

The Flying Pioneers

By HAROLD E. MOREHOUSE



ROBERT G. FOWLER

Early Wright Pilot

First to fly across United States from West to East

Robert G. Fowler first gained prominence in motor car racing, then graduated into the flying ranks late in July, 1911, when he entered the Wright Flying School at Dayton, Ohio. He was then living at Gilroy, Cal. After but a few days of flying training from instructors Turpin and Brookins, he shipped a Wright Model B plane to San Francisco to enter the Hearst Transcontinental Flight Contest. (1) He was the first to enter and the first to start in the event.

On September 12, 1911, Fowler officially started from a field near Auburn, Cal. Circling several times, he rose to about 1500 ft., over twice as high as he had ever been before, and started on his eastward course. Approaching the Sierra Nevada mountains he ran into strong head-winds that really buffeted him about. After sticking with it for nearly half an hour, he gave up and landed in a clearing near the foothills, partially wrecking his plane although he was not hurt. The next morning his mechanics, Ralph Newcombe and Adolph Sutro, helped him get the plane out of the clearing, and they decided it could be rebuilt with the spare parts which they had, except lower wings. They wired to Dayton for the wings and repaired the plane at Colfax, Cal. On September 23d he was ready to start again but after less than an hour in the air, he was back at Colfax, stopped

again by dangerous winds near the mountains. On September 24th he tried again with better luck but after flying about 40 miles, he was forced down with an overheated engine at Emigrant's Gap. Landing in a small pasture, he damaged the plane and repairs took two days. On September 28th he took off and climbed to 7,000 ft., but again he was forced down by overheating and damaged a wheel in landing. It was apparent that the radiator was inadequate for altitude flying.

Fowler decided to ship his plane to Los Angeles and attempt to fly the southern route around the mountains. At Los Angeles his mechanics gave the airplane and engine a thorough overhaul, and on October 18, 1911, he started again from Fremont Park at 4:55 P.M. He fitted his machine with a sort of windshield to protect him somewhat from the cold. The course and dates of his flight were as follows:

Los Angeles, Calif.	October 18, 1911
Pasadena, Calif.	October 19, 1911
Riverside, Calif.	October 21, 1911
Yuma, Arizona	October 25, 1911
Tucson, Arizona	October 30, 1911
Douglass, Arizona	November 3, 1911
El Paso, Texas	November 13, 1911
Fort Worth, Texas	November 27, 1911
Houston, Texas	December 2, 1911
Beaumont, Texas	December 7, 1911
Lake Charles, La.	December 7, 1911
New Orleans, La.	January 10, 1912
Mobile, Ala.	January 11, 1912
Brantley, Ala.	January 20, 1912
Bainbridge, Ga.	February 6, 1912
Jacksonville, Fla.	February 8, 1912

On October 21st he came very near to breaking the existing duration record when he was in the air for four hours covering the distance from Yuma, Arizona to Maricopa, N. Mexico. At Tucson he met Cal Rodgers on his flight from east to west, (2) and they exchanged greetings.

On November 5th, at Mastodon, N. Mexico, Fowler placed his airplane on a railway hand car and took off from the railroad tracks; the sand was so deep, soft and dry that he could not get into the air. This was the first time of record that this had ever been done. Fowler reached Jacksonville, Florida, on February 8, 1912, landing on the Moncrief Race Track at 4:30 P.M. Max Lillie (3) and Harold Kantner, who were flying an exhibition date there, greeted him in the air and escorted him into the field. On February 17, 1912, he flew on to Pablo Beach, Florida, a coast resort, to land on the actual surf, 122 days and 2517 miles from his start in California. A major portion of this time as was the case with Cal Rodgers was consumed by bad weather and repairs. While Rodgers succeeded in completing the trans-Continental trip first, and in only 49 days, credit is certainly due to Robert G. Fowler for his courage and determination in completing the flight. His course took him over many long stretches of bad swamp land and, to add to the risks, he made the trip during what is the normal rainy season for the southeastern section of the nation.

After resting for a brief time in Florida, Fowler started giving exhibitions. On February 24, 1912 he flew at Gainesville, Fla., then Waycross, Ga., and on

February 28th carried a movie operator to make pictures from the air. He then flew to Atlanta, Ga. where he remained for one week and again on March 22d, 1912 at Rome, Ga. and was in Chattanooga, Tenn. on May 17. Working north, he was at Kansas City for a time in July, and by Fall he was back in California. In mid-October started flying his new GAGE TRACTOR with Hall-Scott 60 H.P. engine, at Griffith Park Field. On November 7th he attempted to race a Cadillac from Los Angeles to San Francisco. A landing was made at Saugus and in taking off, he crashed but was not injured. Giving up the race, he shipped his airplane to San Francisco where he flew over the City on November 12, 1912.

Flying around San Francisco and vicinity through January and February, 1913, Fowler carried passengers and made over-city and cross-country flights. He changed his engine from 60 H.P. to 80 H.P. in his Gage Tractor, and was making arrangements to install floats for water flying. In March he was engaged by a motion picture firm to make a flight over the Panama Canal, from ocean to ocean, carrying a camera operator.

Fowler and his party shipped for Panama on April 1st and on April 12th made preliminary flights at Panama City, Canal Zone. On April 27, 1913, he and a motion picture camera operator, a Mr. Duhem, flew across the Isthmus. Leaving Panama City at 9:45 A.M. they landed 1 hour, 45 min. later at Colon, making the flight from West to East. First circling after take-off to gain altitude, he followed the course of the Canal, at times circling to obtain better pictures at various points. Nearly one-half mile of film was used in securing these first aerial views of the Canal Zone. Fowler also became the first aviator to fly from coast to coast for the second time albeit this one was a very short trip. The air line distance was approximately 50 miles. While this was the first non-stop flight across the Canal Zone, Clarence de Giers had previously made a number of flights in Panama in 1912.

Fowler returned to California and began preparing for the Summer, 1913 exhibition season. He appeared at various theaters in San Francisco and its vicinity, showing the Panama aerial movies and making his own personal commentary. Through July and August, 1913, he was at Overland Park, Kansas City, Mo. for an extended engagement giving exhibitions and carrying passengers. While there, on August 9th he made a balloon voyage as a passenger with the well known balloonist Capt. H. E. Honeywell. After an active exhibition season he was back in San Francisco in December. During that month he contracted to fly periodic aerial inspection patrols of electric power lines between Oakland and Oroville, Cal. for the Great Western Power Co., a new use for aviation at that time. On December 24th, he delivered several sacks of Christmas mail by air to Sacramento, Cal., as a stunt.

During all of 1914 Fowler continued his exhibition work and conducted a flying school. In the Spring of 1915, he and Silas Christofferson operated flying boats, carrying passengers at the Panama Pacific International Exposition at San Francisco. He became the manager of all flying activities at the Exposition, and was a mem-

ber of the special board held to investigate Lincoln Beachey's fatal accident. (4)

In July Fowler gave up his passenger carrying concession at the Exposition to manage all the flying activities and in August, 1915, he left San Francisco to join the staff of the Curtiss Aeroplane Motor Co. at Buffalo, N.Y. In October he was at Manhasset, Long Island, N.Y. instructing wealthy New York sportsman Harry Payne Whitney on a new Burgess-Dunne Hydroplane. At this time Fowler obtained Hydro Pilot License No. 36.

Fowler spent the winter of 1915-1916 at Miami, Fla., with a group of wealthy New York sportsmen who had an aviation colony there for the season. Fowler with pioneer aviator Charles Willard and Edmond Lowe, Jr., of New York, formed the L.W.F. Co. at Long Island City, N.Y., to build aeroplanes. Their first airplane was brought forth in May, 1916, a land, tractor, biplane with a 135 H.P. Thomas engine. It had probably the first molded wood, monocoque fuselage and was an innovation for its day. The airplane was a success, and the Company later became engaged in the defense effort during World War I. During the Summer Fowler kept an airplane for his personal use at the Garden City flying field and flew many hours in sport and social use. Both he and Willard resigned from the L.W.F. Company in July, 1916.

In 1917 he was back on the West Coast, where he formed the Fowler Aeroplane Co. in San Francisco, to carry passengers and make charter flights, which he operated until 1921. In later years he continued to fly and retained his interest by assisting with gliding and soaring activities, the building of airports, etc. On February 6, 1952, the new airport at San Jose, Cal. was named in his honor and a plaque in the administration building was dedicated to him, covering his many aviation achievements. His name also appears on the Wright Memorial Plaque at Dayton, Ohio. The history of his later flying activities is left to other chroniclers.

As an "Early Bird", still living in San Jose, Cal., he has devoted his entire life to aviation. He was scheduled to be the Official Starter at the California to New York Relay Race, sponsored by the Silver Wings Fraternity on 26 August, 1961. This event will commemorate the 50th Anniversary of his 1911 transcontinental flight and will end in New York on Labor Day. (5)

FOOTNOTES:

- (1) Hearst Transcontinental Flight Contest Ref. JOURNAL, A.A.H.S., Volume 6, No. 2, pp 101-102.
- (2) Calbraith Perry Rodgers, Ref. JOURNAL, A.A.H.S., Volume 4, No. 3, pp 207-214.
- (3) Max Lillie, Ref. JOURNAL, A.A.H.S., Volume 4, No. 3, pp 207-214.
- (4) Lincoln Beachey's Last Ride, by E.D. Weeks, JOURNAL, A.A.H.S., Volume 6, No. 2, pp 105-111, illus.
- (5) For news of another 50th Anniversary Commemorative Flight see JOURNAL, A.A.H.S., Volume 6, No. 1, pp 1-2 and Volume 6, No. 2, p 100.

THE FLYING PIONEERS is continued overleaf with Mr. Morehouse's biography of Major George E.A. Hallett.

VIN FIZ Commemorative Flight

At this date, as we go to press in early September, we have little to report concerning the VIN FIZ flight. Due to the very large expense involved in such an undertaking it was proving to be more of a problem than first imagined. Peter M. Bowers began his preparations for a 50th Anniversary Commemorative flight almost two years ago, and had, in early August, gotten his VIN FIZ replica to the final stages of completion. Meanwhile, Don Diviney had gotten together with Andy Anderson and proposed to fly Anderson's replica over some of the Calbraith

Perry Rodgers Route. Bill Fleming has done a magnificent job of public relations in writing to the local chambers of commerce and others along the way. This has been aided and continued by Bob Brooks with assists from other A.A.H.S. Members, and as a result a fair amount of publicity has been issued by the national news media. However, the issue is still in doubt, and Peter Bowers indicated that he was strongly considering making a flight from West to East, emulating the great Robert G. Fowler, whose story we print above.

MAJOR GEORGE E.A. HALLETT, U.S.A. (Ret.)

Early Curtiss technician, pilot and engine expert

George E. A. Hallett came from England with his parents and settled at San Diego, California. Mechanically inclined, he was keenly interested in aeroplanes and eagerly read everything he could about them. After finishing school, he worked as a mechanic apprentice for the Baker Machine Company of San Diego. He also took a home study correspondence course in engineering. He saw his first flying in January, 1910, when Curtiss pilot Charles K. Hamilton made some flights at the Coronado Polo Grounds, a great inspiration to him. At this time he was also getting acquainted with two local amateur aviation enthusiasts, Bernard F. Roehrig and Charles Walsh, who were experimenting with aeroplanes and teaching themselves to fly at Imperial Beach, south of San Diego. Hallett enjoyed spending his weekends at the beach to watch their progress and help them make repairs and tune their engines. In late 1910, Glenn Curtiss arrived in San Diego and made arrangements to lease North Island as an experimental and training base for winter operations. Hallett made his acquaintance when Curtiss rented a boat from the Baker Machine Co. to transport men and equipment to and from the island. Needing more help, Curtiss soon made arrangements to borrow Hallett from the Baker Co., the start of a long association.

There at North Island, in January, 1911, Hallett was one of the small group of Curtiss men who succeeded in making the first successful flights off the water after many trials and tribulations. Curtiss had also brought along school machines, and late in January started training operations. The students were: Lt. T.G. Ellyson, (U.S.N.), (1) Hugh Robinson, Lincoln Beachey, (2) Charles C. Witmer and Robert St. Henry. Toward Spring, Curtiss broke camp at North Island and returned to Hammondsport, at which time Hallett returned to his former job at Baker Machine Co. However, Charles Witmer had just finished his course of flying instruction and joined the Curtiss Exhibition Team for the season. He offered Hallett a job on the road as his mechanic and Hallett jumped at the chance.

Their first exhibition date was at Wichita, Kansas, followed by exhibits in Texas, Arkansas, Indiana and North Carolina. After some dates there, they shipped the plane to the factory at Hammondsport for an overhaul and checkup. From there they went to Pittsfield, Mass. where Witmer had a bad smash-up and was quite severely injured. While Witmer was recovering, Hallett went to Hammondsport to work in the factory until August.

Witmer was ready for work again in time for the famed Chicago Meet at Grant Park August 12-20, and Hallett rejoined him. After the Meet, Witmer and Hallett were given a new plane with both land and water gear for their first date at Atlantic City, N. J. From there they toured Michigan, Wisconsin and Minnesota, and in January, 1912 to Miami, Florida with three machines to set up a Curtiss base for the winter. One was a two-place hydroplane for passenger carrying; the other two were land types for school work. Here Hallett started learning to fly.

He and Witmer were sent abroad in April, 1912 to deliver and demonstrate several planes that Curtiss had sold in Europe. While in Europe, they were in Russia three times, Germany twice and France once. They returned to Hammondsport in June, 1913, and Curtiss assigned them at once to the new Flying Boat which was about ready for delivery to Harold McCormick, the Chicago industrialist. Hallett and Witmer accompanied the boat to McCormick's residence at Lake Forest, Ill. and had it flying in late July when it was to be used for social flying and commuting to Chicago. They remained in Chicago for the balance of the 1913 season

where they were in complete charge of McCormick's aviation activities. Later McCormick offered the two men the use of his Flying Boat for a winter season in Florida. They accepted and were stationed at the Royal Palms Hotel, Miami over the winter months carrying passengers. In the spring of 1914, the Flying Boat was taken to Hammondsport for a factory overhaul before returning it to Chicago.

At Hammondsport, Hallett was informed of the plans for the Wanamaker AMERICA trans-Atlantic flight attempt, and Curtiss wanted Hallett to be mechanic and co-pilot with Lt. J. C. Porte, (R.N.), on the planned flight. Curtiss arranged for Hallett to have some additional flight training with the veteran instructor, Doc Wildman. Many changes were made in the plane and hull of the AMERICA before it would get off the water with the necessary 2200 lbs. of fuel. On one occasion, Curtiss was busy experimenting with the throttles while Hallett handled the controls in a couple of short flights. Curtiss remarked that this was the first time he had been in a plane piloted by someone else. Later that year, the AMERICA project was abandoned due to the impending war in Europe.

Hallett went to his home in California for a brief vacation, then reported to North Island, San Diego, in late fall of 1914. His first assignment was the new Curtiss Model "N" Military tractor which was to enter the Army Competition Trials. This airplane later became the well-known "JN" World War I training plane.

In December, Hallett left the Curtiss Co. for a government position as Army Aviation Mechanician at North Island. He organized a course of lectures for engine mechanics, devising a method of investigating engine troubles. This project led him to write a thorough and detailed book entitled "Aeroplane Motors - a Course of Practical Instruction in Their Care and Maintenance", which became the standard text. Hallett's engine course grew rapidly and by 1916 became a regular part of ground school instruction.

After war was declared in 1917, Hallett was called to Washington and placed in charge of organizing mechanics schools for the Air Service. Later, commissioned a Major in the U. S. Air Service, he was sent to Wright Field, Dayton, where he established the Power Plant and Aero Repair Departments, and aided the Massachusetts Institute of Technology to lengthen and improve their course for Air Service Engineering officers.

Following the Armistice, Hallett was transferred to McCook Field, in charge of the Power Plant branch. He established an up-to-date Engineering Department and Engine Test and Development facility. As an advocate of air-cooled engines, he vigorously pursued their early development and adaptation. He set up a cylinder research program and, under his direction, fuel research, superchargers, propeller reduction gearing, and many other features were developed. He qualified as a military aviator and during this period was a very active pilot in order to study engine operation in flight.

In December, 1922, Hallett resigned from the Army to become Research Engineer and Section Head of General Motors Research Laboratory, Detroit, Michigan, where he remained until 1937. One of his major projects was laying the foundation for their diesel engine program which later became one of their leading divisions. He retained his active interest in aeronautics and in 1936 was a member of the group that promoted and arranged for the moving of the Wright residence and workshop from Dayton to Greenfield Village, to become a permanent part of the Ford Museum at Dearborn, Michigan.

In 1937, Hallett resigned from General Motors and moved to Tucson, Arizona, where he lived for four years in semi-retirement. When W.W.II came, he moved to San Diego as consultant for Convair, then retired completely after the war to La Mesa, California, where he still



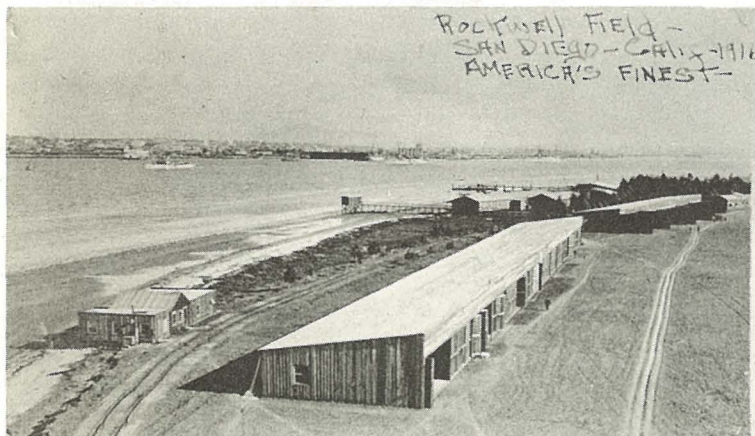
GEORGE E.A. HALLETT

makes his home.

He is an active Early Bird and has recently been able to help in recalling details of the A-1 (the first airplane delivered to the Navy). A flying replica of the A-1 is being made under the direction of Alfred W. Verville, and under sponsorship of the Navy and The Institute of the Aerospace Sciences for the commemoration of the 50th Anniversary of Naval Aviation.

Member J.J. Smith, of 5714 Rimpau Blvd., Los Angeles, forwarded the following pictures from his voluminous correspondence with World War I service personnel. North Island, San Diego, was the scene of great activity from 1911 on, when Glenn Curtiss made his testing base there. These photos give but a glimpse. For the full text of Mr. Smith's letter, see the MAIL SACK, Page 205.

Below - the rescue boat "Pronto" always on duty to give aid to pilots in forced landings in the water. (Photo - Paul P. Begovatz.) Mr. Begovatz was then the pilot of the rescue boat and was later a veteran of the 1st Aero Squadron in WWI. Now resides in Oconomowoc, Wisconsin.



From the album of Chester C. Cole, of Canoga Park, Calif. comes this early photo of the Rockwell Fd., San Diego group including George Hallett, standing, second from right.



Below - The Martin "S" seaplane which held the world's record for endurance at San Diego in 1916 by remaining aloft for 8 hr., 10 mins.

