

Lockheed Vega - Plane & Pilot

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Written by Ron Peterka

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JIMMIE MATTERN'S LOCKHEED VEGA

Ron Peterka

I think most scale modelers enjoy learning at least some of the history surrounding the model they choose to build and fly. Who flew it? Did the pilot do anything famous? Did it set records? Does the aircraft have a distinctive 'look'? Well, Nigel Tarvin was intrigued by the exotic paint job on Jimmie Mattern's Lockheed 'Vega' and that he attempted to set an around the world record in it. The red, white and blue image of an eagle on the fuselage and the rounded fuselage would be a builder's challenge, but Nigel was up to the task.



He has flown his large-scale model for a few years now, and in 2009 Nigel qualified to fly in the Scalemasters National Championships in Wenatchee Wa. The crowd and the pilots loved the wild paint job and beautiful craftsmanship of Nigel's model. Let's look at the history of the Lockheed 'Vega', a very unusual aircraft. The 'Vega' started out life as a small airliner. Lockheed had a habit of naming their aircraft designs after astronomical bodies and Vega is one of the brightest stars in our skies. It was designed by the talented Jack Northrop it marked the height of wooden aircraft construction in its day. The molded plywood fuselage was formed in halves made up of single wooden layers, glued together, and cured in large heated concrete molds. There were no external struts or wires to create drag. It was aerodynamically 'clean'.

The plywood skinned cantilever wing was braced internally and was mounted at the top of the fuselage. The pilot sat close to the leading edge of the wing in an enclosed cockpit. The wingspan was 41 feet and the fuselage length was 27.5 feet.

Powered by a nine cylinder Wright Cyclone J-5 radial engine that put out 225 HP to give a top speed of 135 MPH, later model 'Vegas' were powered by 450 HP Pratt & Whitney 'Wasp' engines that gave a top speed of 165 MPH. Large tanks gave the stock 'Vega' a range of 900 miles.

Lockheed built a total of more than 128 'Vegas' in its Burbank plant with 28 of them being the early configuration with an un-cowled engine. The remainder featured the then new NACA low drag cowling. The planes were fast for their day and in 1930, all five aircraft in the Bendix race from Burbank to Chicago were 'Vegas'. At least five were fitted as seaplanes.

Wily Post flew a 'Vega' close to a 50,000 ft altitude for an altitude record using an early pressure suit made from a deep sea diving suit, Amelia Earhart flew her 'Vega' across the Atlantic as the first woman to do so. Post, along with Harold Gatty as navigator, set an around the world record of eight days, fifteen hours, an fifty one minutes. Jimmie Mattern, the pilot we are most interested in right now, made two attempts to fly around the world solo in a 'Vega'. He failed in both those efforts and almost lost his life on the second flight.

Jimmie Mattern learned to fly at Ryan Field in San Diego CA and bought a Waco 10 to do some barnstorming. There was work for pilots in Southern California Jimmie became a Hollywood stunt pilot flying for many movies. After a stint as a cargo plane pilot he decided to attempt to beat the Post/Gatty record for an around the world flight. He teamed up with Bennett Griffin who was to be co-pilot and navigator and they got backing from Standard Oil Company and others.

In 1932 they took off on the first leg to Berlin and set a new record for that flight. After leaving Berlin for Moscow a hatch on the plane broke loose and struck the tail section causing enough damage that Mattern was forced to make an emergency landing.

Although the flyers had permission to overfly Russia, the Russians arrested them anyway and accused them of 'spying' for propaganda purposes. After some serious government negotiation the two were released, but were sent back to the U.S. by commercial steam ship. The Russians eventually crated the aircraft and shipped it back to Mattern.

Jimmie decided not to settle for a failure and started planning an even more daring flight. He would make a *solo* around the world flight! To do this he rebuilt his 'Vega' using the fuselage and parts from another damaged 'Vega' (NC 106N). The highbred aircraft was given the original registration (NC 869E) from the original plane. While installing extra fuel tanks he left the rear side windows in place to make others think he planned to take a navigator as he had before. Just before final preparation, he closed off the rear windows.

This was the airplane with the famous red, white, and blue eagle paintjob, and was named "Century of Progress". On June 3, 1933 he took off and headed for Oslo Norway. From there he headed for Moscow and then on to Khabarousk (Russia). Unfortunately he got lost and made a landing near the Andmir River in Siberia where he took on some Russian tractor fuel before he made it to Khabarousk.

The next flight leg was to head for Nome Alaska over the vast wastes of arctic Siberia, however, water or impurities in the Russian fuel caused his engine to quit or seize-up and he had

no choice but to make a forced landing. Spotting what looked like a safe landing spot he glided in and found to his dismay he was landing on the frozen tundra surface and the wheels broke through the frozen crust and were torn off the plane. With no nearby civilization Mattern began three weeks of survival on his own. He never gave up and was eventually found and nursed back to health by traveling Eskimos. He spent several weeks with them while recuperating and trying to bring in a plane so he could continue his flight.

A Russian pilot finally arrived and the pair flew on to Nome Alaska. Jimmie then traveled back to Floyd Bennett Field, where his whole odyssey had begun.

Jimmie's flying career was far from over and he eventually got a job test flying Lockheed P-38 fighters in 1938. He test flew and taught Army pilots how to avoid the high-speed dive compressibility problems that reversed controls and caused many crashes in early P-38's. In 1946 at age 43 he was found to have a ruptured blood vessel in his brain and he was told he would never fly again.

Jimmie died peacefully at age 83 in 1988 near his home in Palm Desert California. He left behind his wife, two daughters, and six grandchildren.

MODELING A VEGA

I have been unable to locate a current set of plans, or a kit of a Vega so this project would require some digging and/or drawing from three views. But, a nice 1/5 scale model would have a 98.5 inch wingspan and about 1600 square inches of wing area. By normal large model wing loading of up to 35 oz per sq. ft. of area, a model could weigh up to 24-15 pounds.

There were about 165 known Vegas built by Lockheed, so if you found the Mattern paint scheme "a little much" you can find simpler schemes. The all white with blue trim of Wiley Post's record setting Vega "Winnie Mae" might work. That aircraft is on display at the Smithsonian Aerospace Museum in Washington DC and a replica is displayed at the Kermit Weeks Air Museum in Florida.

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