

JOURNEY TO VALHALLA

By BILL RHODE

History can be very cold, particularly when it records accomplishments without disregard for the costs and failures. Most aviation history — as presently written — regards aviation as a series of stepping stones to success. In a large collection of about 100 different books on the history of flight, very little mention is made of the tremendous sacrifice in human life or the misery perpetrated on those left behind, nor of the large sums of money expended on experiment that for the most part, went down the drain.

Most of us have heard the time-worn cliché that a special breed of man pioneered the airplanes. It did take men and women with an adventurous streak in them. They gave up regular supper hours, home comforts, timeclocks and job security. Most of those in it repolished the same old pair of shoes, patched up the same old pair of pants and had the scepter of death riding their shoulders day after day. In exchange for this, they were bonafide members of the small aviation fraternity; many of them poor and famous at one and the same time.

Strangely enough, most of this small fraternity of airmen felt that if they were to die, they would prefer to go in a plane. The idea was to prolong the eventuality as long as possible.

Death did strike the great and near-great without regard to experience, and when it did, the only thing to do was to give the late comrade a grand send-off on his trip to valhalla or wherever flyers go.

It is this journey to valhalla that has received little mention. Those who have witnessed the burial of a famous military pilot have never failed to be impressed with the well played ritual. As taps are blown, a formation of airplanes screams overhead and fades into the horizon. We note that an empty space is provided in the formation for the missing comrade. A poignant spectacle, as it is meant to be. There were some others.

Back in the record-breaking days of 1929, Ruth Alexander earned brief fame with several air records while vying with other women pilots. She set a speed record flying from Vancouver, B.C. to Agua Caliente, Mexico in a biplane, a distance of 1460 miles, in less than 16 hours. Then in 1930 she set an altitude record, in an open-cockpit low-wing Barling NB-3, of better than 26,000 feet.

In September 1930, newly married to Lt. Bob Elliot of the U.S. Navy, also an aviator, she set off on a transcontinental flight alone. She crashed to death at San Diego, Cal. Among her effects behind was a note left for her husband: "If I go before you . . . finish your work."

Another classic letter of the period was the one left behind by a mail pilot, Capt. Leonard Brooke Hyde-Pearson, a veteran Royal Flying Corps pilot who had emigrated to the United States and took a job flying the mail for the Postal Dept. A premonition of death caused him to write a letter just before he died on March 7th, 1924.

The Captain was flying a DH-4M when he got caught in a snowstorm in the mountains of western Pennsylvania. He tried to set the airplane down in a cornfield, hooked a wing in a tree and burned to death. Here is his legacy:

"To Be Opened Only After My Death MY BELOVED BROTHER PILOTS AND PALS

I go west, but with a cheerful heart. I hope what small sacrifice I have made may be of use to the cause.

When we fly we are fools they say. When we are dead we weren't half bad fellows. But everyone in this wonderful aviation service is doing the world far more good than the public can appreciate. We risk our necks; we give our lives; we perfect a service for the benefit of the world at large. They, mind you, are the ones who call us fools.

But stick to it boys. I'm still very much with you all. See you all again."

Idolization of the self-sacrificing airman was not alone an American institution. After Lindberg had made his flight to Paris, he made a number of flights to Central and South America, which served a great purpose in bringing aviation as well as goodwill to our neighbors to the south.

A well-known Mexican Army pilot, Col. Emilio Carranza also made a Goodwill Flight — from Mexico City to New York City in several stops — a difficult flight in it's day. There were no radio navigation aids or prime instruments for weather, and there was a dearth of established flying fields. Flying a Ryan Brougham similar to Lindbergh's Ryan NYP, Carranza reached New York City via Washington, D.C. He was feted and well received, and Mexico was justly proud of it's airman.

On the evening of 12 July 1928, with unreliable weather reports, Carranza took off on his return flight to Mexico. He got into a severe electrical storm over New Jersey, and crashed near Chatsworth. The body of the illustrious pilot was brought back to New York where it lay in state for a day. It was then returned in honor to Mexico.

One year after his death, a small group of Mexican officials gathered at the exact spot where Carranza had crashed the year before. They placed a small marker, and wreaths, and strewed the site with flowers. Periodically, other groups from Mexico have visited the site. In July 1969, just 40 years after the death of Carranza, still another group of quiet but proud Mexican officials visited the hallowed spot to revere the memory of their dead pilot.

Mexico always did right by it's fallen airmen. In the Spring of 1930, two other Mexican airmen took off on a great flight. Col. Pablo Sidar and Capt. Carlos Roviroza attempted a long flight from Mexico City to Buenos Aires, Argentina. Their airplane, the MORELOS, was an American-built Emsco cabin monoplane. Again, there were no navigation aids. The two Army pilots crashed into the sea in a storm off Costa Rica. Mexico suffered a period of national mourning and when the bodies were brought back, their country gave them one of the grandest official send-offs ever recorded.

Just the year before, Sidar had made a flying tour of Mexico's barren, grassy airports in a Curtiss Falcon. For their funeral procession the ashes of the two pilots were placed on the fuselage of this Falcon and, laden with wreaths and flowers, towed through the streets. Twenty Army mechanics in coveralls and black armbands, towed the somber biplane ahead of the cortege, and at a point the center of a vast, crowded arena it halted and the funeral service was held. Thereafter, the Falcon was towed to the final resting place of the flyers.

In the United States many impressive funerals have been held for well-known, departed pilots. One in particular was the send-off given to Jimmy Collins. Collins was an ex-Army pilot turned civilian test pilot. Among other projects, he did the spectacular dive-testing of the first Grumman biplane dive-bombers. He took on a job writing the aviation column for the New York *Daily News*. In his column, Collins announced plans for giving up test flying after his Grumman contract and just doing routine flying.

Collins was to make 10 dives with the new Grumman fighter for the U.S. Navy, making what was regarded as a terrific test — the 9G power-dive. On 22 March 1935 he made his last flight. He had made nine dives and the tenth one killed him; the engine left the plane in the pullout.

Collins was laid out in the glass solarium atop the pilot's hotel at Roosevelt Field where brother airmen could fly in to pay their respects. A few days later, his ashes were cast from a plane above this field.

Of all the great send-offs, the one this writer remembers as the greatest, was the one held for Frances Harrell Marsalis, a girl flyer on Long Island. Frances Harrell was a Texas girl, from San Antonio. She had been a cashier in a Houston department store in the late 1920's, and when the last of her family passed away, she received a small inheritance and decided to learn to fly.

She came to Casey Jones Flying School at old Curtiss Field, Mineola. She learned to fly and when this operation was moved to Valley Stream she went with it and the old Curtiss Field became Roosevelt Field. Thereafter, she was frequently seen around Floyd Bennett, Curtiss and Roosevelt Fields. Since women pilots were still a novelty, she was often in the limelight.

With her red hair and Texas drawl and a lively disposition to go with it, she made many friends. As Frances Harrell she became an acrobatic pilot and took part in a number of air shows. Later, she married Bill Marsalis, one of her instructors. The marriage was doomed, and though separated, she did not seek divorce and clung to her married name.

In August 1932, at Valley Stream, under the tutelage of Casey Jones, "Francey" and Louise Thaden teamed up for an assault on the Women's World Endurance Record. They went aloft in a Curtiss Thrush and stayed aloft, with refueling contacts, for 196 hours. They became world-famous. The airplane, named after a New York furrier, was nicknamed the 'flying boudoir.'

In December 1933, Frances took the airplane to Miami, where it was renamed the OUTDOOR GIRL. This time she went up with Helen Richey and they stayed aloft for almost 238 hours, setting a new world record. Shortly after this, she returned to Roosevelt Field and took a job selling Waco airplanes. She set up a small apartment just off the field and became engrossed in her work.

In August 1934, the first National Women's Air Meet was held at Dayton, Ohio. There were races, with cash prizes for many of the contests. She wanted to go and the Waco distributor at Roosevelt Field sent her with her favorite, a flaming red Waco F-3, powered by a 225 H.P. Jacobs engine. It was the latest in biplanes, and Frances was exuberant.

Sunday, August 5th, and the scene was the Vandalia Airport about 12 miles from Dayton. The big race was on, the women's free-for-all. Eleven planes including Detroiters, Monocoupes, the Waco and an assortment of others started the grind. In a jam-up at the far pylon, a Monocoupe inadvertently cut in front of the Waco and Frances crashed headlong into the hot, dusty farmland. Her last act was to cut the switch.

Among the large crowd was a well-known sports writer named Paul Gallico, who witnessed the crash. Himself a student pilot at Roosevelt Field, Gallico telephoned the news back to both the home field and his paper, the New York *Daily News*. Shock and melancholy echoed across the Long Island fields. Frances Marsalis is dead. She had no family and was divorced a week previous by her husband. It was quickly decided to give her a royal send-off at Roosevelt Field.

Another pilot, Ed Maloney, flew to Dayton to pick up the coffin. Back at the home field, preparations were made to lay her out in the Waco hangar. Roosevelt Field was a rectangular expanse of several runways, the longest of which was 3200 feet, and there was an L-shaped line of about 30 hangars. It was the mecca of aviation in the New York area in the mid-1930's.

The Waco distributor had one of the largest hangars, a concrete and steel building with a 100-foot span, and this was washed thoroughly clean. A Waco F-3 was placed in the center of the floor, backed up by two other models in the rear, in a vee formation to await the body of Frances.

Telephone calls to nearby Mitchell Field and Floyd Bennett Airport brought promises of full cooperation. Gallico wrote the complete story which was emblazoned on the tabloid *Daily News*. By the time Ed Maloney reached Teterboro, a large group of airplanes on Long Island were taking off to rendezvous with him over Manhattan. Here, above the skyscrapers, three Fleet biplanes of the Roosevelt Field Flying School set up the parade. To the sides were a formation of U.S. Army Curtiss Falcons and a formation of U.S. Navy Curtiss Hell Divers.

A number of other airplanes, including the press, fell in line. Maloney, carrying the casket, followed. Even with all airplanes flying at reduced throttle the roar became an ominous hum. They flew over Brooklyn, to Floyd Bennett Field to the south, then east over Valley Stream and finally to Roosevelt Field. Maloney landed and taxied up to the Waco hangar as the formation wheeled overhead once more.

Frances Harrell Marsalis, just 29, was laid in homage in front of the Waco F-3. The floor was carpeted and heavily banked with flowers. The great and near-great of aviation came to see her and pay their respects. Some stopped to recall incidents, and at times the hangar was choked with people. A few days later, Frances was laid to rest in a nearby cemetery as several airplanes flew overhead dropping roses. It was possibly the greatest unrehearsed send-off in history.

Today, the fraternity has shrunk. The pioneering is over; the color went out with the open cockpit; the glamour and dedication are a thing of the past, too melancholy — some will say — too corny say others. Maybe that is one of the reasons for the heartburn in our present day society, it won't allow itself to be sentimental. But as one old timer put it — *The Clouds Remember*.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bill Rhode's introduction was given in Volume 2 of the *JOURNAL OF AAHS*, so he is one of the earliest Members. His previous contribution to the Journal was "The Lost Airports" in Volume 3, Page 137, a resume of the long-disappeared flying fields of the Greater New York area. From his vast collection of aviation magazines and books Bill has brought forth a recent chronicle entitled *Baling Wire, Chewing Gum, and Guts*. (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1970; a nostalgic account of the flamboyant Ivan Gates and his Flying Circus of Clyde Pangborn, Freddy Lund, Tommy Thompson, and the many "Diavolos." Bill is a parachute rigger and flying instructor, former B-17 air gunner (D.F.C., Air Medal with four Oak Leaf Clusters), and before that a professional parachutist who has been in many of the air shows he writes about.