



The Friesley Falcon, the first and only aircraft to come from the Friesley Aircraft Corporation of Gridley, Calif.

The Friesley Falcon

By ERNEST L. TRUE

The feeling generated during World War I that the United States would blacken the skies with airplanes stimulated many to believe, even after the Armistice, that the airplane was here to stay. The Postal Department had already done a little experimenting with air-mail flying, and various air-minded groups were eager to have a suitable aircraft available when commercial aviation got into full swing.

Several wealthy ranchers in the vicinity of Gridley, in northern California, composed one such group and, although the reasons have grown vague over the years, Captain Eddie Rickenbacker was very closely associated with this group. It was Rickenbacker who persuaded aircraft designer and former Air Service officer Bond M. Spencer of McCook Field to join the Gridley men, and in 1920 the Friesley Aircraft Corporation was formed. Friesley was Harold Friselen, a large land owner in the area, who put forth \$22,000 while other investors put up a total of \$14,000. Daniel Patrick Corcoran provided a portion of his ranch for the flying field, a hangar was constructed and work begun on the Friesley Falcon.

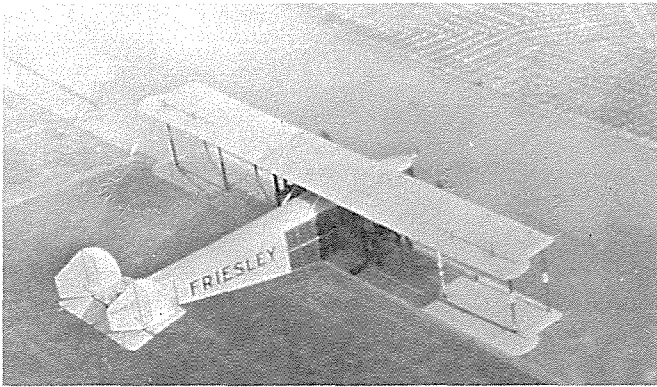
Wing span of the aircraft was 65 feet, and the fuselage was 40 feet long with seats for twelve. A USA #5 wing curve with a 7'6" chord and a 7'6" gap was used. Weight of the machine was 5600 pounds, and it was cap-

able of carrying a 3000 pound load with two Liberty V-12 engines. Top speed was expected to be 120 mph with a 55 mph landing speed, and it was anticipated its climb to 5000 feet would take four minutes. The cabin contained no cross bracing which, with the seats removed, made an excellent cargo space.

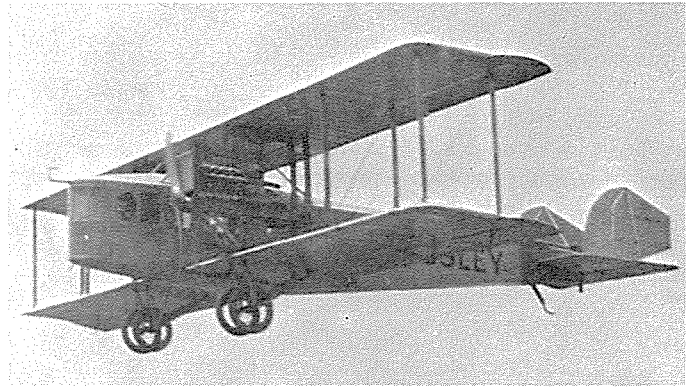
Sunday, April 17, 1921, the Falcon was ready for her test flight, and Captain Rickenbacker, together with Captain Reed Chambers, was on hand for the occasion. Rickenbacker was influential in bringing to Friesley Field a good representation of Army aircraft from Mather Field in Sacramento. The local American Legion was given the concession rights, and although the day was overcast, 17,000 Californians showed up for the first flight of a transport aircraft in Northern California.

With Bond Spencer at the controls, the Falcon moved down the field and was airborne after 100 yards. Flying slowly over the ranch lands, Spencer gradually increased speed and altitude until he reached 90 mph. He then circled back over the field and gave everyone a good look as he continued circling. Landing speed was even less than the predicted 55 mph, and the Falcon came to a stop within 200 feet.

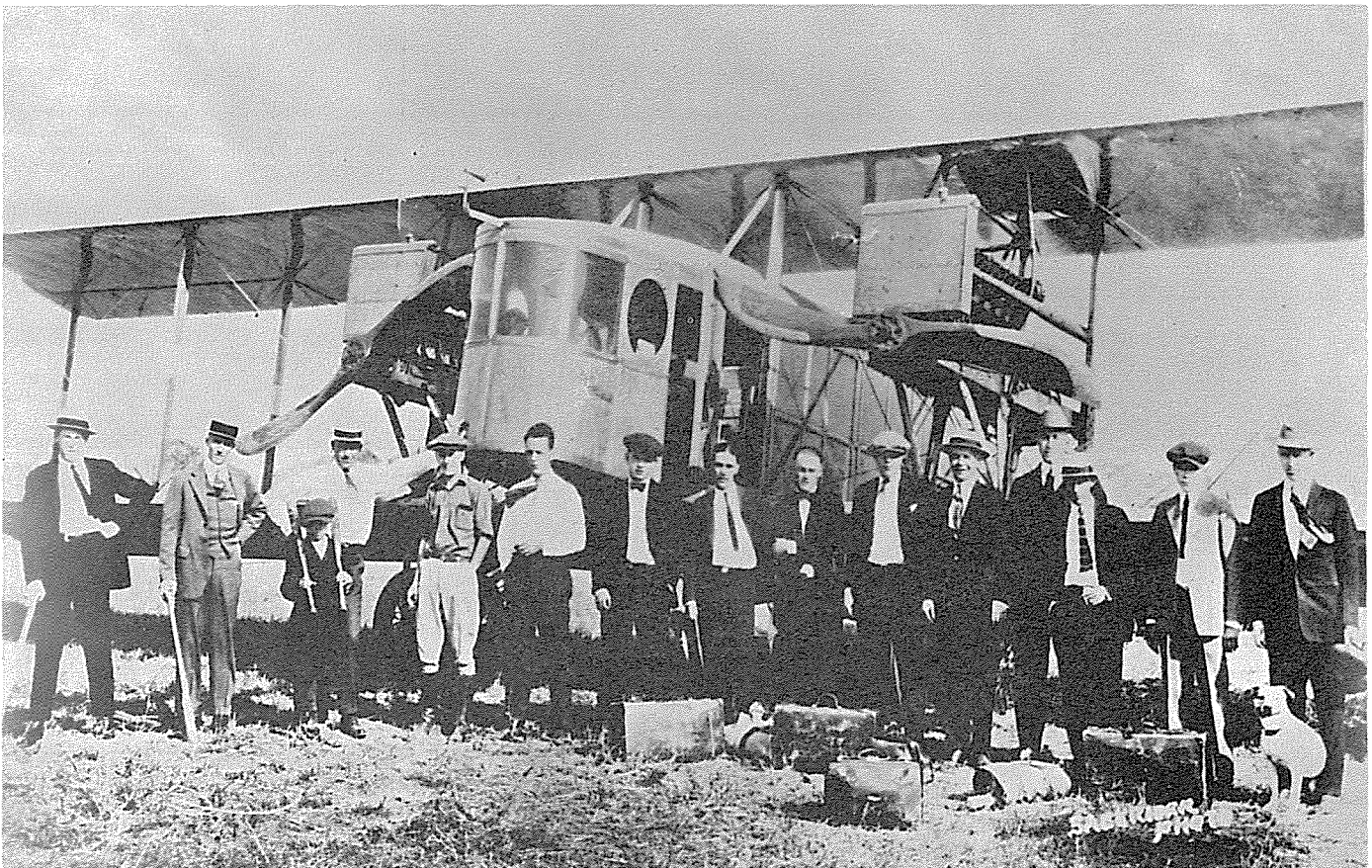
A month of testing followed, and on May 15, 1921, the Friesley Aircraft Corporation announced the plane



The Falcon in flight showing its twin tailed empennage.



Falcon had four wheel undercarriage and Liberty engines.



A possible first in aviation history--Marysville baseball team ready to fly to a game at Woodland, Calif., in 1921.

was ready for passenger service to San Francisco. The seats on the first flight were auctioned off to the highest bidders and with every seat taken, veteran airman Roy Francis took the plane and passengers to San Francisco and return without incident. Roy Francis had been employed as pilot to leave Bond Spencer free to design the next Friesley aircraft. Three flights were made to San Francisco during the summer of 1921, and in August a first was quite possibly made when the Falcon flew the Marysville, California baseball team to Woodland, California for a Sunday afternoon game. Marysville won and flew home again.

The big expansion in commercial aviation was not immediately forthcoming, however, and by winter of 1921 the creditors were looking at each other with big question marks in their eyes. Bond Spencer gave his notice of resignation and set himself up with a radio station

in Gridley. With \$36,000 due to investors, the matter was taken to court where, on February 22, 1922, the corporation was declared bankrupt. The Falcon was flown to San Francisco and put on the auction block, and on May 24, 1922 it was sold to the government of China for \$3,000.

Bond Spencer continued his successful radio station until Hollywood began casting for "Lilac Time" and then he sold out and headed south. It is known that he appeared in "Hell's Angels" but after that he vanishes from the scene.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Material for this article comes from The Gridley Herald - Bill Burleson, Editor. Photographs are from Mr. Daniel Patrick Corcoran. I would like to give special thanks to Mr. Jim Dunavent for copying the photos.