

A Sad Year For Airshows

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As I've stated before, airshow flying is risky. So is practicing to fly in an airshow. Thankfully, not all years include the death of a civilian or military pilot practicing for or flying in a show. But sadly, 2018 was not a good year at all, resulting in the deaths of civilian and military performers, and one who flew in the Reno Air Races for more than 40 years.

The six performer/pilots who passed away during 2018 weren't rookies. Their aviation credentials and experience were unquestionable. Those in the airshow world gather for an annual meeting, at which they mourn the loss of those gone west. And they declare that next year, *everyone* will make *every* effort to fly *safer*, or *slower*, or *higher*—or whatever. What else *can* they say?

The six pilots mentioned below will be deeply missed by their families, friends and peers, and the hardcore airshow fans who all hope, but don't necessarily believe, that next year will be a safe one. These reports were collected during 2018, and are based on research by Jim Froneberger, the editor of *World Airshow News* magazine.

Stephen Del Bagno

Major Stephen "Cajun" Del Bagno, the #4/Slot Pilot for the USAF Thunderbirds, died on April 4 in a training accident at Creech Air Force Base, located about 50 miles northwest of Nellis AFB near Las Vegas. It was the first fatal crash for the team since the stunning "diamond crash" in January 1982 that claimed the lives of all four pilots who were flying a diamond formation. That accident also happened at Creech.

Before joining the Air Force, Stephen was a civilian flight instructor, corporate pilot, skywriter and banner tow pilot. After joining the U.S. Air Force, he served as an F-35A Evaluator Pilot and Chief of Standardization and Evaluation, 58th Fighter Squadron, Eglin AFB, Florida. He logged more than 3500 flight hours in over 30 different aircraft, including 1400 hours as an Air Force pilot. Del Bagno was in his first season with the Thunderbirds.

Elgin Wells

Aerobatic pilot and talented musician Elgin Wells died on April 25 when his *Starjammer* aerobatic aircraft crashed during a practice flight prior to the Zhengzhou Air Show in Zhengzhou, China. He was 68.

Elgin built his monoplane, *Starjammer*, which included a custom onboard sound system and over 200 LED lights, for his night show performances. A computer system he designed coordinated the lights with the music broadcast from the onboard sound system and airshow PA system.

John PARKER

Legendary Reno Air Race pilot John Parker was killed on May 1 when his aircraft overturned at Reno-Stead Airport. He was 80 years old. Parker competed in the Reno Air Races for more than 40 years, and was a four-time class champion: three in Formula One and one in the Sport Class. In recent years he flew his Thunder Mustang, *Blue Thunder*, in Reno's Sport Class.

Dan Buchanan

Airshow performer Dan Buchanan died on June 2 after a hang gliding accident during an airshow at the Gunfighter Skies Air & Space Celebration at Mountain Home AFB in Idaho.

In 1981, while landing a hang glider in bad weather, Dan suffered a spinal injury that left him paralyzed from the waist down. He resumed flying hang gliders less than six months after his accident and flew his first airshow in 1989. His credentials included being a licensed commercial sailplane pilot with more than 3000 hours of flight time in both hang gliders and sailplanes. His airshow acts included a daytime hang glider demonstration, and a nighttime powered hang glider performance with pyrotechnics.

Ken Johansen

Pilot Ken Johansen of the GEICO Skytypers was killed on May 30 when his SNJ crashed on Long Island after departing Republic Airport in Farmingdale, New York, for an airshow in Maryland. There were no injuries on the ground.

Johansen, 52, had flown with the Royal Netherlands Navy and the U.S. Navy before becoming a commercial pilot, first with TWA, and then with United Airlines. More recently he flew out of Willow Grove, Pennsylvania, as a Navy Reserve instructor pilot, flying DC-9s.

Jon Thocker

On Oct. 12, Jon Thocker, 60, of Redline Airshows, was killed during a night performance at the Culpeper Air Fest in Culpeper, Virginia. At the time of his crash, he was performing with flight leader Ken Rieder, who landed safely after Thocker's accident.

Thocker had a 25-year career as an airline captain flying heavy jets in worldwide cargo operations. He retired in order to become an airshow performer, flying his homebuilt Van's RV-8 alongside teammate Rieder. They flew a two-ship formation for both daytime and night airshows.

I mentioned that each year, those in the industry mourn the loss of their cohorts. This occurs during a convention that is currently held in Las Vegas. It's nothing like the Consumer Electronics show, which sees 180,000 attendees these days. The airshow convention draws approximately 1500 people.

I first attended the convention in 2004. The opening session included a video honoring those who, in one way or another, lost their lives during the year. There were those who died of natural causes, or motor vehicle accidents, or something directly related to airshow activities. Initially, it was weird to witness 1500 people being stone silent as the video was presented.

A few years later, I was at the opening session, and it was suddenly "that time" for the video salute to those who were no longer with us. I left the room. One of the persons who would have soon been on the screen was a friend of mine. I haven't watched the salute since.