



# Eagle Screams



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September 2008

The Screamin' Eagles Giant Scale Model Airplane Club meets on the 2nd Thursday of the month. If you have any questions about club activities or meeting location please contact one of the following members.

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## September 11 Meeting will be held at MARCS Field



The Thursday September 11, 2008 meeting will be held at the MARCS Kettle Field. Come early and fly. If weather is inclement we will meet at the Crossroads Bar. Most likely this will be the last meeting at the MARCS field this year because it's starting to get dark pretty early. See you at the field. ➔

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**Trez/Ed Sez** – By Le Roy Stuczynski

**H**i Eagles. I just got home from doing my Contest Director and transmitter impound thing at the 16<sup>th</sup> Annual Lodi Area Radio Control Club (LARCC) Fun Fly. This is a fun event, open to all types of aircraft. The weather was great and everyone had a great time. They have a great raffle each year with great prizes. If you were observant you noticed I used the word great 4 times. That's because the event is just "plane great". They sell raffle tickets in advance so they are easily able to cover the cost of any prizes they purchase. Additionally the club actively pursues numerous prize donations and a bunch of the members also donate prizes. I purchased \$25 worth of raffle tickets and, to my surprise, I won a \$50 Shell gas card. I'd say I had a good day! We had 29 registered pilots including several past and present Eagle members. I strongly encourage you to attend next year. They do a great job.

Speaking of gift cards, Eagle Mark Johnson bought the last gift cards we had and donated them to the LARCC raffle. Thanks Mark!

Seeing I got an extremely late start on the newsletter, I am going to spare you the agony of my usual babbling and include a Historical article I received from my friend "MO" Chance, WWII Corsair #530 VMF-312 "Checkerboarder's" Squadron pilot. He is full of aviation history and I am proud to know him personally! Enjoy the below article! *Le Roy* 

**Upcoming Events**

September 13, 2008  
Bong Rec. Area Float Fly

September 14, 2008  
Edgerton Float Fly

September 20, 2008  
Menominee Falls Fly & Swap

September 21, 2008  
Peshtigo Float Fly

October 12, 2008  
Oshkosh Auction

November 16, 2008  
Brillion Auction (at DePere)

**The Airmail Takes Wing** – Submitted by Merritt (MO) Chance



Of interest to me, because my Grandfather was the Post Master of Wash, DC when the first Air Mail flight went from DC. Lt Edgerton was the pilot and I have a letter that went on that flight, signed by Edgerton. For pilots, a little later, the flyers followed the airways beacons. Today's equivalent of the guides is the VOR. The biggest difference, the timing of the flash on the old lights to the passing of the rotating beacon, is done electronically, giving you a bearing.- before you had to time between the tower flash and when the rotating beam shown, to determine where you were in relation to the tower. A bit of history. MO 

**In an epic filled with stress, confusion, and painfully comedic overtones, as the start of something grand** *Condensed from a narrative by C V Glines*

**Airmail began long before the invention of the airplane**, or even the balloon. It began with pigeon post used by armies many years before the birth of Christ to send messages long distances, but airmail as we regard it began on May 15, 1918, when the world's first scheduled airmail route, between the nation's capital and New York, was inaugurated. The distance of the route was 218 miles, and one daily round-trip was made six days a week. Army Air Service (USAAS) pilots flew the route until Aug 10, 1918, then the Post Office Department took over the entire operation with its own planes and pilots.

Attempts to start airmail service came as early as 1912, when it seemed that airplanes might develop as a practical means of transportation. Recommendations were made to Congress that year to appropriate \$50,000 to start an experimental service. Many government permits were issued to make short exhibition flights with mail, but it was not until 1916 that sufficient funds were made available to try scheduled operations. Bids were solicited, but none was received. However, WW1 caused improvements in aircraft to be made rapidly, and in fiscal year 1918, Congress appropriated \$100,000 for development of an experimental airmail route between Washington and New York.

To the surprise of postal officials, Col E A Deeds, head of the Signal Corps' Aviation Section (later the Army Air Service), offered to operate the postal route with military planes and pilots. The offer stemmed from a request that combat pilots be given more cross-country experience before being sent overseas. Flying mail over a fixed route would offer valuable experience. On Mar 1, 1918, the Post Office Department made an agreement with the War Department.

Maj Reuben H Fleet, Col Henry H "Hap" Arnold's executive officer in charge of planning instruction, was concerned about training pilots at 34 fields in the US—setting up an experimental airmail service was far from his mind. He had enough problems without worrying about what he considered to be unrelated responsibilities. On May 6, he was told by Secretary of War Newton D Baker that Arnold had recommended him for the job of getting the airmail route going by May 15.

**Fleet complained that there were no planes** capable of flying from Washington to Philadelphia and New York. "The best plane we have is the Curtiss JN-4D Jenny, and it will fly only an hour and twenty minutes. Its maximum range is 88 miles at a cruising speed of 66 miles per hour." He also mentioned the shortage of pilots, how very few Air Service pilots had any cross-country experience, and the lack of mechanics. He would need much more than eight days to modify some planes, test them, and train pilots. But Baker was adamant. Postmaster General Albert S Burleson had already issued a press release announcing that an airmail route scheduled for daily flights five

days a week between Washington, Philadelphia, and New York would be inaugurated on May 15, and he was not going to back down.

Fleet was furious, but called on Curtiss Aeroplane Corporation to convert six JN-4Ds with 150hp Hispano-Suiza engines. The Jennys would need a hopper to carry mailbags replacing the front seat, and extra gas and oil tanks for longer-range operation. A total of 12 modified Jennys would eventually be required.

Next he made arrangements with the owner of Belmont Park, a Long Island racetrack, to use its infield as a terminus in order not to interrupt the training of pilots at Hazelhurst Field at nearby Mineola. Bustleton Field, in north Philadelphia, was selected as the midpoint station. The Washington field would be Potomac Park's old Polo Grounds, a 900' x 300' grassy area between the Tidal Basin and the Potomac River. Fleet wanted to use the airport at College Park MD, but postal officials objected that it was nine miles away, too far from the main post office.

Mechanics were hurriedly located and ordered to report to the three fields. Fleet asked for six Air Service pilots and was told to choose four—the Post Office Department would choose the other two. Fleet selected Lts Stephen Bonsal, Howard P Culver, Walter Miller, and Torrey H Webb as the most experienced pilots available — only Culver had more than four months of flying experience.

**Post Office Department officials** selected Lts George L Boyle and James C Edgerton, two recent flight-training graduates. Fleet later learned that Edgerton's father was purchasing agent for the Post Office Department and Boyle's future father-in-law, Judge Charles McChord, was an Interstate Commerce commissioner. Edgerton and Boyle had graduated only a few days before from flying school at Ellington Field TX. During their training they had flown one cross-country training flight, a short hop to a field about 10 miles away. Both had only about 60 hours of student pilot time.

Fleet was upset about the two assignments made solely on the basis of political contacts, but he had no choice. On May 13, he went by train to New York with five pilots, leaving Boyle in Washington to take the first flight to Philadelphia. The modified JN-4Ds had arrived at Hazelhurst Field at by the time he arrived, but were still in crates. Fleet had only 72 hours to get them assembled! Mechanics and pilots worked around the clock, but by the afternoon of May 14, only two were ready to go.

Leaving Webb in charge of getting the other planes ready, Fleet formed a plan and commandeered a stock JN-4D from Hazelhurst Field to escort Edgerton and Culver to Bustleton Field and stay overnight. The next morning he would fly one of the modified JN-4Ds on to Washington so that Boyle would have the honor that Judge McChord wanted him to have. Webb then would leave Belmont Park at 11:30 am on the 15th and fly the New York mail to Philadelphia. Edgerton next would fly Webb's mail pouch and the Philadelphia mail from there to Washington.

When Boyle arrived at Bustleton from Washington, Culver would take the Philadelphia mail, along with the pouches Boyle would bring from Washington, to Belmont. From then on, those four pilots, plus Bonsal and Miller, would make all the trips during the experiment.

**But Fleet's best-laid plans went awry** from the start. He took off from Belmont in late afternoon for the 90-mile flight to Philadelphia in thick haze and fog, followed by Edgerton and Culver in their faster JN-4Ds. Fleet lagged behind in his lower-powered Jenny and soon lost sight of them. "I climbed through the fog and came out at 11,000 feet, almost the ceiling of the plane. I flew south guided only by magnetic compass and the sun until I ran out of gas and the engine quit. Since we didn't have 'chutes in those days, there was nothing I could do but ride the Jenny down. I broke out of the clouds at 3,000' over farmland, so I just picked out a nice pasture and landed.

"A surprised farmer sold me a five-gallon can of gas but I had trouble getting it in the tank without a funnel. Perhaps three gallons went in the tank and the rest all over me, but darkness was coming and I couldn't wait to get more from town. I asked him the direction to Philadelphia and took off. Two miles from Bustleton Field I ran out of gas again and landed in a meadow. Since no telephone was available, I persuaded a farmer to drive me to Bustleton. Culver and Edgerton had just arrived after similar experiences, so I sent Culver with aviation gasoline to get my plane and fly it in.

"There were so many things wrong with our planes and their engines that we worked all night to get them in safe flying condition. For example, one gas tank had a hole in it and we had to plug it up with an ordinary lead pencil. Next morning, one machine was flyable, so at 8:40 I took off for Washington and landed at the [Polo Grounds] in Potomac Park at 10:35. The mail was due to start 25 minutes later!"

While Fleet agonized over technical flying details, Capt Benjamin Lipsner had been detailed to take care of administrative matters. He was waiting nervously at Potomac Park—although not a pilot himself, he knew he would be criticized if anything went wrong with the arrangements, especially since President and Mrs Woodrow Wilson, and many other VIPs had been invited to witness the take-off of "the first plane in history to carry mail at an announced time to and from designated places on a regular schedule irrespective of weather."

**The Polo Grounds had never been intended** to be a flying field(DC), but it was the only open flat space available in the city at the time. Towering trees stood like sentinels around the field—on earlier test flights, Jennys just barely cleared the trees. Lipsner was greatly relieved when Fleet circled the field, threaded his way among the trees, and landed. He asked Fleet if Boyle did not show up, would he take the first run. Fleet said he would, but Boyle—accompanied by his fiancée—arrived at the moment. Producing a road map he had strapped to his

thigh, Fleet instructed Boyle to follow the railroad tracks northward out of Washington's Union Station all the way to Philadelphia.

A mail truck, escorted by a motorcycle, rolled up to park nearby. Four mail bags weighing 140 pounds and containing 3,300 letters were unloaded. Washington postmaster **Merritt Chance** held one of the bags open as President Wilson dropped in an autographed letter to New York postmaster Thomas Patten. Postmaster General Burleson called that the "first aeroplane stamp to be sold by [his] department." He also presented Boyle with a bouquet of flowers and Fleet with engraved watches for himself and the six pilots.

The bags were placed in the plane, and Boyle climbed into the cockpit. Sgt E F Waters slowly turned the propeller three times to prime the engine. The Boyle closed the ignition switch and Waters shouted, "Contact!" and gave the prop a mighty heave. The engine coughed once and died. Waters tried again. And again, but the engine would not start. Fleet thought the problem might be the spark plugs, but they checked out fine. Suspecting fuel problems, he ordered Sgt Waters to check the gas tank. Waters climbed on the wing and inserted a dipstick — it came out dry. In the excitement, everything had been checked but the gas tank!

Fleet ordered the tanks of three nearby aircraft to be drained of fuel for Boyle's plane, and dispatched a truck to the Navy yard to borrow gasoline. Boyle was finally underway 45 minutes late, but otherwise everything seemed to be going as planned. While Fleet remained to greet **Edgerton** on his arrival from Philadelphia, Lipsner returned to his office for a phone call from New York. After similar ceremonies there, Lt Webb had departed Belmont on schedule with mail from New York. An hour later another phone call came in from Bustleton Field. Webb had arrived there and turned the mail over to Edgerton, who loaded it along with the southbound Philadelphia mail. Culver loaded his northbound Philadelphia mail and waited for Boyle, but when Boyle did not arrive in a reasonable time, he took off at 2:15 pm and arrived at Belmont to a rousing welcome.

**A phone call came to Arnold from Boyle** about an hour after he had left the Polo Grounds. Lost and nearly out of gas, he had landed in a farmer's field at Waldorf MD, 20 miles *southeast* of his takeoff point. The plane had flipped over on its back and the prop was splintered, but he was unhurt. Instead of following the railroad tracks northward, Boyle had followed a branch line out of the rail yard that took him southeast instead of north—an unreliable compass was no help. He had become not only the first official, scheduled-airmail pilot to depart with mail from Washington but, unhappily, had also become the first airmail pilot to get lost and the first to have an accident. His mail was unceremoniously trucked back to Washington.

Meanwhile, Edgerton had landed on schedule at the Polo Grounds that afternoon to be greeted by a much-relieved Fleet and a small but enthusiastic crowd. He carried 150 pounds of letters and copies of *The New York Times*. The next day, Boyle's mail bags were sent on the scheduled northbound flight. That flight carried 600 letters, including the one President Wilson autographed—it was later auctioned for the benefit of the Red Cross for \$1,000.

The first day of the airmail service was termed a complete success by Post Office officials, although Fleet, Lipsner, and a few other government personnel felt differently. While no one else seemed to worry about Boyle's flying skill, Fleet wanted a replacement assigned, but Postmaster General Burleson asked Col Arnold to "give the young man a chance."

Two days after his forced landing, Boyle took off again, with Edgerton flying ahead in a Jenny following the four-track Pennsylvania rails to make sure Boyle was headed in the right direction. About 50 miles north of Washington, where the railroad crossed the Susquehanna, Edgerton waved Boyle on, confident that he could not get lost going the rest of the way to Philadelphia, and returned to Washington.

**But Boyle did get lost again.** Completely disoriented after Edgerton turned back, he edged southward again in the areas spring haze and followed the shoreline of Chesapeake Bay in a semicircle. After three hours and 15 minutes, low on fuel, he landed in a pasture at Cape Charles at the tip of the Virginia Peninsula—in his report of the first day's operation, Fleet commented: "[Only] the Atlantic Ocean and lack of gas prevented him from going farther."

Boyle bought tractor gas and oil from a farmer, asked for directions, and took off again. He found Philadelphia and flew around the city looking for Bustleton Field until he ran out of gas, crash-landing between two trees on the Philadelphia Country Club golf course, only a few miles from his goal! Although both wings were sheared off and the landing gear and fuselage smashed, Boyle escaped unhurt. Once more his mail was trucked away.

To Fleet's dismay, postal officials again requested that Boyle "be given a third chance and, if he fails, the Department will take the responsibility for his failure." Fleet denied the request and brought in Lt E W Killgore, who served successfully during the three-month experiment despite five forced landings from mechanical failures.

In a later interview, Fleet said that Boyle's performance was understandable. "There were no maps of value to airmen in those days. Official state maps of the region were all of different scales and showed only political divisions with nothing of a physical nature except cities, towns, rivers, etc. We had to fold large maps of the USA into a strip to have everything on a uniform scale. Naturally, they contained little detail. In addition to poor maps, the magnetic compass was highly inaccurate, affected by everything metallic on the plane. Pilots needed a sixth sense about navigating, and many didn't acquire this until they had flown a long time. Boyle simply didn't have enough training to do the job and should not be criticized too severely."

Lt James Edgerton, the other Post Office Department selectee, served during the entire three-month experiment without an accident, and flew more trips and had more flying time (106 hours) than any of the other five pilots, and only one forced landing caused by mechanical difficulties. Burluson gave him a special commendation for "judgment and courage as well in storms as in fair weather."

USAAS pilots continued to fly the New York-Washington route between May 15 and August 10, 1918, without much more public notice beyond the first two or three days. Although few knew it, the pilots still had their difficulties. The pledge to keep on a regular schedule six days a week "irrespective of weather" drove the pilots to take exceptional risks. However, unplanned landings due to mechanical malfunctions were relatively infrequent, considering the times. The airmail pilot's greatest threat—then, as always—was

**At the end of the first month of operations**, the Post Office press release noted that 10,800 pounds of mail had been flown over 1,000 miles at an average speed of 70 mph. Edgerton was mentioned as having made 20 perfect flights without "a stop en route, and without damaging a plane."

On June 3, the first airmail flight was scheduled between New York and Boston on a single round-trip basis. For public relations and goodwill weather purposes, Lt Gustave Vannelle, a French aviator, was chosen to make the first flight along with a mechanic, but he crashed on take-off with both men suffering minor injuries. On June 6, Lt Torrey Webb was given a Curtiss R-4 for the trip with mechanic Robert Heck.

Webb became lost in a severe rainstorm, landed in a pasture to ask directions, then finally landed at Franklin Park Aviation Field in Saugus MA, where the plane hit a mudhole and flipped over—neither Webb nor Heck was injured. After repairs, Webb flew to New York in bad weather on June 11 with 64 pounds of mail and Boston postmaster William Murray as a passenger. Webb later recalled, "Visibility was zero, and I just skimmed over telephone poles all the way."

Although postal officials bragged about the new postal service, the public did not want to pay the extra charge for airmail stamps, and loads averaged less than 50 pounds daily. Yet, when the Army's airmail experiment ended after three months, operational statistics were impressive. Delivering 40,500 pounds of mail, Army pilots had made 270 flights, of which 53 were forced down because of weather and 16 by mechanical problems. They had flown 421:30 hours without a fatality or serious injury. Lt Edgerton had the best record, with 52 trips covering 7,155 miles and only one forced landing.

**They proved that regular schedules were possible** if a suitable system was in place with properly maintained airplanes and trained pilots. The pioneers set a standard for those to follow as civilian employees of the Post Office Department.

The last USAAS flight was Aug 10, 1918. The Post Office then officially took over the operation and continued until Sep 1, 1927. By the time the Air Mail Service was fully replaced by commercial operators flying under government contract, transcontinental routes were established, radio navigation aids and "blind flying" instruments were being developed, and planes were flying day and night. Today's modern airline industry is the direct result of those pioneering efforts.

## A Little Bit of Humor





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