The AMA History Project Presents:
Biography of STEVE HELMS
August 9, 1948 - December 12, 2016

Written by JS (12/2014) and TS (03/2017), Reformatted by JS (11/2015); Updated by JS (10/2017, 01/2022)

The following was published in the I Am the AMA column, printed in the December 2014 issue of Model Aviation *magazine, written by Jay Smith.*

I Am the AMA
Steve Helms, modeler and industry professional

Jay Smith: *How did you get involved with model aviation?*

Steve Helms: My modeling career began in the fall of 1958 with my father when I was 10 years old.

From the first, flying RC models was in our blood. My father's and my modeling directions were different. He ended up competing in Formula 1 Pylon Racing and I chose F3A Aerobatics, competing on three USA World Championship teams (1981, 1983, 1987) before moving on to helicopters in the 1990s.

JS: *How has model aviation impacted your life and/or career?*

SH: In 1963, Westinghouse transferred my father from Charlotte, North Carolina, to Fort Worth, Texas, and during the summer of 1964, I attended my first Nats in Grand Prairie, Texas. It was my first introduction to an analog proportional system and I knew I wanted to compete.

I began competing in Pattern in late 1964 or early 1965. In order to be a good competitor, I was likely going to need to work in the hobby industry. In 1968 I went to work for EK Logitrol while I finished school.

From EK Logitrol I went to work for Pro Line Electronics and then Kraft Systems, where I worked with Doug Spreng to develop the Kraft Signature Series Radio. After this I started my own company, Radio South, in Pensacola, Florida, doing custom radio work and general service.

Futaba Corporation of America asked me to work as a consultant. I eventually went to work for Futaba full time in 1985.

I still work as a Futaba consultant because my interest in model and improving the hobby in general is a top priority. Modeling has impacted my life in many ways, but the most notable are in competition as well as working in the hobby industry.

JS: *What disciplines of modeling do you currently participate in?*

SH: Helicopters are my primary interest now, but I still enjoy occasionally flying airplanes and indoor aircraft.

JS: *What are your other hobbies?*

SH: At this time, I do not have any other hobbies, but in past years, I have enjoyed riding dirt bikes and street bikes.

JS: *Who (or what) has influenced you most?*

SH: There have been many people in this hobby who have had a long-lasting effect on me and I want to name a few.

- My father for teaching me to be patient and to learn as much as possible about what I was interested in.
- Jim Fosgate (owner of Pro Line Electronics) for teaching me how to build and maintain quality, reliable electronics.
- Phil Kraft for giving me his theory on models and what it took to win. "I don't always have the best-designed model, but I fly it until I know what it takes to make it competitive."
- Doug Spreng for teaching me how to design and develop a product from nothing until it is ready for production.
- Ron Chidgey, Jim Whitley, and Ed Keck for truly teaching me the fine art of trimming a model for competition.
- Yuzo Daimon for teaching me the business aspects of the hobby industry.

JS: *With aviation being such a large part of your life, how have you given back to the aviation community?*

SH: Most people would say pulse code modulation or spread spectrum technology, but I consider these just modes of transmission. They are important, but they're not things we couldn't live without. For me, there have been three major innovations in the past 50 years that have influenced RC.

The first major breakthrough for me was progressing from single channel and reed equipment to proportional radios. This goes back to my first Nats when I saw Dr. Ralph Brookes flying an early prototype Orbit analog proportional system. To this day, all I can remember is how smoothly his model flew without the jerkiness of reeds.

Another was the development of dual rates, end-point adjustment, reversing switches, and exponential.

The development of computerized transmitters, especially the Futaba 14MZ which used Windows as an operating system, was also a major innovation.

The following was published in the In the Air section of the March 2017 issue of Model Aviation *magazine after Steve Helm's passing. It was written by Tony Stillman.*

Steve Helms-A Modeling Pioneer

The modeling community has lost a great pioneer. Steve Helms passed away on December 12, 2016. He was an industry professional who was a key individual in developing the first radio systems that did more than just move the servos when you moved the sticks.

Steve's passion for RC Aerobatics (Pattern) began at an early age, and proved to be the driving force that enticed him to become a part of the RC industry. His journey in the RC industry began in 1968 when he went to work for EK Logictrol (a popular RC system in its day) while he was finishing high school. Bob Elliot (the "E" in EK) gave Steve his first job and trained him in RC system design.

A few years later, Steve went to work for Jim Fosgate at Pro-Line. Jim was a master at designing electronics. You might also recognize the Fosgate name from the top-of-the-line audio equipment designed for the automobile industry after Jim left Pro-Line.

The Pro-Line radio quickly became the most desired system of the day, especially for competition fliers. It was known for its fantastic all-metal gimbal assemblies, especially the single-stick versions, which were designed by Ron Chidgey, and later used in the Kraft Signature Series systems.

Steve was offered a job with Phil Kraft at Kraft Systems in California. He worked with Doug Spreng at Kraft to develop the Kraft Signature Series, which was a major innovation in reliable RC systems. This proved to be his most important contribution to RC.

Features such as servo reversing, dual rates, exponential, end-point travel adjustment, and roll and spin buttons were all available on the Signature Series. This radio was a customer-designed unit! Each one was hand built (the first 600 or so by Steve himself!) with whatever features the customer desired. When delivered, the radio even boasted a front nameplate engraved with the customer's name. Having a Signature Series radio was a statement to other modelers that the owner had spared no expense in getting the best system available.

This successful venture with Kraft led Steve to open his own company, Radio South, in Pensacola, Florida, in 1975. Steve joined forces with Ron Chidgey, Jim Whitley, and Ed Keck, who were co-owners of Southern R/C Products, and under Steve's direction, Radio South became a major repair and service center for RC systems.

Southern R/C was a model airplane kit company that manufactured top-of- the-line kits. Steve had designed his own competition airplane named Bootlegger. Southern R/C soon kitted this aircraft, which featured a fiberglass fuselage. Steve made the plug for the molds that produced the fuselage.

When Southern R/C closed, Steve kept Radio South, which expanded and added a complete hobby shop specializing in serving competition Pattern fliers across the US. In 1985, Steve sold Radio South to me (I still run it today). He moved back to California, this time to work for Futaba Corporation of America, and then eventually for the main offices of Futaba in Japan, doing consulting work.

Steve also had a big impact on the model engine industry. In the 1970s, he worked with YS to develop its line of engines, and later, when he went to work for Futaba Japan, he became

involved with the O.S. Engine line. He helped develop the O.S. fuel-delivery systems that are still sold today.

Steve began a long and successful run as a top competitor in RC Pattern back when he was working at Kraft Systems. He competed on three AMA FAI World Championship teams, winning the team honors three times.

Steve also won many local and regional contests, although winning the AMA Nats always evaded him. He competed often in the famous Circus Circus Tournament of Champions in Las Vegas.

Steve also served on the AMA Frequency Committee as an industry representative for Futaba. He provided insight to the committee and helped with technical issues.

He had countless friends in the industry and throughout the modeling world. He was helpful and supportive, and went out of his way to assist any modeler with a problem. Steve left his mark on many lives, especially mine. Thanks for everything, Steve!

My condolences go to his wife, Molly, granddaughter, and stepson.

As Steve would say at the end of each Pattern maneuver, “Maneuver complete!”

Godspeed, my friend.

-Tony Stillman AMA Flying Site Assistance Coordinator

Steve Helms was posthumously inducted into the AMA Model Aviation Hall of Fame in 2020.

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