

Down East
October 1965

MERE POINT and the FIRST WORLD FLIERS

By E. Carle Libby

ON September 5, 1924, a dense fog along the coast had not yet shrouded the sky above Mere Point, Maine, a peninsula in Casco Bay, about six miles south of Brunswick. Most of the summer colonists "from away" had already left for their winter homes, but those among the two dozen cottagers who lived in or near Brunswick were still in residence. Suddenly, the afternoon quiet was broken by the drone of airplane motors, and presently the startled people on the Point caught a glimpse of three aircraft, nosing their way southward at a low altitude above the sea.

Airplanes were generally an uncommon sight in those days, and the group of three reminded the on-lookers that the U. S. Army Air Service fliers, the first men ever to circle the earth by airplane, were expected to complete their flight that day by landing at Boston, where a huge official reception awaited them. As the planes disappeared from sight and sound, the handful of people on Mere Point resumed their activities. But within a few minutes, the craft could be heard returning, and this time it was evident that they were landing in the Bay.

Mrs. Joseph S. Stetson and a few friends, who were playing auction bridge, dropped their cards and were the first women to reach the shore. Young Joseph Stetson, a lad of fifteen, was playing tennis with his 17-year-old chum, Clarence Johnson. They abandoned their game, raced to the shore, launched one of the rowboats that had been hauled out for the winter, and were the first to reach the planes. Despite their excitement, they improvised a bit of protocol: as the older of the two, Clarence went aboard the first plane they approached, while Joe

held the boat in readiness to take America's outstanding heroes of the age back to United States soil. The boys knew where to borrow anchors and line from neighboring porches and garages and, confident that the occasion justified such liberties, helped the men to secure the three planes. Then they rowed the first world fliers ashore, where Professor Morgan B. Cushing and Mr. Jack Brown greeted them in the name of a welcoming committee that already was being organized among the delighted cottagers.

The six aviators were divided up as house guests among four summer residents, and later the entire colony turned out to play host to the fliers at New Meadows Inn. There the aviators were quickly

A boatload of sightseers row out to the Boston.



recognized by other diners, who asked innumerable questions and collected a sheaf of autographs.

Meanwhile, Lieutenant Lowell H. Smith, commander of the squadron, remained behind with Lieutenant Leslie B. Arnold to handle details connected with their forced landing. His first request was that young Joe Stetson might take him to the nearest telephone. There was only one phone on Mere Point — a public one in George Fuller's combination store and post office. Joe hurriedly commandeered his father's car and, until they saw him drive off to the store with Lieutenant Smith, his parents were not aware that he had learned how to drive an automobile.

Smith first phoned the Secretary of the Army in Washington and then reported to Major General Mason Patrick, commander of the Army Air Service, who was awaiting the fliers in Boston, that the expedition was safely back in the United States. The planes had taken off from Pictou, Nova Scotia that morning, but had been hampered by heavy fog for much of the flight. As they reached the Maine coast the fog worsened, so that the squadron was forced to fly just above the waves, and at one point had almost crashed on a rocky promontory, later believed to have been the island of Monhegan.

By the time they passed over Seguin Light at 3:20 p.m., Lieutenant Smith decided that, with the trip so near completion, it was needless and foolhardy to risk the danger of continuing on in such weather. As they passed over Mere Point, Lt. Smith noted a small area still clear of fog, but hoping at least to reach Portland harbor, continued on to Yarmouth. There the fog was so dense that there was no visibility at all, so the squadron turned back to the clear area, where they set their planes down on the Flying Point side of the Bay, then taxied across to Mere Point which offered more shelter. (Continued)



Above — Many came to view the planes. Right — Young Joseph Stetson, who helped watch the aircraft.



Lieut. Smith chats with Clarence Johnson, who was first to greet the fliers.



Spectators crowd the shores.

At the party at the New Meadows Inn for the fliers — Front row (left to right), Lt. Erik Nelson, Mrs. Joseph S. Stetson, Mrs. Morgan B. Cushing, Mrs. Lawrence W. Smith, Mrs. Frederick Brown, Mrs. Charles T. Burnett and Miss Isabel Forsaith; middle row, Mrs. Alice Laidley, Lt. Henry Ogden, Prof. Morgan B. Cushing, Lt. John Harding, Dr. Joseph S. Stetson and Charles Cahill, manager of the inn; back row, Prof. Frederick Brown, Prof. Charles T. Burnett, Lt. Nelson Wade, Clarence Johnson, Samuel L. Forsaith, unidentified, Mr. and Mrs. Arthur B. Johnson, Herrick T. Nason, Austin MacCormack, unidentified, Lawrence W. Smith and Capt. Solon E. Turner.

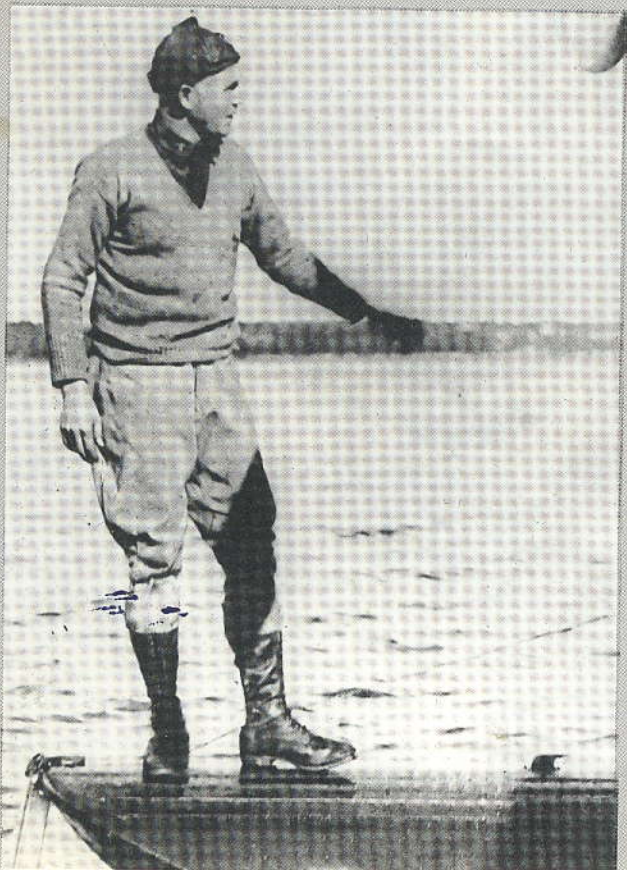




Lieutenants Lowell H. Smith (left) and Leslie P. Arnold relaxing at Mere Point after returning to U. S.

As soon as he reported to his superiors, Lieutenant Smith learned that the U.S.S. *McFarland*, cruising off the coast of Maine, was on the lookout for them, but in the dense fog she was unable to spot the planes at their anchorage far up the Bay. Since the planes would have to remain overnight at the anchorage, Lieutenant Smith enlisted young Johnson and Stetson as guards, with a stern warning that he would hold them accountable for the absolute safety of the

Lt. Erik Nelson aboard his ship, the *New Orleans*, before taking off for Boston.



planes. Even though the fog turned to rain, the boys never relaxed their vigil, alternating rowboat tours of the aircraft with brief periods of shelter aboard one of the launches. At about midnight the *New Orleans*, anchored a bit more to seaward than the *Chicago* and the *Boston II*, started to drag her anchor. Joe quickly woke Lieutenant Nelson, who was lodged at Captain Solon E. Turner's house, and together they secured the anchor and kept the plane from drifting farther.

By 7 p.m. the first newsmen had arrived, and from then until after midnight, stood in line to use the post office telephone, a wooden wall instrument with a crank for ringing "central" to place a call. On Saturday morning, September 6, a day of clear skies with a brisk west wind, Mere Point was invaded by hundreds of people, thrilled to be on the scene of such exciting events.

While the aviators and their many admirers were waiting for the arrival of a truckload of special high test aviation gasoline from Bath and its transfer to the planes by rowboat, a formation of eleven U. S. Army De Havilland planes arrived over the scene, with General Mason M. Patrick, commander of the Air Service, leading the squadron. Unable to land without pontoons, the formation circled the area and dived in turn to salute the heroes, then flew off to land at Old Orchard Beach and wait until the world fliers came along to be escorted to Boston.

THIS historic flight had begun in Seattle on April 6th. Following World War I, several countries planned or attempted to be first to encircle the entire world by air, and some of the Army Air Service's most brilliant pioneers aided in achieving the honor for the United States.

After extensive studies of climatic conditions throughout the world, it was decided that it would be far safer to travel westward, rather than to the eastward, as most other countries had tried to do and failed. The start was made in April so as to be ahead of the low lying fog along the coast of Alaska, the typhoon season in Japan and China, and the monsoons in Burma, returning to the North Atlantic in advance of the Arctic winter.

The Navy collaborated with the Army in locating large stores of fuel, clothing, spare parts and other supplies at strategic points along the entire flight route. Some of these depots were located on land and others on ships of the fleet at various stations. At some of the supply points there were stored as many as 480 separate items, with enough parts among them to build an entirely new plane if necessary. The fliers themselves went through a period of thorough training in all phases of repair work on the planes, and after many hours of practice they could overhaul a motor or repair a broken strut in pitch blackness.

The planes they flew were heavy Douglas Cruisers, built by a young engineer, Donald Douglas, at Santa Monica, under the watchful guidance of Lieutenant Erik Nelson, one of the fliers and also one of the ablest practical engineers in the Army Air Service.

The planes measured 50 feet from tip to tip of the wings and 38 feet from the propeller to the rudder. The motors were 12-cylinder water-cooled Liberties that developed 450 hp each. Each plane carried 465 gallons of gasoline, 30 gallons of oil and 5 gallons of reserve water. When loaded to capacity, and with the pilot and mechanic aboard, each plane weighed almost 4 tons.

When the flight started from Seattle, it was under the command of Major Frederick L. Martin and included a fourth plane, the *Seattle*. Along the coast of Alaska, between Chignik and Dutch Harbor, Major Martin crashed against a mountain in heavy fog, and only after several days of weary travel through the wilderness on foot did he and his mechanic, Sergeant Alva Harvey, reach safety. Since the flight had hardly started and the commander was considered lost for several days, their superiors decided to continue with Lieutenant Smith in command.

While crossing between the Faroe and Orkney Islands in the North Atlantic, they had the misfortune to lose the *Boston*, which capsized in an attempted lift aboard the U.S.S. *Richmond* to repair a broken oil line. Lieutenants Wade and Ogden continued on to Pictou by boat and there picked up the *Boston II*, which the Army had sent on the destroyer *Barry*, so that the two men could finish the flight with their companions.

Earlier in their flight the American aviators had aided a British flier, who also was attempting to complete a round the world trip. And information provided by the American fliers enabled the *Richmond* to effect the rescue of an Italian flier, Locatelli.

The American world fliers landed in 27 different countries, in each of which they were welcomed, feted as heroes, and showered with gifts which had to be sent back home on the supply ships.

They took off from Mere Point, Maine at 12:07 on Saturday, September 6 — less than twenty-four hours after they had landed in a rift in the fog, to link Maine forever with the first circling of the globe by air — and landed in Boston for a wildly enthusiastic official reception. In Boston the planes' pontoons were exchanged for wheels, and the fliers arrived back at their starting point in Seattle on September 28, after logging 26,345 miles in a total flying time of 363 hours and 7 minutes.

All of the men received permission to accept decorations from foreign governments and, from their own grateful government, were the first U. S. Army men ever to be awarded the Distinguished Service Medal for services other than those in war.



Lt. Leigh Wade on the wing of *Boston II* as he prepares to leave Mere Point.

BACK at the small settlement on Maine's rocky coast, preparations were swiftly made to mark the site where the fliers had landed, so that future generations would have knowledge of it.

Since the city of Boston had been designated as the first landing site of the fliers after their encirclement of the globe, it vociferously claimed that honor, protesting that the stop at Mere Point should be disregarded as an accident, due to bad weather.

Governor Percival P. Baxter of Maine was equally determined that Maine was the actual landing place of the first flight around the world, and should be so regarded. On September 12, 1924, in his usual brisk and forthright manner, he announced to the press that he had ordered a bronze plaque to be placed in a memorial boulder at Mere Point to commemorate the first landing of the world fliers on U. S. soil. A suitable boulder was located in an adjacent field and a neighboring farmer, Winfield Smith, worked for many days with a heavy team, a capstan, and a block and tackle to move it to the desired spot. On August 27, 1925, the suitably inscribed bronze plaque was unveiled and dedicated in the presence of several thousand persons.

Those who remember the landing of the world fliers at Mere Point, Maine in that exciting autumn of 1924, share the sense of history expressed by Admiral Robinson in congratulating the aviators: "Never again will anyone fly around the world for the first time."