



Left - Pilot Doerflinger, who, like many captains with the early airlines, also served as ticket chopper, baggage handler, and crew chief. Above - NC138H at Maitland Fd. (All photos by author)

Loenings Over Lake Michigan

By JOSEPH DOERFLINGER

The Kohler Aviation Corporation was officially opened on September 1, 1929. The first official flight was from Grand Rapids, Michigan to Milwaukee, Wisconsin, September 1, 1929. I was the pilot and Brossman was the co-pilot. Among the passengers we carried John B. Kohler and his brother Frank, Daniel W. Hoan, Mayor of Milwaukee, and the Postmaster of Grand Rapids. Upon landing in Milwaukee, we listened to speeches at the airport followed by a banquet at which Mayor Hoan gave a fine address, pointing out in fitting words the significance of this day, the great progress in passenger air traffic and the pleasure of an air trip over the blue mirror of Lake Michigan. Thereafter, two flights were scheduled daily from Grand Rapids to Milwaukee and back.

We had reported at the Loening factory where the Kohler airplanes were being built, co-pilots Brossman and McGee with me. After a tour of the factory, situated on the Hudson River, we rode over to the North Shore to practice on the new airplanes. Over the next several days we practiced alternately until each of us knew the tricks of flying the Loening Amphibian. It had retractable wheels which had to be cranked up and down by hand. It carried six passengers and two pilots. It had dual controls and was powered by a Wright "Cyclone" engine of 525 h.p. and cruised at one hundred miles per hour. (This Loening amphibian was a successor model to the Loening OA-1s which, in December, 1926 - May, 1927, made the Pan-American goodwill tour of South American Countries) for which the U. S. Air Service was awarded the Mackay Trophy.)

When we finished our training, we flew to Loenings to Grand Rapids and made our first practice trip from Lake Muskegon to Maitland Field in the Milwaukee Harbor.

Loening Amphibians made for the Kohler airline were all designated Model C-2-C and powered by the Wright "Cyclone" engine.

The C.A.A. classification was 8PCAnB

Kohler Number	NC Number	Constructor's Number	Years Registered*
1	NC9156	224	1930 - 1934
2	NC138H	235	1930 - 1933
3	NC133H	227	1933
4	NC132H	226	1932
5	NC134H	231	1932, 1933
6	NC	236	1930 - 1934

*To Kohler Aviation Corporation.

In 1930 we had no radio beacons and not very reliable instruments. Blind flying was being talked about. I can remember how all airlines attempted to sell transportation to the public by trying to win its confidence with airline safety records, and by advertising safety devices. This was taking place at a time when we used to fly over Michigan Highway 50 on the westbound flight to set our course for Milwaukee. On the east-bound flight, we could fly over Layton Avenue in Cudahy, Wisconsin, if we were using the county airport, or set our course from the harbor to the lightship which formerly was anchored off Milwaukee harbor. In that way we could set the course and allow for drift. By doing this, we found that we could hit Milwaukee right on the nose from the east, and hit Grand Rapids squarely on an east-bound flight. It was all very scientific.

In May 1931, the line was extended to Detroit, which more than doubled the route. Six planes were now in service. A ramp was built in the Detroit river, but in winter we used the municipal airport.

Space in the Detroit river was limited and getting the 6,880 pound "duck" into the air in a crosswind was difficult at times. While the airport had



Top: The Kohler hangar at Grand Rapids advertised "To Milwaukee in 1 hr.45 min." Upper center: The Milwaukee point of departure where passengers alighted from the airport bus. Lower center: The pilot 'horsed' the big amphibian onto the ramp at the Detroit end of the line. Bottom: Refueling, 1920 style from Kohler trucks. (All photos from author)

fine hard runways, I disliked it a great deal, for in the middle of it, lengthwise, was a gas tank, over 300 feet high and about 100 feet in diameter. The wind swept around the tank in dangerous and unpredictable gusts. It was here that an elderly lady passenger boarding my plane shook her finger at me and said, "See here young man, you be sure now to fly low and slow."

One day MacMillan had landed at the Milwaukee County Airport. They put the ship into the hangar and Mac went for coffee at the Administration building. Twenty minutes later, his Loening burst into flames. They extinguished the fire with foam, and luckily the gas tank did not explode. The cause of the fire was a mystery but I presumed that some hot cinders from the big exhaust pipe over the top wing's center section ignited the fabric.

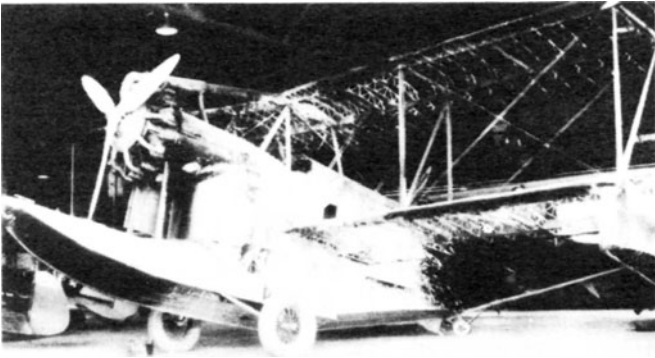
Kohler Aviation Corporation was, to my knowledge, one of the few - if not the only - airline to hold a perfect safety record throughout its operations. No major accident occurred. No lives were lost. Nobody was hurt. There were minor accidents, of course, of which I had one. It happened while flying from Detroit to Grand Rapids with Ben Craycraft, co-pilot, and one passenger aboard. A light snow started falling. The visibility became very poor and forced me to fly at 300 feet. The ground below us was spotted with woods covered with snow. Three miles east of Williamstone, the sudden, ail-too familiar crack, the sure sign of a broken crankshaft, shook the plane. At the same moment the motor stopped.

At 300 feet, with a dead motor, a pilot has little choice of a landing field. By side-slipping on one wing, I was able to reach a fairly large field. The plane, with its wheels up, was almost touching the ground when the left wing struck a small, snow-covered tree which I had not seen. The "duck" turned on its axis and lay still. The passenger and I were uninjured. Ben Craycraft suffered a slight injury to one hand.

Our airplane No. 4 was lost when pilot Jim Benedict had the notion that he could take off from the Milwaukee Harbor with a tail wind. Jim kept on going all over the harbor and out the North-East gate of the breakwater. That's where he hit a big swell which threw him into the air, but not to stay. He was thrown up four times, and higher on every throw. The fourth time he hit the water so hard that the motor broke off and crashed into the hull. Jim was very lucky because the Coast Guard had been watching him all along and they were out on their way before the motor broke off.

In 1933 there was trouble between the government and the airlines concerning airmail contracts. The government claimed "fraud and collusion" by some of the airlines. In February 1934, all air mail contracts were canceled, and the Army began its job of carrying the mail, a job which it was neither trained nor prepared to do and which resulted in a series of disastrous crashes. Fourteen pilots were killed along one mail run alone because they had no proper instruments for the airplanes, none for flying blind. The weather did not help; it was about the worst in history.

The job of carrying the mail was eventually given back to the airlines. They had been advised to bid on new contracts. Pennsylvania Airlines underbid Kohler Aviation and ultimately took over Kohler Airlines in July 1934. I kept on flying for Pennsylvania Airlines until I was laid off in December 1934.



The remains of McMillan's airplane after the fire at Milwaukee Co. Airport, the end of No.5, NC134H.



John Kohler sought to bury, as poor publicity, photo. of this crash of No. 2 airplane by Pilot Doerflinger,

ABOUT THE AUTHOR.

Joseph Doerflinger, during his quarter of a century of flying, has flown under three flags - Germany, France and United States. He obtained his International Pilot's License No. 4641 in May, 1918.

He became an instructor for the French Air Service and obtained his French International Pilot's License and the Brevet d'Aviateur Militaire, his second and third pilot's license. (No. 17,724 and No. 18,442), and later, Transport License (No. 07535) his fourth. In May 1928, he obtained American Transport Pilot License, his fifth (No. 3068).

A tape recording of his experiences was made by Mr. Doerflinger recently. It has been made into an LP record (29 minutes per side) by Thompson Productions and is available from Mr. Doerflinger at \$4.50 postpaid.

An A.A.H.S. member, also, Mr. Doerflinger is retired today, "seventy years young", and lives at 4684 North 45th Street, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 53218. He is the author of *Stepchild Pilot*. Longo, Tyler, Tex.



No. 4 airplane, NC132H, crashed in Milwaukee Harbor on takeoff in a tailwind. It was piloted by Jim Benedict. Here Doerflinger examines the remains.

Right-Handy boy that made good, Herman "Fish" Salmon, famed racing pilot, later Chief Engineering Test Pilot for Lockheed Aircraft Corp. and friend of Doerflinger. Below-International airline pilot Joseph H. Doerflinger by his Latecoere 15 while piloting for Air France.

