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WINGS OVER TAMPA - AND FLORIDA

Only a handful of Tampons, blessed with long lives and memories, can recall the earliest flights to and over our city. The records are faded or destroyed, but perhaps we can recapture some of the brighter - or lighter - moments from the material available. Join me for a flight back to the early days of daring bird-men, who pioneered the air as their forebears had pioneered the new continent and the 11 new frontier" of Florida.

Before we focus on Tampa itself, we should put the picture in perspective by a brief account of aviation activity in other parts of Florida. The first anticipation of coming events was an ordinance put forth by the City Council of Kissimmee to regulate flying over their airspace. The detailed ordinance (actually written by an attorney who was side-lined with an injured leg) covered every then conceivable aspect of air travel, contemplating airships which could carry a thousand passengers. It astutely forbade the discharge of any substance, fluid or solid, over the city's territory; and provided that the town marshal should have a "speedy pursuit plane" with which to apprehend any violators. The publication of this document, in 1908, attracted both derision and serious attention all over the United States, as well as in South America and Europe. Ironically, Kissimmee has never had the scheduled air service which the city fathers were trying to attract by exempting common carriers from regulation for fifteen years.

The next year, 1909, saw more visionary activity in Florida. A doctor at the naval base in Pensacola devised an air ambulance, in which the patient was to be carried alongside the doctor-pilot and evacuated to suitable care facilities. The plane -crashed in

its first trial flight, with no injuries, and the unimpressed War Department refused to support further experiments despite the doctor's lobbying efforts in Washington.

Jacksonville, under the leadership of Cadillac dealer Claude Nolan, formed the first aviation association in the southeast. One member, Bob Kloeppel (later known as a hotel operator and civic leader) built his own plane and crashed it in Jacksonville in December, 1909 - escaping without serious injury but with diminished enthusiasm for pioneer piloting. In those days, a good pilot was one who didn't make the same mistake once.

The first successful flights over Florida were made in February 1910 by Lincoln Beachey, who earned \$1500 for flying over the grounds every day at the Orlando Fair while it was in progress. In May of 1910, Claude Nolan of Jacksonville was the first Floridian to fly as a passenger - a thrill enhanced by the fact that one of his Cadillacs beat an



Tony Jannus' seaplane as it landed on the Hillsborough River on its inaugural flight, January 1, 1914. The picture was taken near the present Platt Street Bridge by Mrs. J. J. Lunsford, with notations made later by one of her daughters. The Mugge Building - erected as a liquor warehouse and converted into the Bay View Hotel after the Prohibition Act passed - is shown in the extreme right background.

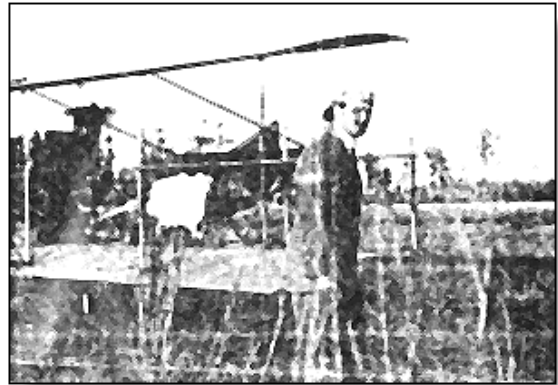
aeroplane in a five-mile race at Daytona Beach. Later in 1910, a Lt. Ely made the first successful takeoff from a ship at Pensacola, and in 1911 this same aviator landed on the modified deck of a moving warship.

Aviation progress continued apace in 1911, with the first experiments in "wireless" communication between ships and planes taking place at Palm Beach. These groping efforts were the foundation of the communication system which we all take for granted today, and which has made possible world-wide travel by air, in safety and comfort.

The year 1911 got off to a flying start in February, when the renowned Lincoln Beachey, of Orlando fame, came to the Tampa Fair, took off from the race-track oval in the fairgrounds, and flew - wonder of wonders!! - at night 11 gracefully over the astonished city". This was the state's first night-time flight.

Miami saw its first aeroplane in 1911 also, just 15 years after Henry Flagler brought the first railroad service to that area. And in September of that year, according to my information, one Bob Fowler left San Francisco on a transcontinental flight which took 155 days and involved 65 landings - most of them unplanned. He finally landed, on purpose this time, at Jacksonville Beach in February of 1912. To improve this record, a pilot named Rodgers crossed the United States in only 49 days, but required 68 stops for repairs and overnight rest. The dates of this achievement are unknown to the writer. As the first World War loomed on the international horizon, we began to see its~effect in Florida. Ample undeveloped land, plus a mild climate year-round, brought about the establishment of training bases at Dorr and Carlstrom Fields near Arcadia.

Here "Boss" Kettering, who later headed General Motors, and Mr. Sperry of Sperry Microwave experimented with radio control of planes in flight. Other notable achievements of that period included a parachute jump, without oxygen or a pressure suit, from an altitude of 20,900 feet. This feat, by a Lt. Hamilton of the Army Air Corps, set a record which stood for two decades.



In this 1929 picture, Walter Beechman, founder of the Beechcraft Corporation, is shown beside an early model aeroplane at Plant Field. Land had not yet been cleared west of the city for the nucleus of Tampa's principal airport.

Our own city of Tampa was busy with aviation matters in the early 'teen years of this century. On January 1, 1914, Tony Jannus established the world's first scheduled airline service between St. Petersburg and Tampa, landing his Benoist seaplane in the Hillsborough River just north of the present Platt Street bridge. While his venture lasted only a few months, it set in motion a train of events which have been recognized with increasing success by the Tampa Chamber of Commerce during the past twenty years. Since 1964, an annual award has been presented to an individual making outstanding contributions to commercial aviation, at a banquet which has become one of the most prestigious events

of the aviation world. The list of honorees is a veritable "Who's Who" of air transportation, and includes great men from a number of countries. On the local scene, your reporter was privileged to know Tony Jannus' mechanic, J.D. Smith of St. Petersburg, during that man's lifetime; and another pioneering Jannus mechanic, J.L. Seale, attends the annual banquets as an honored guest, enjoying himself hugely despite the encroachments of ninety years. Tony Jannus himself left commercial aviation to teach flying to the Russians during World War I, and was killed in a crash in 1915.

Also in 1915, a pilot who shall remain nameless took off from Plant Field (then part of the fairgrounds and now within the University of Tampa campus) as was the custom in those days, and flew low and slow into the front of the old Gordon Keller Hospital on North Boulevard. He was able to walk into the hospital to seek first aid.

The actual entry of the United States into World War I took its frightful toll of Tampa's young men, but also afforded flight training to some who would later develop our commercial airlines and win fame in other fields as well. Prominent among these were U.S. Senator Spessard L. Holland and Peninsular Telephone Company president Carl D. Brorein. Both were Marine Corps flyers during World War 1, and became supporters and customers of commercial aviation throughout their lives.

The finish of "the war to end wars" in 1918, and the surging growth of Florida in the '20s, saw scores of leftover warplanes made available for barnstorming pilots, and almost as many attempts to set up airline operations. Among these were the "Florida Airways" - a venture of Edward V. Rickenbacker, Reid Chambers, and Vic Chenea, all of whom went on to rewarding careers in airlines or other types of business. However, Florida Airways, dependent like all its contemporaries on air mail contracts for 95 % of its revenue, was spectacularly unsuccessful when it tried to link Jacksonville, Tampa, and Miami in 1926. The public still regarded airplanes as exciting to watch, but not a very good way to go anywhere.



Seen in this 1930 picture are members of the Tampa Jaycees Aviation Committee, which had just paved the area around Tampa's airport building. Left to right are John Bize, C. G. Wilkinson, Lewis H. Hill, Jr., G. L. Reeves, and Emilio Pons, Chairman.

To go back a moment, to a time when we must rely on verbal reports and sketchy records, there was a small airport known as "Benjamin Field" about 1920, located west

of Howard Avenue at the present site of the National Guard Armory. When the hurricane of 1921 struck Tampa, pushing five feet of water into Bayshore homes and stranding one of the Favorite Line steamers high and dry in Plant Park, it also wreaked havoc with the small planes based at Benjamin Field. Among these was a plane belonging to Charley Wall, the local gambling czar. It was blown clear off the field, according to reports, and deposited in a nearby swampy area. Other aeroplanes, although tied down, were bounced around by the gales so that most of them were severely damaged or destroyed.

Not all Tampans were "sold" on aviation, as evidenced by the action of the City Council when it declined to accept a deed to Drew Field, the nucleus of today's Tampa International Airport. Unfortunately, this foreshadowed another and more serious decision by the same body, which will be covered later.



This photograph shows a group of students from the Florida State College for Women who made news by commuting to, Tampa for Christmas holidays with area families in December 1939. Left to right: Betsy McMichael Gilmore, Lucille Lowry Logan, Edna Earl Wilson, Helen Iserman, Betty Langston Phipps, Mary Regar McCoy, Virginia Alley, Mildred Anderson Lewis, Gloria Johnston Sparkman, Ann Wilson King, Helen Skipper, and Ann Simpson.

The middle and latter "twenties" saw the development of a group of aviation enthusiasts in Tampa, who had some vision of the future awaiting the fledgling industry. Prominent among these was Emilio Pons, son of a leading cigar manufacturer, whose long memory, voluminous records, and generous spirit have done much to make this account possible. Now well into his eighties, this life-long civic and financial leader of the community still maintains, and shares, his enthusiasm for aviation, as he did sixty years ago. Mr. Pons was among the founders of the Tampa Aero Club, and - along with B. L. Hamner, Kelley Jones, George B. Howell, Truman Green, and many other prominent Tampans - staged an "Aviation Banquet and Ball" on Washington's Birthday in 1928. Ninety-six airplanes were on hand for the races and flying exhibitions, featuring local and national figures from the world of flight. Tickets, at \$1.50 per couple, entitled holders to the ball at the Davis Island Coliseum, and to chances on twenty free airplane rides donated by participating aviators.

Using the names of individuals in this recital is sure to result in the narrator falling into the "sin of omission", but so be it. Herbert J. Drane of Lakeland was our Congressman in those days, and local leaders - Jerry Waterman of Maas Brothers among them - enlisted Congressman Drane's help in striving for recognition for Tampa. The City Council, unwilling to own the airport, leased Drew Field for five years at \$500 per year, but money to remove stumps and clear the land was not easy to find, and for a while Tampa lost its airmail service to Lakeland, which provided a safer landing place for the planes.

An outstanding enterprise at Drew Field in the late twenties was the A.B. McMullen Flying School. (This was not the late Tampa

attorney of the same name, but a life-long aviation figure who later headed the Florida Aviation department and was prominent in national aviation activities in Washington.) The flying school had to shut down in 1929 or 1930 - dates are not certain - because of field conditions. Operations were resumed when the grounds dried out, since there were no paved runways.

It was Col. McMullen's flying school which expanded into a full-fledged - albeit small-scale - manufacturing plant producing the "MAC Airliner". Once again exact records are not at hand, but pictures of the "airliners" indicate that they probably carried three passengers. Only a few were produced before the operation was sold to the Stinson aircraft interests.

Old Drew Field, in those early days, was the birthplace of the first fueling system for airplanes. A gasoline tender, composed of a hand-operated pump and metal drum mounted on a truck, served to replace the tedious and dangerous method of filling the gas tanks of planes by using five-gallon cans, hand-carried and poured into the plane. This crude rig has, now evolved into a mechanical monster, capable of pouring thousands of gallons of fuel into the wing-tanks of jets in a few minutes.

Early international flights were made almost exclusively with flying boats, largely because of the lack of dependable landing strips at most destinations for larger, long-range planes. Tampa was a stop on the short-lived New York, Rio and Buenos Aires airline, which operated amphibian planes. The cautious pilots quite understandably preferred the smooth, inviting waters of Hillsborough Bay to the stumps and mudholes of Drew Field, and their passengers arriving or leaving at Tampa were transferred by small boats at

Ballast Point or (on at least one occasion) in the bay in front of the Bayshore Royal Hotel. Leland Hawes of the Tampa Tribune has written fully and interestingly of this phase our aviation history.

"Tampa Airport" - touted as "the third largest in the nation", was despite its deficiencies, a source of pride to many citizens. The local Jaycees paved the terminal area, and a citizens management group was appointed. A contest was held to choose "Miss Tampa Airport", heralding a partnership between airplanes and pretty girls which has never flagged. Items appeared in the national press, and an airport manager was appointed at the extravagant salary of \$175.00 per month. The local cigar industry fashioned a costume of the best Havana tobacco for a local beauty, who posed for pictures with a small plane also made of cigars -and a few years later accompanied the Tampa Jaycee chapter to a national convention in Washington where she appeared in her aromatic attire. Tampa was on the way!!

Once again exact dates are elusive, but about this time there was a concerted effort to bring the Beech Aircraft plant to Tampa, which Walter Beechman had visited many times. Local attorney H. Blaine Peacock was close to Mr. Beechman and helped in the effort to relocate his manufacturing plant to Tampa, but without success.

One exciting possibility of that era was the prospect for Pan-American Airlines (which had absorbed the New York, Rio and Buenos Aires line and was growing impressively) to serve Tampa and establish a regional base here. Once again the myopic City Council refused to make any concessions to bring the airline into our city, and a grand scheme for dredging up an island in the bay between Davis Islands and

Ballast Point was abandoned. In a personal slant on this episode, long-time National Airlines sales manager Robert A. (Red) McKay once told the writer that the only time he ever heard his father, Mayor D.B. McKay, curse was when the elder McKay came home from the City Council meeting at which Pan-American's proposal was turned down.

It was in 1928 that our Hillsborough County historian, Tony Pizzo, had his great adventure with aviation. Then a typical teen-ager, Tony had formed his own junior aviation club which painted a large arrow on his father's garage, pointing toward the Drew Field "airport". One eventful day Tony saw a "huge" Ford Tri-motor lumbering over Ybor City, heading west toward the field, and without bothering to get his father's permission took the family Hupmobile and raced out to the airport. There he found the Ford Tri-motor standing in lonely splendor, while the crew wondered how they would get into town from the deserted facility. Tony took them in tow, glowing over the promise of a ride in the plane in return for his ground transportation. The stay lengthened into several days, to include New Year's holidays with the hospitable Pizzo family; and all of them got to ride in the Ford Tri-motor, which was the giant of its day. Captain of the flight was Harold Gray, who later became operating head of Pan-American Airways. The group was returning from Mexico City, where they had taken Mrs. Charles A. Lindbergh Sr. to visit U.S. Ambassador Dwight W. Morrow and his family. The Morrow's daughter, Anne, and famed aviator Charles Lindbergh Jr. were married the next year and became America's most prominent young couple.

As the decade of the thirties approached, scheduled airline service for Tampa became a reality with National Airlines (then based

in St. Petersburg) flying to Lakeland, Orlando, Daytona and Jacksonville. Eastern came in from Atlanta and Tallahassee, but was able to offer northbound flights only until World War II. Drew Field was surpassed in runways and facilities in 1935 by Peter O. Knight airport on Davis Islands, with its modern terminal and control tower. The location was on the south end of Davis Islands, commanding the long curved "arm" which enclosed the seaplane docking area, reflected the earlier interest of both airlines and local citizens in amphibian aircraft; and probably reminded many Tampans of "what might have been". However, the growth of good landing strips, and the improvement of land-based planes with retractable gear, greater aerodynamic efficiency, and economy, spelled the doom of seaplanes except for highly specialized usage.

The late thirties, when the winds of war were rising again, saw Tampa along with the rest of the nation, and Florida especially, feeling the impact. Drew Field was taken over by the Army Air Corps, enlarged and improved beyond recognition, and put on a full-time training schedule. The Air Corps staged maneuvers at Drew Field in 1938, while the "top brass" took a preliminary look at what would become MacDill Field, dominating the southern end of the Interbay peninsula. Two movies featuring the Air Corps were made at Drew Field, as Tampa Tribune readers recently saw in Leland Hawes' historical feature.

Once MacDill Field became a reality, the Federal government connected the two air bases with Dale Mabry Highway. Old-timers grumbled about the tax dollars spent for "a concrete road that nobody will ever use after the war is over". Even optimists could not foresee the surging growth of both aviation and our whole community which lay ahead.

At Peter O. Knight Airport, where Eastern and National continued their commercial service, every effort was made to attract new travelers to the airlines. Typical of the public relations efforts was an item in Eastern's company publication dated January 1940, featuring a dozen young women students at (then) Florida State College for Women in Tallahassee, who commuted by air to the Tampa area to be at home for the holidays at Christmas, 1939. This magazine was given to the writer by Betty Phipps of the Tribune staff, who was one of the young women in the photograph.

Generals and statesmen saw this inevitable death-struggle between the Axis powers, dominated by Adolf Hitler, and the forces of freedom. A tremendous build-up of military force was unleashed. Once again Florida's climate and terrain made it a center for feverish preparations. The entry of the United States into World War II, just as 1942 dawned on an anxious and suffering world, brought unity and grim purpose to our national attitude.

The global conflict, with its insatiable demands for air transportation as well as all other methods of moving men and materiel, brought about a wartime seat priority system within jurisdiction of the newly formed civil reserve air force. Half of the transport fleets of the airlines were put into government service, along with their crews, for the duration. Passengers who wanted the remaining scheduled seats on the airlines were allocated space under an elaborate system of priorities, ranging from "DD" or "Dirty Dog" to "AA" or "Awful Awful". The "Dirty Dogs" were minor functionaries on government business, or essential suppliers on needed trips; while the "Awful Awfuls" went to transport pilots on important missions. Would-be passengers without priorities, on personal business or pleasure

trips, frequently found themselves unceremoniously removed from flights.

Let the reader remember that no four-engine aircraft went into general air transportation service until after that global convulsion; and that fully-pressurized "above-the-weather" flights were offered only after the conflict was won. Equipment and facilities which had been developed for that one over-riding purpose were made available to a public newly aware of air transportation as a swift, dependable way to travel. The lives of many - perhaps most - of us were dramatically altered in the years, beginning with 1946.

On this note, it behooves us to close with a reminder that the early years, in our city, state, and nation, were a chronicle of pioneer effort - a diary of individual achievement for the most part. In a later issue of the Sunland Tribune, if the fates are kind, perhaps we can review together the incredible growth of air power, both in military and civilian pursuits; and its effect on our lives during these decades of uneasy peace.

POSTSCRIPT:

Having acknowledged the great contribution of Tampan Emilio Pons to this chronicle, and the source of many items from local newspapers, I should also speak of my indebtedness to "Wings In the Sun" - a great reference work by William Lazarus. Bill was a Floridian who lived and worked in aviation through many of the years we have tried to cover here, and told the story fully and well in his book. We salute him along with so many others who have now earned their eternal wings.

WAYNE BEVIS

August, 1984