

Boardman and Polando's Great Adventure - "Cape Cods" 1931 Record Breaking Flight

By Dorothy B. Polando

It was in the early twenties that Russell Boardman and John Polando met on a warm summer night at the amusement park at Revere Beach, Massachusetts. One of the most exciting concessions was the motorcycle act where Russell thundered around the silodrome to the roar of the many delighted, excited spectators who witnessed the daredevil climb up the vertical walls with speeds that made it possible to rise to the uppermost edge of the trembling wall then maneuver the descent to the dirt track below.

The night before, Russell had overshot his mark and, with a girl on the handlebars, had gone over the wall and dropped to the dirt in the parking area. Fortunately, neither one was seriously injured but Russell hoped and prayed that it not occur again. He was just lucky.

On the night John Polando was there to witness the act, he waited until the crowd had disbursed and then introduced himself to this remarkable man. They took an instant liking to each other and quickly discovered that they both were automobile mechanics and that they both had been bitten by the flying bug although neither one of them was a pilot. John's first love affair with aviation had begun in 1920 when he met an aviator by the name of Lt. Havey on a day when John was supposed to be testing the brakes on a doctor's car. John was working for a local dealership; that is until he returned the doctor's car many hours late and was handed his pink slip. Now he had no job but plenty of time to get acquainted with his new-found friend, Lt. Havey. John, being an accommodating young man, volunteered to get a bottle of milk and a sandwich for his new friend. His reward was permission to caress this beautiful bird, to sit in the pilot's seat, touch the joy stick and actually learn the process of attaching a parachute to the underbelly of the *Jenny*. Lt. Havey was using a grass strip on the Lynnway in the city of Lynn as his base of operation. That this would eventually turn out to be a disaster did not lessen John's determination to pursue and conquer the art of flying.

Russell was the first to learn to fly and became the pilot of the of an aircraft named the "Arrabella." He rigged it so that he could broadcast advertising for some of the merchants in and around the Boston area. He was based at East Boston Airport, now Boston International Airport.

John, on the other hand, gave himself a Christmas present of his pilot's license in 1929. He had flown with friends and finally had received three and a half hours of instruction with

Windsor (Mike) Harlow, an instructor with 67 hours total flying time. John also flew with Ponton D'Arce, a veteran pilot of some note in the Boston area

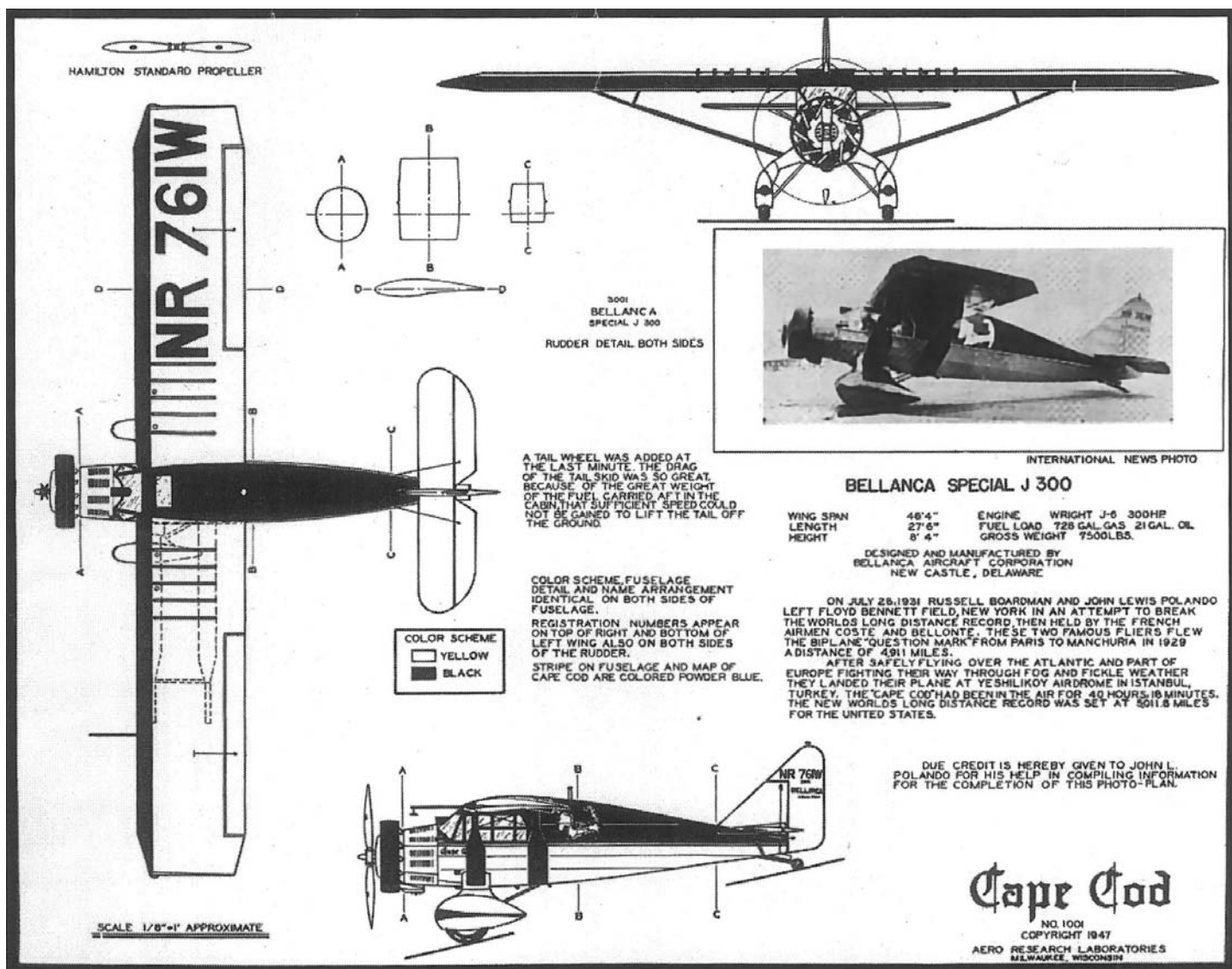
Russell's brother, Earl, owned the Rim Rock Ranch in Scottsdale, Arizona, and Russell was hired to manage the ranch. In his free time he continued to develop his flying skills. Russell's skill as a pilot was greatly enhanced by the company he kept and the actors, who owned and piloted their own planes, welcomed the new man into their elite league of pilots. Wallace Beery was one of the most talented and able pilots. He and Russell became firm friends. Some of the Hollywood stunt pilots found Arizona an excellent place to hone their flying skills. So Russell was exposed to all types of little-known maneuvers. Russell learned to wing-walk, dropped from aircraft to moving automobiles, and did many of the stunts that had appeared or would appear in the movies.

On his return to the Boston area the friendship deepened between Russell and John. They spent most of their waking hours now at East Boston Airport. John worked for the Wright engine distributor. Russell was with East Coast Aircraft Company so they were in contact with each other almost daily.

Russell told John of his wish to try to better the long distance flight of Coste and Bellonte from Paris to Manchuria in 1929. Coste and Bellonte had flown 4,911 miles. To set a new



Russell Boardman (back to camera) and John Polando (third from left) with friends working on the "Cape Cod" in Teterboro, N.J. (From the author's collection)



Specifications on the Bellanca Special J 300, "Cape Cod." (From the author's collection)

record, one had to exceed the existing record by at least 82.137 miles to qualify. In their discussions, John and Russell studied the possible destinations such as Paris, Moscow and Rome but none of these were distant enough to establish a new record. The only viable airport beyond that was Istanbul, Turkey.

The word got around the airport of Russell's intentions and scores of pilots begged to be a part of this great adventure. Russell and John had talked of the flight but until Russell said, "John, how much do you weigh?" and John replied, "127 pounds." There had been no firm agreement. Friendship and companionship were not enough. Every pound of flesh represented a pound of fuel so weight was, in a way, one determining factor in John's favor.

When presented with the exciting and challenging prospect of establishing a new world's record, Russell's brother Earl and a friend, J.P. Stevens, decided to chance it and became their financial backers. With Earl they planned long and carefully each detail of the proposed flight. Russell, through Earl, purchased the Bellanca NR761W, the "American Legion," renam-

ing her the "Cape Cod." She weighed 2,400 pounds empty but grossed for the flight at 7,460 pounds carrying 720 gallons of gasoline and 25 quarts of oil.

Russell and John had a near disaster in the fall of 1930 when a spark caused a fire that burned the fabric off part of the fuselage and the right wing. Russell called Mr. Bellanca in Wilmington, Delaware, the factory, and explained their problem. He instructed them to truck the plane to his hangar in Wilmington. John was the one to deliver the almost bare metal frame for repairs and Mr. Bellanca assured them that the plane would be restored. The ensuing, seemingly endless months dragged and in late November they were advised that the repairs were completed. The combination of protracted repair time, the onset of winter and consistently poor weather conditions continued. By July, they were ready to attempt the record flight.

The fuel capacity of the plane, as she was originally designed, was insufficient for their requirements so Mr. Bellanca suggested that they carry additional fuel in five-gal-

lon cans. The main fuel tank was their seat. The extra can were placed behind them within easy reach for funneling into the main tank over their shoulders. Disposing of the empties was a hazard and they practiced for hours, pushing them out of the cabin over New York's outer harbor. The can was held out the window, John tapped Russell on the knee. Russell would push the stick forward, lifting the tail, and the can would pass harmlessly under it. In spite of their careful planning one can struck the stabilizer on the flight shaking the "Cape Cod" and scaring the wits out of the pilots but doing no appreciable damage. Everything not crucial was eliminated. They had no interior walls, no brakes, no lights, no doors, no flotation gear, and no radio. Their "relief" containers were ice cream cartons that were thrown out the window. Only once did that prove uncomfortable when a container broke, soaking them with the contents.

The pilots spent hours plotting the actual course to be taken. Headings were altered to compensate for magnetic deviation and other considerations described on the charts they carried. They lived at the Y.M.C.A., swimming in the pool and used the exercise equipment to keep in shape for the long flight.

Now, pretty much in readiness, they had to wait for a favorable weather report. Dr. Kimball was the meteorologist whose predictions were used by practically all of the pilots on the East Coast. So they waited anxiously for his instructions.

Before departure they had met Charles Lindberg who wished them success in their crossing but failed to tell them of the agony of sitting in one position for many hours. He might have told them that they needed some kind of muscle relaxant and that they needed lip balm to soothe the dryness they would experience, but he didn't.

The "Cape Cod," powered with a Wright J-6, 300-hp engine, performed perfectly. It sputtered just once on the flight. The weather after leaving the comforting coast of Newfoundland deteriorated considerably. To fly above the cloud base they were forced to climb to 12,000 feet, so saw nothing of the water in crossing. The artificial horizon failed to function within the first few hours, and most of the instruments behaved erratically. Once, the movement of the full fuel can caused the magnetic compass to fluctuate and they made a 180-degree turn and were, momentarily, headed back to Newfoundland.

Sleep was virtually impossible. Russell drowsed briefly until John had to waken him. The weight of his body, leaning against the stick made it impossible to maintain their altitude. John, too, fell forward briefly forcing the "Cape Cod" to lose altitude. Russell woke John with a "Hey you really had a long nap. You look great - really terrific." The hoax worked like a charm. John perked up and felt more rested and refreshed.

The first land they saw at the end of their Atlantic crossing was a large expanse of green. They had reached Ireland. John and Russell agreed that some of the tension was over and that their next objective was the double track railroad that led to London. Their greatest concern had been to successfully cross the Atlantic since so many of the flights had been lost to its depths.

The *New York Times* had paid them \$2,500 to take newspapers with them. Their first delivery had been in Newfoundland where they had dropped the designated number of issues of the newspaper via small parachutes attached to the bundles. The next bundle of papers was for London and they were duly delivered, much to the delight of everyone. It also confirmed their safe crossing of the Atlantic.

The heading now for the "Cape Cod" was south to Paris. Here the designated bundle of papers was dropped after dark so was not discovered until the following day.

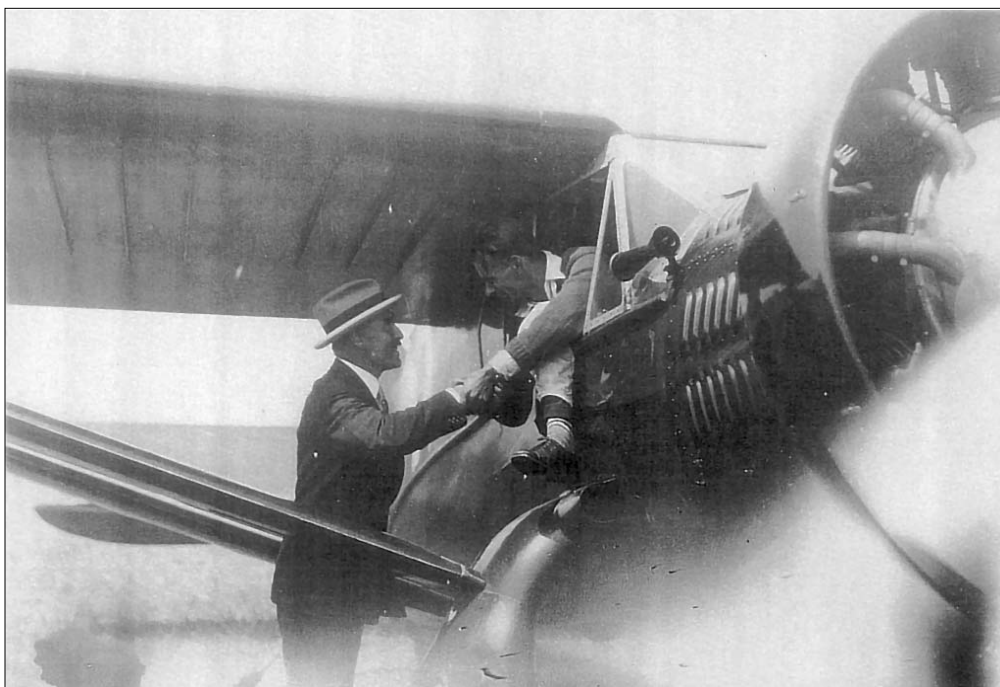
Now they headed east toward Munich which proved a real problem since the mountains in that area rose to 14,000 feet. The "Cape Cod" would have picked up ice when traveling at greater than 12,000 feet. It was now the night of July 29. Clouds hung over the mountains making visibility practically zero. To rise above the clouds was to pick up ice. They decided to fly in circles watching warily the rugged mountains that could mean disaster.

They circled in the valley for hours, praying fervently, that they would be freed from their prison at daylight. After a seemingly endless night, the glow of breaking day fingered its way between the peaks and spread its rays across the horizon helping them find the Danube. Headed confidently for the minarets of the ancient city of Istanbul, they seemed to be more at ease except that the fuel was now getting low. The fuel gauge was a vertical tube and with the dip of the wing the fuel did not register at all. A missed approach could spell disaster.

Because of the added weight of the fuel, Mr. Bellanca had moved the landing gear so they could takeoff on Long Island. Now that the fuel tanks were empty the adjustment for takeoff made the plane nose heavy. On the final approach Russell told John to crawl back as far as he could to the rear and take anything he could find to weigh the tail down. The landing was perfect. Russell then slowed his taxi so that John could resume his normal seat in the plane. After checking their fuel gauge they discovered that they had about 20 minutes fuel left. A missed approach could have been a disaster.

Ambassador Joseph Grew greeted John with a warm handshake and, asked hesitantly, if the flight was non-stop. John was puzzled by the question and assured him that it was. Later they learned the reason for Ambassador Grew's question. One newspaper had stated that a plane had landed to refuel in Wales but no names were given. They were Herndon and Pangborn on a routine fuel stop on their around the world flight.

Ambassador Grew and his daughter, Anita, had motored to Yeschilkeuy airport twice in their effort to be the first to greet the flyers. Twice they had left and then returned, fearful that if the Americans arrived they would not be there to greet them. Yeschilkeuy was a relatively busy airport and there were frequent departures and arrivals. As the "Cape Cod" came into view, they studied it closely. The colors were identifiable, they knew they had chosen well. The dispatch had described the "Cape Cod" as having a yellow and black fuselage, and the leading edge of the wings were also black. The plane, now on its final approach, fitted the description perfectly. When the plane rolled to a stop the ambassador and his daughter were the first to greet them.



American Ambassador Joseph Grew greeting John Polando as he exits the "Cape Cod" through the window at Yesilköy Airdrome, Turkey, on July 30, 1931. (From the author's collection)

The barograph installed by Mr. Heinmueller in New York was removed and placed in the embassy safe in Istanbul. It was kept there until it could be read by a representative of the Federation Aeronautique Internationale who could confirm the figures recorded. It also documented the fact that the trip was non-stop for a landing would have stopped the barograph.

The final reading showed a total of 5,011.8 miles in 50 hours and 8 minutes. Russell and John had, indeed, set a new world's non-stop record for a single-engine aircraft.

A surprisingly large crowd gathered within minutes. Most of the press personnel had become discouraged and left, but some remained and were attempting to get to the unshaven, rumpled, limping but gracious arrivals. Ambassador Grew, very diplomatically, tried to shield Russell and John but the reporters were there with cameras, pencils and pads and a million questions and would not be denied.

A huge table had been set with flowers, fruit, sandwiches, cheeses and drinks including champagne. It was so quickly and beautifully done that it was a bit like rubbing Aladdin's magic lamp. There were toasts to the heroes in several different languages drunk with gusto by everyone until Ambassador Grew was finally able to convince the multitudes that these men needed time to rest after their long ordeal. With that, he and Anita shepherded the happy, exhausted men into the Embassy Buick and whisked them off to the embassy. There they met and were photographed with the ambassador's staff before going to the Pera Palas Hotel where they would be housed for the duration of their stay. Russell and John occupied the bridal suite. Ambassador Grew requested that they wave at the screaming crowd of admirers from their balcony before retiring. The police had posted a notice that no horns were to be blown in the immediate vicinity of the hotel for 24 to 36 hours so the men could get some rest.

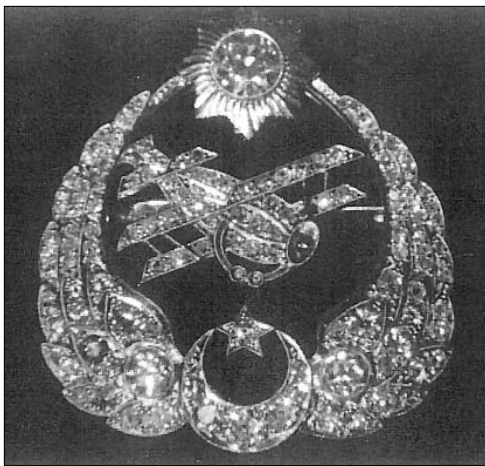
As the door closed on the grinning, exhausted ambassador, both men headed for their private bathrooms. John claimed he was so tired that he filled the tub with only a couple of inches of water because he was afraid he would fall asleep and drown. They both complained that they had difficulty getting to sleep because they were so exhausted. Some time during the night Russell woke up famished. He went to the door of the suite and opened it. Standing at attention was a man in some sort of a uniform. With gestures Russell was able to ask him for food for they had not been able to eat much at the airport due to the confusion and crowds. Russell must have done well with his sign language for in a few minutes trays of food arrived with wine and, unfortunately, cigarettes. He wakened John, and for the first time in many, many hours they had an

appetite and inviting food. They proceeded to eat, enjoying the wine and the Turkish cigarettes. By now they were relaxed and the stress was over. They were so relaxed that they fell asleep and set the sofa on fire. The room filled with smoke and they were obliged to run for help.

The days following their arrival were filled with activities. Each had brought a suit of clothes on hangers in the plane. They now found that the activities scheduled by the Ambassador demanded many items of apparel that they, of course, did not have. A tailor was called and within a day they had bathing attire, white suits, white shoes, sport jackets, slacks and underwear - everything they would need to be presentable. There were banquets, tennis matches, regattas and even a presentation to the president of Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Pasha. The flyers' meeting with the nation's leader was a particularly noteworthy achievement considering that many statesmen of high rank in diplomatic circles, had failed in their efforts to do the same.

During their meeting with the president, a representative of the Turkish Aviation Society stepped forward. A box was handed to Ataturk from which he took diamond brooches and pinned one on the lapel of Russell and an identical pin on John. They differed in that the emblem was set with a small sapphire in Russell's and an emerald in John's. They were to learn that only five of these handsome and very valuable diamond medals had ever been made and that one had been given to Charles Lindberg for his flight from New York to Paris in 1927.

Behind the many accolades bestowed upon Russell and John was the untiring work of our distinguished Ambassador Joseph Grew. Many years later John was to receive a copy of the report Ambassador Grew placed in the Congressional Record which claimed that in all his years as an ambassador, and he had held many posts, this event was by far the most



The diamond brooch presented by United States and President Mustafa Kemal Pasha of the country of Turkey and the Turkish Aviation Society. Turkey. (From the author's collection)

In the ensuing days Russell and John were each presented with beautiful oriental silk rugs made by Turkish prisoners as well as the great silver medallion, also from Mustafa Kemal Pasha.

Russell and John had official papers granting permission to fly on to Japan but, on inspection of the "Cape Cod," John had found that lack of lubrication in the top cylinders had done irreparable damage. He had done everything possible but the engine was "sick" and needed a major overhaul. Their departure from Istanbul included instructions that they fly directly over the Mediterranean to Marseilles because the Turkish had military installations along their coast. But, with the limitations on the performance of the "Cape Cod," they flew until they were out of sight of Istanbul then took the "chicken" route staying near land in case of an emergency.

Fortunately, there were no problems and they arrived in Marseilles where they supervised the loading of the "Cape Cod" into the hold of the vessel and they boarded the *Excaliber* for their return voyage home.

Their return to New York City produced a ticker tape parade similar to that given all returning heroes. They met acting Mayor McKay and were hosted and toasted for days. Then it was off to Boston where there was a repeat performance. Russell and John enjoyed every minute of it. John had a copy of the 35mm film of the parade in Boston with Mayor Curley, Governor Ely and a host of dignitaries. On that film, too, was the parade in Hyannis and the presentation of beautiful silver trophies by their fans. Strangely, the ticker tape parade was not included in the film so he had only memories of the New York City festivities.

With some help from their friend and mentor, Bob Stevens, they were presented Distinguished Flying Cross by President Herbert Hoover. Russell's is number 275 and John's 276."

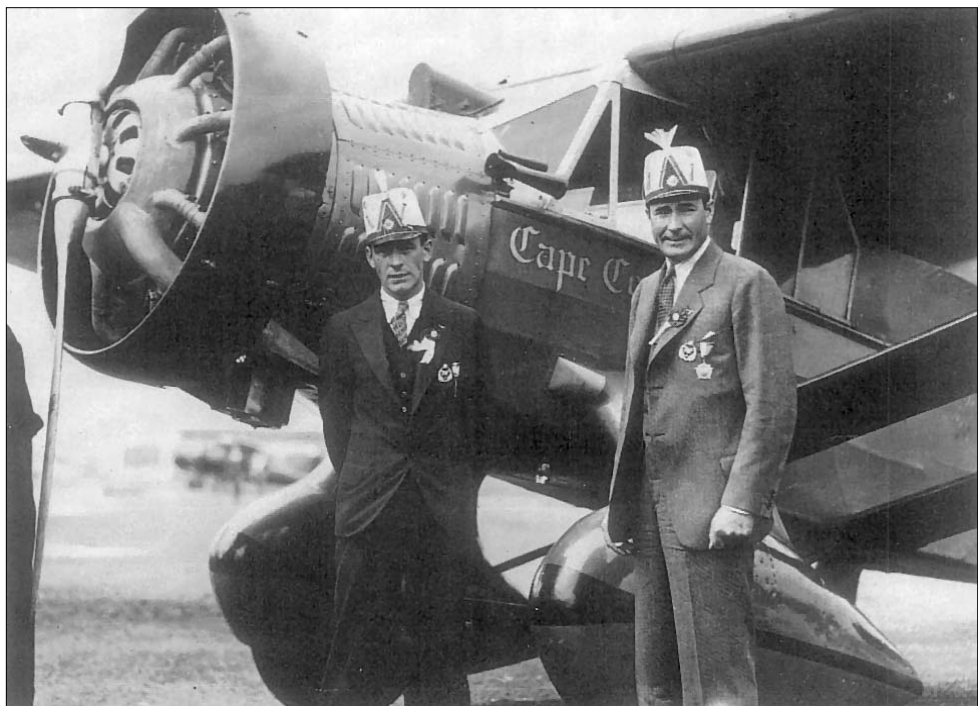
The record breakers hired an agent to book speaking tours to Chicago, Detroit, Philadelphia

rewarding. The two aviators were fine young men, well spoken and deeply moved by the enthusiasm and hospitality of the Turkish people. He felt that they had made a giant step in confirming the diplomatic relations between the

and Boston and for a couple of years made appearances for a modest sum. The frequent travel lost its glamour as they spoke to diminishing numbers at Rotary Clubs, Elks Clubs, and Kiwanis gatherings. Then nothing. The loss of Russell in his accident with the Gee Bee R1 at St. Louis, Mo., in 1933 was the most heartbreaking thing that had happened to John.

In 1981, their friend and fellow pilot, Sanluel Sirkis, hosted a 50th Anniversary party in Hyannis. It was a gala affair and J. P. Stevens, their old friend and backer in 1931, was one of the guests. John was deeply touched to think that anyone even remembered their historic flight of July 28, 1931. Attending the party were 1,068 friends who heard astronaut Gene Cernan, guest speaker, tell that his trip into space was supported by hundreds on the ground monitoring his every move. He said he would not have considered the trip that John and Russell had made where they were completely alone and unaccounted for hours with no emergency options if the "Cape Cod" had failed. When John spoke, he had tears in his eyes as he said that this gala affair would have been perfect if only Russell had been there to enjoy it with him.

John Polando died in 1985, four years after the gala. Twenty-one years after his death, it is appropriate, and gratifying, that we should remember the flight he made with Russell Boardman. It was a feat few would predict from Russell, son of a farmer and John, son of an immigrant Italian fruit dealer. Their flight demonstrated how far reckless audacity, with a dollop of good luck, could take intrepid men and women during aviation's Golden Age. It was a time when the only things that glittered more than gold were the dreams in the eyes of brave aviators. Russell Boardman and John Polando were such men.



John Polando, Russell N. Boardman and the "Cape Cod" on tour in the United States following their record making flight. (From the author's collection)