

History of Pitts Special - N77XX

Pitts Special - N77XX was first flown on June 5, 1971 by Steven Gay in Tunkhannock, PA. This began its fly off period to validate a special airworthiness certificate issued on June 4, 1971 by Peter P. Brunski, FAA Maintenance Inspector, of the FAA EA-GADO. This aircraft was assembled and completed by Steven and his son Charlie Gay at the Skyhaven Airport over a period from late 1969 to early 1971. It was constructed concurrently with a sister ship N77ZZ owned and built by Ben Dziuba, a friend of the Gay family. Both aircraft however have much earlier history as they were largely constructed prior to their covering and assembly in Pennsylvania.

These aircraft were originally commissioned by Peter W. Thelen of Atlanta, GA to be built by a group of pilots and builders in and around Ann Arbor, Michigan. This group was largely centered around airshow performer of note, Bill Barber, and included many aerobatic and airshow pilots and craftsman. This group included airshow pilot and announcer Danny Clisham (nephew of Jimmy Mynning), United Airlines Captain and airshow pilot James 'Jimmy' Mynning (deceased 2018), and welder and pilot Oramel Rowe (deceased 2020). Due to the FAA 51% rule for experimental aircraft, and the fact that Curtis Pitts could not keep up with heavy demand of plans and kits in the 1960s, a cottage industry began of constructing major components of Pitts Specials and then selling them with paperwork of raw materials for completion. These aircraft were often built by experienced and skilled craftsman who would put out the major assemblies to then be sold. In the case of N77XX S-1 (s/n 3459) and N77ZZ (s/n 9543), the fuselages and tails were welded by Oramel Rowe, a local pilot and professional artisan welder who built at least 13 Pitts Special fuselages. Additionally, the wings were built by Jimmy Mynning concurrently and then paired with the fuselage. Interestingly, these are the same builders who built N8J, "Butt Buster," Gene Soucy's first Pitts Special prior to N9J of the Red Devils Team. It is likely that these aircraft were being built by Oramel Rowe around the same time in his shop in the mid 1960s. Finally, a factory new Lycoming O-360 was purchased to complete the aircraft. Once constructed, these could be delivered and covered with fabric, sheet metal and fiberglass parts fabricated and fitted, painted, and then assembled for completion and airworthiness certification. In the case of N77XX, this was never done by the original owner, Peter Thelen, as the assemblies from Michigan were sold to Steven Gay and Ben Dziuba. Both N77XX and N77ZZ arrived in Tunkhannock, PA in 1969 in the same U-Haul truck and when purchased they were essentially ready to cover and had running engines. This allowed them to be completed and certified in just over a year from delivery. Both aircraft were largely identical, except N77ZZ's wings were built with an additional rib bay on the lower wings whereas N77XX has the traditional S-1C shorter wingspan lower wings and was later equipped with Bendix fuel injection.

Following completion of its 50-hour test flying period on July 18, 1971, another airworthiness certificate was issued which began a period of annual recertification until the early 1980s at which point a permanent airworthiness was issued on May 27, 1980. This aircraft was flown and owned by Steven Gay around the Skyhaven Airport (76N) until it was sold on trade to friend and aircraft dealer Timothy Martin for a Piper J-3 Cub in 1994. N77XX remained in the Tunkhannock area until it was sold in 1995 to Owen D. Elliot of Corpus Christi, TX on trade for a 90 hp Piper Cub. Separately in 1997, N77ZZ was sold to an aerobatic pilot of note (Denny

Dobson) in England where it was disassembled, crated, and shipped to England where it was last located at Enstone Aerodrome (EGTN) registered as G-BXFB.

Prior to the sale of N77XX in October 1995, in June of that year, the aircraft was disassembled down to the fuselage and largely reconstructed and repainted. The fuselage was recovered and repainted with the wings in the current paint scheme and many major components were overhauled. The aircraft was then shipped via shipping container to Texas where it was reassembled to be flown by Owen Elliot. The aircraft was only owned by Mr. Elliot for a short period and in late 1997 was purchased by Matthew Higginbotham of Church Point, LA via an aircraft management company in Opelousas, LA (KOPL), Gulf Air, LTD. Gulf Air was a family aviation company consisting of Aubrey, Robert, and Bradley Vidrine, all warbird and competition aerobatic pilots of note in southern Louisiana in the mid 1990s. Finally, in 2000, N77XX was purchased via a trade and transfer through Gulf Air by Neil Broussard of Lafayette, LA. The aircraft initially resided in Estherwood, LA (3R2) with another Pitts S-2E, N1057G until it was relocated to Brenham, TX (11R) in 2001 during Neil's attendance at Texas A&M University. Upon graduation in May of 2003, the aircraft then was kept and maintained by Harvey & Rihn Aviation in La Porte, TX (T41) along with many other Pitts Specials during Neil's employment as a Pitts and aerobatic instructor for Debby Rihn-Harvey. In 2003-2004, at Harvey & Rihn Aviation, a complete firewall forward rebuild of the aircraft was performed by A&P / IA Robert Felts to include a fresh engine major overhaul as well as all engine components and propeller overhaul. After moving back to Louisiana, N77XX once again resided with Gulf Air, now based in Jennings, LA (3R7) in 2007 and then in 2008 was finally relocated to Abbeville, LA (0R3 / KIYA) where it has remained since. In 2014, the fuselage was once again disassembled at T&M Aviation in Abbeville, and the entire aircraft received updated Teflon hoses, a rework of much of its sheet metal, and a complete rebuild of the entire electrical system. It has since been maintained by A&P / IA Chad Daigle of T&M Aviation / VIGOR Aviation. In May of 2021, N77XX was sold to Col. Andrew Malousek of Lincoln Nebraska and the aircraft is to be based at his home airfield at Seward Municipal (KSWT).

This provenance and history was assembled and compiled by Neil Broussard from May 24 through May 26, 2020 via phone interviews with Steven Gay, Charlie Gay (570) 466-0697, Danny Clisham (734) 730-2599, Gene Soucy (281) 513-6590, and Bradley Vidrine (337) 351-4176 as well as internet searches and the FAA Airworthiness and Registration Databases for N77XX and N77ZZ.