

The Post Office Air Mail Service acquired four Curtiss R-6's, one of them shown here at Heller Field c. 1920, with the ever present weekend crowd.



AT HELLER FIELD

By THOMAS W. RUTLEDGE

The following story came as a result of the author's search for some old log books. He came across an album of snapshots made when he was a young man. Yellowed with age and captioned in an awkward, boyish hand, they depicted operations of the U.S. Air Mail Service at Heller Field, near Newark, New Jersey. Though the airplanes looked crude, he related, as he continued to examine them a curious thing happened; old memories came alive and the craft became less ancient. They began to look like the modern, glamorous airplanes they were at the time the photographs were taken. He said, "It dawned on me that I was seeing what was almost the beginning of the enormously grown air lines system that we know today — and that I had been there. I decided to write something about those times and inflict the result on *somebody*."

"Some of the people mentioned here are still alive, and some have gone to the Happy Flying Fields many years ago. I feel I can relate this bit of history with all the authority inherent in being a charter member of the Pioneer Air Mail Watchers Association, an organization conveniently invented just for these pages. The other charter members of this group are Davy Anderson, Archie and Chappie Butts, and Roy Jacobus, all equally of an age."

This group might have been called the Pioneer Air Mail Volunteer Workers Association. Though the U.S. Air Mail Service could have gotten along without our help, it would have been difficult. Our chief mission was to be the first to sight that tiny speck in the sky over the Watchung Mountains of New Jersey and raise the excited cry of "Mail!! . . . Mail! . . . Mail!" This mighty hullabaloo resulted in the alerting of all that furious activity associated with the arrival of the once-a-day planes coming in from Bellefonte and Washington. At times, faithful performance of this self-imposed duty required us to stand behind the hangar, exposed to the biting northwest winds and acquiring severe chilblains in the process. Was ever duty as well or more nobly performed?

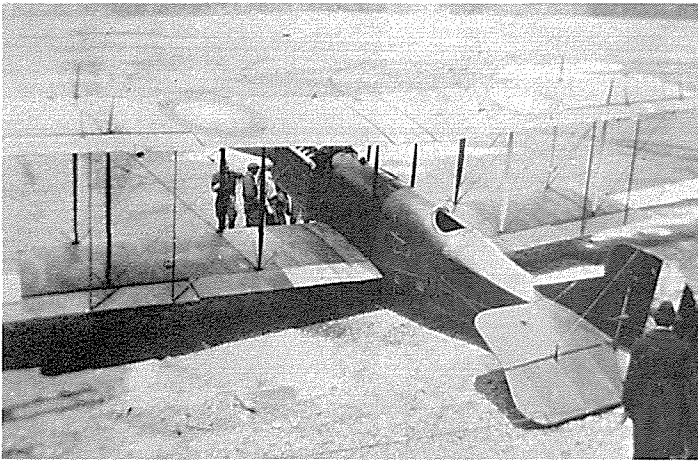
The first attempts at scheduled, daily mail-carrying flights were made by the Army Air Service between Washington and New York while the Great War was yet going on. 150 HP "Hisso Jennies" were used, and the first departure from Washington was witnessed with great ceremony by President Wilson. It was fortunate that the President did not see the conclusion of this flight because the pilot landed, lost, only forty miles from Washington. Army participation did not last long.

On August 10th, 1918 responsibility for the operation of the route was transferred to the Post Office Department and civilian pilots were recruited. Under the new leadership the operation shortly became efficient. In use were four airplanes made by the Standard Aircraft Corp. at Elizabeth, N.J. especially for mail flights. Powered by 180 HP Wright-Hispano engines, they could carry two hundred pounds of mail at about ninety miles an hour. When the Post Office took over from the Army, the New York terminus was moved from the infield at Belmont Race Track (on Long Island) to Standard's airfield at Elizabeth. About four months later the operation went back to Long Island, presumably because Standard went out of business at the end of the War. The same day, Dec. 16th, Carl Smith was killed in a crash; he lacked experience in the DH-4. There were thirty-seven other Air Mail pilots killed in the next eight years.

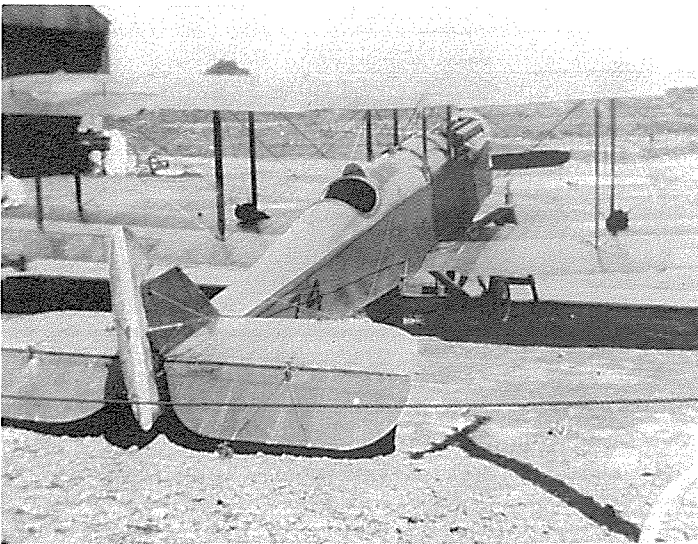
While up to this time operations were moving along the New York-Washington route, plans and preparations to extend service had been under way. On Dec. 18th the first trial run between New York and Chicago, with stops at Bellefonte, Cleveland and Bryan (Ohio), was made, and later this became part of the transcontinental route to San Francisco. Daily operation of the Cleveland to Chicago leg was started on May 15th, 1919, and because it was more difficult, operation of the New York-Cleveland leg was delayed for a month and a half.

There were then no accurate charts or navigational aids of any kind. The pilot had a magnetic compass, an altimeter, air speed indicator, fuel tank gauge, his engine instruments, and a good pair of eyes. To fly in bad weather he had to recognize his entire route by an almost infinite succession of landmarks. This meant low flying, often at altitudes not certain to clear objects in the way. It was said that W.L. Smith used the first attitude instrument - a half empty whiskey bottle - truly a spirit level. It is reasonable to presume that any inclination of the whiskey surface indicated a departure from the straight and level.

While the foregoing events were taking place I was in high school, only dimly aware of them. Very few of us had seen an airplane; the one who had was possessed of a conversational capability which was exercised to the fullest. The airplane "nuts" in school were considered tiresome bores, but when I in turn got bitten by the flying bug things were viewed differently. It happened this way. . . An interest in target shooting was greatly abetted by the fact that the Navy had a wartime rifle range not far from Caldwell, N.J. In the latter months of the War, and for a short time thereafter, civilians were allowed to shoot there; and the Navy supplied the Enfield and the ammunition. Thus, when the National Rifle Matches came in the Fall we were often in attendance, and as usual, each arm of the Services put on a show.



Another view of Curtiss R-6 Mailplane. All photographs courtesy of author.



DH-4's were converted to mailplanes but kept their Air Service markings. The small windscreen was later replaced by larger one for winter flying.



One of two Curtiss HA Mailplanes used by the Post Office Department, at the Heller Field hangar. Date approximately 1920, since the canvas in the hangar opening was replaced in 1921 with sliding doors. Dark spot on fuselage side pictured a mail bag representing the Air Mail Service.

The central feature of the show was an imitation war-torn French village erected in the middle of a large cleared area and the Services staged mock attacks on this village in a manner suitable to the specialty of each. Most pertinent to this story, the Air Service was to bomb and strafe it.

We were watching a rapid-fire pistol match, with about fifty shooters in line. Suddenly an S.E.5a burst into sight, low, over a nearby line of trees. It was in a diving bank, and firing at the village behind our backs. It looped and came down again, firing as it came, and disappeared as quickly as it had appeared. The pistol match was stopped as we all turned to watch. It stopped the match but started something else . . . the flying bug had bit me. Perhaps to modern eyes an S.E.5a is a boxy thing, but then it seemed . . . agile, saucy, feisty, full of "moxey", and conveyed a sense of power. It seemed the very epitome of all that is desirable to the heart and mind of an impressionable youngster.

When the New York terminal of the Air Mail was moved, near mid-November, to newly-created Heller Field at Newark, that event, coming as it did only a few months after my recent inoculation, was a really big thing. Heller Field was about six miles from home, if one walked the line of the Greenwood Lake Division of the Erie Railroad. Davy Anderson, who shared this mutual interest and lived nearby, went along. We had bicycles, but because of the crowds on weekends, they were a hindrance at the field. It was more convenient to walk.

It is difficult now to appreciate the interest the presence of this field aroused in the general populace of Newark and its surrounding areas. On one of the first days of operations a boy was killed by a whirling propeller because people simply could not be kept at a safe distance. The use of Standard Mailplanes had been discontinued by this time; in use were DH-4's, Curtiss HA's, Curtiss R-4's, and two converted Martin Bombers powered by 400 HP Liberty engines. They could carry four hundred pounds of mail each, except the Martins which could carry more. The HA's and Martin's were not used much.

Heller Field does not rank prominently in the annals of aviation. It existed for a very short time, and the only references to it have been deprecatory. Memory lingers on only in the minds of a few oldtimers. There is a commemorative tablet at the Newark Airport which states that the field was nine hundred feet long. This seemed shorter than I remembered, and then I recalled that ten years after the field had been abandoned I flew over in a Curtiss-Wright Junior. Though sorely tempted to land for old times' sake, I did not, partly because there might have been unknown wires, but mostly because it looked extremely small.

The use of the land for Heller Field was donated by "Old Man Heller", head of the nearby Heller File Company. It was located in North Newark, between the diverging arms of the main Greenwood Lake Division of the Erie RR and its Orange (N.J.) branch. The main line ran northeasterly, whereas the Orange branch curved widely toward the Northwest. Heller Field lay very close to a siding and was bounded on the Northwest by a golf course about four to five hundred feet wide. This made the field seem bigger than it was. Beyond the golf course lay the Morris Canal and a large ash dump. Near the middle of the fairway was a high tee-off mound with sloping sides, and its presence made the golf course a most welcome neighbor. The occasional plane that overran the landing space could hopefully be stopped by climbing the mound, thus, saving the mail from a dunking in the canal. Naturally, the golf club raised the devil about this practice, which seemed to us to be a most uncivic attitude!

Air Mail pilots were likened at that time to the earlier Pony Express riders. There were similarities; the success of each depended largely unaided solo effort, and courage to the point of foolhardiness. Nor were they amenable to rules. One pilot, Collyer, for example, on arriving from Washington with a load of mail, made fifteen consecutive loops over the field before landing. This was done on a dare, or perhaps to settle a bet as to whether an R-6 could be looped at all.



Walter H. "Steve" Stevens, killed in a crash of an Air Mail Service Junkers-Larson JL-3 in September 1930 with mechanic Russ Thomas.



Frederick A. "Robbie" Robinson at Heller Field, c. Summer 1920. He was killed in a DH-4 crash in September by the Susquehanna River.

There was another quality not quite so apparent - devotion to the job and a belief in its worthiness. One pilot came in from Bellefonte so stiff from the cold that he quite literally had to be lifted from the cockpit. There *had* to be something other than recklessness or love of adventure that moved them to face conditions like these repeatedly.

The pilots were exalted beings, to be approached only with the greatest awe. Most of them - the list is long - we knew by sight only. Only two knew me, Walter H. "Steve" Stevens and Frederick A. "Robbie" Robinson. There was published at that time a weekly aeronautical magazine called *Aerial Age* which cost a dime. Somehow the practice was started whereby first Steve and then Robbie bought them from me. One suspects an act of kindly consideration in that, but in any event it gave a reasonably valid excuse to enter the field and the hangar in order to deliver the magazines.

Thus, it was that we five hangers-on spoken of earlier were, in time, tolerated on the ramp. The word "ramp" should be taken with some reservation. It was a dusty cinder-covered area when dry but when wet pools of water or ice stood all over. The tops and sides of packing crates were scattered at strategic spots in an attempt to ameliorate the worst conditions.

It was a privilege to stand at a wingtip while an engine was being revved-up. In truth, this was a mild form of self-flagellation, because the idea was to stand there without covering one's ears. We were permitted, at times, to hold a wingtip and help turn a plane away from this ramp area. This was hard to do. We were often dragged along without appreciable effect on the course of the airplane, and it is suspected that this came through the pilot's holding rudder against our best efforts, a low form of humor.

The most stimulating activity of our group, by far, came through pre-arrangement with an out-going pilot. We stood in a group on top of the golf course mound while the departing mailplane turned and dove on us. The idea was to remain standing and not "chicken out" by lying down. It was a challenge, for both parties to the arrangement. Please take our word - an airplane approaching low and close is an intimidating sight.

One aspect of modern-day flying is very casual, but in the days of the Air Mail Service there was a distinct ritual involved, that of starting the engine. There were sound safety reasons, of course, but a sense of the dramatic also had something to do with it because there was usually an audience. In the first place, the Liberty was a big engine; it took three men to start it. Because the man in front did all the work and took the chances, it was proper that he should be boss; and he was. He issued commands in a loud clear voice, with which the man in the cockpit complied and indicated compliance in an equally loud, clear voice. It went something like this. "Gas on - Switch off." ... "Gas is on -

Switch says off." ... "Throttle closed." ... Throttle closed." After the propeller had been pulled through enough times to charge the cylinders with gas the command was: "Throttle cracked - Contact - Boost on three." ... "Throttle cracked - Contact, on three." It is important to note that the word "contact" was not spoken as written, nor as you hear it in the late TV movies. It was "Hontac", spoken almost as one syllable, and as explosively as possible. (The present day "Make it hot" is completely lacking in style.) After the last command the man and his helpers joined hands. Swaying to the count of "One ... Two ... Three!" he pulled the prop through while his helpers did their best to throw him over the nearest fence.

The first winter of operation at Heller Field was a cold one. It passed without major incidents; crack-ups, yes, but nothing serious. Skis were used in place of wheels on some airplanes but not after that. In the early Spring tragedy struck. Harry Sherlock was killed while attempting to land a DH-4, March 30th. There were two reasons, his inexperience with the approach to the field, and the nature of the obstructions at the southeast end. Two moderately high brick chimneys and a sort of turreted tower stuck up there in the worst possible place. They were part of a large factory owned by Tiffany.

Had Heller Field been longer the approaches could have been made at a height to clear the chimneys. Because it was not, a maneuver known as "coming through the cut" was used. This meant coming in low, under power, between the factory and an adjacent hill which had been cut to a steep slope, then making a twenty-degree turn on final when less than five hundred feet short of the threshold. Harry was new to the field and came in straight; he hit the lower of the two chimneys about ten feet from the top. For years afterward one could distinguish the new bricks used when the chimney was rebuilt.

Ten days later Dick Wright was killed on the Washington run when his R-4 caught fire in the air, and the very next day, a Spring-like Sunday, April 11th, Robbie spun in an OX-5 Jenny much used for unauthorized joy-rides. There were no flying rules or restrictions other than personal common sense dictated, and the term "joy-ride" carried the connotation that anything went. So it was this time. Robbie Robinson and his passenger, Clarence Stapleton, had been diving on a ball game and chasing horses in a nearby field. They went upstairs for some stunting. There was no recovery from the third spin; they hit on the hardest of all places, the railroad track near Tiffany's. Robbie recovered to fly again, but died barely six months later.

As result of the inadequacies of Heller Field, for DH's in particular, the eastern terminal of the New York - Chicago route was moved to Hazelhurst Field, at Garden City, Long Island, in late Summer, 1920. During September three more pilots were killed. In the early morning of Sept. 1st, a Junkers monoplane

passed over, headed west. Not more than twenty minutes later, it crashed in flames on Schooley's Mountain near Morristown, N.J. So perished Max Miller, the most senior pilot of the Air Mail Service. On the 14th, another Junkers caught fire in the air, landed safely, and then exploded before the pilot could get out. Kindly Walter H. "Steve" Stevens, who used to buy magazines from me, died then. And Frederick A. "Robbie" Robinson, barely recovered from his crash in the Jenny, was flying under low clouds and hit a cable over the Susquehanna River and was decapitated, Sept. 27th.

Heller Field continued to be used for the New York - Washington route until that route was abandoned in May 1921, but it remained an airport another three years after that. In 1968, just after I retired, I went east and made a solitary pilgrimage to the old haunts. The Tiffany factory was still there though the color difference in the bricks of the chimney could no longer be discerned. The nearby hill with its cut slope appeared the same except for some trees. The railroad remained but all else was changed. The hangar and operations office that once reverberated to the sound of the mighty Liberty were gone, and the landing strip was filled with small buildings. The dirt access road was now

paved, with houses along both sides. It was no longer possible to see where the threshold had been except for a gentle sloping of the ground. The canal and golf course had disappeared and are now occupied by a part of Branch Brook Park.

Players and scenes come and go. While never large enough to be nationally noted, Heller Field was a scene, for a time. It had its players, and it was a part of "the beginning". It is too bad that there is not marker there to commemorate the men and the pioneering events of 1919-1921. Only the tablet at Newark Airport remarks the place.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author is indebted to Charles F. "Chuck" Schultz of A.A.H.S. for much of the data which enabled refreshing memory on names and dates; names half-forgotten such as Max Miller, E. Hamilton "Ham" Lee, Walter H. "Steve" Stevens, Randolph G. "Dizzy" Paige, Harold T. "Slim" Lewis, Paul P. "Scotty" Scott, Harry W. "Hukie" Huking, Robert H. "Bob" Ellis, Frederick "Robbie" Robinson, and many others.

Note: See also Neilson, Dale (Edit.) *Saga of the Air Mail Service*. Air Mail Pioneers, Inc.; 1962. LC 62-21038. Collyer (sic), could be D.B. Colyer, Air Mail pilot based at College Park, Md.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tom Rutledge was born about the same time that the air age was ushered in, and became obsessed with flying when he saw his first S.E.5a. He soon owned one of the few Aeromarine 39B's while in college, but sold it to the Gates Flying Circus. He has flown Avro 504's, the Standard J-1, and a Thomas Morse S4C, but never a Jenny. Most of his working life was spent, from the time he came out of college, in the manufacture and assembly of aircraft engines. He worked on the original Wright J-4 for Lindbergh's SPIRIT OF ST. LOUIS, and as the jet age came, with General Electric Co. as Supervisor of Planning at the Evandale Plant.

Through the years the author has kept up his flying on a small scale, was instructor for the Wright (employees) Flying Club in the 1930's, and in the Sixties he flew a Piper J-3 many hours over the Mid-West. Now, he is honorary co-pilot of a Great Lakes replica 2T which, he says, "... so nearly duplicates the S.E.5a in power, weight, size and performance that I feel my great desire to fly an S.E. has been satisfied." He is a Member of E.A.A., No. 21704, pilot license No. P32842.



MacMILLAN EXPEDITION LOENING



Needing a last minute space filler, what could be better than showing this photograph of the MacMillan Expedition Loening amphibian taken at Boston in 1925 by the late Stu Rich, submitted by Robert F. Brooks? The Naval Air Detail, under command of LCdr Richard E. Byrd of the

MacMillan Expedition, sailed from Boston with this and two other Loening amphibians aboard the USS PEARY to explore the area of Greenland to the North Pole in June 1926. The Expedition covered 30,000 square miles in its survey, completed in late August, 1925.