

# THE FLYING PIONEERS

By HAROLD MOREHOUSE

RODGER W. JANNUS

Early Benoist Pilot—World War I Instructor



Rodger W. Jannus was born in Washington, D.C., December 25, 1886, the son of Franklin Jannus, patent attorney, and grandson of an ex-mayor of Washington. At age 17, he and his younger brother, Antony, were left orphans following the death of their parents. Washington attorney J.M. Spaulding adopted the boys and completed their schooling. Rodger attended Washington schools and then took up engineering, ultimately entering government service. He later was stationed in Panama on Canal Zone assignments.

During late 1911 and through 1912, "Tony" Jannus was making quite a name for himself as an aviator, and through brotherly contact Rodger was induced to return and also get into the flying game. Accordingly, he joined Tony at the Benoist Company, St. Louis, Missouri, in the spring of 1913. There he first started to work as a mechanic, then began taking flight instruction about May 1st. Tony was instructor at the Benoist School, at that time; however, there is evidence that William H. Bleakley probably also gave Rodger some of his flight instruction. He was an apt pupil and soon became an excellent pilot. By mid-summer, he joined the company staff and began to fill assigned exhibition dates.

Rodger finished out the summer flying season at St. Louis on the exhibition circuit. As the year ended, he shipped to Florida with the Benoist staff and flying boat equipment, where he helped inaugurate the celebrated Tampa-St. Petersburg Air Line by Benoist in January, 1914. This early successful air line operation was truly  
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noteworthy, and was undoubtedly the first such venture in the United States operating on a fixed daily schedule to carry passengers, light express and some food commodities. There, in daily scheduled operations, Rodger soon became a very competent water pilot. A short time later, Benoist also established a winter school. Rodger assisted with the instruction of a class of students through the late winter months. Among them were J.D. Smith, Glen I. Smith, Henry Railsback, W.H. Evers and B.M. Latham. That winter, Rodger had the opportunity to get much valuable flying experience and he became a very expert pilot.

After the winter season, Rodger returned to St. Louis with the Benoist crew. That spring, a wealthy Duluth, Wisconsin, grain trader and sportsman, W.D. Jones, purchased a new Benoist Flying Boat. In June, 1914, Rodger left the Benoist Company to fly for Jones (social flying and making commuting trips). Jones named his new craft, "The Lark," and operations started on June 8th, with Fritz Ericson as mechanic. Later, Rodger gave Ericson some instruction and he went on to work for the Jannus Brothers in their later projects. Rodger also gave Jones some instruction in the operation of the Lark and a very active flying season resulted.

About August 1st, Rodger purchased the Lark from Jones then he and Ericson left on an exhibition jaunt. They first went to Cedar Point, Ohio, to join Tony Jannus who had also left the Benoist Company and was operating a thriving passenger-carrying business there. Rodger and Ericson also filled some exhibition dates later that fall, first

at Muscatine, Iowa, then at Burlington and Fort Madison, Iowa. They spent several days at each point carrying passengers and giving exhibitions. In early October, Rodger made an appearance in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, then flew 140 miles down the river to Bellaire, Ohio, for an exhibition. Following that, Rodger and Ericson joined Tony in Baltimore to start a business of their own, to operate a flying school, carry passengers and fly exhibitions. They also planned to design, build and market a new Jannus Flying Boat. The brothers started to operate their flying boats from the Patapsco River and late that fall carried many prominent people from both Baltimore and Washington on flights about the Bay area. On November 4th, Rodger made an extended flight over Baltimore carrying a local news photographer. He put on quite a show, bringing headlines in newspapers.

At this time, both Jannus brothers took tests and obtained U.S. Department of Commerce Marine Operator Licenses, authorizing them to operate motor vessels, thereby complying with Harbor Regulations. They were probably the first flying boat pilots to comply with this requirement when operating in congested harbors. Former Benoist student J.D. Smith joined them and took some additional instruction. Fritz Ericson completed his course and A.W. Harris, Peoria, Illinois, entered the school. Former Sloane land graduate W. Knox Martin purchased one of the Benoist Boats and took flying boat instruction at the school. In late November, the fledgling Jannus Brothers Company started construction of their new Flying Boat, a pusher biplane model of 45 ft. span for pilot and two passengers, using an 8 cyl. 120 h.p. Maximotor engine installed in the hull behind the occupants driving the propeller, mounted between the wings by a roller chain transmission.

In January, 1915, Rodger and W. Knox Martin started to fly their boats under contract for the Panama-California Exposition at San Diego, California, making daily flights and carrying passengers. Between January 5th and March 13th, they made 627 flights and carried 376 passengers. Later, J.D. Smith also joined Rodger as a pilot there. On January 15th, 1915, Rodger obtained Hydro-aeroplane License No. 26 on his Benoist Boat. At the Exposition, that winter, Rodger carried many distinguished passengers on flights about the San Diego and Coronado area. On February 19th, he crashed into San Diego Bay while flying alone, but was not injured. During the later winter months of 1914-1915, Tony and Ericson started first flight tests of the new Jannus Flying Boat at Baltimore. They were highly satisfactory. The design work on this craft was largely the work of Ericson, who was a close friend of Max Lillie and had attended technical school with him in Sweden.

In May, the Jannus Brothers Company signed a contract with the Toledo Railway & Light Company of Toledo, Ohio, to operate a flying boat at Toledo Beach Resort on Lake Erie for two months, starting July 1st. Reportedly, they had received orders for their new Flying Boat and the first one was shipped to W.E. Davidson of Detroit, Michigan, on April 28th, and Tony went there to supervise the assembly and demonstrate it. Then, for some unknown

reason, Tony joined the Curtiss-Toronto Company (about June 1st). Rodger fulfilled the summer contract at Toledo, giving daily exhibitions and carrying passengers. He also advertised a flying school there that summer. The Jannus Brothers venture was evidently dissolved at the completion of the Toledo contract. About this time, Rodger also did some writing for aviation magazines, advocating the use of flying for forest patrol, forest fire spotting and other public services. After completing the Toledo Beach assignment, Rodger returned to the Benoist Company at St. Louis where he did some flight testing of new planes, including the large twin-motored Model C Biplane Flying Boat of 65 ft. span using two 100 h.p. Roberts engines. It was flown with seven passengers and had a top speed of about 70 m.p.h. Reportedly, this boat was taken to Florida that winter for the passenger-carrying season.

During the spring of 1916, Rodger did some more exhibition work with his Benoist Boat and on May 24th had a smashup. He crashed in the Detroit River carrying D.M. Parker as a passenger, but they were not injured. That summer, the war clouds of World War I were thickening in Europe and American aeroplane manufacturers were finding a market there for their planes, so Rodger went overseas that fall and early winter. After returning to the United States, he became an instructor at the Curtiss Flying School at Miami, Florida, where he remained until June, 1917, when he enlisted in the Aviation Section, Signal Corps Reserve and was sent to Ithaca, New York for duty at the Thomas-Morse Aircraft Company. On July 26th, 1917, he was appointed First Lieutenant and on September 4th was detailed to Selfridge Field, Mt. Clemens, Michigan. Remaining there until he was promoted to Captain on March 25th, 1918, he departed for overseas on July 6th. While in Mt. Clemens, Rodger was married. In France he was given advance training on combat planes and on September 4th, 1918 he crashed and burned to death near Champenoise Indre, France. He was survived by his wife who gave birth to his son on Christmas Day, 1918. The son is now an attorney. Ironically, Tony Jannus had also lost his life in a flying accident in Europe in October, 1916. Thus ended the aviation careers of two very fine young men whose noteworthy early flying accomplishments were legend.

Flying Pioneer Rodger W. Jannus richly deserves great credit for the major part he played in the history of early American aviation development. It is to be seriously regretted that the Jannus Brothers died at the very time in their lives when great things undoubtedly lay ahead for them, and it is difficult to comprehend where they might well have progressed had they lived. Both gave their lives for their country and the new science of aviation. Their names will ever remain high on the list of those who helped carve out the aviation industry of today.