

Reel Fliers of 1934

by Phil Stewart

There's just something about aviation during the mid-1930s. The pace of both civilian and military aviation development was speeding up. It was an era that fostered the growth of new aeronautical ideas, designs, and know-how that allowed pilots to push the envelope of flight. It was a time of innovation and risk, of trial and of error. Just seven years after Lindbergh's epic flight to France and only five years before the start of WWII, 1934 was a year of record hops, Army air postmen, and high-altitude pressure suit tests. It was the year of aviators like Codos and Rossi, DuPont, Hawks, Lindbergh, Marsalis and Richey, Picard, Post, Rickenbacker, Turner, Ulm and Wedell – just to name a few. It was also a period of novel aircraft like the flying pancake, parasol plane, flying wing, rotating-wing gyro, and the tailless flivver. It was a time of adventure. Consider a few of the aviation headlines from that year...

STRATOSPHERE HOP PLANNED
EIGHT KILLED IN CRASH AS AIRLINER HITS MOUNTAIN
GIANT PLANE MAKES FIRST HOP
NEW PLANE CARRIER TESTED
DARING PILOTS RISK DEATH IN SENSATIONAL AIR MEET
AVIATRIX PREPARES FOR BIG HOP
NOTED SPEED PILOT KILLED
REVERSIBLE PROPELLOR TESTED
ARMY PREPARES FOR MASS HOP

These headlines are the actual titles of aviation newsreel stories from 78 years ago.

THE NEWSREELS

Before television, there was the newsreel. From the late-1920s to the mid-1960s, the major American sound newsreel companies filmed all kinds of people, places and things — including the ups and downs of aviation. The newsreels typically appeared twice a week at the local “movie palace,” averaged nine minutes in length, and featured up to a dozen stories. The newsreel was usually part of the movie entertainment package that accompanied the cartoons and the featured movies. Sound newsreels were truly an eyewitness to the middle third of the 20th century. Today, they provide a unique moving-image visual reference of the past, in glorious black and white.

Since the early 1970s, only one of the major newsreels has been readily accessible for your review and royalty-free use: the Universal Newsreel. This treasure trove of 35-millimeter

celluloid includes over 14,800 motion picture film reels. The surviving edited stories and outtakes are available for your viewing pleasure at the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) facility at College Park, Maryland.

Regrettably, these newsreel stories are usually silent. What, they're silent? Weren't these stories filmed in the era of the talkies? Yes, . . . but as was the custom at the time, Universal destroyed the film stock narration and music tracks soon after a story was released, for silver recovery purposes. While the studio usually kept a couple of release prints of the entire newsreel issue with the audio track intact for reference, few of them survive today. As a result, the Universal Newsreel stories held within NARA prior to the mid-1950s are usually silent and missing the golden-toned narration of Graham McNamee and, later, Ed Herlihy. However, after some intensive sleuthing in NARA's files, original as-recorded narration scripts of most of the 1934 stories were “re-discovered” – so the original story lines have not been lost.

PLEASE STAND BY

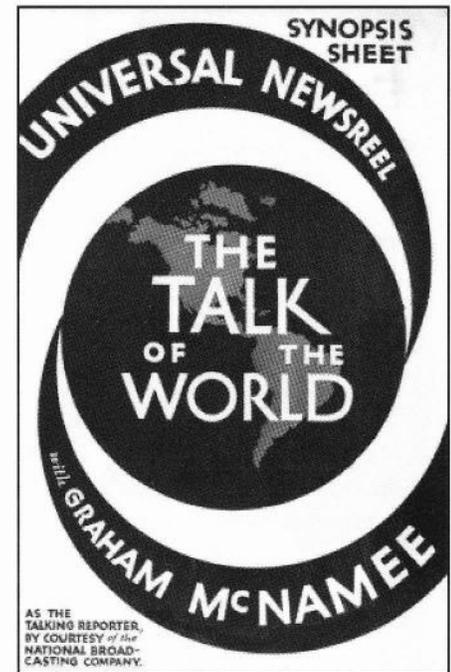
The information regarding the three stories presented below is based on catalog cards, related paper documents, microfilm records, and a review of the newsreels themselves.

Below the story title and photo is the notation STORY LINE, a section that provides an overview of the story based on the Universal Newsreel Synopsis Sheets. These single-page flyers were sent to the movie houses of the period to inform theater managers of the action-packed news film coming in the next Universal release.

The ACTION describes the edited film scenes that visually support the story line. As noted above, because the Universal Newsreel stories are without their sound tracks, a copy of the original narration script appears in the SCRIPT section. Cameraman comments and general historical information are provided in the NOTES area. Last, the story's reel number, length (in seconds), event location, and release date are all logged in the DATA category.

So with the formalities out of the way, it's time to...

ROLL FILM!





NAVY'S HUGE SEAPLANES REACH HONOLULU AFTER RECORD OCEAN FLIGHT

STORY LINE: Six giant Navy seaplanes leave on a 2,150-mile nonstop flight to Pearl Harbor in Hawaii, which, if successful, will establish a world's record for long distance formation flying, exceeding General Italo Balbo's mark by several hundred miles.

ACTION: Aircrews are inspected by Lt. Cmdr. Knefler McGinnis; a close-up of McGinnis; a shot from the seaplane of a spinning prop on an engine with a pan to the tail that shows it's taxiing on the water; a wing tip pontoon skims the water; a view of the seaplane taking off; an engine; an aerial view of a flight of three seaplanes above the Golden Gate; aerial shot of a single seaplane above the Gate; a close-up of the pilot at the plane's controls in flight; two aerial views of seaplanes as they fly in formation.

SCRIPT: "Here are the officers and men of the Navy's famous V.P. Squadron 10, with their chief, Lt. Cmdr. Knefler McGinnis, all set for a mass flight to Hawaii – more than 2,000 miles – the longest group flight in aviation history. They're having a tough job getting the giant 100-foot, 10-ton planes off the water, but they're up now! They're in the air! All set to circle the Golden Gate and head for Honolulu, 24 hours away! The squadron is manned by 30 officers and men, five in each plane. Navy mine-sweepers and destroyers are stationed at 300 mile intervals along the course, and radio communication will be constant. It's a great undertaking—worthy of the U.S. Navy!"

NOTES: The six planes featured in this story, shot on January 9, were the Navy's Consolidated P2Y-1 flying boats. The Universal cameraman was McHenry, and the Navy provided the aerial photography. The total time of the trip was 24 hours and 35 minutes, which set three new flying records. You may have noticed that the aerial views

of the seaplanes flying over the Golden Gate are bridge-less. That's because construction of the famous span wouldn't be completed for another 39 months.

DATA: ID: 6-214-10; T: 47; L: San Francisco, Calif.; RD: 01/10/34.

U.S. ARMY SPEEDS UP PREPARATIONS TO FLY AIR MAIL OVER NATION

STORY LINE: America's new air postmen again!

ACTION: Postal officials and Army pilots in flying gear stand in front of an Army plane and check flying routes; three planes start their

engines; U.S. Mail trucks approach the planes; mail bags are unloaded from a truck and moved to a plane; mail bags are loaded into the plane; a plane takes off and climbs; President and Mrs. Wilson arrive at a flying field on May 15, 1918; a close-up of the first presidential airmail letter; president and Mrs. Wilson view the crowd; a U.S. Air Mail Service truck; a letter is put into a mail bag; the President chats with an Army pilot; mail bags are loaded into the front cockpit of a Curtiss Jenny; the pilot bids farewell to President and Mrs. Wilson; the plane takes off.

SCRIPT: "Uncle Sam's new air postmen, the Army's expert aviators, are getting final instructions for flying the mail over the U.S., and here are the big planes that will do the job. Almost 12,000 miles of air lines are being manned by Army fliers. Several hundred Army lieutenants and captains are set for their new task. The mail couldn't be in safer hands. The speedy fighting planes make 130 mph, and there she goes — the new Army airmail! Birds of war on a mission of peace and utility! How different from the first time the Army flew the mail! 1918! President and Mrs. Wilson are out for an auspicious event.



The first airmail letters from the president to the New York postmaster and it inaugurates a new era in postal service. These historic pictures were taken by the Army Signal Corps and are among the prized possessions in the War Department archives. The pilot of the first flight was Lt. George L. Boyle. On this epochal hop, only four sacks of mail were carried, but many of those letters are worth many times their weight in gold now to stamp collectors. With the President's Godspeed, the first U.S. airmail flier takes off for New York in an old war-time Jenny, and goes 25 MILES without stopping!"

NOTES: The Universal footage was shot on February 13 at Wright Field, Ohio, by cameramen Traynham and Sinkey, and the historical footage, as noted in the narration, was provided by the U.S. Army. The mail planes shown in this story were single-engine Fokker-built Air Corps C-14s. As mentioned in the narration, an Army Air Service Curtiss JN-4 Jenny carried the first airmail from the Washington Polo Grounds. The pilot got lost on his way to New York City and had to land for directions about 25 miles from his starting point.

DATA: Reel ID: 6-224-2; Length: 79; Location:, near Dayton, Ohio, and Washington D.C.; Release Date: 02/14/34.

POST SET FOR ALTITUDE HOP

STORY LINE: In a final test of his plane and special flying-suit, Wiley Post prepares for a perilous climb into the stratosphere.

ACTION: Wiley Post, in his pressure suit, sits on a stool beside his airplane, the *Winnie Mae*, as men put the flying-suit helmet in place; an air pump; Post screws on the face plate of his helmet; men attach the helmet to the suit; the suit is pressure tested; Post in the cockpit of *Winnie Mae*; the plane taxis in front of a crowd and a hangar; the *Winnie Mae* takes off and climbs; the plane returns for landing and is pushed into a hangar; Post climbs out of the cockpit; a close-up of tired Post with his white eye-patch. SCRIPT: "Glenview, Illinois! No, that's not a deep-sea diver.

It's Wiley Post, round-the-world flier, trying on his new stratosphere suit. It's made the same as a diver's outfit, though, face-piece and all, and is pumped full of air to equalize the air pressure at high altitudes. See! Post is getting all swelled up. He's going up to try out the suit at 30 or 40,000 feet, and there he goes, in the same good old *Winnie Mae* that took him around the globe to a solo record. If this try-out is a success, he'll go up again soon in an attempt to break the world's altitude record for planes, now 47,000 feet. Here he comes down. He reached 40,000 feet this trip, which means that it ought to be easy for him to top 50,000 at least on his next try. He says the new-fangled suit is a great success and that it will make stratosphere flying practicable. That means a new day in aviation, and when Post says it, it's so!"

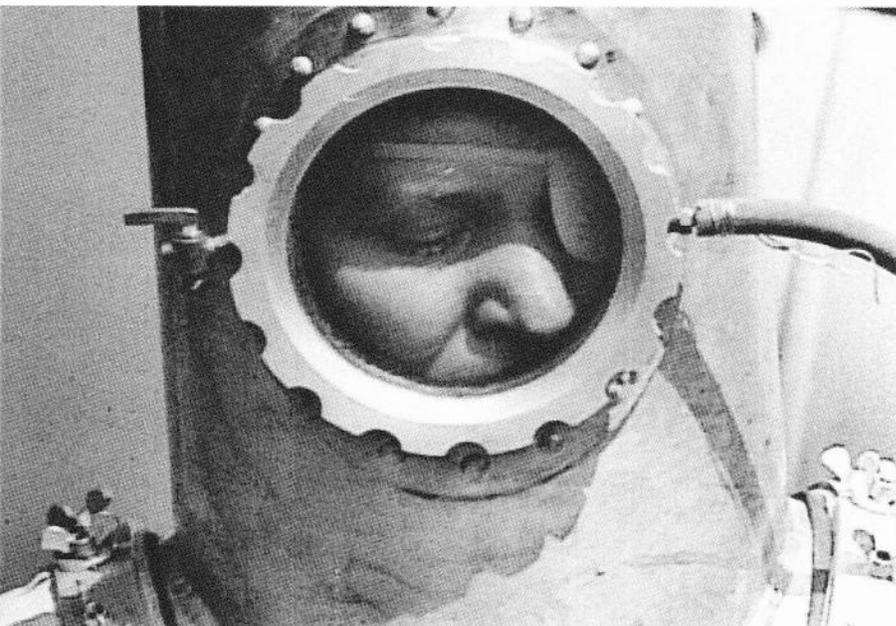
NOTES: This story was shot at Curtis Reynolds Airport on August 31 by Universal cameramen Savitt and Traynham.

DATA: Reel ID: 6-282-4; Length: 48; Location: Glenview, Ill.; Release Date: 09/05/34.

THAT'S ALL FOLKS!

There you are, a sample of the aeronautical activities of 1934 as seen through the motion picture camera lens of the Universal Newsreel. There are over 100 other aviation stories from this particular year awaiting your review at NARA's Motion Picture, Sound and Video research room in College Park. Incidentally, the photographs that accompany the above stories are video-capture images from the actual Universal news stories.

It's one thing to read about, or see a photograph of, a pilot, an airplane, or an event in aviation. However, to see these historic moments with the added element of motion, as it actually happened, is enlightening, instructive, and often rather dramatic. The Universal Newsreel is truly a visual time machine and well worth adding to your aviation research toolbox.



About the Author

Phil Stewart is an award-winning author of eight motion picture-related NARA reference books. His recent aviation related title, *Aerial Aces of the Universal Newsreel: A Researcher's Guide to the Aviation Stories Released Nationally by the Universal Pictures Company, 1929-1931*, is available from Amazon.com and other online resources. He can be reached through his website at www.pwstewart.com or via email at pws@pwstewart.com.