

"Fleetster" No. 1, in the colors of the New York, Rio and Buenos Aires Airline. (photo - Convair)

Consolidated "Fleetster"

By RICHARD S. ALLEN

Late in 1929 the Consolidated Aircraft Corp. of Buffalo, N.Y. brought out a new airplane. It was an exceptionally "clean" aircraft, with a cantilever wooden wing and a special monocoque metal fuselage developed and patented by Lawrence D. Bell, General Manager of Consolidated. A high-wing, eight-place transport, it was called the "Fleetster" after Maj. Rueben Fleet, the

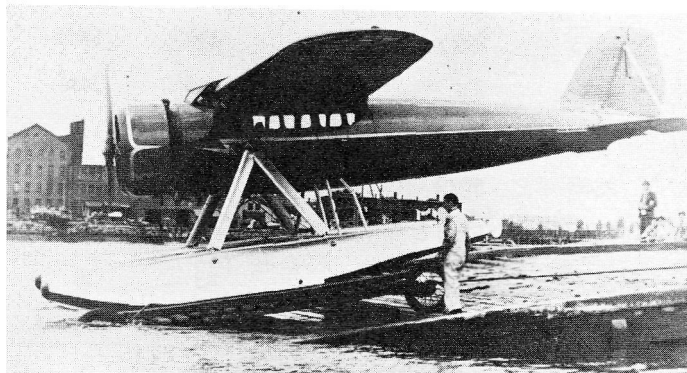
No. 1 on the unique "Boston Dolly" for seaplanes, now in the hands of its third owner, Cape Aircraft, Inc., of Falmouth, Mass. (Photo - Guy A. Ham)

firm's president. Powered by a Series B Pratt & Whitney "Hornet" engine of 525 horsepower, the new airplane was first flown in October, 1929.

Number 1 was the only "Fleetster" built in 1929. Designated Model 17, it received Approved Type Certificate #291. The prototype was tried with both Pratt & Whitney "Wasp" and "Hornet" engines, going through exhaustive tests under the direction of Lt. Leigh Wade, well-known former Army Round-The-World flyer and Consolidated test pilot. The shiny aluminum alloy fuselage was at first left unpainted, and the word "Fleetster" in large letters appeared on the sides, with "Consolidated Aircraft Corp. Buffalo, New York" on the vertical fin.

The original registration, "X-657M" was soon changed to "NC" when the airplane was sold to the New York, Rio & Buenos Aires Airline of New York, for service in South America. Repainted, probably white, with dark wings and trim around the windows, each side of No. 1's fuselage bore the lettering: "N.Y.R.B.A. Line" with a large arrow the length of the fuselage. The name "Fleetster", in the shape of a small streamlined aircraft body, appeared on either side below the windows of the pilot's compartment, and between the registration number and company name on the fin.

The first Fleetster went to South America as an 8-place cabin seaplane, fitted with EDO 5100 floats. It was flown principally on the 625-mile air mail run between Rio and Puerto Allegre in southern Brazil. Howard



C. Stark, who pioneered instrument flying by airlines, was her main pilot, and his book "Instrument Flying" (1931) mentions the "Fleetster on pontoons".

After a brief few months of service, the NYRBA Line merged with Pan American Airways in September, 1930. The Fleetster and some of its NYRBA sister-ships were flown briefly by Pan American, stored, and then sold. NC 657M was returned to the United States, and next appears on the registers as a landplane, being used by the Lycoming engine factory in Williamsport, Penna. as a test airplane for the Lycoming-Smith Electric propeller. Powered by a 450 hp geared P&W "Wasp" engine, it was experimentally licensed X 657M.

Andrew Peddie of Lycoming recalls the Fleetster as "yellowish cream fuselage with large white arrow trim, the wings grey or white". He remembers the aircraft handling very nicely in the air, but difficult to maneuver on the ground due to the fixed tail wheel. It was necessary to blast the throttle enough to lift the tail in order to turn. While at the Lycoming Plant X657M suffered a taxiing accident, hitting a small ditch and damaging the tail wheel and adjacent fuselage. George Brew, then General Sales Manager and Chief Pilot for Lycoming, did most if not all of the flying of the Fleetster during its stay in Williamsport. Modifications, tests and disposal were all done at Mr. Brew's instigation.

In 1935, Fleetster #1 was acquired by Cape Aircraft, Inc. and used in charter service, once again on Edo 5100 floats. Flying out of Falmouth, Mass. The Cape Company re-installed a P&W A-2 "Hornet" of 525 hp. On floats its gross weight was 5700 lbs., and it was thought prudent to reduce the payload from eight to six passengers.

Guy A. "Gus" Ham, Jr., of Cape Aircraft recalls very well flying the Fleetster during this period, and he put about 400 hours on it himself. Cape Aircraft operated the "world's shortest airline" - 50 miles in length between New Bedford, Woods Hole, and the islands of Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket, using two Fairchild 71's, a Travel Air 6000W, a Waco YKC and the Fleetster, all on floats. Ham's most memorable charter job with #1 was a trip from Albany, N.Y. to Corner Brook, Newfoundland in August, 1936. William Stoneman, paint and wallpaper merchant of Albany,, and his fishing buddy, famed trial lawyer Edward J. Reilly arranged this pleasure jaunt.

Gus says "the ship performed beautifully and handled like a kitten". It would pull a full load out of glassy water in 12 to 15 seconds, and flew at 143 mph. The only complaint he had about this Fleetster's flying characteristics was that it was extremely stiff on lateral control, and resisted any efforts to free it up. His firm finally discovered that this prototype model had aileron arms (upper only) about 8" shorter than on similar Fleetsters, which had arms about a foot long. The arms were attached to bell-cranks operated by push-pull tubes. When Ham's hands were sweaty, with the summer flying season in full swing, he could not grip, the wheel hard enough to operate the ailerons. To solve the problem he wound heavy twine around the wheel, and at the end of the season his palms were well calloused. As a landplane, Gus had exactly the same criticism as Peddie concerning the fixed tail wheel. "The only way the aircraft could be turned on the ground", he says, "was to lock the brakes, hit the throttle, raise the tail slightly, and release one brake, blasting it around. Not the safest procedure in the world!" Mechanics who worked on the ship jokingly referred to the lifting bars ahead of the stabilizers as "pall-bearer's handles", and suggested that the cabin should be lined with purple!

On acquisition from Lycoming the Fleetster's color scheme was cream, orange and black. Cape Aircraft repainted it a brilliant red, with gold stripe and lightning bolt beneath the cockpit. They flew it from 1935 to 1939. On retirement from service, it was stored, on wheels, alongside the hangar at Falmouth for some months.

In 1940, the plane was purchased by Merrill Hale of

Narragansett Aviation, Hillsgrove, Rhode Island, and ferried to the Rhode Island State Airport there by George Nelson. For the Fleetster's last flight, Nelson picked a day when there was no air turbulence. The fuselage was found to be badly corroded, and the plywood veneer on the wings had started to separate. The windshield was missing and the engine instruments inoperative. The purchasers had stuck a few cloth patches on top of the wings, but the main spars appeared to be in excellent shape.

The engine was started with no trouble. On taxiing to the end of the field, a crew had to turn the tail around, using the "coffin handles" to lift her. Nelson started to make a fast taxi run down the field to get the feel of the ship, and in two hundred feet found himself airborne! He flew around the Falmouth port a few times and then on to Hillsgrove. Of No. 1's last flight declares Nelson: "The aircraft flew exceptionally well, and I would have liked to put more time in it."

On arrival in Rhode Island, the airplane's engine was purchased by Allen Rooke, operator of the Allen School of Aeronautics, and used in his mechanics ground school. According to Arthur R. Jones of the R.I. Division of Aeronautics, the Fleetster's aluminum fuselage and wings were "stored in the Herman Burlingame barn, a couple of miles WNW of Hillsgrove, and later junked and disposed of."

Eleven years of hard service on both wheels and floats over two continents is a good record for a prototype airplane. Consolidated's Fleetster #1 certainly proved itself.

Specifications: FLEETSTER Model 17 c/n 1 (1929)			
Length overall	31' 9"	Wing Span	45'
Height overall	9' 2"	Chord at Root	104"
Wing Area	313.5 sq. ft.	Tread	8'
Gross Weight	5,300 lbs.		
Useful load	2,150 lbs.		
Weight empty	3,150 lbs.		
Weight (on floats)	3,650 lbs.		
Fuel capacity	150 gals.		
Seats for six passengers,	pilot and co-pilot		
Top speed with load	172 mph		
Rate of climb	1,300 ft. per min.		
Landing speed	"just under" 60 mph		
Service ceiling	20,000 ft.		

Acknowledgements are due to; Guy A. Ham, Glens Falls, N.Y.; Andrew Peddie & Harold Morehouse, Williamsport, Pa.; Howard Levine, Riverside, R.I.; Allen Rooke, Warwick, R.I.; Arthur R. Jones, Hillsgrove, R.I.; Maj. George W. Nelson, Dover, Del.; CONVAIR DIV. General Dynamics, San Diego, Calif.; Contemporary Aviation magazine files.

Richard S. Allen, Round Lake, N.Y.

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Robert G. Hufford.

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