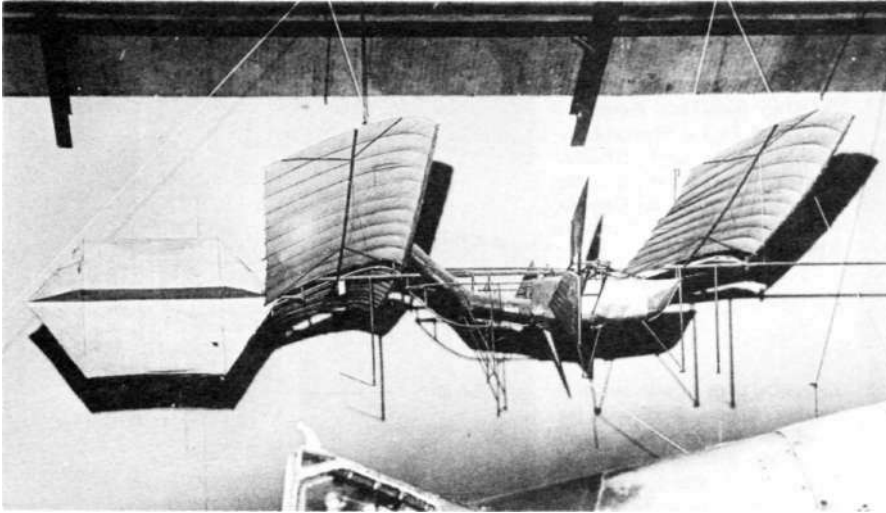




# SILVER HILL - OUR HERITAGE IN LIMBO

By WILLIAM F. HALLSTEAD III

Truly historic aircraft—for eventual display in the National Air and Space Museum — are stored at the Silver Hill Facility. Above left, the first working model of Samuel Langley's Aerodrome. Below, left — a WWI French Caudron, and right — the Loening Pan American Goodwill Flight amphibian.

In 1969, a popular aviation periodical termed a federal project in Maryland "a shame and a disgrace." The article's author, who was one of the magazine's four senior editors, said that the facility "can only be described as a junkyard in a suburb of Washington called Silver Hill."

What he was attempting to describe is the Preservation and Restoration Division of the National Air and Space Museum of the Smithsonian Institution.

The magazine's relentless indictment of Silver Hill hit this writer particularly hard, having been enamored of wings since my very first venture into the crisp air of upper Pennsylvania in a Kellett Autogiro in an age when flying in an open cockpit was very close to heaven, and a sky full of jet soot was unthinkable. The sky was young then, a high road for such legends as Amelia Earhart and Wiley Post. Now, a few decades later, most of us confidently believed that the airplanes of those — and earlier and later — days were on orderly if not glamorous display in Washington's Smithsonian Institution. Some of them are, as discovered during a visit to the Arts and Industries Building and the neighboring temporary air museum building.

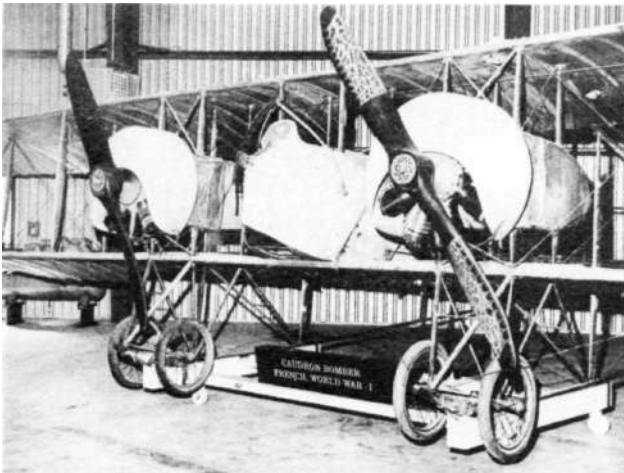
The two most famous airplanes in the world, the Wright Brothers' FLYER and Lindbergh's SPIRIT OF ST. LOUIS, hang there. And there are others: the VIN FIZ, which Calbraith Perry Rodgers flew to distinction on the first transcontinental flight of the U.S. in 84 harrowing days; Billy Mitchell's Spad XVI; Wiley Post's WINNIE MAE. Just a few others.

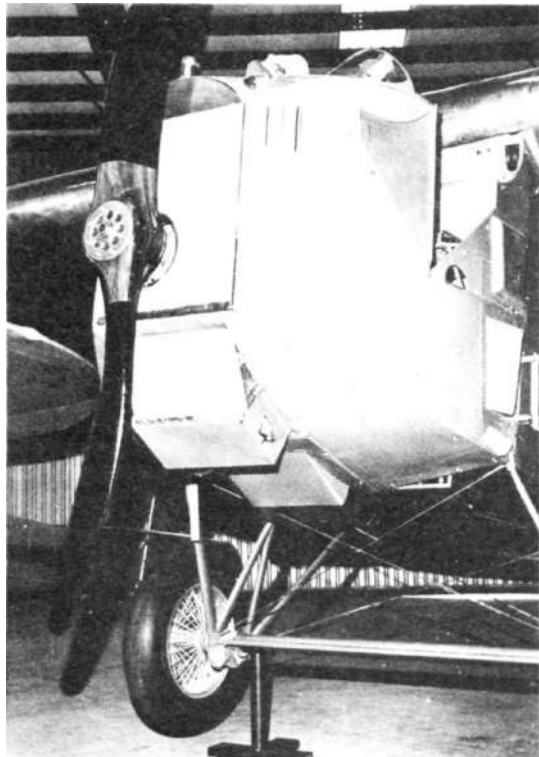
Where is the vast collection of 200 more aircraft which constitute the promised display for the long proposed new National Air and Space Museum? They are at Silver Hill, the installation which the aviation magazine had flayed in print.

Having been horrified by the magazine article, a visit was arranged, expecting to find a vast wasteland of decrepit and decaying relics, possibly hidden from taxpayers' view by a Ladybird Johnsonian planting of fast-growing hedge. Turning off heavily traveled Route 5 a mile or two southeast of the District of Columbia line, and two blocks north, I found a neatly fenced 24-acre compound. A courteous gate guard directed me to Building 10 and a gentleman named Don Merchant, Chief of the Preservation and Restoration Division. The aviation magazine's editor had intimated that one could not visit Silver Hill without certain difficulty, but a phone call to Don Merchant was no difficulty at all. In fact, he took the time to open the Silver Hill facility on a Saturday especially for me and a coincidental group of antique airplane enthusiasts from Baltimore.

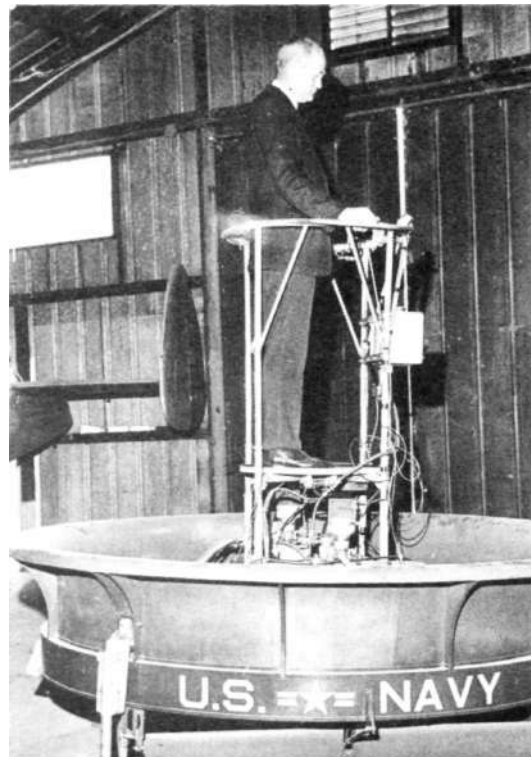
Silver Hill, however, is not open to the general public; it is not a display organization. It is a storage and workshop set-up, and its staff of 14 has more work than it can possibly handle for the next you-name-it number of years. In addition to the hundreds of aircraft stored there, thousands of historic engines, instruments, and parts fill building after building, all neatly inventoried and cataloged.

What the small staff is able to do, it does unbelievably well.





L.—the beautifully preserved Fokker T-2, first non-stop transcontinental airplane. R.—Don Merchant shows off the Hiller Flying Platform. Below L.—the Bell XP-59A, America's first jet airplane. Below R.—the Northrop Gamma, POLAR STAR, Lincoln Ellsworth's explorer.



Opposite page — the James V. Martin Kitten, first with retractable landing gear. Below L. — SPAD XIII of 22nd Aero Sqdn., World War I, stored for future restoration, and R. — nose of the ENOLA GAY stored inside.

Priceless reminders of an historic past at Silver Hill.

An example of its handiwork was the beautiful restoration of the huge NC-4. They had helping hands of three Navy people on the NC-4 work, but other efforts in the cavernous workshop are evidence of indigenous ability touched with a bit of inspiration.

"This is the kind of damage we would repair, not replace," Don Merchant said, running his hand along the badly deteriorated wood of a World War I German Albatros tail section. "We replace as little as possible in order to preserve historical accuracy." The Fokker D.VII was recently renovated. (See *JOURNAL* of AAHS. Vol. 13, No. 3, Summer 1968, pp 137-148.)

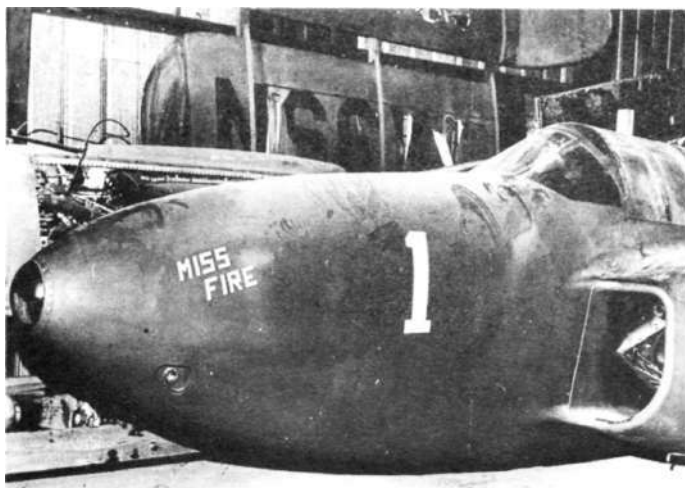
Another project in the workshop is the restoration of one of the four Army Douglas *World Cruisers* which took off April 4, 1924, on a mass flight around the world. On September 28, not quite half a year later, two of them finished the 26,000-mile trip.

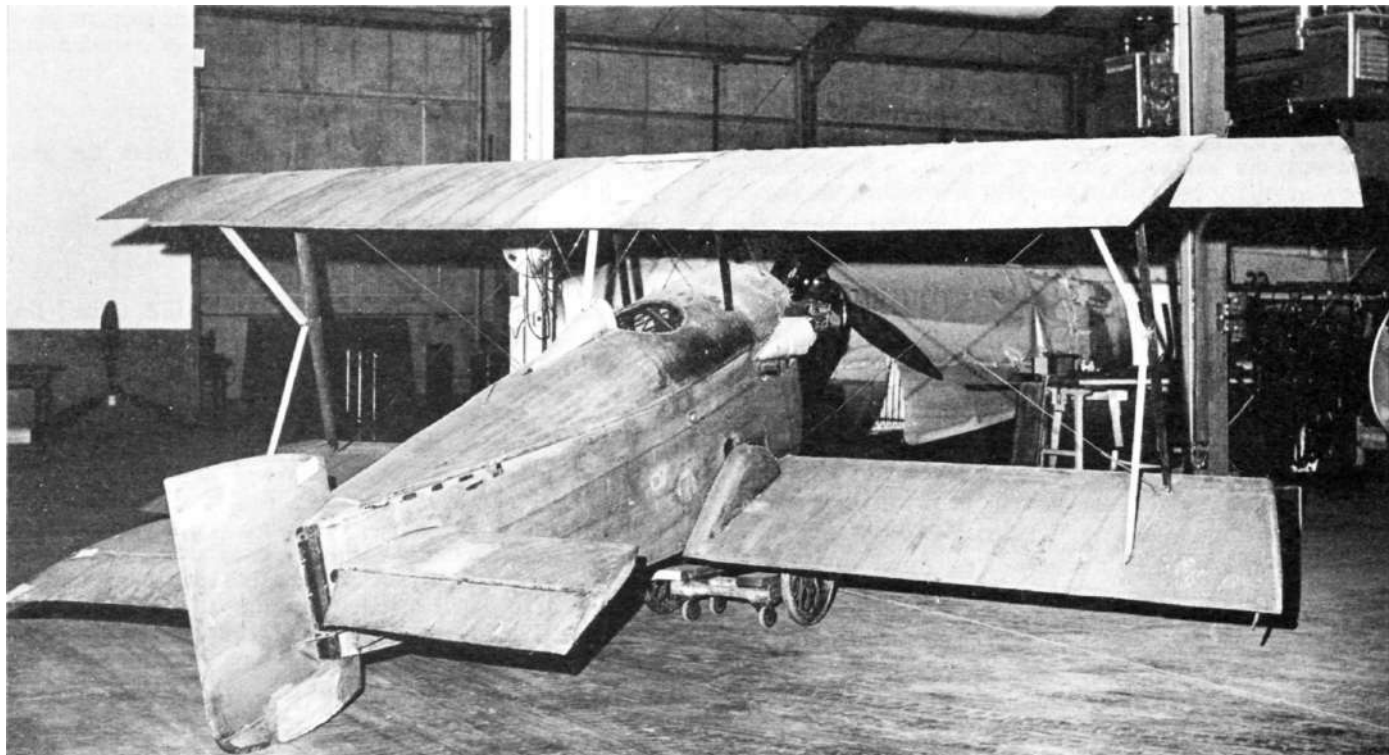
Samuel Pierpont Langley's first working model of his projected AERODROME hangs from the ceiling in the workshop. It flew in 1896, propelled by a steam engine. The success of this very model got Langley a \$50,000 Congress-

sional grant to develop a full-sized man-carrying version. Ready in October, 1903, and powered by an efficient gasoline engine, it crashed into the Potomac on attempted take-off from a houseboat launching rack. It crashed again, on December 8, in a second try, and the nation's press had a great time jeering at Langley's efforts; in fact it succeeded in completely crushing the spirit of the very able inventor.

Nine days after the second failure, the Wright Brothers did precisely what the newsmen were still gleefully claiming was impossible, and this time the fourth estate was more generous. The *Washington Post*, for example, gave Orville and Wilbur a whole six short paragraphs. (The *Post's* fascinating lead story that day was the centennial celebration of the Louisiana Purchase.)

Nose-to-nose with Langley's 1896 model is the tiny but chilling *Baka* bomb. *Baka* reportedly means stupid, and from an American viewpoint, the name is apt indeed. A pilot was bolted into this stubby little rocket-powered glide bomb, and dropped from an Imperial Japanese Air Force bomber to plunge wholeheartedly into the target. The pilot's setting of his affairs in order had been culminated the previous evening with his guest appearance at his own





funeral ceremony. The *Baka* at Silver Hill was piloted by a fellow who was not so baka after all, though. No one can figure out how he got his short-winged flying bomb into nose-up landing attitude, but the abrasions of his explosion-less seaside touch-down are evident, and there they will stay.

"That kind of damage is legitimate history," Merchant stated. He later pointed out the fuselage damage incurred by Lincoln Ellsworth's 1935 trans-Antarctic Northrop Gamma in a bad landing. Ellsworth, whose first major expedition had been sponsored by the John Hopkins University 11 years earlier, claimed 300,000 square miles of Antarctic territory for the U.S. in the airplane which now reposes at Silver Hill.

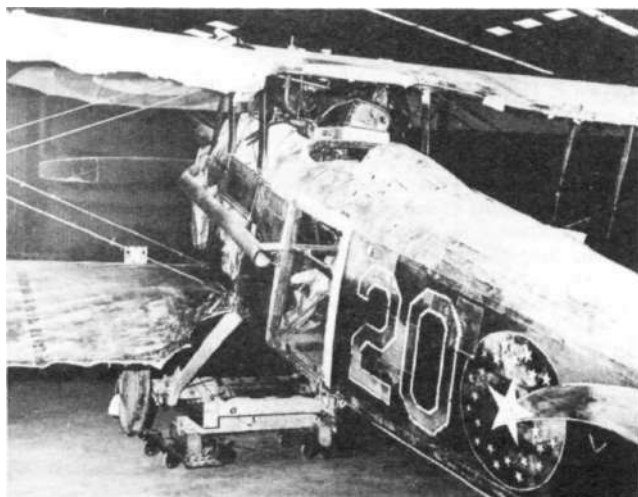
"We won't touch that rippling on the fuselage skin," Merchant promised. "That points out a major difference between us and the private restorers who are concerned with bringing an old airplane back to flying condition. We're after historical accuracy, not flyability."

There's no doubt that Don Merchant could direct aircraft restoration toward either objective. His early fascination

with aviation led him to Hagerstown's Fairchild Aircraft in 1941. He was temporarily de-winged during World War II when he somehow ended up in the U.S. Infantry. After the war, he returned to Fairchild where he became foreman of the research and development shop. In 1961, he joined the National Air and Space Museum.

A tall, balding, and very pleasant man, Don Merchant knows what's what at Silver Hill. He delved into obscure nooks among the 17 buildings to point out such oddments as a little rotor-powered flying chair, equipped with a tiny engine on each blade, and intended to sail Nazi troops into combat. "Designed by Bruno Nagler," Merchant said. "The trouble was that centrifugal force made the fuel flow too fast into the engines. Nagler finally did overcome the problem enough to fly the machine."

Silver Hill's long sheds offer continuous surprises. "That's an atomic bomb casing," Merchant said casually, nodding at a hideously huge olive-with-fins in a cluttered corner. A few minutes later, we came upon a giant cylindrical fuselage in another building. Painted on the nose were the words, ENOLA GAY. The ENOLA GAY waits, dismembered but



complete, in suburban Maryland for the fate of the Air and Space Museum.

Yes, for the fate of the museum. For its construction is anything but assured, although it has been expected to get underway year by year for most of a decade. The three-block-long site has been allocated between 4th and 7th Streets on the south side of the Mall in Washington. Two million dollars have already been invested in site studies and the completion of the building plans. In fact, the plans have been complete for two years.

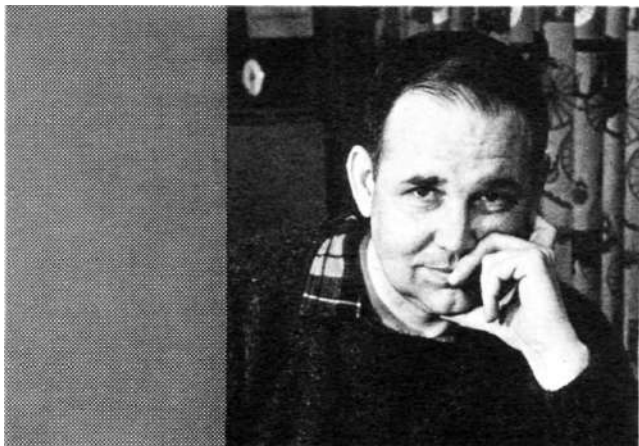
S. Paul Johnston, until recently Director of the Air and Space Museum, came to the Smithsonian in 1964, eager to create in Washington "a great new facility on behalf of the government and the aerospace industry." (See reprint of Johnston's address given before the Washington Aero Club, April 22, 1969, carried in *AAHS JOURNAL*, Summer, 1969, issue.) But he left the Museum last year in what he described as "an atmosphere of frustration and disappointment."

Behind the buildings, in the rear of the Silver Hill compound, are to be found the aircraft which apparently had lit the aviation magazine's editorial fuse, and which are starkly symbolic of Johnston's loss of hope. They are exposed to weather, although some cocooning has been done. But in fairness it must be explained that they all are not exactly priceless. The World War II airplanes can take much more standing outside than the earlier fragile ships which are safely undercover. And of the exposed aircraft, not all are historically valuable except as representatives of their types. There does repose the fuselage of the SACRED COW, the first Presidential aircraft, and QUE SERA SERA, the first airplane to land at the South Pole. It is not a pretty sight to see these old machines suffering naked in the weather, but at this point, they could be quite easily reconditioned.

What is lacking is space and staff; space in which to work and then display, and the staff with which to do both. The estimated \$45-50 million needed to build the long-proposed new Air and Space Museum building have not yet been appropriated by Congress. Forty-five million dollars sounds like a lot of money on the face of it. But in proper perspective, is it? Forty-five million dollars will buy just one destroyer escort vessel at current prices. It will buy less than one third of a nuclear attack submarine.

There are other avenues to consider. For example, paid admissions to amortize advanced costs; or private subscriptions to serve as a starter for a bond-underwritten construction fund. That is better than no museum at all.

Is it too much to demand that an acceptable way be found to display permanently these priceless heritage pieces of aviation:



—The Fokker T-2, first to cross the U.S. non-stop, its gigantic one-section wing a beautiful example of contemporary large-scale wood finishing?

—Amelia Earhart's Lockheed Vega?

—The sole remaining hook-on airplane from the great dirigibles of the early 1930's?

—Several whole generations of space vehicles?

—President Kennedy's CAROLINE?

—Calbraith Perry Rodgers' VIN FIZZ, the first Transcontinental airplane, with many stops in forty-five days?

—Jimmie Doolittle's Curtiss R3C-2, winner of the 1925 Schneider Trophy race, and of the 1925 Pulitzer Race as R3C-1?

The real losers are your children. You, like me, may remember the thrill of another day when fragile fabric-covered biplanes inaugurated the air line service between the converted pastures which were to become today's air terminals. But your children certainly cannot. To them, the beginnings of aviation may something between the passive covers of a book; something long gone and remote. Dry stuff.

You and I know that it's not remote, and it's far from dry. There were individualists deluxe in the past decades since the dawn of flight, people with guts, and initiative, and an overpowering need to prove themselves. They grabbed the sky for us and tamed it to the point where we can rent a safe piece of it and cross the continent in not so many minutes — unfortunately staring at a movie with God's great sky blocked out by confidently closed curtains.

Something irreplaceable begs for survival in the silent sheds of Silver Hill. Unless imagination overcomes governmental inertia, it will die there. Your children and their children will never realize that the last resting place for the living evidence of more than 70 years of unbelievable adventure and discovery was in a quiet suburb of Maryland, just a mile from the more urgent concerns of this era: the sprawl of a shopping center.

Editor's note: Since last year, when the author made his investigation of the Silver Hill Facility and wrote this article, most of the aircraft formerly kept outside for lack of storage space inside the buildings have been moved into new sheds, out of the weather, and the many crated airplanes have been sealed up inside new or repaired storage boxes. Protection is afforded, though restoration or refurbishment must await a more enlightened day. The pressure to provide space for display, and the funds for restoration, must be increased through public response.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

William F. Hallstead, a free lance writer for 20 years, has authored several aviation books for teen-aged readers and innumerable articles on subjects ranging from a John Hopkins study of fireflies to crop-dusting in Illinois.

He was a 15th Air Force B-24 radio operator awaiting transition to B-29's when WWII ended, and is now a television executive with the Maryland Center for Public Broadcasting. In recent years he has written *Dirigible Scout*, *The Missiles of Zajecar*, and *Sky Carnival*, all novels.

The seemingly unjustified attack upon the National Air & Space Museum prompted his first-hand investigation. A popular version of this article was written for the Baltimore *Sunday Sun Magazine*, and the photographs are used here by arrangement with the *Sun* and Photographer Robert F. Kneische.

Bill Hallstead's current Research Project is No. 6906, a study of mercenary pilot activities since WWII, especially American, and their recruitment, living conditions, aircraft flown, and motivations (though none will be published without permission).