

THE FLYING PIONEERS

By HAROLD E. MOREHOUSE

RALPH M. BROWN

Early Thomas Aviator — Plane Constructor — Boat Builder

Ralph M. Brown was born in West Springfield, Massachusetts February 17th, 1893 and graduated from the local High School in 1911. He was naturally mechanically inclined and during his youth was always busy making something of this nature.

During 1910-1911 Brown became interested in flying and with the aid of his brother built a hang-type full sized glider, with which he made some short flights. During this time he also became a charter member of the Springfield Aeronautic Society.

As a result of his increasing interest in aviation Brown went to Bath, New York in April, 1912 where he joined the Thomas Brothers Aeroplane Company as a flying school student and shop mechanic on plane construction. The company had just started a flying school and Brown was taught to fly that spring by Walter Johnson. He made his first solo hop in May, 1912 at the Thomas Brothers flying field near Kanona, four miles northwest of Bath. Brown continued his flying practice that summer and also received a considerable amount of good firsthand shop experience in building aeroplanes. That fall he obtained his F.A.I. pilot license No. 185 on November 6th, flying a Thomas Biplane with a 6 cyl. 65 H.P. Kirkham engine.

On November 20th Brown had a minor smashup when he was forced to land with a dead engine, but fortunately was not injured. As 1912 ended Brown became assistant instructor to Walter Johnson in the Thomas School. The school was operated over the winter months flying off the ice of nearby Lake Salubria.

In 1913 Brown again started to fly exhibitions and was busy in the shop between engagements, helping the firm develop and build new model planes. Starting on August 16th he gave exhibits in his home town of Springfield, Massachusetts for several days. His flying was so well received that he was engaged to fly there again September 11th to 13th. That Fall and through the winter months Brown tried his hand at designing and building a new Flying Boat with an imported Austro-Damlier engine. It turned out well and in May he took this plane to Dobbs Ferry on the Hudson River to give a series of demonstrations around New York City and vicinity. Earl Beers accompanied Brown as his mechanic on this assignment.

On May 12th he flew over a major league ball game at the Polo Grounds in New York City, carrying Thomas Company business representative Fausto Rodriguez as a passenger, and dropped a bouquet with a complimentary mes-



sage to Manager John McGraw of the Giants. This flight brought Brown under infraction of the Aero Club of America rules which prohibited flights over cities and public gatherings, and resulted in his flying license being suspended for a time.

About this time the Thomas Brothers were laying plans to move their business from Bath to Ithaca, New York and Brown was made Factory Superintendent, at which time he began to take an active part in the manufacturing end of the business. At Ithaca the firm increased their facilities and enlarged the Flying School.

In March, 1915 a new Thomas Military Tractor was brought out, of very advanced design, which attracted the attention of both the United States and several foreign Governments. The company made a very progressive growth and their school was soon training many Canadian students who later went into active military service during World War I. In January, 1917 the firm was reorganized to become the Thomas-Morse Corporation and Brown was retained as Factory Superintendent. The firm's many noteworthy contributions to Military Aviation through World War I is well known.

Brown remained with Thomas-Morse until 1919 when he left to go with the Old Town Canoe Company, where he remained until 1924. That year he joined the Penn Yan Boat Company of Penn Yan, New York. A former Thomas Brothers flying associate, Charles Hermann had started the firm and induced Brown to join him in the venture. The business grew and in 1940 Brown became President, where he remained until he retired from active business in 1961. He still resides at Penn Yan, New York where he enjoys hunting and fishing as a hobby.

Flying Pioneer, Early Bird Ralph M. Brown deserves great credit for his many noteworthy contributions to early American aviation history.