

REEL FLIERS OF 1938

by Phillip W. Stewart

Welcome to the third installment of the REEL FLIERS series that looks at the “Golden Age” of aviation through the motion picture camera lens of the Universal Newsreel. Started in late 1929, this newsreel documented all types of people, places, things and events, including those associated with the ups and downs of aviation through the end of 1967. Today, this newsreel provides a unique moving-image documentation of our aeronautical heritage, stored on celluloid film, in magnificent black and white. Along with the photograph and the written word, the newsreel should be considered a principal tool in the aviation enthusiast’s research toolbox.

As previously mentioned in the Spring and Fall 2012 issues of the *AAHS Journal*, the MCA/Universal Newsreel Library Collection contains over 14,800 reels of surviving edited stories and outtakes and are available for your viewing and research pleasure at the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) Archives II facility located in College Park, Maryland.

QUIET ON THE SET!

As we continue to explore this vast film collection for aviation Golden Age stories, let’s take a look at 1938. That was an active aviation year and Universal produced 104 newsreel stories on the subject. Titles included:

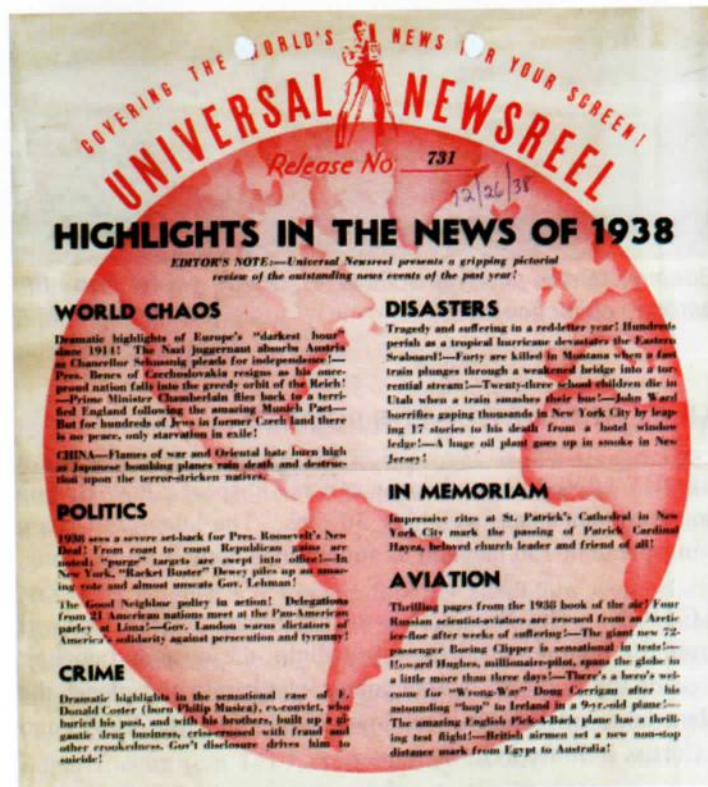
CHINA CLIPPER FORCED BACK
AIRMEN IN THRILLING STUNTS
BOMBERS ON GOOD-WILL TOUR
BALLOON BARRAGE TESTED
FRENCH INSPECT AIR BASES
AIR RAID TAKES DEADLY TOLL
AIR ENDURANCE RECORD BROKEN
HAWKS DIES IN PLANE CRASH
\$31 COAST-TO-COAST FLIGHT

By the way, these headlines are the actual titles of aviation newsreel stories from 75 years ago.

PLEASE STAND BY...

The following newsreel stories are based on catalog cards, related paper documents, microfilm records, and a review of the newsreels themselves.

Below the story title you will find the notation STORY LINE, a section that provides an overview of the story based on the Universal Newsreel Synopsis Sheets. The ACTION section is



(From the Universal Newsreel collection at NARA)

next and describes the edited film scenes that visually support the story line. The original narration script appears in the SCRIPT section and any 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.

As an interesting side note, Universal typically destroyed the narration and music tracks for silver recovery soon after a story was released. As a result, the Universal Newsreel stories held within NARA prior to the mid-1950s are usually missing the golden-toned narration of Graham McNamee, and later, Ed Herlihy. Unfortunately, the only noise you may hear within a story about aviation’s Golden Age is the “sound-on-film” of speeches, statements made directly to the camera, and the occasional “wild” or “natural sound.” However, after some serious digging around in NARA’s files, as-recorded narration scripts were discovered for these stories and are included below.

So, let’s take an in-depth look at a few aviation related newsreel stories for 1938 as produced by Universal Pictures.

ROLL FILM...ACTION!



Boeing XB-15 at Wright Field. (USAF photo from the author's collection)



Tuscar Metal Co. H-71 flying wing preparing for a demonstration flight. (Universal Newsreel photo from the author's collection)

ARMY GETS NEW 30-TON BOMBER

STORY LINE: Pleased Army officials inspect a new Boeing bombardment plane weighing 30 tons. The huge craft has a wingspread of 150 feet and its streamlined body is 90 feet long.

ACTION: The Boeing XB-15 positioned on the ramp as ground crew prepare it for a test flight; the nose and cockpit area of the bomber; crewmembers climb into the plane; the plane takes off; a high-speed low-altitude pass; the XB-15 and a Curtiss P-36 fly in formation.

SCRIPT: "Uncle Sam receives something extra special in the form of a 30-ton Boeing bombardment plane, being tested here at Wright Field. The new monster looks like the Flying Fortress type, but is much bigger. It has a wingspread of 150 feet, and is 90 feet long. Every modern convenience is provided, including emplacements for six machine-guns, but may they never have to chatter in gossip with an enemy acquaintance."

NOTES: The XB-15's first flight was October 15, 1937. It set both a world record for payload lift capacity and a U.S. distance record for flying a closed-course in 1939. The XB-15 was converted to a cargo/transport plane in May 1943 and re-designated the XC-105. This story was shot while the XB-15 was in Air Corps acceptance testing and filmed by Floyd Traynham on March 28, 1938.

DATA: Reel ID: 10-654-2D; Length: 33; Location: Wright Field, near Dayton, Ohio; Release Date: March 30, 1938.

BUMBLEBEE PLANE MAY STING

STORY LINE: Pilot Jimmy Taylor tests a new pusher-type tailless plane. Resembling a bumblebee, Army officials claim a machine gun can be mounted in it to shoot straight to the rear, a long sought advantage.

ACTION: A side view of the plane on the airport ramp with the prop turning; a closer rear view of the plane; men gather around the cabin door as Taylor sits in the pilot's seat; the plane starts to taxi; the plane flies at low altitude over the camera.

SCRIPT: "A strange 'bumblebee' plane, developed by the Tuscar Metal Co. of Ohio, is attracting great attention in New York flying circles. A pusher type midget plane, its main distinction is the fact it's tailless. But tail or no tail, it'll do 120 mph."

NOTES: This story is about the Tuscar H-71 (NX-20399) and was filmed on April 14, 1938, by cameraman Arnold. The production notes give a lot more information in the cameraman's suggested narration. "Local aviators have been rubbing their eyes these last few mornings when seeing a new type of tailless plane taxiing to and fro all over the airport and zooming up into the air for flight tests. This new tailless 'whosit' looks like a chubby, overgrown bumblebee and, unlike the other midget planes that have been built, is really a tailless airplane. Of the pusher-type, its 95-hp Menasco engine and prop are located in the rear. Its cabin has room for two people, sitting side-by-side. Estimated top speed about 125 mph; surprising speed when one looks at the plane. Developed by Tuscar Metals, Inc., of New Philadelphia, Ohio, it is being tested at Floyd Bennett Field by Jimmy Taylor, famous test flier. One of the most unique features of this plane is the fact that it is steered by rudders situated at each wingtip. It also has two vertical fins attached to center, rear of fuselage that act as 'airbrakes' by being turned sideways to face into the rush of air passing by the ship, they break the air-flow and slow the plane's speed down while landing. The airplane is still under experimental license."

DATA: Reel ID: 10-662-3F; Length: 24; Location Floyd Bennett Field, N.Y.; Release Date: April 27, 1938.



Howard Hughes during press briefing. (Universal Newsreel photo from the author's collection)



Douglas "Wrong-Way" Corrigan during review of New York's Fighting Irish Regiment. (Universal Newsreel photo from the author's collection)

HOPS TO PARIS ON GLOBE TRIP

STORY LINE: Howard Hughes, wealthy sportsman pilot, takes off in his "scientific" Lockheed on the first leg of his projected "round the world" flight, in which he set a new transocean record of 16.5 hours.

ACTION: Large crowd at the airport; mechanics watch an engine test on the Lockheed aircraft; closer shot of the test engine; mechanics hold down the tail of the plane; the engine cowl is replaced after the test; reporters crowd around the plane as Hughes, his crew, and Grover Whelan face microphones; spectators behind the airport gate; a closer view of Hughes and company; Hughes and Whelan speak to the press; Hughes in the cockpit; the plane taxis; the takeoff; the plane in flight and with the Manhattan skyline in the background.

SCRIPT: "As 6,000 watch, Howard Hughes is making the last delicate adjustments on his huge plane before heading for Paris. The start has been delayed for a day by motor trouble but now everything is set and Hughes with his crew of four is anxious to get away. The plane will carry a load of 25,000 pounds, including 1,500 gallons of gas. When the plane is dedicated, Hughes and his crew pose for one last farewell picture with Grover Whelan. And regular is the word as Hughes makes an unprecedented statement."

(Whelan speaks): "Thank you very much, again."

(Hughes speaks): "I want to say that, ah, today's news came in and I have to say that I'm awfully sorry about the delay here and if I seem to be in too much of a hurry to wait and pose for your pictures, it's not because I'm high hat or anything like that, but just because I've been terribly worried that I wouldn't get out of here before the weather changed. I had a good break in the weather yesterday and lost that and I suppose it will be fair today but I've been in an awful rush to get away from here. I hope you'll forgive me."

(Whelan speaks): "Ah, you bet."

(Script): "No high-hat is right--for it's a battered old felt, his

lucky one that adorns his head as Hughes rolls the huge plane to the end of the runway. Paris, it proves, is just 16 and a half hours away--they land at Le Bourget in less than half the time it took Lindberg."

NOTES: Hughes' crewmates for this adventure were Harry Connor, copilot and navigator; Tom Thurlow, navigator; Richard Stoddart, radio operator; and Ed Lund as flight engineer. Grover Whalen was president of the New York World Fair Corp. and christened Hughes' Lockheed Model 14-N2 Super Electra (c/n 1419, civil registry NX18973) as the *New York World's Fair 1939* prior to the flight. The plane took off from Floyd Bennett Field on July 7, 1938, and returned on July 14, 1938, after covering 14,672 miles.

This story was filmed by Roy Edwards, Fred Fordham and Kay Karup.

DATA: Reel ID: 10-683-1A; Length: 112; Location: Floyd Bennett Field, N.Y.; Release Date: July 11, 1938.

"EAST-WEST" CORRIGAN FETED

STORY LINE: Douglas Corrigan, Number One Man of the Hour, visits the spot where he took off for Ireland. At Camp Smith, he reviews New York's Fighting Irish Regiment, while in New York City his famous \$900 plane arrives back in the U.S.

ACTION: Corrigan sits in back seat of a car and waves to the camera; a parade of cars and crowd; Corrigan gets out of car and moves through reporters, police and others to the speaker's platform; views of the platform and the crowd; at Fort Smith, Corrigan shakes hands with Army brass; soldiers march in formation; Corrigan and two others review the troops; more parade; Corrigan; the cargo ship Lehigh in New York Harbor; Corrigan's plane (minus its wings) is lifted from the ship's hold; the fuselage, now riding on a flatbed trailer, is pulled through a dock area followed by the wings loaded on a truck escorted by motorcycle cops.

SCRIPT: "Douglas Corrigan can at least find the airport where he started his famed flight. With fanfare in direct contrast to the quiet of his Atlantic takeoff, the now famous flier visits Floyd Bennett Field. It was from here he started for Los Angeles and wound up in Dublin, and so today it's the triumphal return of a hero, a visit from the man of the hour. The 69th Regiment, the famous Fighting Irish, is at its annual encampment and what could be more appropriate than to be reviewed by Corrigan. Corrigan takes this honor, just as he has the others that have been heaped upon him, with his good natured, abashed grin. This military tribute is another indication of the esteem America has for modest 'Wrong-Way.' The freighter *Lehigh* docks at New York with a precious cargo--Corrigan's Clipper. Shorn of its wings and appearing too frail even to lift from the ground, the 9-year-old plane is being taken to an adjacent airport to be assembled. The ship that took Corrigan to Dublin and fame will have to be re-licensed by the government before Doug can fly it again. Then possibly, a museum exhibit!"

NOTES: Corrigan's Clipper was a 1929 Curtiss Robin with an engine built from two old Wright Whirlwind J6-5 engines that provided 165 hp. Upon his return to the U.S., Corrigan received celebrity treatment in addition to that covered in this story including a ticker-tape parade in New York City, a meeting with President Roosevelt at the White House and a nationwide tour in his faithful old Robin. Wherever he went during the tour, his hosts gave him many joke gifts. For example, the Liars Club of Burlington, Wis., elected him a member and various cities presented him with compasses. At Tulsa, Okla., an Indian tribe initiated him as "Chief Wrong Way," and Abilene, Tex., gave him a watch that ran backward. The story was filmed on August 5, 1938, by an unknown cameraman.

DATA: Reel ID: 10-691-1A/B/C; Length: 94; Location: Floyd Bennett Field, Camp Smith, and New York Harbor, N.Y.; Release Date: August 8, 1938.

NEW AMPHIBIAN PLANE TESTED

STORY LINE: A novel plane, equipped with a motor in the hull connected by special gears to a propeller above, is taken for a successful trial flight by its two inventors. Its landing gear is also of unique design.

ACTION: The Air Car lands on Manhasset Bay; the seaplane taxis out of the water and up a wooden ramp; Spencer shows the location of the engine compartment; a rear view of the amphibian; Larsen and Spencer stand next to the cabin of the plane.

SCRIPT: "Here's the latest in amphibious flight. It's the Spencer-Larsen amphibian, coming down after a trial flight on the waters of Manhasset Bay. Of considerable interest in aeronautical circles, the craft is unique not only because of the novel landing gear in the wing pontoons! The motor is located inside the hull with a special gear arrangement to the propeller above. With no engine mounting to cause air resistance, the two-seated craft can attain a high rate of speed."



Spencer-Larsen SL-12C Amphibian Air Car. (Universal Newsreel photo from the author's collection)

NOTES: This story about the Spencer-Larsen SL-12C Amphibian Air Car was filmed by Kay Karup on November 13, 1938. According to the cameraman's caption sheet, the amphibian had a 140-hp motor and a top speed of 128 mph. The development work done by Spencer on this project ultimately led to the design of the Republic Aviation Corporation Seabee. **DATA:** Reel ID: 10-722-3A; Length: 39; Location: Port Washington, N.Y.; Release Date: November 23, 1938.

THAT'S A WRAP!

Well, there you go -- a selective overview of some of the aviation activities of 1938, as documented by Universal Newsreel cameras. Incidentally, three of the photos that accompany this article are video-captured images from the actual Universal stories.

If you are interested in obtaining a video copy of an existing newsreel story, please contact NARA's Motion Picture, Sound, and Video Branch via email (mopix@nara.gov). As an alternative, feel free to contact a private film researcher. There's a list on the NARA website (www.archives.gov/research/hire-help/index.html). Better yet, visit College Park and take advantage of their self-help video duplication equipment. You can also make arrangements with the Motion Picture, Sound and Video Research Room staff to purchase high-quality film or digital video copies through their vendor system.

The Universal Newsreel Library Collection is truly a visual time machine and well worth adding it as a tool to your aviation research toolbox.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Phil Stewart is an award-winning author of eight motion picture-related NARA reference books. He is also a 2012 recipient of the J. Franklin Jameson Archival Advocacy Award given by the Society of American Archivists. Mr. Stewart's 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.

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