

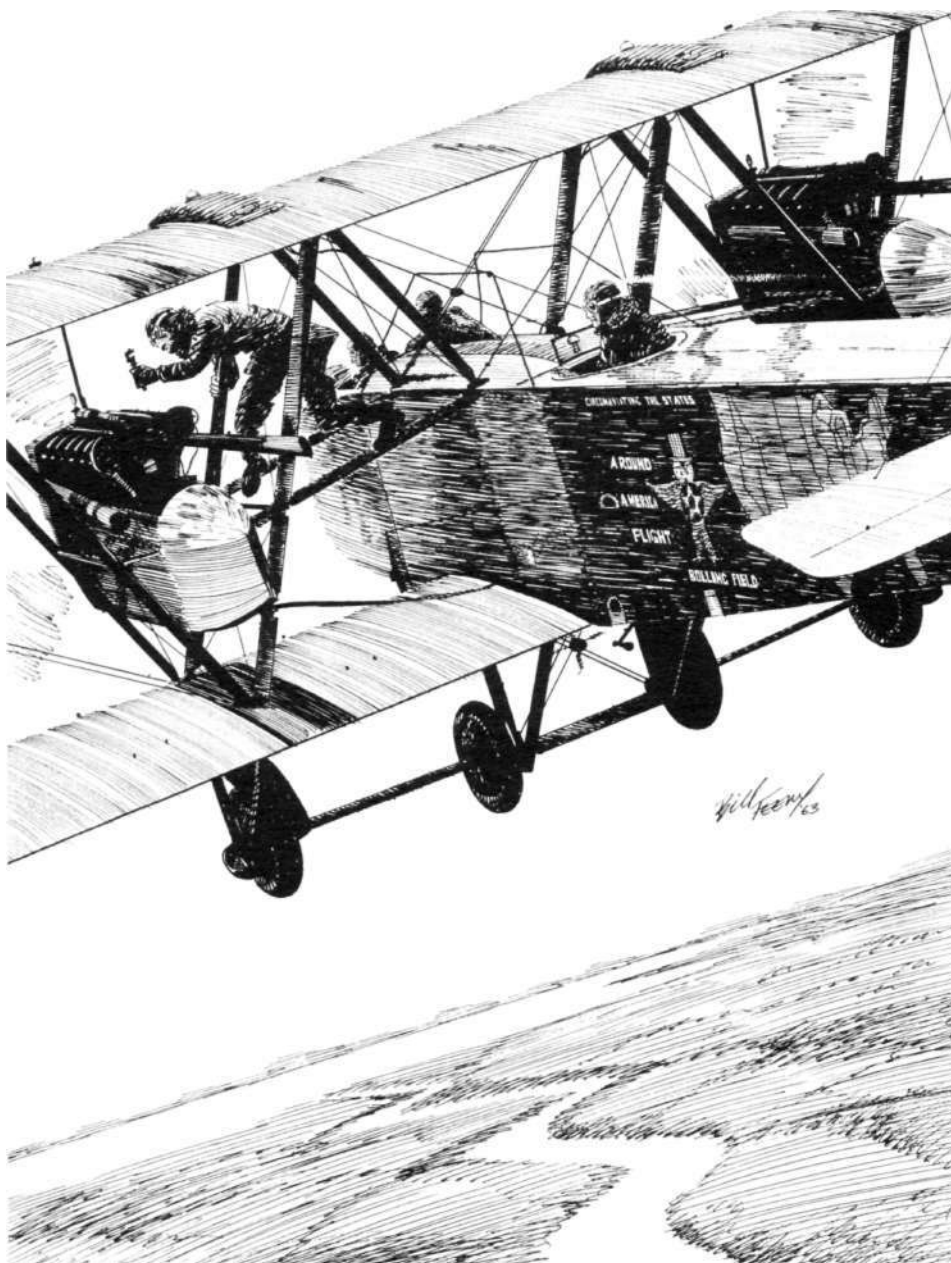
the odyssey of GMB no. 2

By MERLE C.OLMSTED

The famous picture of the crew of the Around America Flight was printed on the *JOURNAL* of AAHS, Summer 1969, in commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of their flight. Additional research has been done by Merle Olmsted to document the journey from the memoirs and photo albums of two members of that epic flight.

The sketch of the repair on one of the engines, done high in the air over Maryland, is reprinted here from the book. *In Their Honor*, through the courtesy of the author, AAHS Member William D. Feeny.

The journey began at Boiling Field on July 24th, 1919, and with many stops, a crash landing and repairs requiring a month, had arrived at Curtiss Field, St. Paul on September 16th. (Photo — Jack Harding)



The Great War was over. The countries of Western Europe, victors and defeated alike, were in economic chaos, and shorn of seven and one half million young men. A large percentage of a generation was lost in the catastrophic casualties which began with a single pistol shot at Serajevo in August of 1914, and ended with the final gasp of the German armies in the fall of 1918.

The United States, although involved only a little over a year and a half, has sustained slightly over 50,000 dead. The end of that conflict, as with all others, brought vast relief, and apparently a genuine belief that peace would reign forever more.

Although the U.S. air effort has been condemned over the years as a failure, it had really accomplished a great deal. It is true that the wild promises of the summer of 1917 to "darken the skies with airplanes" were not met, but in the short space of 19 months, the U.S. Air Service had gone from near nothing at all, to the point where it had 45 squadrons in the Zone of Advance, most of them operational. It is true that most were flying French and British equipment, but the infant American aviation industry was just reading its stride when the Central Powers collapsed. Had the war continued into 1919, . . .

With the war over, the huge contracts for aircraft and equipment were canceled, and thousands of trained Air Service people dissolved into civilian life. The few regulars that remained were to struggle through many years with inadequate funds and personnel, and deteriorating equipment. Brigadier General William Mitchell returned from France with an excellent record of the use of the limited air power of the day, and an almost fanatical belief in the power of the military airplane. Along with it he had the fiery determination to convince others of his beliefs. Obviously he had hoped to be appointed Chief of the Army Air Service where he would be in the best position to build an air arm as he wanted it. However, Mitchell was considerably too fiery to suit his Army superiors and he was appointed Assistant Chief of Air Service, where, it was hoped, he would be less troublesome.

The job of Chief of Air Service went to Major General Charles T. Menoher, whose qualifications to lead an air force were nil. An 1886 graduate of the Military Academy, he had been a "red leg"* artilleryman for most of the 32 years since he left West Point. His most recent command had been the famed 42nd (Rainbow) Division of the AEF. Although he was not an airman, and had little knowledge of the subject, he appears to have become a believer in military aviation (within much more strict limits than

Mitchell's) and wrote several articles in 1919 and 1920 for magazines such as U.S. AIR SERVICE and AVIATION, in which he urged a strong air force. However, he viewed the Air Service strictly as an auxiliary of the foot soldier, which was in no way how Mitchell viewed the mission of the Air Service. Though Mitchell was a brilliant leader and had many talents, he had no talent for knowing when it was prudent not to speak, and as a consequence, Menoher asked the Secretary of War to relieve Mitchell as Assistant Chief. There was no possibility of the two working together. Menoher was turned down, and he therefore requested, in 1921, that he be relieved as Chief of Air Service and he went out to the Islands to command the Hawaiian Department. He was replaced by Major General Mason M. Patrick; Mitchell remained in the number 2 position.

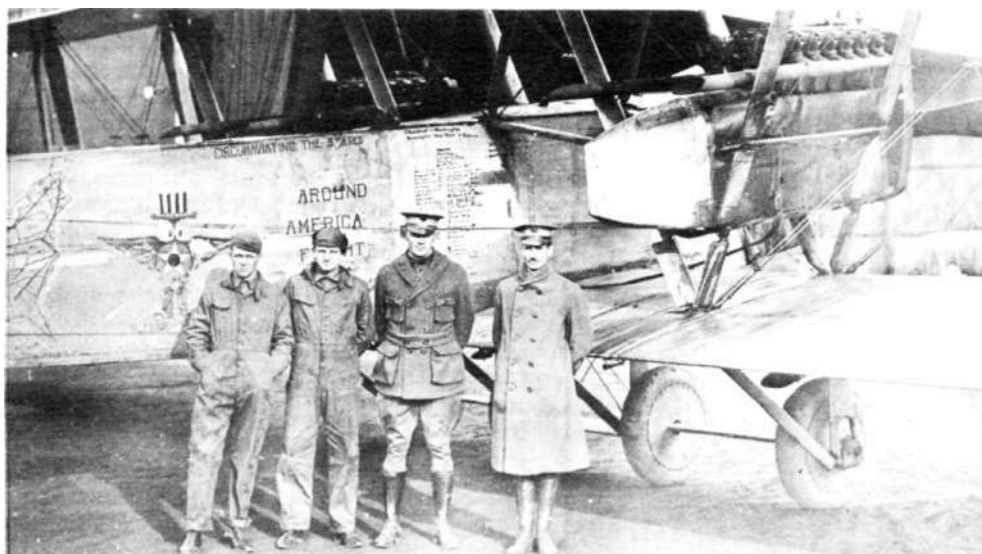
This was all in the future in the Spring of 1919, and the disappointment of not being selected Chief failed to dampen Mitchell's spirits. Even as Assistant Chief he was able to instigate and set in motion a series of aerial projects that were sensational to the public and great training and morale boosters for the infant Air Service. All of these projects, of course, had to be approved by Menoher.

Although the military airplane had proven its worth — to some at least — in the Great War, it was still a vehicle of limited range. Cross country flying was not indulged in to any great extent, and most Army aircraft of the immediate post war era seldom ventured far from their home stations. There were many flyers in that first year of peace who were eager to test the long range capabilities of the airplane, and several successful attempts were made in rapid order. The Navy's crossing of the Atlantic in the Curtiss NC boats was the first.

The Army planned three operations of this nature in 1919, the Round the Rim Flight, the Transcontinental Reliability Test, and a flight from New York to Nome, Alaska. The last project did not get off until 1920.

The Reliability Test was open to any Army pilot and any Army aircraft capable of at least 100 MPH.¹ It drew 74 entries and could be flown from either east or west, or round trip for the hardy ones. It was the center of attention for most of October and showed up more "unreliability" than "reliability."

The other flight, which had gotten off in July and did not end until the month following the Transcontinental dash, was the Around America Flight, more commonly known as the 'Round the Rim Flight.' It involved only one aircraft and five men and its purpose was to fly completely around



Harding, Dobias, Harmon and Hartz posed for this picture upon landing at Boiling Fd. November 9th, lean and experienced after a journey of nearly 10,000 miles in four months. Total flight time was 114 hours, 45 mins. but engine time went well above due to warmups, to 139 hours. (Photo—Courtesy of William D. Feeny)



The Round the Rim Flight paused abruptly at Ausable Falls, New York on July 26th. (Photo - Nat'l Archives)

the periphery of the United States, an outstanding feat at the time.

The flight was to originate and end at Boiling Field. The man who was to command the flight was no product of the sudden Army expansion of 1917, but was an old line regular Army officer, Lt. Col. R.S. Hartz. He had been in the Army since 1900, and had assumed command of Boiling Field early in 1919, probably in January.²

It is interesting to note that Hartz, who was to make his name in the yet undiscovered field of aviation, was born in the era when the west was still wild. He was born the 21st of April, 1880, at Fort Wingate, New Mexico Territory, which was still very much frontier country at that time. Although the Indian Wars were almost over further north in Texas and Indian Territory, New Mexico was still terrorized by small batches of Apaches, led by such chiefs as Victorio and Nana.

Whether Hartz's father was a soldier or not is unknown, one thing is certain his father was Republican and an admirer of Rutherford B. Hayes, the President of the United States. His son was christened Rutherford Scott Hartz.

Apparently the Hartz family left the frontier soon after, as the 12 year old Rutherford is next found in Dresden, Germany, where he attended a private school for two years. Returning to the U.S. he attended Shattuck Military School until 1897, and then spent another two years at Virginia Military Institute. His interest in the military is evident from his choice of schools, and in June, 1900, he enlisted in the 4th Battery, Field Artillery, where he became a corporal by 1902.

Army regulations in effect at that time called for regimental vacancies for 2nd Lt. to be filled by graduates of the Military Academy, and if there were not enough of these, the

The crew lowered the fuselage tail and began to assess the results. Damage to landing gear and nose was extensive. (Photo—USAF)



vacancies were to be filled by commissioning qualified men from the ranks who were able to pass the rigid tests. It was by this route that Corporal Hartz became 2nd Lt. Hartz, 21st Infantry, in October of 1902.

The Army in those days was a small and close knit outfit, even though most of it was scattered "from hell to break-fast" across the immense distances of the west. It was not uncommon for an officer or enlisted man to stay in the same regiment for many years and through numerous reenlistments. So it was with Hartz, who remained with the 21st Infantry for 15 years, and was a Major when he transferred to the Aviation Section of the Signal Corps in December, 1917.

In the Air Service now, but still a ground officer, he commanded various training units until August, 1918 when he reported to Rockwell Field, San Diego, for flight training. He completed this in November and received his wings as a JMA, now age 38.³ Hartz then reported to Washington where he was assigned to the Operations Section of the Division of Military Aeronautics. He remained in the Operations Section less than two months before assuming command of nearby Boiling Field.

Whose idea the 'Round the Rim Flight' was is not known. Hartz's official request to make the flight is contained in a four-page letter to the Director of Air Service and dated 11 July, 1919. Scrawled across the last page above Billy Mitchell's signature is "Recommend Approval."

Three days later an almost identical letter was dispatched to the Secretary of War from the Director of Air Service, indicating that Menoher had also approved. An endorsement on the letter indicated the Secretary's approval, and the way was clear.

Hartz gave as his main reason (and it was repeated in Menoher's letter) the fact that neither the new Martin bomber or the Liberty engine had ever had a real endurance test. He desired to demonstrate the practicability of the airplane, to increase public interest in aeronautics and stimulate recruiting. The route as conceived in his original request was: Washington to Miami, thence to the West Coast, northward to the state of Washington, turning eastward and home to Boiling Field along the northern rim of the country. He indicated that the route might be reversed, as it ultimately was. He requested, as crew, 1st Lt. Lotha A. Smith, 2nd Lt. Ernest E. Harmon,⁴ and MSE Jack Harding.⁵

From the dates on the above letters the project sounds very much like a spur of the moment flight, with request for approval on 11 July, less than two weeks before it began. However, a letter from Colonel Lewis Brereton, Chief of Air Service Operations, dated 18 July, 1919, may have let the cat out of the bag. Brereton stated that an officer and three enlisted men had been on duty at North Platte, Nebraska since June 8th awaiting the transcontinental flight, and requests they return to their duty station until the actual flight got under way. It is possible, of course, that Brereton was referring to another project which did not come off, but some flight had been in the planning stage for a number of weeks.

Meanwhile, many more stops had been added to the original plan, and because of this, Hartz requested that Sergeant 1st Class Jarelsa Tobias be added to the crew, citing him as one of the top Liberty engine mechanics in the Air Service. Formal orders for the flight were published under date of 17 July, with Tobias included.

On the day the flight departed Boiling Field, Major W.R. Weaver, Chief of the Engine and Plane Maintenance Section complained in a memo to Chief of the Property Division that he had learned of the flight from the newspapers and

"inasmuch as this section will no doubt have to maintain these planes and look after them in case they get into trouble, it is believed that it is only right that this section be informed". A reasonable request it seems, and the Director of Air Service agreed and issued orders to this affect.

It is not known who made the choice of airplane but it would not have been difficult. If a large multi-engined, multi-place airplane was desired, there was only one suitable machine, the Martin GMB. True, there were a few U.S. built Handley Page 0/400s and Caproni bombers available, but the purposes of the flight made a U.S. designed and built aircraft highly desirable. In addition, the Martin was, for its time, a very good airplane. The GMB had a maximum speed a bit over 100 if the Liberty's were pushed to their maximum 1800, and cruised at a leisurely 60-70. With a full load, the service ceiling just topped 10,000 feet.

The GMB airplanes were too late for the War and only an order for six, plus a follow-on order for four, survived the post war economy axe. The first four machines were meant to be long range reconnaissance aircraft, the next three were built as bombers, and the remaining three as special aircraft of no concern to this story. Except for the last airplane of the lot (a transport) they were generally referred to as GMB (Glenn Martin Bomber), and in later years, after the appearance of the Martin MB-2, they were often called MB-1 (Martin Bomber #1). The first GMB, Air Service serial number 39055, had first flown at Martin's new Cleveland plant in August 1918.

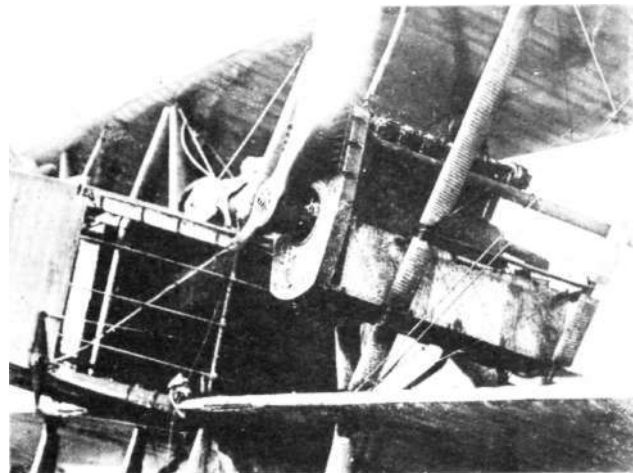
In the spring of 1919, when the 'Round America Flight' was in the planning stage, the aircraft chosen was the second GMB, serial number 39056, then at McCook Field and carrying the Number P-88 on its rudders. It had 110 hours flying time and had already established record flights between various cities in the east. It was ferried to Boiling Field from McCook Field on 29 June by Lts. Lotha Smith and Harold Harris.

Hartz had completed flight training only a few months previously and his flying time and experience were limited. The flying chores would fall on Smith and Harmon, and fate would decree that Ernest Harmon would end up handling the controls for most of the flight.

Harmon had enlisted in the Army Reserve in September 1917, attended aviation ground school at Austin Texas, and reported to Gerstner Field, Louisiana in December for cadet flight training. He received his wings as RMA (Reserve Military Aviator) and his commission in May 1918, but remained at Gerstner Field as an instructor pilot. Transferred to McCook Field in October as test pilot, he remained only a few months before being assigned as test pilot at Boiling Field, thus putting him on the scene at an opportune time to become part of the Rim flight. Less is known about the other pilot, Lt. Lotha A. Smith, whom Hartz had picked for the flight. Smith enlisted in the Aviation Section of the Signal Corps in June 1917. Nothing is known of his flight training, but he was known to Hartz as one with experience on Martin bombers when he made up his crew list in the spring of 1919.

For some unknown reason Hartz had decided to make the flight in the opposite direction as indicated in his original proposal. Since Washington is not on the "rim" of the country, the initial legs of the revised plan would take them to Augusta Maine, where they would reverse course and head west along the northern edge of the country.

When GMB #2 took off from Boiling field at mid morning on the 24th of July, there were aboard a few spare parts, extra oil, tools, and the crew's baggage. No special modifications had been made except for the addition of a device which was due to the thoughtfulness of Lt. Smith. We may



Harmon fires up the left engine for the first time after the crash. Fuselage panels not yet re-installed. (Photo - National Archives)

never know the true originator of that piece of equipment which has brought comfort to uncounted thousands of airmen, the relief tube, but we do know that Smith had foreseen the problem and 39056 had a relief tube installed at Boiling before the flight began.

Besides the three officers, M.S.E.s John "Smiling Jack" Harding and Jerry Tobias were in their place in the after cockpit. Both men were, at the time, assigned to the 312th Aero Sqdn at Boiling as aircraft mechanics.

In this first day's flight, an easy hop to Hazelhurst Field (later Roosevelt Field) at Mineola, two events of interest took place. Over Baltimore leaks developed in oil or water lines to the left engine. Details of the episode are sketchy, but it was at this point that Sgt. Tobias began to earn his pay. Rather than land at Baltimore or return to Boiling Field, Tobias climbed out on the wing and with no parachute and the slipstream tearing at his flight suit, made his way to the engine. He soon stopped the leaks, and holding to the engine support struts, made his way back to the safety of the cockpit.

The other event had comic overtones and involved their first attempted use of Smith's relief tube. Harmon was at the controls and to him fell the honor of testing the device for the first time. The soft rubber tube ran from the cockpit and protruded through the bottom of the fuselage. Its end had been cut off at a slant in hopes the airstream would cause a suction in the tube. It did.

Unfortunately, when Harmon tried to use it the suction caused the tube to collapse. Harmon immediately began to jump around in his seat and yelled to Smith to "get it off". Jack Harding handed over his pocket knife and Smith severed the offending rubber tube, releasing the suction and

Repairs to the nose of #39056 continued under a tent in rainy weather until completed late in August. (Photo - Nat'l Archives)



Harmon's distress at the same time. No further attempt was made to use the equipment again.

The second stage to Augusta Maine was trouble free, except for a very hard landing on the strange field. The crew made a careful inspection of the landing gear for damage from the landing, but found none, and departed the next day (26 July) for Cleveland and the Martin Company plant.

With the flight barely under way, disaster struck and almost brought the project to an end. The weather report had indicated fair weather over the route, but several small storms were encountered, and avoided, over the Green and White Mountains. Beyond that the weather deteriorated rapidly and after the bomber crossed Lake Champlain they were soon flying in heavy rain.

The compass was mounted forward of the cockpit on top of the fuselage, exposed to the elements. Tape had been used to fasten compensating magnets to the compass bowl, but not of waterproof variety. Rain soon caused the tape holding the magnets in place to come loose, allowing the magnets to be lost and rendering the compass useless.

Because of the mountains below an attempt was made to climb above the storm. No break in the rain was found at 12,000 feet, so the flight continued in rain and mist for another hour and a half. At this time a rift in the storm was encountered but is closed before a descent could be made. Twenty minutes later another clear spot was found and Harmon dived through the hole, finding himself over a valley with the mist ceiling at about 500 feet. No likely landing place could be found though two different valleys were circled several times and finally, in a third valley, they found a suitable field. They were forced to land in any case since the ceiling was rapidly dropping to zero.

Harmon made a routine three point landing, but after running only 15 feet, one of the right main gear struts broke at its upper end followed immediately by the collapse of the two center wheels. The right wing dug in, the Martin whipped to the right and went up on its nose.

"Tiny" Harmon (he was a big man, but universally called "Tiny") whose safety belt was not fastened, was thrown from the cockpit. Hartz threw up his hand, catching Harmon's collar, inadvertently turning him enough to land on his feet and escape injury. The only injury was to Lotha Smith, whose foot was pinned in the wreckage of the nose. He was soon released and a little later a local doctor put splints on the ankle and taped it. As is often true with sprained ankles, it was to give trouble later.

The Martin was a sad sight, the landing gear was wiped out, the right lower wing was badly damaged, along with the interplane struts and engine mounts. The nose section was badly crushed and unrepairable. As usual, the local residents soon began to arrive at the wreck scene, and with their help, a rope was tied to the tail and it was pulled down to its normal position.

The crew soon found that the crash site was in the Adirondack Mountains near the towns of Jay and Ausable Falls. Most of Hartz's telegrams to and from Washington went through the Western Union office in the latter city. Hartz decided that they would repair the airplane on the spot and push on with the project. An unused farmhouse was obtained and the local people were helpful in many ways during the next month.

Although the entire crew pitched in on the repair work, assisted part of the time by a small crew brought in from the Martin plant, it was Harding and Tobias who directed and accomplished most of the rebuild. Lotha Smith later recalled that the contributions of both mechanics was exceptional.



Col. Lotha A. Smith, circa 1942. Lt. Smith had to leave the Flight at Milwaukee, injured. Now Brig.Gen.,USAF (Ret)Photo-USAF)

John Harding, Jr. was born in 1896, the son of John and Roberta (Chase) Harding. Harding was one of the illustrious families in the Nashville area. The original John Harding had come to Tennessee from Virginia in 1798 and the family was fairly wealthy by the early part of the 19th century. In 1853 Belle Meade Plantation, which is today one of the outstanding examples of the southern 19th century plantations, was built by them.

Harding attended Vanderbilt University in 1915 and 1916 where he studied mechanical engineering. He enlisted in the Aviation Section of the Signal Corps and his aptitude for things mechanical became apparent. Early in 1919 he was stationed at Boiling Field and the first flight in his log book indicates a JN-4H as "passenger." Through the spring he flew often as mechanic on test flights, cross country hops, etc., with his first flight in a Martin bomber on 31 March. The six in early July were probably all in GMB # 39056. By this date he had risen to the rank of M.S.E. and was considered one of the most competent mechanics available to accompany the 'Round America Flight.

Jerry Tobias was the mystery man in this research. No photographs of him (except with the rest of the crew) exist in government files and it was found that even the correct spelling of his name could not be determined with certainty. Jerry Tobias was the name that Colonel Hartz used in requesting him for the flight and his name appears as such on the orders, but was probably not correct. The Aircraft Yearbook for 1920, which describes the flight briefly, spelled his name in three different ways in the short article! The National Personnel Records Center at St. Louis was able, after months of search, to provide only the barest information, but their records probably indicate his correct name, Yugoslav Dobias.

Three days after war was declared Jerry Dobias enlisted in the army at Jefferson Barracks, Missouri. Nothing more is known of his military career until he appeared upon the scene at Boiling Field in 1919 and was selected as a last minute addition to the flight crew.

The day after the crash, 27 July, work began on the big Martin. Colonel Hartz talked to the Chief of Air Service by phone and arranged to have the necessary parts shipped from the Martin plant. The crushed nose was the biggest problem and a party from the Martin Company soon arrived to see what could be done with it.

The decision of the Martin crew was that a new nose could be built in Cleveland, shipped by rail to the nearest railhead, and then be spliced onto the existing longerons. As soon as this decision had been relayed to Cleveland work on the new nose began while those on the scene went to work stripping the crushed structure, rebuilding the landing gear and repairing the damaged wings. Hartz went to the Martin plant and returned to the crash site on 7 August. The new landing gear parts had arrived and by that night the bomber was back on its own wheels.

Throughout the rebuilding task the crew was plagued by bad weather. In mid-August a pit was dug and the Martin's landing gear rolled into in order to make it easier to work on the nose installation, the airplane now being in a flight position. Because of continued heavy rains, a tent was borrowed and erected over the forward part of the airplane.

Meanwhile, back in Washington, there seemed to be some confusion in the office of the Chief of A.S. On the 15th of August, three weeks after the flight began, General Menoher queried Hartz by telegram as to why he was crashed in the mountains of New York when his original flight plan showed he should have been somewhere in the direction of Miami. Apparently the General had not been paying much attention to the flight. He further requested Hartz's route plans for purposes of publicity. Thereafter, Hartz kept him better informed on progress in the valley, and in a handwritten letter dated the 17th he estimated that 10,000 people had come to see the airplane, some coming from as far away as Montreal. It seemed a very large number of people to visit one crashed airplane, but Hartz went on to say that about half of them had never seen an airplane of any kind before.

On the 18th the new nose was unloaded at the nearest railhead, 8 miles away, and trucked to the crash site. In nine more days the crew completed the rehabilitation of 39056 and the Liberty's were cranked up for the first time in 31 days. The left engine started easily on the first attempt, and the right engine after only a short hesitation. (The BG spark plug company used this remarkable performance in their advertisements for some time thereafter.) The entire flight was, in fact, completed on the original set of spark plugs, an excellent showing for plugs in those days.

On the 27th of August, with the full crew aboard, Harmon took off without difficulty and flew 35 miles to Plattsburg, where they remained through the next day, making four short flights.

Departing Plattsburg on the 29th, they made it across the state of New York to Buffalo, but not without another forced landing. 20 miles short of Buffalo, the gasoline gauges failed and the Martin landed at the small town of Gasport, where the mechanics repaired the gauges, and Buffalo was reached before dark.



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There were but six forced landings during the entire journey. Two had occurred before the flight got out of New York and the third came three hours after leaving Buffalo, when they were forced down at Willoughby, Ohio because of storms. It would be the last for quite awhile.

Lt. Smith left the flight at Milwaukee; his ankle was doing badly and a doctor recommended treatment and rest. He was, therefore, relieved of assignment to the 'Round America Flight', and has been somewhat slighted in accounts of it. In fact, in Colonel Hartz's final report to the Chief of A.S., Smith was not even mentioned as being part of the crew at the beginning of the project.

To be continued - Winter 1970

REFERENCES

1. The complete report of the Transcontinental Reliability and Endurance Test of October 1919 was reprinted in the *JOURNAL* of AAHS, Volume 4, Nos. 1 and 2 (1959) and Volume 11, Nos. 1 and 2 (1966).
2. Some sources say that Hartz was the first commander of Boiling Field, July 1918. His biography in Air Force archives show that he was in flight training at Rockwell Field until November 1918 and special orders to report to Boiling Field were dated February 1919.
3. Junior Military Aviator, a pilot rating for regular Army officers, normally held for three years at which time they were rated as Military Aviator.
4. Harmon AFB, Newfoundland was named in his honor in 1949. See Feeny, William D., *In Their Honor*. New York, Duell, Sloan & Pierce, 1963.
5. MSE — Master Signal Electrician, a Signal Corps rank equivalent to that of Master Sergeant, U.S. Army.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Merle C. Olmsted's review of the Around America Flight was occasioned by correspondence with Jack Harding and the opportunity to copy his personal photo album, during which he learned that there was very little documentation extant regarding that famous flight. This is the latest of a long series of articles for the *JOURNAL* by Merle Olmsted which, this year, has already produced the account of the first air victory of the Korean War, "One Day in June" (Spring 1970). His book, "The Yoxford Boys," the story of the 357th Fighter Group in Europe in WWII, is nearing the press at Aero Publishers and should be available late this year. In the meantime, Merle also keeps busy as an instructor at Sheppard Air Force Base, Texas.