



## **LEN POVEY**★ He Did It All!

by Kent A. Mitchell

**E**NLISTED ARMY PILOT, BARNSTORMER, AIRBORNE booze runner, test pilot, inventor of the "Cuban Eight" aerobatic maneuver, father of the Cuban air force, CAA aeronautical and flight test engineering inspector, civilian pilot consultant to the U.S. assistant secretary of commerce for air, commissioned officer in the U.S. Marine Corps Reserve, commissioned officer in the U.S. Navy, operator of four Army Corps contract schools as VP of Embry-Riddle during WWII, manager of military sales and service for Fairchild Aircraft, a VP and co-former of Ft. Lauderdale's Mackey Airlines (until it merged with Eastern Air Lines), VP and general manager of the airline's Eastern Aviation Services (until the operation was sold and became Hangar One), in semi-retirement was a public relations and aviation consultant with Stevens Beechcraft, Inc., at Greenville-Spartanburg Airport, South Carolina—and a helluva nice guy!

Born in 1904 at Nashua, New Hampshire, Leonard James

Povey got the flying "bug" at the early age of 14 when he was allowed to handle the controls of a visiting aircraft. Thus inspired, Povey tried unsuccessfully to enlist in the Royal Canadian Air Force during WWI at age 15. Undaunted, he finally was able to enlist three years later (1922) into the U.S. Army's Signal Corps flying school where, at that time, by special permission of General "Billy" Mitchell, received flight instructions under Lt. E.H. Barksdale and became one of the first enlisted pilots. Povey later assisted Barksdale in laying out the first transcontinental airway routes between New York, Seattle, and San Francisco.

After his stint in the military, Len purchased an old Hisso-powered Lincoln *Standard* biplane and joined the ranks of ex-Army pilots on the county fair circuit as a barnstormer. A good pilot, he eventually flew through the late 1920s with the legendary Gates Flying Circus.

Also, during the period 1925–1927, he barnstormed a Cur-

Len Povey poses with the Curtiss *Hawk* in which he invented the "Cuban Eight" maneuver. (Povey Collection)

Povey's Cuban *Hawk* had a 1,000-hp *Cyclone* engine. (Povey Collection, Courtesy William R. Coleman)

tiss Flying Boat off various lakes in New York state and New England. He was also "chassis tester" and chief road serviceman east of the Mississippi for Rolls-Royce automobiles.

Between 1928–30, Povey organized the Massachusetts Airways Corporation and served as its general manager and chief pilot. He also sold airplanes, gave flight instruction and conducted charter flights from Springfield, Mass.

It was also during these times of the '20s and early '30s that liquor prohibition was in effect—and Povey had another business on the side. Flying a big Bellanca CH-300 cabin monoplane with a 300-hp Wright J-6 *Whirlwind* engine, Len transported whiskey from Canada into a cow pasture in upper New York state. Povey always laughed when he told this story because he had state troopers guarding his landings on this side of the border! "I was getting paid \$50 per trip," Len recalled. "Some time later I learned 'the gang' made \$4,000 on each delivery. That really taught me how dumb I was in those days." Povey had made 77 trips before he found out he wasn't high enough on the payroll.

So then, to supplement his income, Povey joined with Lowell Bayles as a test pilot for the big engined *Gee Bee* planes that made Jimmy Doolittle famous as a racing pilot. The overpowered, stub-winged *Gee Bee* was designed for only one thing—high speed. After Len saw Bayles' plane disintegrate during a high-speed, low-level pass at Detroit,

Michigan, in 1931, he decided to give up flying the *Gee Bee*.

Upon purchasing a Waco *Taperwing*, Len again began performing at airshows. During a 1933 show called the American Air Aces at Bellanca Field, Newcastle, Delaware, Povey in his Waco (with passenger Harold Neumann) and another plane were flying across Wilmington to attract attention to the show. Flying in a loose formation, the other pilot, Roy "Speed" Hunt decided to perform a roll. However, upon completion of the roll, his Great Lakes aircraft dropped onto the top wing of the Waco! Povey recalled, "We flew along locked together before the other plane fell off. I lost four feet from the top wing. Part of the other plane's wing was wrapped around my center section. I prepared to jump. But, I had forgotten all about my passenger . . . until he suddenly stuck his head up from the front cockpit. He had been keeping his head down out of the wind . . . I couldn't jump!" Povey had a parachute, Neumann didn't. Flying with the throttle wide open, Len managed to make it five miles back to the field and make a successful high-speed landing. However, the fate of the other airplane is what made the front page of the *New York Times* . . . after Hunt had bailed out it crashed through the roof of a house of ill repute, scattering embarrassed customers into the neighborhood.

Povey was a competitor in the 1933 All-American Air Maneuvers in Miami, Florida—and unintentionally became the father of the Cuban air force. It seems that Len had a spectacular aerobatic act, which he performed at night over Biscayne Bay, firing off rockets and Roman candles from the wings of his Waco while doing loops and rolls. After the air show, Povey got a job to fly out during the day and drop





flowers on a boat carrying the mayor of Miami. The pay was \$50—all that he expected to make the rest of that Depression year. Len recollected what happened then: “As I got ready to taxi out with the flowers, the boys said, ‘When you come back give us some aerobatics.’ I had no idea of doing it, but when I got all ready to land I thought I’d give them a little. I came up the center of the runway on my back. That was illegal even back then. As I did, I spotted a guy with a Panama hat—Johnny Puckett, the [local CAA] inspector. I knew I was in trouble so I went through every maneuver in the whole book. When I got out and I walked up to him and said, ‘John, here it is.’” Len held out his pilot license. The inspector asked whether he wanted a \$500 fine or 30 days on the ground. In 1933, Povey didn’t even dream of \$500.

However, in the onlooking crowd was also a scout sent by the newly self-installed revolutionary leader of Cuba, Fulgencio Batista. The scout had been sent to the U.S. by the former Cuban army sergeant, self-appointed Colonel and then President Batista to find a pilot who could be recruited to organize an air force. Povey said that when the Cuban scout had seen his flying, “. . . he figured I must be the greatest pilot in the world.” Consequently, Len became a Commandante in the Cuban Air Force. But when he arrived in Cuba (and unable to speak a word of Spanish), he found they (he) had 14 aircraft, shops, hangars, and mechanics—but *no* pilots! Cuba’s 1933 revolution had left the country with no pilots—all were either wounded or in exile. Povey then soon became known as Cuba’s “One Man Air Force.” Eventually, Len personally trained 45 pilots. In addition to training pilots, Dictator Batista required Povey to put on an air show each September 4th to celebrate the anniversary of his revolution. Len said, “I had to stage the exhibition over Havana each time, being careful never to repeat the same performance. When friends ask why I finally left Cuba, I used to say I ran out of new tricks.”

In between training pilots, Povey flew a Curtiss *Hawk* in many airshow aerobatic competitions, representing Cuba, and won 17 trophies. During one contest in 1936, with Jimmy Doolittle as a judge, he accidentally invented a new

maneuver. Often called upon to recall the incident, Povey always laughed while telling the story: “It was a mistake. However, it won me first place on the All-American Air Maneuvers of 1936. I got up far too much speed while starting a double snap roll on top of a loop. I had to pull out and still make something from it to stay in the competition, so I managed an eight on its side. The judges wanted me to identify the supposed trick and, as I was allowed an optional maneuver, I thought quick and called it the Cuban Eight. The name caught on. It sounded OK, for I was flying a Cuban plane and wearing a Cuban uniform.”

After an air show at St. Louis, he met the woman who would later become his wife. However, he stood her up on their first date—after he fell into the Mississippi River. All was smoothed over the next day when her employer (she was an anesthetist for a surgeon who was a friend of Povey) took them to lunch and Povey invited her to Havana. A few letters later she took him up on the invitation and in 1938 she became Edie Povey.

Povey not only earned the friendship of Batista by building an air force for him and earning air show trophies for Cuba, he endeared himself forever on two other occasions. One was when Len was flying low over Havana and his Curtiss *Hawk* collided with a huge buzzard. “I went over the orphanage and decided to give them a blast. I was doing about 300 miles per hour in a climbing slow roll when I felt something hit the airplane. On the left upper wing was the remains of what looked like a turkey buzzard, only bigger. It rolled me over on my back. I got up to 800 feet and thought of all the good things and bad things I’d done and wondered if the good outweighed the bad.” Povey thought he was doomed. Part of the wing was missing and he had no control. (One aileron was knocked off the plane and the other became jammed.) The story was told that Povey took the Curtiss out over the bay and bailed out to keep it from going into Havana’s streets. Actually, Len admitted later, “I had no idea where I was going.” The International Cuban Red Cross and Batista awarded him a decoration for preventing the plane from falling into a congested area and thereafter called Povey *El*

At left, Commandante Povey of the Cuban Air Force. On the right of the photo is Fulgencio Batista. (Povey Collection)

At Fairchild Aircraft, Povey wore his Quiet Birdmen wings when flying the company's Lockheed Lodestar in the early 1950s. (Photo by Lyle S. Mitchell)

*Fenomeno* (The Phenomenal).

The dead buzzard fell on the monument to the U.S. battleship *Maine*. Batista had it stuffed and the bird reposed on exhibit in the Cuban Air Force headquarters.

Other decorations received by Povey while employed by the Cuban government included the Distinguished Service Medal, Military Merit Medal, Order of Commander, and the Revolution Medal of the 4th of September.

The other time Povey became a hero in Batista's eyes was when a group of communists who, opposed to the dictator, were forming a parade to march upon the Presidential Palace. Len, flying overhead, saw what was going on and dove repeatedly at the crowd at treetop height. Not realizing Povey's plane was unarmed, the communists fled for home. (That incident was not forgotten either when Castro and company later took over Cuba.)

Breaking up the parade was the closest Povey ever got to dabbling in Cuban politics and his reluctance to do so caused him to decide that, after four years, it was time to return home. Povey explained, "Our government was glad to have a friend at court, so to speak, but I was cautioned not to get too involved in Cuban affairs. When certain Cuban officers got ambitious, I told Batista my job of getting his pilots ready was over and turned in my uniform."

Returning to the U.S. in 1938, Len accepted a position with the Civil Aeronautics Administration (CAA) as an Aeronautical and Flight Test Engineering Inspector in the Safety Section. In this position, he was responsible for the flight testing of all new inspector applicants and the re-rating of flight instructors throughout the country.

In 1940, Povey was appointed Civilian Pilot Consultant to the Assistant Secretary of Commerce for Air. Stationed in Washington, D.C., and wanting to keep his hand in with military aircraft, Povey elected to accept a commission as an officer/pilot in the Marine Corps Reserve. Later, once again switching uniforms, Len obtained a commission with the U.S. Navy!

With war clouds looming, the U.S. military had undertaken a massive pilot training program. The then powers-that-be decided that was where Povey would fit right in—but as a civilian. Made vice president of the Embry-Riddle School of Aviation, Povey was placed in charge of the four Army contract schools the company operated. Under his direction, the schools trained more than 19,000 pilots.

It was during this time that Povey's reputation as a stickler for paying attention to details became apparent. General George Stratemyer, commander of the Army's Southeast Training Center, made an inspection at one of the schools which was operating about 150 Vultee BT-13s and North American AT-6s. Completing the inspection, Stratemyer asked Povey, "I know you are averaging over four hours a day

per aircraft—how do you keep them so clean?" Povey replied, "We clean them, General."

After the war, Povey ran into his former boss in the CAA Safety Section, Richard S. Boutelle, who since the early 1940s had been Vice President and General Manager of the Fairchild Aircraft Division in Hagerstown, Maryland. Soon, Len became Manager of Military Sales and Service for the division and moved back north.

At the time (1946–1950), Fairchild was a major contender in the competition to build a new postwar military primary/basic trainer. Povey flew both of the company's prototypes to critique their performance as training aircraft. (See the author's article, "The Fairchild XNQ-1/T-31 Trainer," *AAHS Journal*, Vol. 22, No. 1, Spring 1977, pp. 48-55.)

"Dick" Boutelle eventually became President of the Fairchild Engine and Airplane Corporation and Povey became Assistant to the President. In this position, one of Len's "duties" was to fly Fairchild's executive transport, a Lockheed *Lodestar* (manufacturer's serial number 2456, N1123V). That plane had previously been owned by William P. Lear and therefore was "loaded" with the latest Lear, Inc. automatic pilot, communication and navigation equipment—having been used as a testbed during development of the electronics.

The author remembers, at age 10 or 12, riding in the jump seat behind Povey in the *Lodestar*. I'm sorry to say Len didn't do a Cuban Eight for me in that lumbering plane—but I am certain he could have!

After eight years with Fairchild, Povey was contacted by another previous acquaintance and fellow barnstormer, Joseph C. Mackey. He had also been a safety agent in Boutelle's CAA Safety Section—and had also competed against Povey in aerobatic shows. In the '30s the CAA was always trying to lift Mackey's ticket for flying upside down over air show crowds—so to get rid of this thorn in their side—they had hired him as an inspector in the Safety Section! During WWII, Joe became Colonel Mackey ferrying transport aircraft across the Atlantic. After the war, Mackey became a successful businessman in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. However, what Mackey *really* wanted to do was start an air service between Florida cities and islands in the Caribbean. Thus began a six-year fight for certification as a scheduled carrier. Mackey Airlines was finally certificated in 1952—and a phone call was made to Povey. The colonel needed help to get his airline off the ground. Bags packed, Povey returned to Florida as the airline's Executive Vice President.

The airline began operations on January 2, 1953, with DC-3 service and a Ft. Lauderdale–Palm Beach–Nassau (Bahamas) triangle route. After two years, the route structure had expanded to include Tampa and St. Petersburg.

From 1953 to January 1, 1956, Mackey Airlines carried more than 71,000 passengers, starting out with 15,000 passengers in 1953, jumping to 22,000 in 1954, and 34,000 in 1955. No mail was carried, so the airline never drew a penny of federal subsidy.

By 1956, Mackey Airlines was operating four DC-3s and two ex-Capital Airlines DC-4s. Other planes were available

for charter, including a very plush DC-3 on loan-lease from a stockholder. The airline provided charter service for several customers on a regular basis to various islands of the Bahamas—such as Western Electric, who rotated crews supporting down-range activities of the Air Force Missile Test Center, Cape Canaveral.

Also in 1956, Mackey Airlines added a long-sought addition to its route map—Havana. However, that was one route the line's executive VP could *not* personally check out. His old friend Batista was in exile near Lisbon, Portugal, and Povey was no longer welcome in Cuba. Len's wife Edie often expressed fear for his life—it was suspected that Castro had a "hit man" waiting for Povey to step off a plane. (Executive Povey was not above getting his hands dirty loading baggage or taking his turn at the wheel—often logging 40–45 hours per month, adding to the over 12,000 in his log book.) But the new route did provide an access to a source of cigars—a weakness Povey acquired while in Cuba.

Another personal note: during this same period, the author—who was then age 19 and the proud owner of a Private Pilot certificate—and with the brashness of youth, decided to drop in on Povey (unannounced, uninvited) at his canal-front home in Fort Lauderdale to talk about airplanes. Len probably had more hours flying upside down than I had in my log book altogether—but nonetheless, the gentleman that he was, graciously entertained me on his patio and listened to my prattle about my great feats in an Aeronca.

In 1958, Povey was presented the Wright Brothers Memorial trophy for distinguished contributions to Southern Florida aviation by the Greater Miami Aviation Association.

With the airline firmly established, about 1961 Mackey decided to expand the charter business into a full-blown

executive aircraft service operation. Thus Mackey Aviation Services was created at the Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International Airport—with Povey in charge.

Very soon, the new fixed base operator (FBO) became famous throughout the business aircraft world for its "red carpet" treatment. Povey literally met each deplaning executive with a rolled-out red carpet. Another touch was Povey's hat. If the arriving customer came in a Lear Jet, Len's cap would be embroidered with the name "Lear." If the airplane was an Aero Commander or a Beechcraft, the appropriate hat was worn—Povey had a shelf full! Len and his people also met customers coming from abroad at the customs building, picked up their luggage, and escorted them to Mackey's facilities.

In an era where most FBO's "executive" accommodations consisted of a few chairs in a corner of a hangar next to the soft drink machine, Povey saw to it that Mackey's provided an aircraft owners' lounge, executive conference room, separate pilots' lounge, briefing room equipped with weather teletype and direct line to FAA flight service, airport shuttle service, a coffee pot that was always on—and a *beautifully landscaped, palm-shaded swimming pool!* On the ramp, everything was first class also, with 24-hour service, modern refueling trucks and other equipment, with A&P mechanics on the staff.

All of this service was provided at no charge, except for fuel and labor. However, it paid off. Povey gave an example of one captain who said, "Look, we don't really need any more fuel, Len, but your people have done such a swell job, throw on another 200 gallons." Such satisfied corporate aircraft operators brought repeat business to Povey's pioneer FBO and the firm was soon pumping over two million gallons of fuel per year. Povey's operation made money every month he



Students head for the flight line at the "Riddle-Aero Institute," L.J. Povey, General Manager. (Povey Collection, Courtesy William R. Coleman)

Povey (on right) poses with U.S. Army officer Donovan (on left) and an unidentified major (center) on an Embry-Riddle flight line during the early 1940s. Evident is Povey's short stature (5' 6"). (Povey Collection, Courtesy William R. Coleman)

Eastern Aviation Services, Inc. executive Povey poses at desk (1970). (Povey Collection, Courtesy William R. Coleman)

ran it. Len once said, "Lots of months we have made more money than the airline."

A survey conducted by *Professional Pilot* magazine during the late 1960s indicated Povey was one of three top FBO customer service specialists in the nation. Len soon found himself chairman of the support services committee for the National Business Aircraft Association and elected to the NBAA board of directors. In those positions, Povey made recommendations to improve the services of FBOs at airports across the country. He often said, "It doesn't make sense to go 500 mph in flight and then spend 30 minutes on the ground waiting for service."

The successful (and profitable) airline and FBO got other attention too. In 1967, Mackey's operations were bought and merged with Eastern Air Lines. However, as part of the deal, Povey was to remain on as VP and General Manager of the FBO, which would then be known as Eastern Aviation Services.

In 1972, Povey was inducted into the OX5 Aviation Pioneers Hall of Fame. Then age 68, Len semi-retired but continued as director and consultant with Eastern Aviation Services until it was sold and became Hangar One. He continued to fly, however, holding Airline Transport License No. 4513, and was active as a member of the National Advisory Council of Embry-Riddle Aeronautic University. Povey was also active as a member of the Quiet Birdmen pilot fraternity.

Moving north to a mountain home in Highlands, North Carolina, for his retirement, Povey, unable to stay away from the airplane business, took a public relations and aviation consultant position with Stevens Beechcraft, Inc., Greer, South Carolina, at the Greenville-Spartanburg airport. Stevens also had facilities in Knoxville and Nashville, Tennessee, and Louisville, Kentucky, so Len spent a lot of time traveling between them and other places all over the country. Although Povey had promised his wife that when he had turned 65 he would no longer fly alone, when he was well into his 70s he admitted that he had "almost kept my word."

Although Povey never actually crashed in a plane, he was a double member of the Caterpillar Club, an organization of pilots who had made forced jumps from doomed aircraft. His first use of a parachute was from a plane on fire over Springfield, Massachusetts, and the second was the famous buzzard incident over Cuba. Even though never injured in an airplane, Len was in three automobile accidents—each time as a passenger.

However, Father Time caught up with the pilot extraordinaire. Len Povey died in his sleep at his home in Highlands, North Carolina, on September 26, 1984. He was 80 years old. □



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