



AVIATION PHOTOGRAPHER LYLE S. MITCHELL

by Kent A. Mitchell

BEGINNING IN 1977, READERS OF the *Journal* may have noticed many fine photographs credited to Lyle S. Mitchell. Many of his previously unpublished photographs have appeared in these pages—and hopefully many more will follow. During a period of over 65 years—and continuing to this day—Lyle has been on the flight line with his ever-present camera to capture on film both planes and pilots.

Born November 16, 1911, in Hagerstown, Maryland, Lyle grew up in the town which already had a rich aviation history. Giuseppe Mario Bellanca completed one of his first airplanes there, the

single-place CD Tractor Biplane, in September of 1917. Another Bellanca plane, the two-place Model CE Tractor Biplane, was built and flown from a Hagerstown farmer's meadow in 1919. One worker on the early Bellanca designs was Lewis Reisner, who later co-founded the Kreider-Reisner Aircraft Company, builders of the *Challenger* series of airplanes in Hagerstown.

During the 1920s, all America was infatuated with airplanes—inspired by the barnstormers, air races, and the 1927 Lindbergh flight. While in high school, Lyle developed simultaneous interests in airplanes and cameras and began devel-

oping rolls of 120 box camera film in the darkened cellar of the family home. The Hagerstown High School Class of 1929 yearbook noted that he belonged to the school's Challenger Aviation Club.

After graduation, anxious to join the growing aviation industry (and not foreseeing the beginning of the Great Depression in October 1929), Lyle persuaded his father to let him enroll in the School of Aeronautical Engineering of Beckley College, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. The aviation curriculum at Beckley was developed by President Charles R. Beckley, Dean Charles S. Smith, and first pilot Walter A. Hoffman. In

addition to classroom aviation studies, second-year students also received flight instructions.

The college operated its own flying field 2.5 miles outside of Harrisburg. The field was composed of 122 acres of turf runways. Four different types of planes were used for instruction.

The head of the school's Aeronautical Engineering Design and Flight Instruction departments was Captain Martin Jensen. He formerly owned and operated the largest flying school in the country and had also served in the Navy Air Service. At that time, Jensen was the holder of several world records. One was the World Altitude Record of 26,600 feet in a Fairchild 71, June 2, 1929. At Roosevelt Field, New York, 28-year-old Jensen had kept his Wright J-5 powered Bellanca, "The Green Flash," in the air for 35 hours, 33 minutes, 20 seconds to set a new record for non-refueled flight

Lyle Mitchell poses before boarding a Kinner K-5 powered Fleet (NC 615M) in 1931.

(Lyle S. Mitchell Collection)

Lyle flew this *Bird* (NC 961M) in 1934. The automobile is a 1933 Ford five-window coupe.

Bettie Lund (head barely visible in front cockpit) taxis out for takeoff.

Martin Jensen, as seen in Lyle's college year-book.

(Lyle S. Mitchell Collection)

Laura Ingalls visited the Kreider-Reisner hangar at Hagerstown in a de Havilland *Moth*.





(March 27-28, 1929). He was one of the winners (second place) of the Dole Flight across the Pacific Ocean to the Hawaiian Islands. He had also designed and built a training plane which was faster and safer than any other of its kind (at that time). While at the college, Captain Jensen directed the design and the building of a steel plane (the *Beckley Jensen Plane*).

Lyle's pilot logbook shows that he received his first 30 minutes of dual flight instruction from W.B. Moore on April 10, 1931, in a 90-hp Curtiss OX-5 powered C-2 *Challenger* biplane (NC 7563). After 2.5 hours in that airplane, training was received in Fleet biplanes, powered by a 100-hp Kinner K-5 (NC 615M) and a 110-hp Warner-Scarab (NC 8686).

After the May 28, 1931 Commencement at Beckley College, Lyle returned to Hagerstown with diploma (and camera) in hand and eight hours in his logbook. Interested in continuing his flying activities and obtaining his pilot's license, Lyle engaged Richard A. Henson (who had just obtained his Transport Pilot rating, No. 15703) as an instructor and began flying a C-2 *Challenger* (NC 10290) at the Hagerstown airport. Henson, who operated a local Standard Oil automobile service station, had borrowed \$375 and talked three co-workers into providing a like amount to buy the used C-2 so that they could all learn how to fly. After six hours and 55 minutes of instruction time from Arthur C. Pottorff at the Waynesboro, Pennsylvania airport, Henson soloed in 1930. In turn, Henson



A 1929 Cierva C-19 autogyro (NC 10790) visited Kreider-Reisner.

Part-time Fairchild employees Lyle S. Mitchell (far right) and Richard A. Henson (far left) pose in front of a new Model 22.

Alexander Procofieff de Seversky buries his head in the front cockpit of his prototype two-place 2XP pursuit fighter during preparation for takeoff from Hagerstown.

Standard Oil Company of New Jersey's Lockheed Vega 5B refuels at Hagerstown.

Charles Abel, world champion acrobatic glider pilot, participated in the dedication of the Hagerstown Municipal Airport. He held the record of 48 consecutive loops in one flight.

Famed aviator Jacqueline Cochran was caught freshening her lipstick before stepping from a Beechcraft Model 17 *Staggerwing* biplane.







soloed Lyle in the *Challenger* September 1, 1931.

Also in 1931, Pottorff, in addition to operating the Waynesboro airport (12 miles from Hagerstown) was also operating the Hagerstown airport and had hired Henson as his Airport Operations Manager. Continuing to fly Henson's C-2, Lyle passed his flight examination and obtained his Private Pilot's License (No. 23983) on January 14, 1932. Such licenses at the time were personally signed by the Assistant Secretary of Commerce for Aeronautics and was worthy of a federal news release from Washington, D.C., to the local newspaper:

LOCAL FLIER GETS LICENSE AS PILOT

Washington, D.C., Feb. 8—Lyle S. Mitchell of 1023 Main Avenue, Hagerstown, is now the possessor of a license to navigate the air as a private pilot—the second of the four types of authorization issued by the Federal government. This was announced today by the aeronautics branch of the Commerce department.

In the meantime, Henson was also "moonlighting" as a test pilot for Kreider-Reisner Aircraft Company, which was then a subsidiary of the Fairchild Airplane Manufacturing Corporation. One of Henson's first test jobs was to fly their new parasol wing Model 22. Subsequently, Lyle got checked out by Henson in an early "22" (NC 10773) powered by a 75-hp Michigan *Rover* four-cylinder inverted engine on October 13, 1931. Later, Lyle flew Fairchild 22s powered by the 95-hp American *Cirrus* Hi-Drive Mark III inverted engine (NC 12689) and the 90-hp Wright *Gipsy* (NC 2691).

With the extra money earned as a test pilot, Henson had decided to buy out Pottorff and formed the "Henson Flying Service" in March of 1932. The new business had two employees, "Dick" Henson as the pilot and a mechanic, Lyle Mitchell.

The Model 91 prior to its first flight. Note the retractable floats—production models had fixed-position ones.

Although it was unusual for Lyle to ask, he did get 1930s and '40s motion picture leading man Brian Aherne to pose with his new Fairchild 24. The plane was custom painted black for Aherne and had a non-standard grey upholstery interior.



Of his first job in the aviation world, Lyle recalled that he received \$6.00 a week . . . the week being seven full days "from sunup to sundown," plus half an hour of flying time. Henson then had obtained another OX-5 powered *Challenger* (NC 280K) and Lyle logged a lot of time in it. "Dick and I used to go barnstorming, and we would put on air shows with great frequency, and we took people for airplane rides every chance we could find."

One of their flights was made to promote a new (1932) movie and was reported in the local newspaper:

CROWDS SEE PLANES

Saturday afternoon crowds in the downtown section were attracted in large numbers when three planes flew over the city in V formation, at 4 o'clock, in connection with the moving picture, "Lost Squadron," which was shown at the Maryland Theatre. The aviators were Richard Henson, Lyle Mitchell and Joseph McDaniel. The stunt was through courtesy of the Henson Flying Service and the Kreider-Reisner Aircraft Co.

The film starred Joel McCrea, Richard Dix, Eric von Stroheim, and Mary Astor. The plot involved a tyrannical film director who made his aerial stuntmen do perilous tricks, so they band together to stop him.

As was the custom in those days, "real pilots" wore their helmet and goggles whenever and wherever they went—it was their "badge of courage." Once, while on a local swagger through the streets of downtown Hagerstown, Lyle stopped at the 5 & 10 cent store where he met a young salesgirl—petite, brown-haired Mary Heefner. Lyle then found it convenient to stop quite often at the store. Soon, he learned that Mary spent her summer vacations at a relative's farm in a remote mountainous area of an adjacent county. Consequently, NC280K became the first airplane to land in Wolfsville, Maryland.

Movie star Barton MacLane prepares to depart in his Fairchild 24.

Radio and TV personality Arthur Godfrey flew a Bell 47H-1 to Hagerstown for a checkout in the new Fairchild F-27.

General James H. Doolittle visited Fairchild to fly the new C-82A.





It was while working for Henson at the Hagerstown airport that Lyle was able to begin photographing interesting planes and pilots in earnest. There were many transient visitors to the field and many famous people came there to take personal delivery of their new Fairchild airplane. (In 1934, the name Kreider-Reisner Aircraft Company, Inc., subsidiary of Fairchild Airplane Manufacturing Corporation, was changed to Fairchild Aircraft Corporation.)

Although Lyle had no formal training in the art of photography, he soon displayed a knack of being able to capture personalities in unposed shots.

Dick Henson continued to do test flying for Fairchild and eventually Lyle began working for them also on a part-time basis . . . for 38 cents an hour. Lyle's log shows a lot of Fairchild 22 time during 1933 and 1934.

By April 1934, Henson Flying Service had stepped up from the OX-5 powered C-2 *Challengers*, with the purchase of a used Brunner Winkle *Bird* with a 100-hp Kinner K-5 engine (NC % 1M). Checked out in the *Bird* on April 22, Lyle flew it for about seven hours that summer. Then Dick Henson acquired his first "brand new" airplane—an Aeronca C-3 *Collegian* with a 40-hp Aeronca E-113 engine (NC 14536). Lyle started flying that little airplane almost exclusively on November 26, 1934. On December 6 of that year he also went to work full time for Fairchild Aircraft (for 45 cents an hour). Consequently, he was there to work on (and photograph) Fairchild's Model 24, the prototype of the Model 45 "Sedan of the Air," the XC-31 cargo plane built for the U.S. Army, and the Model 91 "Baby Clipper" amphibian.

Since Lyle now had a "high paying" job, he decided it was time to get married. Mary Heefner became Mrs. Lyle S. Mitchell on July 5, 1935.

One of only five built, a Bellanca *Airbus* P-200 (NC 796W) parked in front of the Henson Flying Service "complex."

A 1938 Pitcairn PA-36 *Whirl Wing* autogyro (NX-20674) stopped for fuel at prewar Hagerstown. The aircraft had a 165-hp Warner-Scarab engine mounted amidships in the streamlined all-metal fuselage.

A PT-19 seen in 1942 through the legs of a Warner-powered Fairchild 24.

All of Lyle's 1935 flying time was in the Aeronca C-3—except for one flight in a three-place Travel Air W-4000 (NC 647), powered by a 110-hp Warner-Scarab engine, on October 8.

In early 1936, Mary found that she was "with child"—the author. Shortly thereafter, on March 16, Lyle resigned from Fairchild to take a job with "more security" at the local U.S. Post Office as a Special Delivery mailman. However, that did not prevent evening and weekend trips to the airport for photo-taking opportunities. That included photos of the only Fairchild Model 46, built in 1937, which used the Clark-Fairchild developed *Duramold* construction process. By then, Lyle had progressed from a series of smaller cameras to an Ikoflex-Zeiss twin-lens reflex camera.

In 1938, Fairchild Aircraft developed and first flew their Model 62 monoplane trainer. By 1939 the company had received a contract to produce the airplane in large quantities for the U.S. Army Air Corps as the PT-19 primary trainer. The first production PT-19 rolled out the factory door in February 1940 and Fairchild was soon turning out two and three airplanes a day.

On June 24, 1940, Lyle returned to Fairchild's hangar and flight line and became intimately acquainted with their PT-19 and subsequent -23 and -26 series aircraft. During the remainder of the 1940s, he was also able to photograph the AT-21 twin-engine crew trainer (built with the *Duramold* process), the first flight of the XC-82 *Packet*, the M-84 *Family Plane*, and the development of the C-119 *Flying Boxcar* series of aircraft. On the other side of the Hagerstown airport, Willard R. Custer was building his *Channel Wing* aircraft.

The 1950s produced a lot of experimental Fairchild aircraft (and missiles) built for the military and another Fairchild trainer almost made it into production—the T-31. In 1954, Fairchild began a production run of 300 C-123B *Provider*

NC 13572, a somewhat rare Waco UIC, parked at Hagerstown.

Standard Oil Company of New Jersey's Loening C2H (NC 137H) visited Hagerstown in the 1930s.

This 1938 photo shows the new Fairchild 24 paint scheme designed by Raymond Loewy.





assault transports for the Air Force. The year 1958 saw the introduction of the Fairchild F-27 airliner and executive transport series aircraft.

During all of those years, Lyle had been a foreman (since March 1, 1943) on the flight line and in the hangars—and thus had the opportunity to take thousands of photographs. His camera collection had grown over that period of time such that he had customized a suitcase with felt-lined compartments for various camera bodies, lenses, filters, flash attachments and bulbs, light meters, and film. The suitcase was usually always close at hand. Later, Lyle narrowed his choice of cameras to a Hasselblad 1000F plus various smaller 35mm ones, such as a Voigtlander Vitessa, which could be carried in his coat pocket. Always having a fully equipped darkroom, he did his own developing and printing as well as color film processing.

In 1964, Fairchild obtained the rights to build and market the Swiss Pilatus Porter in the U.S. In the same year the company purchased (for cash) the Hiller Aircraft Company and the corporate name was changed to Fairchild Hiller. Lyle was now General Foreman of Hangar Operations at Hagerstown.

By 1968, Fairchild had established an FAA-approved Repair Station for inspection, maintenance, overhaul, and modification of Fairchild aircraft and Lyle was the manager of the facility.

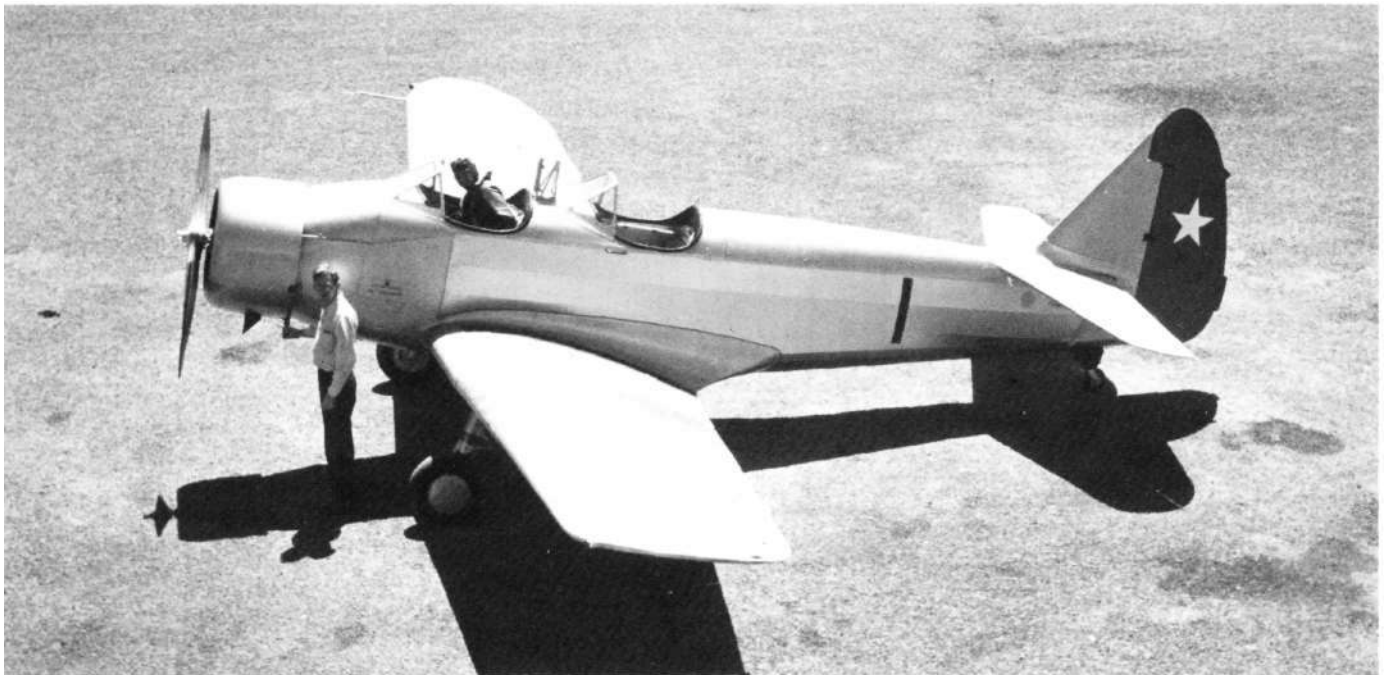
Lyle retired from Fairchild in 1973—but not from the airplane business. Because the company was no longer building the F-27 series of aircraft and not interested in continuing to run a Repair Station, they decided to scrap their remaining inventory of parts—over Lyle's protests about them not supporting "his" customers.

So, he placed bids and obtained much of the inventory—which the company required to be removed from the premises

Anxious to fly, this Piper J-3 decided not to wait for a CAP pilot (or a propeller) in this WWII photo.

The XC-82 takes off on its first flight. Note that no landing gear doors are installed.

A C-82A with civilian registration as the United Flying Mail Car on the Hagerstown ramp, as seen from under the nose of a Fairchild 24.



immediately. Included with the numerous items were such things as complete outer wing panels and fuselage sections—which were still in their assembly jigs. Lyle had to scramble to have crates built and hire a local contractor with a Grove hydraulic crane and trucks to transport the bulky items to a large hangar and every empty garage and chicken coop that he could rent.

Later, in 1976, Fairchild delivered the last American-built *Porter* to the Royal Thai Air Force and Lyle bought the remaining 15 ship-sets of sheet metal parts and other items from the company.

Today, over 20 years after acquiring the F-27 parts, Lyle is still selling items from his inventory—and never had to place a single advertisement—word-of-mouth among the operators of the Fairchild aircraft did fine.

In addition to the airplane parts business, the author keeps Lyle busy with requests for copies of photographs for a long list of future articles for the *Journal*.

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Dave Lewis (who later would own the only Fairchild Model 46) prepares to crank the first M-62B to be delivered to Chile.

Lyle S. Mitchell self-portrait (using timer and tripod) in the early 1940s.

