

the **V-GRAM**

Newsletter of the Formula V Air Racing Association, Inc.

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**STEVE AND PAULA WITTMAN PERISH IN CRASH OF O & O
SPCL. ON APRIL 27TH. – STEVE WITTMAN'S AIR RACING
CAREER – REMEMBERANCES OF STEVE AND PAULA**



Steve Wittman at the 1978 Cleveland Formula V air races. Photo by Jim Vliet.



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President's Message



The Old Master has Gone West...

I first heard of Steve Wittman when I was a kid building models. He was at the time to me kind of like Superman, not a real person or someone you would really ever meet. A living legend in every sense.

As I got to know him, I realized several things....he was fiercely competitive (I never did beat him in a race). He would have to show off his latest creation, in some ways like a big kid. He gave me a ride in the O & O once in Florida. He was 88 at the time and he was sharp. I asked him to give me a BFR at the time just to get his name in my log.

Point a camera at him and he was all smiles, a real ham. He also had a wonderful dry sense of humor.

I got to stay at the Wittman's [Steve & Dorothy's] during Oshkosh once...kind of like staying with John & Yoko in the Hamptons. We went to Acey Deucey about midnight, a bar where the airshow performers gathered. Steve was in his late 80's at the time, no couch potato he. That noisy bar suddenly became silent as everyone realized who just walked in. Steve handled it modestly, not easy when everyone is in awe.

We will miss you, Steve. I sometimes thought you might go on forever.

It was a privilege to know you.

Here's how the news unfolded...

AVIATION PIONEER STEVE WITTMAN MISSING FOR 2 DAYS

Saturday, April 29, 1995 - Oshkosh, Wis. (AP) -- Authorities searched a mountainous area of Alabama today amid reports that aviation legend Steve Wittman and his wife disappeared while flying to Wisconsin. Wittman, 91, and his wife, Paula, have been missing since Thursday morning, when they left their retirement home in Ocala, Fla. The couple should have landed in Oshkosh at 3:30 p.m. Thursday.

The search in northeastern Alabama resumed this morning. The search began around noon Thursday after several law enforcement agencies received simultaneous reports of hearing a plane crash, said Roy Sumja, a pilot with the Alabama State Troopers.

None of the Stevenson, Ala., residents saw the plane, and it is unknown if the incident involved the Wittmans, he said. "When the calls came in, we felt like it was a bona fide emergency," he said Friday. "The only thing was that yesterday, we had no aircraft missing." Friends of the Wittmans in Oshkosh and Florida reported the disappearance Friday.

The search has concentrated on a remote area about seven miles in diameter, Sumja said. The rugged, mountainous terrain also contains a lake with many inlets. Sumja searched by helicopter from noon to 6 p.m. Thursday. From 8 a.m. to nightfall on Friday, the air search continued and a ground search was begun.

"He built that plane 10 or 12 years ago and he is still doing a good job of flying it," said Experimental Aircraft Association founder Paul Poberezny. "They go down to Ocala in October and were coming back up here for the summer."

Wittman managed the Winnebago County Airport from 1931-69. He was honored in his retirement when officials renamed the airport Wittman Field. The EAA is headquartered at Wittman Field.

About 1,000 EAA members along the flight route between Florida and Wisconsin also have been searching, Poberezny said.

"It's a rural, desolate area, and it's a hard search," Sumja said. "What makes it even more frustrating is that no one saw the plane." The 30 or so reports received since Thursday vary widely, he said. "Some thought the plane crashed on the mountain, some thought it went in the water," he said. "People pretty much agree that they heard an engine wind up and heard a thud like a crash." A sonic boom from a low-flying military jet occurred just before people reported the plane in distress. It is unrelated to the disappearance, he said. "People said they were sure what they heard wasn't the sonic boom," he said. "It's unusual for so many people to call 911 like that."

Wittman joined the EAA in 1953, the year after it was founded in Milwaukee by Poberezny. He flew in numerous air races between 1926 and 1984 and holds a number of aircraft patents. The Fond du Lac-area native learned to fly in 1924. His first flying license was signed by flying legend Orville Wright.

PILOT'S BODY FOUND AFTER CRASH WISCONSIN MAN, 91, WIFE KILLED ON ALABAMA MOUNTAIN

Monday, May 1, 1995 - It was a career that nearly spanned aviation itself, from the days after World War I when he got his first pilot's license signed by Orville Wright, to the present day, when a plane can fly so high a passenger can see the curve of the Earth.

Steve Wittman, 91, was one of America's most daring and creative aviators for more than 70 years, a renowned designer, builder and barnstorming air racer who was so devoted to flying that both of his homes-in Oshkosh, Wis., and Ocala, Fla.-were along airstrips.

So it was that Wittman died in an airplane, doing what he loved best-flying.

Officials said on Sunday that the bodies of Wittman and his wife, Paula, were found among the wreckage of an airplane that crashed Thursday on Sand Mountain, in northeastern Alabama.

"He was one of the best sorts of legends: the small guy who never worked for a big company but who just loved to fly," said Tom Crouch, the chairman of the aviation department at the National Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C., where one of Wittman's planes is displayed. "He really covered all of aviation."

Wittman and his wife left their winter home in Ocala on Thursday in his yellow O-and-O Special, a high-wing two-seat plane he designed and built. They were bound for Oshkosh, where they lived in a house at the airport he managed for 38 years, and which is named for him.

A neighbor in Ocala reported to friends in Oshkosh on Friday that he had not heard from Wittman, who had promised to telephone after he touched down in Wisconsin.

Search teams converged on Sand Mountain after officials received reports from several people who said they heard a crash in the vicinity.

Meanwhile, several hundred pilots from the Experimental Aircraft Association, which Wittman helped found in 1953, flew along Wittman's route, said the group's spokesman, John Burton.

The first pieces of the wreckage were found shortly before dusk Saturday, said Jackson County Sheriff Mike Wells, while the rest was found spread over 3 miles of the rugged mountains Sunday. Wittman's body was found about 50 yards from the fuselage; his wife's body was still in it. "Debris is everywhere," Wells said from a command post on the mountain.

The Federal Aviation Administration was on the scene to investigate the crash. Wells and others said it appeared that the small plane tore apart in flight. The wings were off the fuselage and spread far apart, as were clothing and additional plane parts. "Maybe he had some kind of physical problem that caused a loss of control," Paul Poberezny, one of Wittman's closest friends in Wisconsin, said from the crash site, where he had flown early Sunday. "But that was a very well-built aircraft. We just don't know."

Wittman, in fact, was a remarkably vital 91 years old, according to friends, and they knew of no health condition that made flying a risk. Wittman flew regularly and he had taught his wife, who was 56, to fly about a year ago, the friends said. Flying, they said, was all he cared about. His first goal was to become an aeronautical engineer; he thought problems in one eye would make flying impossible, however.

[continued]

But he learned to fly shortly after World War I and bought his first plane in 1924. Soon after, he was barnstorming across Wisconsin, selling rides at county fairs and flying exhibitions. His daring and fondness for speed earned him a reputation that placed him alongside such great U.S. aviators as Jimmy Doolittle and Roscoe Turner. He also flew with them. His racing career stretched from 1926 to 1984, and he was at his peak during racing's so-called golden age, in the 1930s, according to Crouch and other pilots.

At the same time, he was designing and building planes-sport aircraft and race planes that earned him several key aeronautic patents. Burton said that Wittman adapted to all the changes in aviation and that several of his innovations remained important. "As a designer and builder, he was extremely influential," Burton said. "He was sought out by anybody who was going to own or build an airplane. But it was in racing where he really got his popular recognition. He was a really great racer."

Wittman was manager of the Winnebago County Airport in Wisconsin from 1931 to 1969. He was honored in his retirement when officials renamed the airport Wittman Field.

Steve Wittman's Air Racing Career

...by Jim Vliet

S. J. "Steve" Wittman was born on April 5, 1904 in Bryon, Wisconsin. He learned to fly in 1924. His first air race was in 1926 at Milwaukee, and his last air race was on April 16th, 1989 at Daytona Beach, FL. His 64-year air racing career encompassed nearly every major pylon air racing class.

Steve's first few races were in his Pheasant H-10 biplane [apart from his very first race in which he flew his Standard J-1 biplane]. In 1931 Steve designed and built his first raceplane, the "Chief Oshkosh". He competed in the National Air Races from 1931 through 1937 in this aircraft, as well as numerous other pylon races around the country. In 1934 Steve built his "Bonzo" raceplane to challenge the top raceplanes in the country in the premiere air racing event of that era, the Thompson Trophy Race. "Bonzo" participated in the Thompson Trophy races from 1935 through 1939 [apart from 1936 when it was damaged by fire en-route to the Nationals]. His first "Bonzo" had angular lines but was very light and efficient. It was clocked at 325 Mph. in 1939, faster than the top U.S. military aircraft of the era. Steve's first "Bonzo" is displayed at the EAA Museum in Oshkosh, Wisconsin.

After World War two, Steve competed in the postwar Thompson Trophy races in a modified Bell P-63 fighter. He rebuilt "Chief Oshkosh", adapting it for the newly-introduced Goodyear class midget races, and renamed it "Buster". Piloted by Bill Brennand, "Buster" won the first Goodyear Trophy race in 1947. After several more years of pylon racing competition, "Buster" was donated to the Smithsonian and is now on display at the National Air & Space Museum in Washington, DC.

In 1948, Steve built a new Goodyear-class raceplane, also naming it "Bonzo", in which he competed in Goodyear/Continental/190 cu. in./Formula One pylon air races from 1948 through 1971, winning eight events. Steve also competed in the Oshkosh 500 cross-country race from 1978 through 1984 in "Bonzo". In 1994 Steve donated his second "Bonzo" to the EAA Museum.

In 1969 Steve built the first Formula V raceplane, his "Witt's V". Piloting this airplane, Steve won the first official Formula V air race at Sturgis, KY in 1977, and went on to win Formula V races at Cleveland in 1978 and 1979, and at Cincinnati in 1981. Steve returned to Formula V competition for one more race, his last closed-course pylon air race, at Skyfest Daytona in Daytona Beach, Florida in 1989. Steve won the Saturday Feature race, and finished third in the final Championship race.

In addition to his many accomplishments in air racing, Steve designed a number of lightplane aircraft, including the Buttercup, Tailwind, Big X and O & O special. Over a hundred examples of his Tailwind design have been built by homebuilt aircraft enthusiasts. He invented the leaf spring landing gear now in common use on many production and homebuilt lightplanes.

For many years, Steve was the operator of the airport at Oshkosh, Wisconsin. He resided in Oshkosh and at the Leeward Air Ranch in Ocala, Florida.

A mild case of Hero Worship...

...by Jim Vliet

I first met Steve Wittman at an air race at Martinsburg, West Virginia on Saturday, June 21, 1975. At the time I was 26 years of age, and this was the first air race that I had ever attended.

I certainly knew all about Steve Wittman's exploits. I had first become interested in air racing in the early 1960's as a teenager, and had seen Wittman's name in various magazine articles covering recent 190 cu. in. midget races. In 1963 I asked my parents to give me as a birthday present, a new book about air racing that I had seen advertised in Air Progress. The book was called "the Golden Age of Air Racing" and it was available from a little outfit that I hadn't heard of before in Hales Corners, Wisconsin, called the Experimental Aircraft Association. Anyway, in this book I discovered that Wittman had been a top competitor in the prewar National Air Races, and his angular "Bonzo" and "Chief Oshkosh" racers of that era held a strange fascination for me. I began to build scale models of the 1930's racing planes, especially Wittman's and the other Menasco-powered ships. As a part of the research into these raceplanes, I began to collect photos and swap them with other collectors.

The day I met Steve, I had with me a photo of a scale model I'd built of "Chief Oshkosh". I recall waiting until no one else was talking to Steve, and then rather shyly approaching him to show him the photo. Steve immediately showed great interest in the photo, and praised the accuracy of my model. WOW!! [I still have the model displayed in my office.] A mild (??) case of hero worship ensued.

I next saw Steve at the 1977 Sturgis, Kentucky air races. This was the first official Formula V race, and Charlie Terry and Verne Willingham were there to do battle with Steve. I was made a pylon judge and stood all afternoon at #3 pylon in a hot, dusty corn field, having the time of my life!

My first trip to Oshkosh was also in 1977, and I was there to see Steve and the other Formula V pilots receive their race trophies for the Sturgis race. Sometime over that fall or winter, I decided to build a Wittman V-Witt racer and participate in Formula V races with it. So, I bought a set of V-Witt plans from Steve. As an owner of a Wittman project, which

at that time had progressed little beyond buying some materials, Steve invited me to his builders party at his home during the 1978 EAA Convention. There I met many other famous aviators, including Tony LeVier, Harold Neumann and Deke Slayton. Steve's hangar door was open, and all his homebuilt planes were displayed. All across the back wall of the hangar were propellers, many of them broken. I wandered through his home, viewing with awe all the racing trophies and memorabilia.

I had found out that Steve was especially interested in photos of his raceplanes from the 1930's, and so we enjoyed looking through my modest collection. I recall several occasions we handed the photos around as Steve would tell us of his adventures with the plane or person we were viewing. I also saw Steve at the 1978 and 1979 Cleveland Air Races, where he continued to dominate Formula V competition.

In 1979 I purchased a partially-completed V-Witt from a builder in Wisconsin, and Steve assisted my father and I in loading the plane onto our trailer. This was the first time that I was a house guest of Steve's.

I continued to see Steve at the major races and fly-ins, and in 1982 visited him in Florida at his home under construction at the Leeward Air Ranch. During this visit, Steve took me up for a short flight in one of his Tailwinds. I found it amazing the way Steve had trimmed out his plane to fly hands off - it would make a smooth coordinated turn with a gentle tap on the rudder pedal only.

I was by this time heavily involved in administrating the Formula V class, and was the V-Gram newsletter editor. My V-Witt was flying in 1986, and competed in Formula V races in the 1987 and 1988 seasons, flown by Brian Dempsey. It was also flown in the Wittman flyby at the 1987 EAA Convention, and was the only V-Witt to take part in this event.

In 1986 I had become the Formula V race announcer, and so I was the announcer for Steve's last Formula V race, at Daytona Beach, Florida in 1989. I was also pleased to be a guest at Steve's 90th. birthday party celebration at the Leeward Air Ranch in 1994.

I last saw Steve and Paula Wittman at this year's Sun 'n Fun Flyin, where Steve presented a forum on Tailwind and Formula V. Before it started, Paula, Steve and I talked about the plans for the Wittman Trophy, and then during the forum I assisted Steve in answering questions. Steve gave me a few minutes to announce the 1995 Formula V race schedule. I then announced the Wittman Trophy which brought forth a standing ovation.

Steve always took on the role of educator and seemed anxious to pass along his logic on aircraft design. I recall having a conversation with Steve several years ago, wherein he expounded at length on his belief in the impact theory of lift. Forget all that bournelli stuff; Steve's approach explained forward-loaded vs. aft-loaded airfoils, effect of aspect ratio, tip losses, etc. His logic on wing tip plates vs. the triangular tip was another example.

Steve continued to experiment, and his last project - leading edge flaps for the Tailwind [tested by Steve on "Buttercup" in the late 1930's] - was under construction in his hangar in Florida when he left for the flight to Oshkosh.

I'll always remember Steve's dry sense of humor and his willingness and patience with all those around him clamoring to talk with him. I'll miss you, Steve and Paula.Jim Vliet

Sources of Information about Steve Wittman:

The definitive biography of Steve Wittman is the article by Dr. Aaron King entitled "Steve Wittman - World's Greatest Race Pilot" in the book "Golden Age of Air Racing". This covers Steve's aviation career through 1969. Anecdotes about Wittman's participation in the early Reno races are found in "Gentlemen You Have a Race" by John Tegler.

Excellent scale drawings of Wittman's Big Bonzo are available from Bob Sonnleitner, 724 W. Gruenwald Avenue, Oshkosh, WI 54901. Bob was part of the group that restored Big Bonzo and these drawings are based on his measurements of the structure while it was uncovered. They have lots of internal structural details documented nowhere else.

Many, many magazine articles cover various aspects of Wittman's career and aircraft. Here's just a few - with an emphasis on his Formula V activities....

Tailwind Seminar by S. J. Wittman, published in the Dec. 1969 issue of *Sport Aviation* - Steve's own retelling of the history of the Tailwind, within the context of a forum at the 1969 EAA Convention at Rockford, IL.

Wittman Formula V Racer Progress Report by Jack Cox, published in the March 1970 issue of *Sport Aviation* - detailed report on design aspects of Wittman's prototype V-Witt.

200 MPH Volkswagen? by Don Berliner and Bob Pauley, published in the February 1974 issue of *American Aircraft Modeler* - review of Wittman's prototype V-Witt (short wings) with scale 3-view drawing.

'77 Sturgis Air Races by Don Berliner, published in the Sept. 1977 issue of *Sport Aviation* - coverage of the first official Formula V race.

Steve Wittman's Oldsmobile-Powered Tailwind by Jack Cox, published in the Nov. 1978 issue of *Sport Aviation* - development of the Olds Tailwind, with comments on triangular wing tips.

The Lowers-Baker-Falck 500 by Don Berliner, published in the December 1978 issue of *Sport Aviation* - Wittman sweeps the inaugural 500 mile cross-country race.

Formula Vee Racers by Don Berliner, published in the December 1978 issue of *Homebuilt Aircraft* - report on startup of Formula V racing.

Oshkosh '79 500 by Aaron King, Jr., published in the October 1979 issue of *Sport Aviation* - Wittman wins Lowers speed competition, 2nd. in Baker & 2nd. in Falck.

Cleveland 50th. Anniversary Races by Don Berliner, published in the Dec. 1979 issue of *Sport Aviation*.

Formula Vee Air Racing Update by Jim Vliet, published in the March 1981 issue of *Sport Aviation* - coverage of 1977-79 Formula V races.

Wittman Memorial Service

On Saturday, May 6th. about five hundred friends of Steve and Paula Wittman gathered at the EAA Museum in Oshkosh, Wisconsin for a memorial service. The service was held in the air racing gallery immediately adjacent to Steve's two Bonzo raceplanes on display. Formula V was represented by Jim Vliet, Dave Patterson, Toots, Dean Vogel and his wife. After opening remarks by Rev. Bill Barnhart and Tom Poberezny, the eulogy for Paula was delivered by Mary Remillard. Then Dr. Aaron King presented the eulogy for Steve. Henry Kimberly and Paul Poberezny added further reflections, then the service closed with a prayer and taps.

Donations to Wittman Memorial Hangar Requested

Rather than send flowers, the family has requested that donations be made to the Wittman Memorial Hangar now being built on Pioneer Airfield behind the EAA Museum building in Oshkosh. Please send your donations to:

Wittman Memorial Hangar
EAA Aviation Foundation
P.O. Box 3065
Oshkosh, WI 54903-3065
attn: Lonny Head

All donations are tax-deductible. Anyone with photographs of Steve Wittman and his raceplanes is also encouraged to donate them to the hangar.

We got calls....

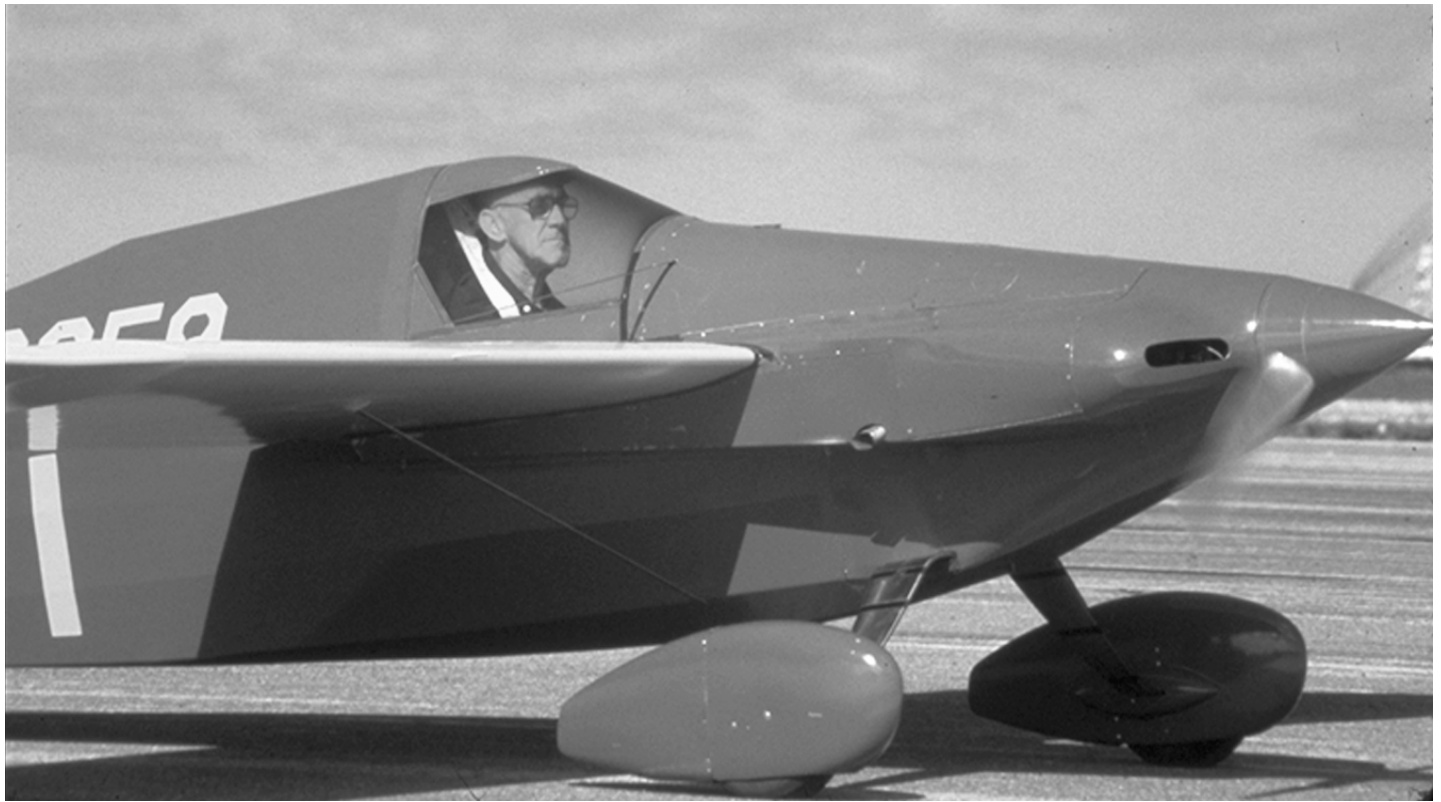
Sunday and Monday after the accident, the phone here was almost constantly busy with all sorts of phone calls requesting information about Steve Wittman's accident. The office of Wisconsin Senator Russ Feingold called, requesting background information for the eulogy delivered by Sen. Feingold on Tuesday, May 2nd. on the floor of the US Senate. I also got calls from Nigel Moll of Flying magazine, AOPA, Zoom Campbell at US Aviator and many, many friends wanting more information. Living in the Metropolitan New York City area, it was hard for me to get any details; there was little or no TV coverage here, whereas the accident was covered in depth by TV and newspapers in the Midwest and Florida. Thanks to Betty Monnett, who called me with details of the search. and to Ed Saurenman (builder of the Chief Oshkosh replica), who called me with the details of their crash. I also received several requests for photos and text from several writers planning books about Steve Wittman's life.

The Wittman Trophy

We've received the trophy and it is huge! and very impressive!! It's now being engraved, and a model of Steve's V-Witt is being designed for the top of it.

Coming in the June V-Gram...

Lots of news and developments in the next V-Gram, including a practice Formula V air race at Seymour, Indiana on July 18-20 [the Tuesday-Thursday before Dayton], Cassutt Formula V, plus updates on Dayton, Oshkosh, and later events. See you then....Jim



Steve Wittman in his #1 “witt’s V” await the starter’s flag at the 1978 Cleveland Formula V air races. Steve went on to win the Championship race, setting a new national speed record in the process. Photo by Jim Vliet



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