

HISTORY MATTERS

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Remembering “Speed” Holman

May 17th marked the 75th anniversary of the death of legendary aviator Charles W. “Speed” Holman. He died in the crash of his Laird biplane while making a low-level inverted flyby before several thousand spectators at an Omaha Air Show. Holman earned the “Speed” moniker during his barnstorming days when he won many air races both over closed circuits and long cross-country distances. In 1930 he won the prestigious Thompson Trophy. In 1928 Holman established a world record by flying 1,433 consecutive loop-the-loop maneuvers over the downtown St. Paul airport (later named Holman Field in his honor). That record held for more than twenty-two years.

Holman was a pioneer and was instrumental in the founding of Northwest Airways. He served as the airline’s first Operations Manager and Chief Pilot and participated in establishing the airmail routes. He had the distinction of carrying the airline’s first paying passenger on an epic twelve-hour flight from Minneapolis to Chicago. In 1988 Holman was inducted into the Minnesota Aviation Hall of Fame.

“Speed” Holman’s death was headline news in the Twin City newspapers. It was estimated that 50,000 people lined the streets along the funeral route and another 50,000 attended the burial service at Acacia Park Cemetery. Naval Reserve and civilian aircraft flew over the area. Planes from the Army Air Corps 109th Aero Squadron flew over in the “Missing Man Formation”, which allegedly was the first time the international honorary tribute maneuver was performed.

In 1930 Holman was presented a plaque by his fellow Northwest Airways employees on which many of his fetes are recorded. Many thanks to Holman’s namesake nephew, Charles W. Holman; who loaned us that plaque which is currently on display at the NWA History Centre

Noel Allard, well known historian of aviation in Minnesota (an Associate Member of the NWA History Centre) wrote a book, published in 1976, about Holman, titled “*Speed*”. Unfortunately the book is out of print; however the History Centre does have a copy available for your perusal.

Speed was honored at the Memorial Day Service at Acacia Park Cemetery this past May 29th.

Remembering Charles “Speed” Holman

(Editor's Note) Mr. Miles Johnson, a Board member of our *Fort Snelling Memorial Chapel Foundation*, arranged a tribute to Charles “Speed” Holman at the Acacia Park Cemetery in Mendota Heights. I was honored to deliver that tribute at the 78th Memorial Day program on May 29, 2006. The following are those remarks:

A Commemoration — The Life of Charles “Speed” Holman

Today, on this Memorial Day, we are taking a few moments to remember the short life of Charles “Speed” Holman, whose remains are buried here at Acacia Park Cemetery.

This Minnesotan’s influence on the progress of early aviation was pronounced, considering he lost his life at an air show in Omaha, Nebraska when he was only 32 years of age.

He was born in Minneapolis in 1898, and although he dropped out of school at age 16, he chased his dream of flying airplanes for the next 16 years of his life. As a young man he bartered his labor at local airfields for the opportunity to take flying lessons. One such airfield was called “Speedway Field.” Today we know it as the Minneapolis/St. Paul International Airport.

As he grew to be an imposing figure, well over six feet tall, he became known for his daredevil ways; whether it was motorcycles, parachuting, or flying. For example, on his wedding day he took his new bride Elvera, whom he had nicknamed “Dee”, for an airplane ride by flying under the Mendota Bridge with the airplane upside down as it passed under the bridge.

Like many in early aviation, he barn-stormed throughout the Midwest making his living flying, wing walking and parachuting in air shows. Early in his career he took the name, “Jack Speed” to cover up his parachute jumping from his parents. One day when his father came to one of the shows he was amazed to find out that this “Jack Speed” was his son. The “Jack” was dropped, but the moniker “Speed” stuck!

As his reputation as an aviator grew he transitioned to commercial aviation and became a pilot for a new venture that would become Northwest Airlines. While flying for Northwest he also continued his air show flying and this led him to an air show at Omaha, Nebraska on the afternoon of May 17, 1931.

To hold the attention of the crowd of 20,000 spectators during the intermission he volunteered to take his black and gold laird bi-winged aircraft up and entertain the crowd with what he had done for many years. This was his stunt flying. After putting on his breath taking performance of twisting stalls, loops and rolls; his final run past the grandstand would be an inverted roll of the aircraft. He would be just 50 feet off of the ground as he passed in front of the crowd. However, something went seriously wrong — perhaps his seat belt broke, but the plane crashed and he was killed instantly.



Photo: Charles “Speed” Holman (1898-1931)
Robert R. Blanch Photography
Photograph Collection ca. 1930

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His death shocked the aviation world! His body was escorted back to Minneapolis by his fellow pilots, especially those from his beloved St. Paul Aero Club. At his funeral and along the funeral procession from south Minneapolis to this site it was estimated that over 50,000 people came to pay their respects to the fallen aviator. Another 50,000 were at Acacia Park Cemetery for the interment.

Aircraft from the Naval Reserve, the 109th Aero Squadron, and civilian aircraft flew over the area and thousands of rose petals were dropped from a low flying aircraft.

However, the life of Charles Homan is what we celebrate today! His accomplishments were many:

- He became the first pilot and operations manager of Northwest Airways (known today as Northwest Airlines).
- In 1928 he set a record of flying 1,433 consecutive loops for over five hours above the St. Paul airport. The record stood for 22 years.
- He won the prestigious Thompson Trophy Race in 1930, which marked him as a premier pilot of his era.
- In 1932 St. Paul Airport was re-named "Holman Field" in his honor.
- In 1988 Charles "Speed" Holman was inducted into the Minnesota Aviation Hall of Fame.

But to get to the essence of the man, perhaps it takes another airman, who lost his life in World War I, to explain what it meant to fly in the early years of aviation. I refer to a poem called, "High Flight" by John McGee, Jr. of the Royal Canadian Air Force.

Oh, I have slipped the surly bonds of earth,
And danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings.
Sunward I've climbed and joined the tumbling mirth of sun-split clouds,
And done a hundred things you have not dreamed of.

I have wheeled and soared and swung high in the sunlit silence.
Hov'ring there, I've chased the shouting wind along,
And flung my eager craft through footless halls of air.

Up, up the long delirious burning blue.
I've topped the windswept heights with easy grace
Where never Lark or even eagle flew.

And while with silent, lifting mind
I've trod the high untrespassing sanctity of space,
I've put out my hand ... and touched, the face of God.

As a monument at Homan Field denotes, "Now Charles "Speed" Holman, belongs to the heights, and the heights have claimed him."

— Newell L. Chester

Heroes Carved in Stone

from the heart of 13-yr old Sabrina Stidham

I stood staring in awe as my gaze settled upon a black Granite wall of memories.

As I stood there not a muscle in my body twitched, Except for the rhythmic beating of my weary heart. Before me, a great wall, with the names of Fathers, Sons, Mothers, Daughters, Soldiers: Heroes ... carved in stone.

As I looked at the granite I saw behind it. A scene of tangle jungles, mud covered boots, people crying as their lives came to an unwritten end. On the ground I saw the bodies of fallen soldiers, bloody and cold from death. In my heart I felt their pain and fear, which lingered in their unforgotten souls.

In my mind I could see them standing around me, in what was left of their tiger-striped tattered camouflage. Blood covered, dirty calluses had formed on their hands, and memories of home were lost in the emptiness of their stares.

I saw beside me the American Flag, still and unmoving in the bustling air. I shivered in the eerie sight. Suddenly, I felt that I wasn't alone, as though I were in the presence of a soldier; I paused not believing in my feeling. A chill went down my spine as I felt a touch on my shoulder. I turned to see a woman; a mother, with tears in her eyes, reading the name of her son. At the moment I realized that the soldiers have not been forgotten. They live on in our hearts; then, now, and forever.

As I turned to leave, I hesitated; looked back at the wall and said aloud, "Thank You." I swear I heard a voice carried on the wind whisper ... "Never Forget."

Submitted by: Patricia Swanson



Above, a 1927 picture shows Speed Holman (tallest man in the center) with personnel of fledgling Northwest Airways, of which he was operations manager; right, pictures from the collec-

tions of the Minnesota Historical Society show National Guardsmen holding back the crowds at Holman's funeral in 1931 and his casket being borne before the ranks of the Masonic contingent.



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dives in northern Minnesota—"God, I had goose bumps!"—now calls Holman Field "one of our most precious assets."

Its value is not financial, for the field's annual operations usually incur a deficit made up by revenues from fees and leases at International. But Holman does siphon off many corporate, military and flight-training aircraft that might otherwise seek to use the larger airport.

There were only 140,407 takeoffs and landings at Holman in 1972—the lowest number since 1965 and fewer than total operations at International (241,614), Flying Cloud (248,245), Crystal (146,109) and Anoka County (145,000) airports.

But the St. Paul field can at least boast a bit of scheduled service now. Earlier this year, service started between St. Paul and New Ulm, Minn.—two flights a day, serving primarily as a shuttle for 3M employees between the firm's plants. Typically, those flights are made with small planes. Of more than 190 aircraft based at Holman, about three-fourths are relatively small, privately owned and non-scheduled, though some corporate jets also use the facilities.

Holman's potential for serving larger craft is limited by runway length. Of its three runways, the longest is 5,400 feet, compared with the 8,200-foot shortest runway at International. Over the years, several studies have recommended building a longer landing strip at Holman, but flood protection has been a consistent drawback. Dikes might keep floodwaters off the runways, but the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has raised questions about whether the dikes would raise flood levels even higher upstream. The airports commission and its consultants are developing a master plan for Holman that could determine how much Holman will be changed.

In any case, commission staff members see little major change in Holman's role as a reliever airport for International, unless the much-heralded short-takeoff and landing aircraft come into heavy use. Perhaps the largest percentage of Holman's activity today is training flights, says Ralph Rovie, airport manager. Flight schools are among the airport's most important tenants.

They always were, says Geng, the first manager, who retired in 1961. He recalls he had trouble trying to keep students from stunting in the early days. ►

