have come about as much by chance as anything, the essential spirit of the Tripoli Rocketry Association of today has been consistent, and owes a debt of thanks to all those early advanced rocketeers who pooled their enthusiasm and skills to make the modern TRA happen.