

THE GOLDEN YEARS OF FLYING

by

Bill Rhoda

An oldtime pilot asked me recently, "What's the matter with private aviation, what's holding it back?" As he spoke, he pointed to several of his well cared for aircraft and continued: "During the Depression, I made more money with one airplane than I now can make with several of them. There is a general lack of interest in private flying the likes of which I have never seen before". His remarks were not unique, rather he voiced the sentiments of nearly all small operators and pilots of today. What is the answer to his question?

True, the major airlines are doing a peak business and corporation flying is setting new records. But why are there not more people actively engaged in taking instruction and flying their own planes? Why are there not more students and pilots storming the airports and flight offices as they did in previous years? It certainly isn't the cost. Flight rates are correspondingly cheaper today than ever before. Airports are larger, planes are safer.

In puzzling over the answer to this question I dug out my old scrapbooks and browsed down Memory's Runway and came up with what I believe is the correct answer to this perplexing problem. What aviation needs today is more Roscoe Turners, Amelia Earharts and Doug Corrigans. It needs much more publicity than it is now getting, a little more oldtime glamour. We have got to get the large crowds out to the airports as we did in former years.

Back in the "Thrilling Thirties", during the period which I believe were the Golden Years of Flying, anything connected with flying was front page copy. A flyer was a Tin God and many thousands of people came out to the airports week after week. It all began with Lindbergh's famous hop to Paris. This young, courageous and unassuming boy of 25 years of age, flew a single-engined cabin plane of 220 horsepower on a solo flight across the Atlantic Ocean. He immediately captured the Public's imagination not only for apparent modesty but also because he performed a feat with a plane in 1927 that most everybody believed was impossible. Then began a wave of interest and enthusiasm for flying that reached right into everybody's home.

Many other great ocean flights followed on the heels of Lindbergh's flight. There were the great flights of Commander Byrd in the tri-motor Fokker plane "America". Chamberlin and Levine in the Bellanca monoplane "Columbia". The flights of the Bremen flyers, Ruth Elder, Amelia Earhart, Coste and Bellonte and a gallant host of others.

As the decade of the "Thirties" began the nation plunged into its blackest Depression in history. This depression affected all industry, all employment, as well as the incomes of those lucky enough to weather the financial storm. Yet it did not affect aeronautical progress to any great degree; certainly not the great interest that followed aviation happenings of that period.

Banner headlines and reams of copy heralded the great flights of the "Thirties". Flyers in high polished riding boots and fancy whip-cord breeches were breaking and rebreaking all of the existing air records, as they roared back and forth across the

nation and the rest of the world. There were the endurance flyers as exemplified by the St. Louis Robin, the Spokane Sun-God, the Hunter Brothers, the Keys Brothers and many others who boosted the Refueling in Flight record to well over 1,000 hours. Speed records were lowered, altitude records set and distance marks lengthened beyond all comprehension.

There was the indomitable Frank Hawks of the Texas Oil Company and his famous Travel Air Mystery-3 plane who kept lowering the Transcontinental Speed Record and who held all the principal speed records between large cities. There was the very personable Roscoe Turner (who lives today who hasn't heard of Roscoe Turner). Turner, with his famous swashbuckling uniform, high polished boots, waxed mustache and lion cub mascot. Turner flew a Lockheed "Air Express" for the Gilmore Oil Company. He epitomized all that was colorful in the competent and successful pilot as he roared here and there competing with Hawks for speed marks.

There were teen-age pilots such as Eddie Schneider and Bob Buck who were breaking junior-class records. And the women, God bless them. The truly great and illustrious Amelia Earhart, Ruth Nichols, Laura Ingalls and many others. Let's not forget little Elinor Smith either, the piquant girl flyer from Freeport, Long Island, New York. At 17 she flew an old Waco 9 under all four existing suspension bridges in New York City. At 18 she broke the Women's Solo Endurance Record without refueling by remaining in the air for 26½ hours. At 19 she copped the Women's Altitude Record in excess of 25,000 feet. A very plucky girl, Elinor.

The newspapers outdid themselves heralding these aviation events and achievements. There were accounts of the Mail pilots carrying their entrusted loads over the renowned "Hell's Stretch", that fog enshrouded area extending from Bellefleur Mine in the Alleghenies all the way into Cleveland, Ohio. Many good men were killed, but many more saved their lives and their mail by bailing out of their ice-encrusted or otherwise disabled aircraft with their mailsacks under their arms.

Any pilot in the "Thirties" who could make an Outside Loop with any type of plane was welcomed into a tight inner circle of stunt pilots. Later some of them set records for the amount of Outside Loops to be made in one flight. Tex Rankin set a record of 143 in one flight. Dorothy Hester set the women's record of 46 Outside Loops in one flight. There were other acrobatic records, among them the record for Inverted Flight for a given length of time. Milo Burcham set the present record of flying upside down, for a period in excess of four hours, while flying from one city to another.

Fine stories of the World War I pilots began to flood the papers and magazines as the aviation conscious public began to demand the facts concerning Richthofen, Rickenbacker, Immelmann, Billy Barker, Frank Luke etc. As though this wasn't enough, boys of all ages could buy armloads of dime novels with fictionized accounts of the war in the air. These pulp magazines with gaily decorated covers and flashy titles gave glowing tribute to the heroes of the first and only air war up to that time.

There were many courageous parachute jumpers who jumped all about the country in their endeavor to draw crowds out to the airports and they also helped perfect the parachute to the wonderful piece of safety equipment it is today. At one time the Navy dropped twelve men from a Ford Tri-Motor over Washington, D.C., to set a record of jumps from one plane. Then at Roosevelt Field, N.Y., the management dropped first sixteen men, and finally twenty men, from a single Curtiss "Condor" biplane to regain the record for the civilians.

Clyde Pangborn, one of the nation's greatest pilots and Hugh Herndon flew a Bellanca single-engined monoplane on a non-stop flight from Japan to Washington. This remarkable flight, made in 1931, covered over 4,000 miles of over-water flying and has yet to be simulated by a civilian plane.

Then Doug Corrigan, in a nine year old Curtiss Robin, took off from New York and lacking official permission for an ocean flight, he facetiously read his compass wrong. On the pretext of heading for Los Angeles, he landed in Ireland. He, like Lindbergh, captured the public's imagination and remains today one of the great legendary pilots of that great era.

The Navy began purchasing and testing new type dive-bombers in the "Thirties" and with the late Jimmie Collins and Lee Gehlbach testing them to destruction, the sensational 9-G Power Dive was created. The public ate up the glowing accounts of these dives.

There were records for the youngest solo pilots. But by far the two youngest pilots to absolutely solo a plane were the following two boys. Joe Sheehan, 12 years old, soloed an CX-5 Bird at Teterboro, New Jersey, and was followed by Jackie Chapman, 11 years old, who soloed an Arrow Sport at West Hampton, New York. Then there was Dr. Brock who flew at least 10 minutes a day, regardless of the weather, every day for over four years. There were great Air Shows, Air Meets, Aircraft Salons, the Schneider Trophy Race, Thompson Trophy Race and many other great events. The press gave aviation every advantage. Many crime stories were displaced from the front pages as day after day new feats in flying were performed. Even when the public went to the movies they were given no rest. Great air pictures such as Wings, Lilac Time, Hell's Angels, Ceiling Zero, Dawn Patrol, Lost Squadron, Hell Divers and others held them spellbound and fired their enthusiasm for flying. The movie Wings played for over a year on Times Square, New York.

These were the Golden Years of Flying and they lasted right up through 1940. What benefit did all this do for aviation? Its benefits were enormous. In spite of a great Depression hoards of student pilots who couldn't otherwise afford to fly were going without lunch-money, without necessities, without comforts to pay for flying time. Chambers of Commerce and Town Commissions went all-out in their endeavor to start airports in their local communities. Many students bought planes for the sole purpose of building up time for Licenses. Following this they opened their own airports, bought more planes so more students could learn to fly. Thousands of people took rides to find out what it was all about, as Sunday after Sunday the airports were jammed. Airports increased, interest increased, and all consideration of flying costs were thrown to the winds. It was a grand period in flying as everybody worked toward a common goal, the future development of private and commercial flying.

Call it color, call it glamour, call it anything you like but this great interest in flying lasted right up to World War II. Then when Uncle Sam called for Air Power, he got it. An Air Force of 2½ million men, air power consisting of 262 Wings. All this the direct result of the enthusiastic interest in aviation aroused in the pre-war years. As a matter of fact the Air Force in 1944 felt justified to turn over 50,000 men to the man-short ground forces.

Well, what happened to all that mania for flying? What happened to all that enthusiasm for aviation? What happened to that big pipe-dream about post-war private flying? Following the Big War, certain aviation groups, and aviation commissions decided that all spectacular publicity, all record breaking, in fact any publicity

concerning aviation should be cut out. Flying was to be considered an everyday business like anything else. Perhaps this was a good idea, but many of us believe that they cut out the publicity at the wrong time. They should have waited till we had the two million planes and pilots before they buried all the attraction.

Some new students have come in but more have quit flying than are being replaced. The C.A.A. has not revealed the shocking number of airports and seaplane bases that have been closed up in the past seven years. Some of the finest airports in the country have closed up and forsaken their sites. Oldtimers were aroused some time back when famed Roosevelt Field, New York, closed its runways. Roosevelt Field, one of the World's oldest airports, once a beehive of activity where thousands of pilots landed during its 40 years of existence, has been closed forever to be made into an industrial area. Central Airport, Camden, New Jersey, is another to feel the pinch due to lack of interest displayed. What is the end result of all this? Today the Airport Operators across the country have begun to squeeze the plane owners evermore for more revenue, and are even instituting despicable landing fees to make up lost revenue.

It is all the more sad when one considers the fact that as each airport closes down and its site is abandoned, the lack of sites for future airports are rapidly diminishing. What will we do for airport sites in the years to come?

Where once the tie-down lines and hangars were filled with planes whose pilots were working toward a goal, today such hangars and tie-down lines consist of planes that never fly for weeks at a time. Even the Air Force today is finding it hard to keep together its 143 Wing force. Its Reserve pilots are demanding to be grounded. This is a condition unheard of in pre-war years. Just as the Prohibitionists of the Twenties did more harm than good, so have certain of the aviation groups and others who wanted all record flights to cease. All air shows, in fact everything but take-offs and landings, to be stopped. All this has been too soon.

Today we go weeks at a time with nary a good line in the papers about flying. Let's give aviation the publicity it deserves. We still have records to be broken, new airports to be opened, new type planes to be introduced. Let's publicise all this. Let us have more Air Meets, more aircraft salons. In short, let's revive some of the oldtime interest in flying before many more Fixed-Base Operators (the backbone of aviation) have given up for more lucrative fields of endeavor. We are having an era of prosperity in all industry. Why don't we extend it to private flying. Time is wasting.

- - - -

*

Dorothy Hester set a record for Outside Loops in one flight of 62. Her final effort. Tex Rankin set a record of 131 (both of these in Great Lakes trainers). Paul Mantz made the final record of 146. This latter was, I believe, in a Fleet. Charles W. Speed Holman set a record for inside loops in one flight of 1,433.
