

NEWS and COMMENT from the MEMBERS

The NEWS and COMMENT section is open to all Members of the Society for statements on any aspect of aviation history or for expressions regarding the affairs of the Society. The chief purpose is to bring forth the facts, including the airing of controversies. It serves to present information in brief form which Members might not feel moved to contribute as complete articles. Opinions are welcomed but such opinions, and the accuracy of the information contained therein, are the responsibility solely of the contributor.

EDWIN C. PARSONS

Dale L. Walker, El Paso, Texas

When Rear Admiral Ted Parsons died in Sarasota, Florida, May 2, the country lost one of its authentic heroes; indeed, one might say one of its few authentic legends. His quiet, sudden death at 75 closed a book, thrilling and remarkable, about a man who wore the uniforms of three nations in two world wars and a revolution, and whose life could aptly be called, to borrow the title of his story of the Lafayette Escadrille, *The Great Adventure*.

Edwin Cornet Parsons, a descendant of the Cornet Parsons who was a founder of Springfield, Massachusetts, was born in Holyoke, Massachusetts on September 23, 1892. He attended school at Springfield, Philips Exeter Academy and the University of

Pennsylvania. In 1912, following a disagreement with his father over entering the family insurance business, young Ted left for California. There a chance meeting with Glenn L. Martin, the pioneer aircraft manufacturer, inspired the fledgling adventurer to learn to fly. He did so at Dominguez Field near Los Angeles, and in a year was using his new skill in Mexico.

Nineteen-thirteen was a time of upheaval in Mexico with revolutionary factions, having split off the original 1910 Madero revolt, tussling for control of the country. Perhaps best known of the rebel leaders was Francisco "Pancho" Villa, whose home territory was the state of Chihuahua, an immense chunk of desert and mountain country on the south of the Rio Grande.

Villista sympathizers in Southern California let it be known that aviators were needed in Chihuahua, especially someone who could teach selected rebels the mysteries of flight. The offer held forth so much luster and potential adventure that Ted Parsons hastened to Mexico to investigate. He was to spend 11 months as a captain in Villa's Armee del Norte in the exasperating attempt to teach goggle-eyed Mexican guerrillas to fly. The machine used (representing perhaps 50 per cent of Villa's air force) was a decrepit Curtiss biplane that had been transported into Mexico, disassembled, on a flat-car. Parsons, in charge of the pile of junk, recalled using considerable amounts of baling wire and scrap lumber to patch the two-seater together.



Lafayette Escadrille members at Chaudun, 2 July 1917. (Front row, l. to r.): Raoul Lufbery, Didier Masson, Stephen Bigelow, Charles Chouteau Johnson, William Thaw, with Fram (Capt. Thenault's dog), Capt. Thenault, EDWIN C. PARSONS, Thomas Hewitt, Harold Buckley Willis, Willis Haviland. (Second row): Ray C. Bridgeman, Robert L. Rockwell, Henry Sweet Jones, David McKelvy Peterson, William L. Dugan, Douglas MacMonagle, Walter Lovell, Lt. Arnoux de Maison-Rouge. (Photo - Courtesy of Dale L. Walker)

After almost a year in Mexico, Parsons became aware of the war in Europe, its immensity, and its novel need for experienced airmen. Using the excuse that he had to go to El Paso to buy parts, Parsons went to El Paso and kept going, heading for parts northeast, toward home. His stopover was brief and in mid-1915 he boarded the *Carpathia*, rescue ship of the Titanic disaster three years earlier, and sailed for France, earning his keep by acting as assistant veterinarian in a hold-full of horses, hay, and their combined odorific by-products.

In France, Parsons served briefly with the American Field Ambulance Service and on April 13, 1916 transferred to aviation. He received his training at Buc, Avord, Cazeau and Pau and on August 23, 1916, received his brevet on the Caudron machine. On January 25, 1917, he was sent to the Lafayette Escadrille with which he served until it was disbanded a year later.

From the start, Ted Parsons was a standout aviator. A contemporary, Arch Whitehouse, has written that Parsons in the air and Parsons on the ground (especially Parsons on "permission" in Paris) were two men. In the air, he wore a dreary pair of nondescript breeches, a ragged mackinaw jacket and an outmoded British crash-helmet decorated with the skull and crossbones of the Death's Head Hussars. Between sorties, says Whitehouse, he was a veritable Scarlet Pimpernel: smart and jaunty kepi, ascot tie, custom-tailored and freshly pressed tunic and spit-shined field boots. A high French compliment of the day was applied to him--"Un chic type." And, while he looked the part of an "aviateur des boulevards" he was a dedicated and fearless combat pilot. With the Lafayette he scored only one confirmed victory but, when the time came for the Lafayette crew to receive their commissions in the USAS, Parsons stayed in French uniform and joined the famous Spad 3 Squadron--"The Storks"--which Georges Guynemer had made famous. With the Storks he scored another seven confirmed victories. Parsons was decorated with the Medaille Militaire, Cross of Leopold, Belgian Croix de Guerre and French Croix with eight palms. Some forty years later, the French Government bestowed on him their highest award, the Legion of Honor.

In the 1920's, Parsons worked as a Special Agent for the FBI and then moved to Hollywood where he became a technical director and writer. His most famous coup was his work with William A. Wellman on the film "Wings" which won the first of all Academy Awards in 1927-28. In 1937, Parsons' witty and thoroughly splendid book on the Lafayette, *The Great Adventure*, was published.

In September, 1939, coinciding with Hitler's march into Poland, Parsons went on active duty with the U.S. Navy. As the war progressed he rose in rank and by 1941 was a Lieutenant Commander, serving on aircraft carriers in the Pacific. By war's end, Parsons was serving on seaplane tenders and amphibious vessels, taking part in many crucial landing operations in the Solomons and other strategic island outposts. He retired with the rank of Rear Admiral.

In recent years, the Admiral had lived quietly with his wife in Osprey, Florida. His death on May 2 thins the ranks of surviving Lafayette pilots to two: Henry S. Jones of Largo, Florida, and Carl Dolan of California.

DID ANYONE KNOW BESSIE?

Frank W. Wiley, Helena, Montana

I have read with pleasure several accounts in the Journal, Spring, 1968, just received. Reference is made to the article on page 46 "Did Anyone Know Bessie?"

I was working for Claude Ryan in San Diego in 1924. One day, a rather run-down (OX5) Jenny landed at Dutch Flat landing field. As usual, we sauntered out to see who it was. To our surprise, out stepped a negro woman who asked about getting gas and a place to tie down. She advised that her name was Bessie Coleman.

Later (1926), I was building up a Hisso Standard in Americus, Georgia at the former WWI Army field where a large assortment of parts were available. An OX5 Standard landed on the field, but didn't taxi in to the hangars. We drove the Model-T out to the airplane where we observed the pilot sitting on the ground, sobbing his heart out.

Overcoming our embarrassment, we asked him "how come?" With a Texas accent, he said he had had an uncountable number of near-forced-landings in the Georgia pine trees and red clay "coves." Every time he pulled the nose up to crash, the engine would start again and pull him along; he had been repeating this cycle for some time, until this field showed up. This Texas pilot said he flew the ship for Bessie Coleman, who was barn-storming for the negro people through the southern states.

We found a ball of friction tape in one of the two air-intake pipes that extended, in the lower cowl, to ports behind the propeller. When the nose was pulled up, the ball of tape would roll back against the air-intake port on the Zenith Carburetor and cut off half of the air.

The pilot said he was enroute to Jacksonville, Florida. I later read an account where he was said to have been killed in a crash and the wreckage burned. I was told, later, that he was doing acrobatics at a negro air show with Bessie Coleman in the airplane. She fell out and he attempted to catch her, but didn't make it.

The Jacksonville, Florida papers should have in their files an account of this incident. (Mr. Wiley does research for the Montana Historical Society and had compiled a book on Montana aviation. (Editor)

JOHN J. MONTGOMERY

Martin Cole, Whittier, California

In the interest of historical accuracy and spirit of good fellowship may I reply to the comments of John A. Bagley, who has taken certain exceptions to my story "The Last Flight of John Joseph Montgomery." Mr. Bagley divided his criticism between my article and Willis Nye's review of Father Spearman's splendid biography of Montgomery.

Mr. Bagley points out, "Martin Cole's article . . . tells us enough to make it quite clear how uninspired and unproductive these (final flights) were." This overlooks the ultimate purpose of a historical journal. It is not to record for posterity only deeds of those who inspired others, but rather to give an overall glimpse of history in the making. My purpose of the article was just that.

Mr. Bagley qualifies himself as an "aerodynamicist interested in aeronautical history." I qualify myself as a historian for the State of California. When an historian involves himself in research, he may be concerned with either, or both, primary and secondary sources. In writing of the last flights of Montgomery, I involved myself in primary information of sworn testimony. In those few background paragraphs, I relied upon both primary and secondary sources. Unfortunately, one secondary source has proved to be unreliable. I did not have access to *Proceedings of the Chicago Conference* and, consequently, quoted an accepted assumption. (Incidentally, on matters of California history I have had twenty years of revealing discrepancies; therefore, I am very much alert to the ease with which a writer of history can be led astray.)

Regarding the claim of first controlled flight, the tenable argument is that the 1905 flight mentioned was the first to fly from Point A to Point B, a pre-designated spot. Perhaps the use of the word "controlled" has too many implications; contrary to Mr. Bagley's views, I do not wish to detract from the Wrights, whom I admire very much.

Mr. Bagley apparently disclaims Montgomery's 1883 (or 1884) flights, inasmuch as there is no definite confirmation by Chanute. Does that make it necessarily *not* so? I had the opportunity to peruse the sworn testimony of eye-witnesses who recalled these early trials. I am convinced a successful flight was made. True, there are discrepancies in these recollections. But as we know, nearly all documented evidence is more-or-less lacking in complete argument.

CONCERN AT MONTGOMERY BOOK REVIEW

Pearl Young, Hampton, Virginia

In the A.A.H.S. JOURNAL, Winter 1967, pp.300-301, there appears a review by Willis L. Nye of Father Spearman's book on John Joseph Montgomery.

I am one of the few aeronautical historians to have made an objective evaluation of Montgomery. Based on my research of Octave Chanute, and all pioneers in aeronautics before 1914, some facts are presented here.

In 1950, I spent hours in the Varsi library of Santa Clara College, organizing the material in the Montgomery files and preparing a Bibliography of 58 items on Montgomery covering the period from 1872 to 1912. Several copies were given to the Varsi Library.

A search was made of the aeronautical material in the San Francisco libraries and of the Montgomery material in the State Library at Sacramento and all pertinent material copied. The directories of San Diego were searched for entries on the Montgomery family.

J. J. Montgomery came to Chicago in 1893, met Octave Chanute and obtained an entrance ticket to the aeronautical congress. He told Chanute privately of his gliding experiments in the Otay mesa and discussed the papers on gliding presented at the Congress. Chanute reports these in "Progress in Flying Machines," pp. 223-226. The *San Diego Daily Journal* of August 9, 1948, page 2, has an article by Lionel Van Deerlin "San Diego hails anniversary of flight that never paid off." He says that Bill Noonan, artist, shows his conception of

Montgomery's first flight in August, 1883. This claim would make Montgomery the first man to make a heavier-than-air flight, 8 years before Lilienthal. The Montgomery ranch home near the mouth of the Otay river was washed away in the 1916 flood; which removed all traces of the inventor's workshop and early models. There should have been ample time to have photographed them between 1883 and 1911.

In a letter to Miss Clara E. Bread, City Librarian, San Diego, dated October 13, 1949, Carl W. Milman, assistant to the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution wrote:

"Professor Montgomery conducted glider experiments at Otay Mesa from 1883-1886. We know of no *tangible evidence* remaining today of these early experiments. . . . We believe that it is entirely possible that Montgomery made successful flights 8 years before Lilienthal. However, much further research needs to be done to fully authenticate these early gliding experiments."

Copies of the Chanute-Montgomery correspondence were made and mailed to the Varsi library. This correspondence includes the rejection of a Montgomery paper in 1895 as being too erroneous. Montgomery became angry at being "denied publication." This paper was still around in 1907 (at the time of the Jamestown Exposition Aeronautical Congress) and A. F. Zahm published it. *Aeronautics*, Jan. 1908, 43-50.

Fred C. Kelly, biographer of the Wright Brothers, wrote "Myths of Aviation - Early gliding experiments of John J. Montgomery are evaluated against a background of seven decades of progress in aeronautics. It was printed in *The Technology Review* of December, 1949 and reprinted in *Science Digest* April, 1950.

Upon hearing that Father Spearman intended to publish a biography on Montgomery, I had an interview with him on June 8, 1962, pointing out that the so-called early experiments of 1883-1884 were completely unsubstantiated. Similar legends and claims have been built up for Mouillard, Whitehead and Gilmore--after all the men themselves had died. Even older legends credit J. B. Dante of Perugia in the 14th century sailing over a lake on artificial wings and Paul Guidotti (born in 1569) is said to have glided a quarter of a mile on wings of whalebone covered with feathers.

The later experiments of Montgomery in the gliders built after 1903 are not in question. They are well covered by newspaper accounts and photographs.

(Pearl I. Young, Hampton, Virginia. Pearl Young, now retired, was for many years a scientist and educator, served with NACA (now NASA) and as Associate Professor of Physics at several universities. Editor)

ASTRA TORRES

Donald Woodward, Los Altos, California

In regard to the Anniversary Photo (Vol. 13 No. 1 inside rear cover), I believe that the airship is not the AT-1 flown by the U. S. Navy, and that the air station is not Paimboeuf. The ship is obviously an Astra-Torres, and may well be the first A T, but the complicated array of rudders and planes certainly has a prewar look. The rudders and planes of the British 1913 A T, H.M.A. No. 3, were more or



Paimboeuf, France, 1918. (Photo - Courtesy of Donald Woodward)

less like this, but their 1914 A T, H.M.A. No. 8, had evolved more conventional long fins and flaps. The A T-1 which was turned over to the U. S. Navy in March 1918 was part of the 1916 building program of L'Aerostation Maritime, and was completed in 1917. I have seen photos in the National Archives which (if I remember correctly) show twin engines on outriggers, rather than the single large tractor propeller in your photo.

I enclose two photos of Paimboeuf, the aerial view shows the two hangars existing when the station was turned over to the U.S., with the beginning of the framing of a new hangar visible between them. Although the small wood hangar might be identified with that at the left of your illustration, the larger one is clearly a French expeditionary hangar, steel framed and canvas covered. The door end is shown in the other photo.

I cannot refrain from pointing out that Webb's statement that the ZD-US-1 was the largest non-rigid built up to its date is contracted by comparing his Tables II and III. That distinction, as a matter of fact, was probably held by the French Army class of 800,000 ft³ non-rigids of their 1912 program.

A description of the original Astra-Torres gives it a 55 hp Chenu engine with single two-bladed wooden propeller, as in your illustration. The A T-1 of 1917 had two 150 (or 160) hp Renault engines.

Since my first letter, I have had a look at a good photo of the French Navy AT-4, which was of an homogeneous class with the A T-1 which became our P-1. The photo is in a booklet published in 1919 by the Sous-Secretariat de l'Aeronautique Militaire et Maritime, entitled *L'Aerostation Maritime et ses Constructions pendant la Guerre 1914-1918*. (LC card number D603.A4 1919.) The AT-4 differs from your illustration in having bow stiffening battens, a long car with deep, flat sides rigged much closer to the envelope, two engines in streamlined nacelles on outriggers, a short blower pipe in a streamlined casing from car to balloon, and simple cruciform fins with no top rudder but a semibalanced rudder on the lower plane.

I think, after considerable staring at the photo, that the lettering on the hangar door reads *AERO PARC CLEMENT BAYARD*.



The SST, a British-built non-rigid airship, shown here with the A-4 (Goodyear), which was not illustrated in Mr. Webb's article "Foreign-Built Airships in U. S. Service," *JOURNAL*, Spring 1968. (Photo - Courtesy of Merle Olmsted)



An interesting view of the pilot's compartment area of the ROMA. (Photo - Courtesy of Tom Ward)

FOREIGN BUILT AIRSHIPS

Merle C. Olmsted, Wichita Falls, Texas

In regard to Mr. Webb's interesting account of foreign built airships in U.S. service, I would like to correct a mistake which has appeared many times in other publications which deal with the *Roma* disaster.

This misconception is that *Roma* crashed on Langley Field, which she did not. *Roma*'s final plunge into high tension wires was at Lambert Point army base, a Quartermaster depot in Norflok, Virginia. Although not far away in miles, maybe 20, it was across Hampton Roads from Langley. There was no bridge connecting the city of Hampton (Langley Field) and Norfolk as there is today. The exact location of the crash as given in a letter to the Adjutant General of the Army from the Chief of Air Service is: "a point east of warehouse 3, and in a triangle formed by a railroad spur, South st. and Capp st. Quartermaster Intermediate Depot, Norfolk, Virginia."

Mr. Webb also does not mention the two British SST ships which were erected at Langley and flown for a short period. General Anderson once told me they were fine flying airships except for the deterioration of their envelopes.

ADDENDA—SUBMARINE-BORNE AIRCRAFT AFT

Robert W. Krauskopf, Washington, D. C.

Mr. David Winans deserves great praise for his interesting article on submarine-borne aircraft, published in the Spring 1967 issue, (Vol. 12, No. 1 p. 40), and for the breadth of the research upon which it is based. I would like, if I may, to contribute a few additional items of interest to his excellent study.

According to Navy Department records, the aircraft stowage tank was removed from the submarine S-1 in 1927, after final tests with the XS-2 aircraft in the summer of that year. It was never regarded as more than an experimental installation and had by this time served the purpose of testing the feasibility of operating submarine-borne aircraft. Moreover, the tank produced some sluggishness in the submerged handling characteristics of the S-1 and there was some fear that if it accidentally flooded when the vessel was submerged, it would have a dangerous effect upon the trim and stability of the relatively small submarine.

The XS-2 aircraft, while a great improvement over its predecessors, was also considered unsuitable for service use: it was underpowered, carried no radio, and required virtually ideal conditions of sea and wind for take-off and alighting, which imposed unacceptable limitations upon its use in combat situations.

The Loening XSL, which appeared in 1931, was based upon Bureau of Aeronautics Design No. 87, prepared in 1929. While this aircraft, in both its original and modified forms, passed flight tests satisfactorily, it was never actually carried aboard a submarine. A mock-up of an 8-foot diameter stowage tank was built at NAS Anacostia for testing purposes, and the XSL-1 was disassembled and stowed in it satisfactorily to meet contract requirements. The XSL-1/2 airframe (a flying boat, not an amphibian), spent its short life at Anacostia; the NACA installation at Langley Field, where it was given wind tunnel tests; the Loening factory, the Naval Aircraft Factory, Philadelphia, where it was finally written off early in 1934.

Abandonment of the XSL-2 project in 1933 may have been affected by the accidental loss of H.M.S. M-2. Probably the decisive factor, however, was the Navy Department's decision at this time to construct no further large fleet submarines, such as the 2,700 ton *Narwhal* and *Nautilus*, modified versions of which might have been suitable for carrying aircraft, with adequate stowage, handling and launching gear. Instead, the Navy chose to develop future classes of fleet submarines of smaller size, in the 1,300 - 1,500 ton range, thus making the most effective use of the limited tonnage available under the restrictions of existing naval treaties.

MORE ON EARLY RACING

Thomas G. Foxworth, Flushing, New York

Mr. Randolph F. Hall should certainly have been mentioned in the article on the Thomas Morse military racers (JAAHS, Vol 12, No. 4, 235-245, Winter 1967). He joined the Thomas Brothers in the spring of 1915 and worked closely with B. D. Thomas on many Thomas-Morse designs. One notable design

he prepared was that of the original S-4 "Tommy Scout." He also did the stress analysis, detail drafting, and supervised the static testing of the unconventional MB-7 racer (cover, *Winter Journal*). He left Thomas Morse in the fall of 1928 after thirteen years, and with Paul D. Wilson, helped form the Cunningham-Hall Aircraft Corp. of Rochester, New York. He left this company - which bore his name - in 1941. Today he lives in Wallingford, Connecticut, and wrote me after seeing the Thomas Morse article in the *Journal*.

He related how the Thomas Brothers, W. T. and O. W., built quite a number of airplanes before being taken over by the Morse Chain Co. to become the Thomas Morse Aeroplane Co. early in 1917. But by that time O. W. Thomas had ceased to be active in the Company. B. D. Thomas joined the Thomas Brothers before they moved to Ithaca from Bath, New York. "BD" was English, he had been with Sopwith originally, but came to Thomas by way of Curtiss where he worked on the Wanamaker trans-Atlantic flying boat (the *Americ* of 1914) and laid out the plans for what became the "Jenny." Although "BD" seemed coldly distant with his typical English reserve, he was highly original and had a warm heart. He once told Hall, "History is written from the end of the book on."

During 1921 Hall was helping organize a dinner meeting with the Aero Club of Ithaca; one of the guests was Lt. John A. Macready who was there to test the MB-3 fighter. (See p. 240, *Winter Journal*) Mac was "shook up" after his crash that afternoon, but promised to be at the Ithaca Hotel Dutch Kitchen for the dinner. He was a sturdy fellow, having been a boxer during his college days. (Today he is a retired colonel of 80 living in California.) Hall managed to prime the evening's speaker, Charles Cresswell, the first army aircraft inspector, with a full half-pint of "white mule" right out of the Thomas Morse assembly foreman's cellar still. The entertainment was "real" and Macready quickly forgot about his crack-up.

In 1922 Hall and Jake Swirbul (later president of Grumman) made a hurried dash from Ithaca to Selfridge Field in an old Essex car with a new prop for the R-5 racer lashed to the top. From Buffalo they took a boat across Lake Erie to Detroit. Jake, although a rugged individual, became seasick during the choppy crossing, and Hall recalls how he added to his discomfort by munching chocolate bars. But all to no avail, since the R-5's performance, as told earlier, was disappointing.

VOUGHT V-326

L. Bruce Van Alstine, Baltimore, Maryland

In regard to Mr. Wheeler's and Mr. Schoeni's comments on the V-326, (Vol. 13, No. 1, p. 68) I have no technical information to add, but, as an artist who first became interested in aircraft from the visual standpoint, a bit of detective work indicates to me that the V-326 is closely related to the XTBU-1 of 1941. The tail group, wing and landing gear are most certainly linked to the design of Vought's unsuccessful competitor to the TBF. The wing has gone from mid to low on a new fuselage whose cabin hatches would indicate the high-altitude role. It would be interesting to hear from anyone connected with Pratt & Whitney concerning this rare bird.