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Article Summary: Charles "Speed" Holman, an experienced stunt pilot, was preparing to roar past the grandstands upside down at Omaha's first annual Air Races when his plane plunged to the ground.

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Editor's Showcase

Death in the Afternoon

By Wallace C. Peterson

A recent article in an aviation magazine on the Laird "Speedwing" took me back nearly seventy years to a warm and bright Sunday afternoon at the Omaha Municipal Airport when Charles "Speed" Holman crashed to his death before twenty thousand horrified spectators.

It was May 17, 1931, the last day of Omaha's first annual Air Races, which continued until 1934, when depression and drought brought them to an end. I was ten years old, absolutely hooked on airplanes, and thrilled to be taken by my older brother Harold to this spectacular event.

Holman flew into Omaha from Minneapolis/St. Paul Saturday afternoon, entering in dramatic fashion into a race already underway. For his late Sunday afternoon performance, he made an exciting takeoff, holding his black and gold Laird tail high on the runway well beyond the normal point of liftoff, then pulling the stick back to climb almost vertically to over one thousand feet before rolling over and starting his act.

Like every other spectator on that warm May afternoon, my eyes were locked onto Holman's biplane as he dove repeatedly to within a hundred feet of the ground, roared past the grandstands at around 250 miles per hour, and then zoomed and rolled high into the sky, only to turn in a hammer-head stall and start another descent. Holman and his plane were only a hundred feet or so away from the spectators

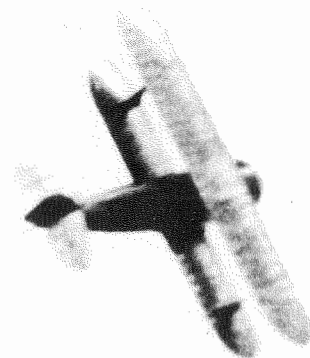
when flying level after each dive.

Holman started his last dive north of the field, flying downwind to give the spectators the illusion of even greater speed, rolling the Laird upside down when perhaps three hundred feet in the air. He clearly intended to roar past the grandstands upside down, giving the crowd, as he told some fellow pilots before the flight, a "special thrill." He never made it.

As the plane rolled over, everyone came to their feet, blocking my view so I did not see the final crash. But I heard it—it was like a great pop, as if a gigantic light bulb had been dropped onto concrete! For a moment there was absolute silence, as a cloud of dust rose from the spot of the crash. There was no fire.

A front page photo from the *Omaha World-Herald*, taken an instant before the crash, shows the plane upside down, nearly level, and about twenty feet above the ground. Then the nose suddenly dropped, and the plane hit the ground, killing Holman instantly as the beautiful black and gold Laird turned into a bouncing, twisted mass of metal, wood, and fabric. This photo and its negative, unfortunately, have disappeared from the newspaper's "morgue."

Spectators reported that just before the crash, Holman's body seemed to be hanging halfway out of the cockpit, which led to the belief that Holman's safety belt broke, causing the crash. Some pilots told reporters they thought at the last second Holman managed to control the plane enough to avoid crashing into the stands.



Charles "Speed" Holman climbs out to the south with the sun shining on the gold wings of his Laird as he turns for another dive before the grandstand at the Omaha Air Races. All photographs from sixteen millimeter movies taken by the late Harold F. Peterson and now in the collections of the Nebraska State Historical Society.

My brother Harold, who brought his sixteen millimeter movie camera to the air races, took shots of Holman during the dives, turns, flights past the grandstand, and his final, fatal dive. The photos with this article were made by the Nebraska State Historical Society from frames in the original negative, now in the archives of the Society. I was so stunned and shaken by what I saw that my brother didn't tell me until several



Sequence of photos showing Holman and his Laird upside down, then plunging to the ground in the fatal crash.



Holman speeds to the north in front of the grandstand.

hours later that "Speed" had been killed. I think I knew it, although I didn't want to believe it.

There is still no final answer as to why Holman crashed that Sunday in Omaha. Department of Commerce aviation inspector J. E. Boudwin said that a bracket holding the seat belt had apparently snapped under the strain of centrifugal force as Holman came out of his dive, while Eddie Stinson, another eyewitness, thought that the gusty surface winds were a major cause. The winds were estimated as at least twenty-five knots out of the north.

Years later in 1983, Jimmy Haizlip, a

fellow race pilot and also an eyewitness, wrote to a friend in Omaha that he thought Holman may have forgotten to adjust his trim when he inverted his flight. Normally, Haizlip said, the trim would be adjusted nose high for a right side up power dive, but when inverted that would make the airplane dive. Haizlip also thought Holman's tremendous strength broke his lap belt as he fought to control the plane. He did have a shoulder harness.

We shall never know what really happened that May afternoon. Charles Holman was not a "reckless dare devil," as some of the press reports indicated,

but an experienced and careful pilot. His main occupation was operations manager for Northwest Airlines in Minneapolis/St. Paul, where, as Jimmy Haizlip said, he had built for that company an "enviable reputation for safety and dependability in a sometimes hostile winter environment." Perhaps, his luck just ran out.

Charles "Speed" Holman was buried in Mendota Heights, Minnesota, on May 22, 1931. For a ten-year-old Omaha lad who loved airplanes, May 17, 1931, was a day he would never forget.

Wallace C. Peterson lives in Lincoln, Nebraska.

