

LOCKLEAR

Daredevil of the air!

By ART RONNIE

When Robert Ripley's "Believe It Or Not!" cartoon strip was less than a year old, he featured in a 1919 panel the unbelievable feat of a young Texan pilot who walked the wings of a plane in flight, hung by his legs from the landing gear and climaxed these spectacular aerial gymnastic acrobatics by leaping from one plane to another several thousand feet above the earth.

That daring young daredevil was Ormer Leslie Locklear.

Fifty-five years later, "Believe It Or Not!" is still being read. But Ormer Locklear is truly a forgotten man of aviation history, yet, when he was tripping across the wings of Curtiss Jenny's, he was one of the most famous aviators in America and was internationally known. There was no county fair from Hartford, Connecticut, to Canada's Calgary Stampede that didn't declare a "Locklear Day" and post him as the leading attraction.

At the height of his career he was making \$1000 a day — sometimes \$3000 for a half-hour's work!¹ His name was a household word. He made wing-walking an art, and when he became the first man to change planes in mid-air, he amazed the world, even though most credited him with more guts than brains. It was his startling stunt work in the air, copied by so many others, that gave that extra dash and thrill to movie serials just beginning their greatest era. He provided many of those thrills himself as the star of two silent movies.

To Locklear, perhaps more than anyone else, must be credited the tremendous boom in barnstorming that captured America in the Twenties following World War I. Jersey Ringle, Ivan Gates, Slates Rodgers and all the hundreds of others that followed in that dazzling era owed their careers somewhat to the unique and incredible Ormer Locklear, who thrived on the clamor of the crowds and lived only for aviation.

Then why is he forgotten today, except for a few cursory remarks in aviation histories? The answer lies in the short span of his career — which lasted only 16 months — from his professional debut on May 16, 1919, at Uniontown Speedway in Pennsylvania to his fiery death on August 2, 1920, while filming the last scene of a movie. It is easy to forget a personality when 55 years of even more incredible aeronautical feats, from Lindbergh's flight across the Atlantic to the first men on the moon, obscure the memories of a daredevil who captured the public's fancy with his aerobatic daring.

Ormer Locklear was born October 28, 1891, in the small Texas town of Como, Hopkins County, not far from Fort Worth. His daring and craving for thrills was demonstrated early when he quickly became noted around Fort Worth, to where his family later moved, for his wild stunts on a bicycle. When he became older, he simply transferred these stunts to a motorcycle which provided power and speed. It was a brief stop in Fort Worth on October 18, 1911, by Calbraith P. Rodgers, well on his way to making the first transcontinental flight, that provided Ormer with his inspiration to become an aviator.

It was America's entry into the Great European War which satisfied that ambition. Locklear enlisted in the Air Service on Octo-



ber 25, 1917. From Fort Sam Houston he was transferred to University of Texas' School of Military Aeronautics in Austin and then to Camp Dick on the Dallas Fair Grounds, where he waited to be admitted to advanced training. Almost two months later he was ordered to Barron Field near Fort Worth to complete his flying course with Service Squadron B, formerly the 106th Flying Squadron.

Here he was introduced for the first time to the Curtiss JN-4D, familiarly known as a "Jenny." It was the universal training plane in the United States and following the war, it would be the mainstay of American civil aviation during its lean years and the plane which introduced America to aviation through the dedication of hundreds of former Air Service pilots turned barnstormers.

One of the first of several incidents which prompted Lock to clamber about a Jenny in flight occurred on a cross-country training flight over rough country 100 miles west of Stephenville when the radiator cap jogged loose and hung flopping by its short chain. Seated in the front cockpit, boiling water splashed into Ormer's face, the slipstream tearing the particles of water into beads of stinging liquid. A forced landing caused by an overheating engine would have been dangerous in the badlands below. Signaling the instructor to hold the ship steady, Lock unbuckled his safety belt, climbed over the combing of the front cockpit and onto the hood. Straddling the scalding metal, ignoring burns to his hands and legs, he flattened himself between the engine's jiggling rocker arms, stretched forward and replaced the cap on the bubbling hole. Then he made his way back to his seat and continued the flight to Fort Worth.²

Locklear's natural aptitude as a gymnast, coupled with his desire for thrills quickly led to more daring antics. With two close flying companions, Milton "Skeets" Elliott and James Frew, he began experimenting by walking the lower wings of the Jenny while in flight. This was comparatively easy, considering he had any number of struts and wires to wrap his hands and arms around.

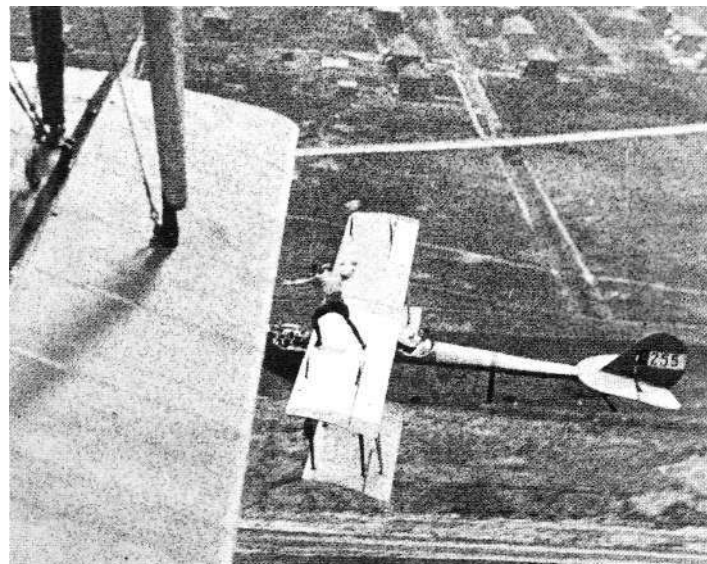
Standing on the top wing was the next, albeit more dangerous, step. Once on top and standing erect, Lock decided it wasn't so difficult after all, if he leaned into the wind like a skier. "When I am standing on the plane, the wind is so strong that I can lean against it just as if it were a brick wall," was the way he described it. "The sensation isn't much different from that of standing in a speeding car."³ It wasn't long before he had walked, crawled and scampered over every part of the plane that could be walked upon, crawled around and scampered over.

All of Locklear's wing-walking activities were performed far from Barron Field. But it was not long before the showman in him could not resist demonstrating his aerial ability to a group of fellow pilots. Unknown to him, his commanding officer, Colonel Thomas C. Turner, was an unseen observer. His reaction was the antithesis of what Lock would have expected. Turner knew the value of publicity and saw the stunts as a morale booster. There had been so many fatal crashes lately at Texas flying fields that Turner hoped Locklear's lack of fear and obvious faith in the Jenny's stability would instill the same in other fliers. He officially ordered him, with Elliott and Frew, to fly demonstrations at Barron and other fields in the area.⁴

With the assignment came a promotion. Captain George M. Church, in charge of flying at Barron, reorganized Squadrons A,B,C and D into a Flying School Detachment. Ormer was placed in charge of the cross-country stage with Elliot and Frew assigned to assist him.

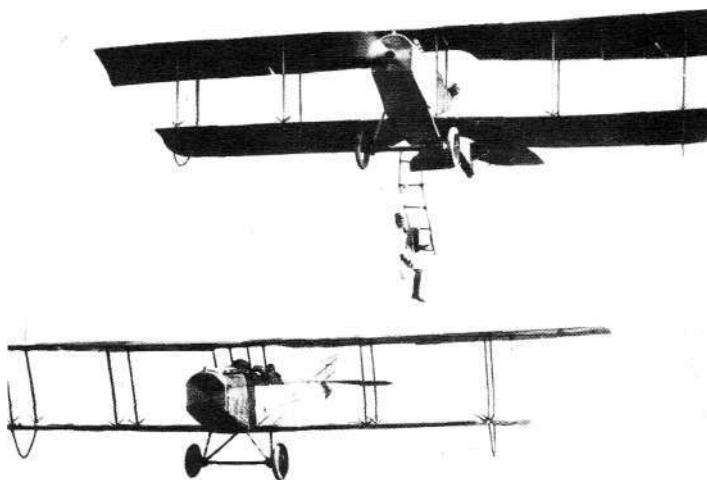
But the routine of training other pilots and watching them go overseas, eager to become aces, and the boredom of routine wing-walking forced Locklear to seek other thrills. He found them in changing from one plane to another while in full flight.

For the first transfer attempt, Locklear climbed down to the landing gear of Frew's plane where he sat on the spreader bar.⁵



In this scene from a 35 mm film strip, Locklear is shown standing on the wing of a Canuck, C255, with Skeets Elliott at the controls. (Courtesy of Sherman Grinberg Film Library)

The photo below was taken over the Santa Monica beach, with Locklear changing planes via the rope ladder swung from Elliott's Jenny to one flown by Shirley Short. C. 1919 (Locklear Family Collection)



Frew throttled down to give Elliott a chance to catch up and get in position from below. At the moment when the top wing of Elliot's plane was just a few feet from the wheels of Frew's plane, Lock swung down. Extending himself by his arms from the bar, his body swayed in the powerful blast from the propeller just scant feet away. Gauging the distance carefully, Locklear released his grip, dropping on all fours onto the center panels of Skeet's top wing. He crouched there for a few moments, relieved that he was still alive. When he caught his breath, he slipped over the forward edge of the wing to the lower wing and made his way to the cockpit. The date was November 8, 1918.⁶ The first mid-air transfer of a passenger from one plane to another went into the record books.

During the next year, and while performing at exhibitions throughout the country, Lock would refine the transfer by stepping from the wing of one plane to the other while the Jenny's flew parallel with each other. He also first used the rope ladder which became popular among barnstormers, a device developed by his older brother, Osman.

With the signing of the Armistice, Frew decided to return to civilian life. Ormer became CO. of B Squadron and Skeets was named CO. of C Squadron. Command positions did not change their feeling about stunt flying. They looked for a new man to replace Frew.

The new man was Lieutenant Shirley J. Short, an instructor in the Primary Stage and one of the most able pilots at Barron. Born in Goldfield, Iowa, his serious mien was a perfect complement to the more jocular natures of Lock and Skeets. His background was varied. A former automobile and tractor mechanic, Short also was a bookkeeper, farmer, store manager and retail and wholesale seller. Following his barnstorming career, Short joined the United States Air Mail Service and became one of America's most respected fliers. From 1923 to 1927 he flew the route between Chicago and Cleveland, and in 1926 President Calvin Coolidge personally awarded him the first Harmon Trophy for having flown 2,769 hours in all kinds of weather and in various types of planes without a mishap.⁷ In 1927, the Aero Club of France named Short the most valuable air mail pilot in the world.

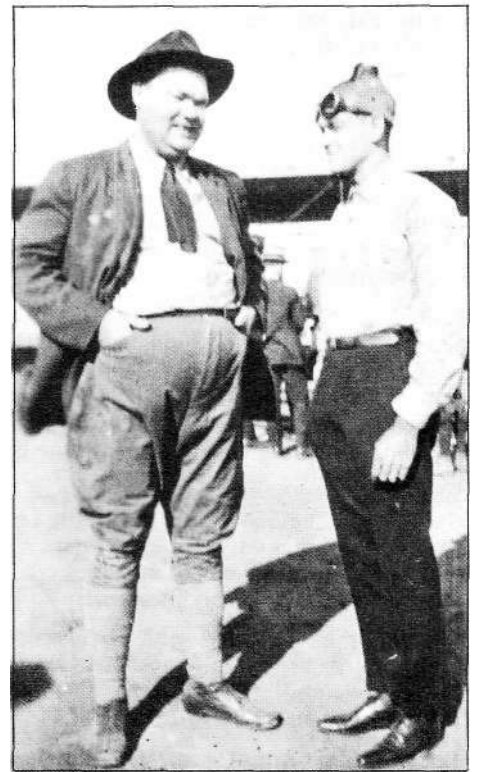
In 1929 Short flew as a pilot for the *Chicago Daily News*, gathering news and promoting the paper. He also was backed by the newspaper in aviation experiments. While test flying the new Belanca "mystery" plane in 1931, a tandem-engined plane built for carrying huge payloads long distances, the wings of the BLUE STREAK collapsed while attempting to set a world payload record and crashed at Wheaton, Illinois, killing Short and crew of three.

Elliott was born into one of Gadsen, Alabama's most important families. His father was a former riverboat captain who established the Elliott Car Works just in time to cash in on the street-car boom. Skeet's mother was Nina Kyle Elliott who, as a small child, was a great friend of General Nathan B. Forrest. Skeet was a member of the Sigma Alpha Epsilon fraternity at Columbia University.

Shortly before the three fliers decided to leave the service in May, 1919, Locklear met a man who was to influence his life tremendously during his few remaining months. William H. Pickens, press agent and ballyhoo artist was the one person responsible for creating national and international fame for Ormer Locklear.

Pickens had once peddled nickel juke boxes for Thomas Edison and had helped start the roller skating rink craze in America.⁸ Prior to the war he had managed such aviation and auto driver celebrities as Barney Oldfield, Fred Hoover, the Chevrolet Brothers, the Stinson family, DeLloyd Thompson, James "Bud" Mars and Lincoln Beachey. He also publicized the first aviation meet held in the United States at Dominguez Field, Los Angeles, in January 1910. And he devised the automobile versus airplane races which thrilled county fair goers for years. The first such

William H. Pickens, left, with Locklear on the set of the Universal Picture, *THE GREAT AIR ROBBERY*. Pickens was Locklear's flamboyant manager and press agent. (Locklear Family Collection)



race was between two Pickens clients — Barney Oldfield, the "Demon of the Ground" and Lincoln Beachey, the "Flying Fool of the Air."

When Pickens met Locklear, his promoter's instinct told him he had the box-office sensation of the century. Pickens promised to send the trio on a national barnstorming tour. He would call the group the Locklear Flying Circus. He also purchased three new airplanes from the Curtiss factory in Canada.

The first public exhibition of Locklear's plane-changing act was at the Uniontown Speedway in Pennsylvania.⁹ The result was the beginning of the golden renaissance of barnstorming. At an airshow on Long Island, the *New York Times* called Locklear "a flashing comet across the aviation sky."¹⁰ And that's exactly what he was. No one had ever seen anything like him before.

The pattern was always the same. Sometime along mid afternoon, a biplane would come streaking out of the sun headed directly for the grandstand where thousands would gasp in awe. There would be an audible intake of breath and exclamations of surprise as the gawking crowd suddenly realized there was a man on the biplane and he wasn't in the cockpit. He would be either standing on the top wing, waving his arms, or sitting on the landing gear waving just as gaily. A cry of "Locklear!" would go up, for that was who the man was.

Everything on the fairgrounds and everyone for blocks around would come to a stop as this madman clambered all over the plane. First he would be hanging by his legs from the landing gear, then he would dangle by one arm from the skid bar at the tip of the bottom wing, then he would inch his way along the fuselage to the tail where he would sit waving as the plane zoomed by the grandstand. Then there would be the agonizingly long crawl back to the front of the plane where he would flirt with death by doing a headstand behind the whirling propeller. It was hypnotically compelling. Cars on the way to the fair would screech to a stop, their occupants pouring out on the roads to get a better view. Without giving the crowds a chance to catch their breaths, another plane would suddenly roar into view. It would be Skeets, a six-foot rope ladder dangling from his plane.

The *Illinois State Journal* describing Ormer's performance in

Springfield, told best what happened next.¹¹ The reaction, of course, was the same wherever he appeared that summer season:

"Locklear's plane-changing feat requires about 10 minutes from the moment the machines begin to jockey for position until he is safe in the seat of the other airplane. During that time, silence prevails among the crowd, no matter how huge. It seems as though everyone holds his breath. As he makes the change, the crowd bursts into a spontaneous cheer that does not die until the intrepid fellow is landed in front of the grandstand."

And so it went at county fairs all over the country as Locklear and his flying circus created one sensation after another. They seldom flew from one fair to the next. Unlike the traditional flier who ate, slept and lived with his plane at county fairs and in farmers' meadows, Ormer and his crew traveled in first class luxury aboard trains and stayed only at the best hotels.¹²

Some fairs were paying Locklear a fee of \$3000 a day and considerably higher amounts were paid for a week of exhibitions. It was an incredible amount of money to pay a flier when almost all other pilots recently out of the war were lucky to attract a crowd of farmers in some lonely meadow.

"We can't be bothered with flying sodbusters at five bucks a hop," Bill Pickens would say. "Locklear is giving them something that no one else can. And until someone can do what he's doing, I'm taking them for everything I can."¹³

Lock's career almost came to a tragic end on June 14, 1919, when he made his first attempt at making a car-to-plane change. It happened at the Erie Exposition Grounds in Pennsylvania on a day oppressive with heat. When Ormer's fingers closed over the last rung of the ladder dangling from the Jenny, his sudden weight pulled the plane down lower to the track. In the extreme heat the plane lost much of its lifting power and was dragging Lock along the ground directly in the path of the auto. Rather than cause a tragedy that might kill all three men, Lock let go of the ladder. The Jenny shot into the air; Locklear rolled out of the way of the car and the driver turned sharply to avoid Lock's tumbling body, crashing through the guard rail.¹⁴

Locklear suffered only two small lacerations; one on his head and one on his right hand. Concerned because his wounds would require bandages for several days, Ormer feared audiences would be repulsed by his appearance and the gate would suffer. He also felt



Shirley Short, Ormer Locklear and Milton "Skeets" Elliott, 1919. (Photo — San Francisco Examiner)

the bandages refuted his preaching that flying was absolutely safe. But Pickens, the old pro, reassured him: "Don't worry about it, Ormer. You've got your reasons for risking your neck and I've got mine for handling you. But don't forget that we're both capitalizing on sudden death. And bandages are box office. They hold the romance of freshly-healed accidents and the lure of catastrophes yet to happen."¹⁵

However, not until later did Lock try the car-to-plane transfer. It came about this way. It was inevitable that Locklear's aerial antics would interest Hollywood. The Universal Film Company was the first studio to seek his services. Carl Laemmle, president of Universal, signed him to star and stunt in an action melodrama, "The Great Air Robbery." It was a thriller about the highjacking of airmail planes by a mysterious band of criminals, and it was during the making of this picture that Locklear finally made the first successful transfer from an auto to airplane. In fact, he made a double change. The date was July 26, 1919.¹⁶

Following completion of the picture, Locklear's Flying Circus made another successful tour around the country of county fairs. But now there were a lot of imitators, including Al Wilson, Frank Clarke, Dick Grace, Fearless Tinney and a hundred others.

When Lock returned from the tour, he was signed by the William Fox Studio to star in another picture, *The Skywayman*, telling the story of a Lafayette Escadrille ace returned from the war with amnesia. After performing a series of wild stunts, he finally recovers his memory.

One of the wildest was crashing his Jenny into a steeple of a church which was being used as a refuge by a robber band. Locklear successfully performed the feat, causing only slight damage to the top wing.

The final scene of the picture was to be filmed at night in the glare of five powerful arc-lights, totaling half-a-million candlepower. The script required Locklear and Elliott to climb to a height of 3000 feet, go through several stunts and then glide to 2000 feet where they would go into a spin. Ten magnesium flares, attached to the wings and totaling 30,000 candlepower, would be ignited by a 'hot-shot' battery switch just before going into the spin. The resultant Roman candle effect would simulate a flaming crash.

Mixed media drawings (pencil, tempera wash, and acrylic) here and on Page 33 by James H. Farmer.





DeMille Field No. 2 at the corner of Wilshire Boulevard and Crescent St. (Now Fairfax Blvd. In Los Angeles, 1920.

(Courtesy of Col. Arthur Goebel)

The site was Cecil B. DeMille's airport at Wilshire Blvd. and Crescent (now Fairfax) Avenue in Los Angeles. An enormous crowd, including many film stars and directors, gathered for what became a festive occasion.

The show turned into tragedy. Evidently blinded by the powerful arc lights, Locklear and Elliott never recovered from their spin. They crashed with deafening force into an oil sump on the corner of Third Street and Crescent. The magnesium flares ignited the oil in the sump, causing the fuel in the plane's tank to explode and burn the already dead fliers. It was August 2, 1920.

Ormer Locklear's meteoric career ended as suddenly and finally as it had begun. The first and perhaps the greatest of the post-World War I's barnstormers was dead, however, his violent death was no deterrent to the adventurous and daring. Barnstorming was already well into its bloodiest era.

Some years later that Bill Pickens finally admitted that a man transferring from one plane to another in mid-air was just a stunt and nothing more.

"Although I ballyhooed that my circus fliers were contributing to science," he said, "I can look back and see that changing planes in mid-air didn't mean anything. It was just a wonderful thing to look at."¹⁷

It was more than that, for there are some who say Locklear did as

much in his own way to further the cause of aviation as did Lindbergh with his flight across the Atlantic. That, of course can be disputed, but what cannot be disputed is that a great many youngsters who saw Locklear perform at fairs, and others who sat in darkened theaters, seeing his plane-changing and aerial stunts on Pathe newsreels, were inspired to become fliers when they grew up.

Ormer Locklear would probably like to have been best remembered for that contribution to aviation.

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17. *Saturday Evening Post*, Dec. 24, 1927.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Art Ronnie first became aware of Ormer Locklear when as a boy, he read the autobiographies of Dick Grace. But it wasn't until 1960 that interest was rekindled while preparing a magazine piece on the history of Cecil B. DeMille's flying activities. Years of research finally resulted in the 1973 publication of *LOCKLEAR: The Man Who Walked On Wings* (A.S. Barnes). (See Book of Reviews, *JOURNAL*, Vol. 18, No. 4, p. 281).

Ronnie was born and educated in Los Angeles. He has been a reporter, feature writer, television writer, records editor, radio editor and book reviewer for the Los Angeles *Herald-Express* and *Herald-Examiner*. He has been a publicist for MGM Television, Paramount Television, 20th Century-Fox Television and presently is a publicist for Screen Gems. His articles of varied interests have appeared in national magazines.

To write and research his articles, Art Ronnie has a large library including many books on aviation. Best of all are autographed editions signed by Lindbergh, Byrd, Doolittle, Rickenbacker, Curtiss, A.V. Roe, Fokker, Chamberlin, Johnnie Johnson, Eckener, Doenitz, Whitten-Brown, Sikorsky.

