

The Great Pulitzer Air Race Mystery

By Thomas G. Foxworth

The woods were forbidding deep and dark, and the lost hunter was becoming anxious. Thick undergrowth enclosed every step while overhead a web of twisted limbs hid the cold, gray sky. The tops of trees, swaying mournfully in dry, bitter wind heightened his loneliness and with quickened pulse he thrashed his way forward. Suddenly a long, ragged tendril floated in front of him. There was another, like some ghostly gossamer hanging from a limb, and then another. Caught in a gloomy thicket, these ancient bits of cloth seemed to reach out and beckon the hunter into some sinister lair. With morbid fascination, he pushed the undergrowth aside. There, partially hidden by a fallen, rotting tree, was the dark wooden skeleton of — what? Some deathly Flying Dutchman's ship? No — it was an airplane. It had to be. By winter 1925, the hunter hadn't seen many airplanes but the framework was unmistakable. Only—where was the pilot? With cold dread, the hunter pried the moss-encrusted frame away from the clinging brush. He half-expected to find some macabre evidence buried there, perhaps a crushed skull, at least part of a uniform. There was nothing.

The hunter fingered part of the fabric that remained but the rotted cloth had long since given up its color. There was nothing definite about this eerie plane, except that it had been there for years. The hunter could almost hear the spirit of the departed flier laughing over his shoulder. With a shudder, he turned away and rushed from the spot. In another hour, he regained his bearings and was joined by his comrades.

So unreal had the incident seemed — and if real, certainly the airplane must have been seen before — that the hunter, Warren Campbell of Brooklyn, N.Y., didn't mention his find for a number of days. But when he did, the news fell like a bombshell.

Campbell had been on a weekend hunting trip with friends in the remote Berkshire hills of western Massachusetts, one of those areas which, while they hardly can be called unexplored — and indeed are not far removed from large metropolitan centers — are nevertheless not visited by humans for long periods. The largest town in the area was Pittsfield and the nearest village, Tyringham. It was from a meadow near this very village that six years before, on May 29, 1919, Captain Mansell R. James, late of the Royal Flying Corps., took off in his war-surplus Sopwith Camel for Atlantic City, N.J., to collect the first Pulitzer Aviation Trophy. James departed from Tyringham, all right, only he never arrived at Atlantic City — or anywhere.

James' disappearance was among the greater sensations of 1919. The hunt for him was pursued for months but led nowhere. False hopes appeared and shattered like diabolical bubbles. But now, six years later, in the midst of a decade drenched with morbid sensationalism, a crashed plane had been seen just a few miles from the village whence James had departed. Everyone confidently agreed it had to be the missing craft of Mansell James.

The curious, the ghoulish, and the optimistic all came forward, ready to make an easy matter recovering the last effects of the long-lost flier from the nearby woods. On December 18, 1925, the first searching party set out to find and examine the plane and beat the woods for the pilot's body. Eugene Chague of Lenox, Mass., one of Campbell's hunting companions the day the plane was seen, was in the lead. But frustration awaited the posse. For two days the men searched in vain.

Campbell himself returned from Brooklyn to lead a searching party over an area of 1000 acres but, incredibly, was unable to relocate the ruined plane. He recalled vividly his discovery of the previous week; he had not dreamt it.

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*Captain Mansell R. James, Atlantic City, May 28, 1919.
(Photo - War Dept. No. 165-WW-424-791, National Archives)*

On three separate occasions, Campbell tried doggedly to reverse the bewildering circumstances. Over one hundred volunteers and Boy Scouts from Pittsfield beat the brush and woods, but all signs of the plane evaded them. Four days before Christmas the search was abandoned. Mansell James — or his ghost — had once again eluded his pursuers. After a six year lapse, the puzzle was even more confusing. But the puzzle has its pieces.

History, like wine, has its vintage years and in the field of air racing 1919 had been a superior year. The Great War was at last over, releasing some 25,000 pilots to peaceful pursuits, and aviation was maturing rapidly, struggling to to prove itself a force in world affairs. Air races superseded warfare as the competitive stimulus to technical development and individual prestige; and magnificent races they were, too. Those hardy pioneers of the air were stretching their primitive wings as never before, during that turbulent year. "Aerial Derbies" were held between New York and Toronto (with 52 entries); from coast to coast (with 38 entries); and in the greatest race of all, no less than 27 hopefuls prepared to be first across even the mighty Atlantic!

Excitement was in the air, for there was more than a medal or hero's welcome awaiting the victors in these aerial duels. Truly fantastic prizes were being offered. Lord Northcliffe of the London Daily Mail set the pattern when he put up the enormous sum of £10,000 (then \$50,000) for the first non-stop trans-Atlantic flight. Other visionary newspapers, eager to stimulate newsworthy racing events, soon followed suit. Many took the initiative at a huge aeronautic exhibition held during the entire month of May, 1919, in Atlantic City, New Jersey.

This was the Second Pan American Aeronautic Convention, held under the auspices of the Aero Club of America, the Aerial League of America, and the Pan

American Aeronautic Federation. Following a rather desultory convention two years previously, the post-war event offered a list of activities that was indeed comprehensive. All manner of races were planned. Colonel Billy Bishop, fresh from his 72 kills abroad, even put up an "Ace of Aces" Trophy. By the end of March, a month before opening day, \$30,000 had already been posted in prize money. And no less a dignitary than Rear Admiral Robert E. Peary, President of the Aerial League, was named convention chairman.

Then, on April 5, the event received a tremendous boost. It was on this day that the Pulitzer Trophy was first put forth for aerial competition. The Pulitzer brothers, Ralph, Joseph Jr., and Herbert, owners of the New York World and St. Louis Post-Dispatch, established a prize valued at \$5,000 which would be given to any aviator covering the greatest distance in a "non-stop cross-country flight" to or from Atlantic City during May. There were no restrictions on the type of airplane or horsepower, and a competitor could make as many attempts to win as he pleased during the month.

It was envisioned that the challenge trophy, to be competed for annually, would be retired when any successful competitor won it three times, thus following the pattern of the popular Jacques Schneider Maritime Trophy. The first Pulitzer competition, in connection with the Pan American convention, was to be known simply as the "Aerial Derby."

Despite extravagant endorsements, the trophy suffered two temporary setbacks when the War Department refused to let Army aviators fly in the derby. On April 20 Assistant Secretary of the Navy Franklin D. Roosevelt followed suit by declining the Aero Club's invitation for the Navy to compete. Nevertheless, the snow-ball had started to roll.

The very next day, announcement came that the Boston Globe, Cleveland Plain-Dealer, and Atlanta Journal, following the Pulitzer brothers' lead, had all offered air race trophies of their own with total aggregate prizes of \$3,500. These prizes would be won by the aviators making the best records between Atlantic City and the home city of the respective newspaper, and further inducement was provided by enabling contestants to compete for separate prizes simultaneously. About the only restriction involved was the Atlanta Journal's requirement that copies of their newspaper accompany competing aviators on their voyages.

On April 28 yet another newspaper joined the merry-go-round of aviation promotion. The New York Herald, whose own helmsman for so many years had been "The Commodore," that wealthy and charismatic patron of automobile, airplane, and balloon races, James Gordon Bennett himself, was not to be outdone. The Herald added \$3,000 to the swelling list of prizes. The Detroit News jumped in when it was estimated that a million people would witness the Pulitzer contest. By convention time total prize money offered had exceeded the robust figure of \$50,000.

The flimsy flying machines available in 1919 were, for the most part, inadequate for such ambitious journeys, but the line of spirited rivals eager to win cash formed at the rear. It seems the first recorded Pulitzer contestant was an anonymous Georgian who confidently expected to carry a bale of cotton from his home town of Americus to Atlantic City, and to subsidize his venture (in case he didn't win) he planned to sell the cotton at auction on the Boardwalk. Other hopefuls followed: one journal of the day described Major Tom Baldwin's Atlantic City airport on Albany Avenue as a "regular beehive" as aviators scrambled to be off. There were so many places one could fly and win money the choice was a dilemma.

The convention opened amid great fanfare. The President of the Pan American Aeronautic Federation, pioneer Brazil-

ian aviator Alberto Santos-Dumont, greeted the assembly with stirring declarations, as did Winston Churchill and Gabriel d'Annunzio. Other dignitaries chortled expansively among the hub-bub while dare-devils plummeted for a dollar a foot in primitive parachutes overhead. One jumped from a Jenny piloted by Eddie Stinson, "skyrocket among aviators," whose own sister Marjorie went on to win the Flying Trophy for Women. Even bicycles and motorcycles with patched-on wings (optimistically called "aviettes" by their promoters) raced excitedly, and a contingent of the "New York City Air Force" in sky-blue uniforms staged an "arrest" of an errant plane to preview the efficiency of future "cloud-cops."

Omar Locklear, nerveless instructor, exemplified the extreme of exuberance when he changed planes 2,500 feet over the crowded Steel Pier, climbing a rope ladder attached to one Jenny's spreader-bar. He then hung monkey-like by one hand from the right wing-skid. Not satisfied with that, he scrambled to the top wing where he stood with no support – and no parachute – (he was known to have taken on an equally foolhardy challenger for a tennis match up there in full flight!) and before the Jenny disappeared from sight he was perched astraddle the rear fuselage.

Then, just three days before the convention's close, a comet suddenly appeared on the scene. Captain Mansell R. James, soon to confound the gathering, arrived noisily and with great flourish. Originally from Watford, Canada, the 26-year-old devil-may-care bachelor, who had become a double ace on the French and Italian Fronts, had come to the States three weeks earlier with his cousin and wartime comrade Lt. Alan Clarke. The flying chums brought two surplus Sopwith Camels with them and were planning to pick up some easy prize money at Atlantic City before barnstorming their planes around the countryside. On his first flight at the meet, Clarke put on an aggressive, singularly harrowing aerobatic display with his Camel – probably



The war-surplus Sopwith Camel flown by Captain Mansell R. James in 1919.

(Photo - Hawker Siddeley Aviation)

the most maneuverable type of airplane ever built – and the enthusiastic crowds immediately dubbed him the “flitter.”

But the meet’s list of prizes fascinated the two aviators. On May 16 Melvin W. Hodgdon of Somerville, Mass., had tentatively garnered the three richest stakes, the Boston Globe prize, the New York Herald efficiency prize, and the Pulitzer Trophy. Carrying passenger Ralph J. Dale of Allston, Mass., in his Wittmoreham biplane, he flew from Saugus

Field, six miles north of Boston, to Atlantic City in just over five hours despite having to land in Long Island’s Central Park for an hour’s frenzied auto chase for gas. It would be no difficulty for the nimble Camels to best the clumsy Wittmoreham’s record, and so James and Clarke decided at once to fly their little fighters wing-to-wing to Boston.



Wingwalkers typified the exuberance of the Second Pan American Aeronautic Convention held during the entire month of May, 1919, in Atlantic City, N.J.
(Photo - Author)

At the last minute Clark's Sopwith was grounded with mechanical problems, so on Wednesday, May 28, James took off alone, and in his first flight from American soil he disappeared northeastward "in a twinkling."

In just four hours despite headwinds and including a forty minute fuel stop James had covered the 340 mile run from Atlantic City to Boston. Word was flashed that he had indeed won the Globe, Herald, and Pulitzer prizes, together worth \$7,000. Everything appeared to be "coming up roses." All James had to do was to return to Atlantic City to claim his money and perhaps beat his own record to boot.

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James relaxed overnight in Boston, and early on May 29 set out on his return trip. He left in a dash for Atlantic City via Mitchel Field, but soon after take-off his compass malfunctioned. He followed a likely looking railroad, but it led him far to the west of his intended course, and for several minutes he flew disoriented over the confusing Berkshires. Eventually he picked out the town of Lee, Mass. and set the Camel down in the Tyringham meadows nearby.

Since there was nothing he could do to repair the balky compass, he decided to get some fuel and push on. In a moment of conservatism, he decided to telegraph ahead from Pittsfield. His stated intention was to leave at 11 AM for Mitchel Field; after rising from the clearing he would fly to the Housatonic River, follow that to Long Island Sound, cross to Mitchel Field for more fuel, and make the last hop to Atlantic City via the Jersey shore. But when Mansell James took off from Lee, his Sopwith vanished without any apparent trace . . .

The disappearance of the popular young hero was first met with disbelief – then deliberate action. A reward of \$1,000 was almost instantly established for any helpful information. Colonel Archie Miller, CO of Hazelhurst Field at Garden City, Long Island, mobilized a party of search planes and led it personally. An extensive telephone trace was undertaken by the telephone company of all residents near James' proposed flight path. The Army search planes first concentrated on the wooded country of Connecticut between Winchester, Newfield, and Lake Wonksunkmonk. Some people in Platt Hill reported, in response to the telephone inquiry, that they had seen a plane headed southeast on Thursday at about 5000 feet, its engine running fine... an ex-war aviator had seen the Camel from Winchester Center... Torrington farmers saw a plane headed south – but on Friday... a farmer at Millerton, Mt. Riga,

N.Y., heard what sounded to be an airplane engine in nearby woods – on Sunday.

Boy Scouts joined the hunt. James was down in the woods south of Harwinton on the outskirts of Bristol... James had changed his mind and headed north for Toronto to capture the "Ace of Aces" Trophy (and Col. Miller expanded his aerial search to cover the mountains adjoining the Hudson River all the way to Albany). James was down at sea... James' uncle, a doctor from Sarnia, Ontario, and brother-in-law soon came to join a frustrating search that only increased the confusion as it progressed.

The telephone trace was completed as far as Hancock, Conn., and it was tentatively determined that James passed over Hancock by 12:30 on Thursday – an hour and a half after his reported take-off. At this rate he certainly didn't have the fuel to cross Long Island Sound. But other reports continued to puzzle the searchers. Were these merely the machinations of bounty-hunters or the figments of publicity-seekers? A plane was seen dropping into the Hudson at Blue Point headed north... a plane was seen in trouble near Mt. Stamford... a wrecked plane was actually discovered in a wooded gully at Mt. Riga near Millerton, N.Y.! But still there was nothing conclusive.

Eleven weeks passed. The mystery of Mansell R. James remained unsolved and became more shrouded in the mists of time with every passing day.

In mid-August, a flurry of interest in the strange disappearance was excited by part of an airplane wing that washed ashore near Branford, Conn. Certainly this must be the wing of James' Camel, confirming that he had crashed in the Sound and explaining the absence of definite search evidence. As with all previous clues, no positive identification could be made. Yet, three New Haven businessmen who were fishing the day James vanished read of the incident in local papers and came forward to say that on that day they had seen an object resembling a man's head in the water, "blackened by smoke," and what appeared to be part of an airplane wing. This vague piece of information was all that could be gleaned. Had they seen evidence of an airplane on fire? No. Might the object they saw have been a submerged log? Possibly ...

With nothing to follow up, the mystery again dropped into a limbo until hunter Campbell's strange discovery more than six years later. It seemed almost as if the ghost of the Canadian ace, still cavalier, was playfully dropping clues, tantalizing shreds of his fate, now here, now there, toying with the confusion of hapless mortals. Did James fall into the sea? Or into the thick Berkshire forest near Tyringham meadows? Or, perhaps, into some other circumstance as yet unknown or unsuspected?

In one of the enigmas of the air Captain Mansell R. James, late of the RFC, the first aviator to win the Pulitzer Trophy, vanished from the face of the earth as though he had never existed. The unclaimed reward for any definite information concerning James today would be worth over fifteen thousand dollars. Despite this, no one yet has been able to come forward with a single clue to this event that remains, even now, one of aviation's most baffling riddles.