

AVIATION IN THE NEWSREELS

By Phillip W. Stewart

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Most of us who are fascinated with that glorious period of aviation known as the Golden Age, study the era through the written word and photographs. If we're lucky, we'll get to see one of our favorite vintage airplanes at an air show, beautifully restored, projecting vast amounts of between-the-wars ambiance. However, there is another resource that can help us enjoy that period of aviation — the MCA/Universal Newsreel Library Collection held in the U.S. National Archives. Unfortunately, most aviation historians and enthusiasts are unaware of this treasure trove of aviation history.

Starting with the silent films in the 1900s and continuing with the sound reels in the late 1920s, the newsreels documented all types of people, places, things, and events, including those associated with the ups and downs of aviation, through the mid-1960s. Today, newsreels provide 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 one of the premier tools in the aviation enthusiast's research toolbox.

Only one of the five major sound newsreel companies that documented aeronautical stories during the 1929-1967 time frame is readily accessible, royalty free, and in the public domain — the Universal Newsreel. Over 14,000 reels of surviving edited stories and outtakes of this superb moving image resource are available for your research and viewing pleasure at the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) facility known as Archives II, in College Park, Maryland.

QUIET ON THE SET!



When you start to explore this vast collection for Aviation Golden Age stories, it's probably best to start at the first full year of the newsreel, 1930. That was an active aviation year and Universal produced 114 newsreel stories on the subject. Amazingly, 99 of those stories have survived these past 70 years, and video review copies of the black and white films are

available at NARA. While the video copies are acceptable, the quality is, well, VHS-ish...most lack resolution and look a bit washed out.

Regrettably, they are also usually without sound. They're silent? Weren't these stories filmed in the era of the talkies? Yes, but...as was the custom at the time, Universal typically destroyed the narration and music tracks for silver recovery soon after a story was released. While they usually kept a couple release prints of the entire newsreel issue with the audio track intact for reference purposes, few of them survive today. As a result, the Universal Newsreel stories held within the NARA prior to the mid-1950s are usually silent and missing the golden-toned narration of Graham McNamee, and later, Ed Herlihy. Unfortunately, the only noise you may hear in the stories about Aviation's Golden Age is the "sound-on-film" of speeches, statements made directly to the camera, and the occasional story that had "wild" or "natural sounds." However, after some serious digging around in NARA's files, "as-recorded" scripts of the narration were found for most of these stories and are included in the information below.

A sample of the aviation related story titles that made it into the Universal Newspaper Newsreel (as it was known back then) of 1930 include:

- *48 DIE IN FIERY RUINS; DESTRUCTION MARKS END OF ILL-FATED R-101*
- *AIRPLANE PARACHUTE LANDS CRAFT SAFELY FROM 6,500 FOOT DROP*
- *ARMY FLIERS BLIND "ENEMY" WITH SMOKE SCREEN IN WAR GAME*
- *BOYD AND CONNOR HOP TO LONDON IN HISTORIC "COLUMBIA"*
- *ELINOR SMITH, IN SWOON 6 MILES UP, SETS NEW AIR MARK*
- *HAWKS FIGHTS GALE AS 3,000-MILE DASH IN GLIDER TOW ENDS*
- *HURL NAVY PLANES FROM CATAPULT IN SENSATIONAL TRIALS*
- *LINDY GETS A NEW "WE"*
- *NEWS PARAGRAPHS - ARROWHEAD SAFETY AIRPLANE*
- *NIPPON FLYER STARTS 'ROUND-WORLD FLIGHT MID COLORFUL RITES*

• *USE FLOATING ISLAND AS LANDING FIELD FOR PASSENGER 'PLANES*

Let's take a more in-depth look at a few of the other aviation related newsreel stories for 1930 as produced by Universal Pictures.

ROLL FILM...ACTION!



The Curtiss-Tanager, winner of the grand prize in the Guggenheim Fund safety plane contest. Shown here in its first test flight.

The first aviation release of 1930 was titled, *AMERICAN PLANE WINS \$100,000 SAFETY PRIZE*. It documents the Guggenheim Award to the Curtiss-Tanager airplane on January 6th, at Mitchel Field, NY. The motion picture action is of a crowd in front of the Curtiss-Tanager biplane; two men as they stand in front of the plane and stage a large-sized check presentation; the plane makes a short-field takeoff; scenes of the plane as it maneuvers in the air; and a very short short-field landing. Over this action the script reads, "...in Long Island. That's a nice piece of change to get right after Christmas. Vice President Land, of the Guggenheim Foundation, is giving the check to President Keyes of the Curtiss Company. Up she goes like a toy balloon. Now we're sailing along 4,000 feet over the field. Almost a mile. Watch this fellow rock the boat. If you tried to do that with any other plane you'd go into a spin so fast that you'd think you were falling out of bed. No wonder they call this the safest little plane in the world. They say a child could run it and I believe them. Another great stunt is the short landing. Notice the speed he's traveling at, but there won't be any bump. Just nice and easy like falling into a snow pile."

Then there is the story about the *ARMORED, ALL-WING AIRPLANE IN FIRST THRILLING FLIGHT*, which was filmed on February 8th at United Airport in Burbank, CA. This is the story of the first version of the

Northrop Flying Wing concept and the first real "All Wing" airplane actually constructed and successfully flown.

The plane is registered as X216H, and the test pilot for this flight was Eddie Bellande. The filmed action shows the pilot as he walks on the wing and gets into the cockpit; the engine is started; the plane taxis down the runway; the take-off run; aerial views of the plane flying. The voice over the footage says, "Every week it seems as if some new kind of airplane comes out. At first glance you'd say this one wasn't finished yet, but it is. Everything is in the wings; motor, gas tanks, supplies, and the pilot. This cuts down the air resistance and increases speed. The little machine you see here made over 125 miles an hour. Tri-motored planes of this type are being built to carry 15 passengers. They claim the big fellows will travel from Coast to Coast in 15 hours. I wouldn't argue with 'em about it. Time means nothing, these days, unless somebody steals your watch..."



"Flying Wing" plane tested in California. An all-metal plane of radically different design can do over 100 miles per hour.

In an April 16th release, there was an interesting story titled, *USE SPEEDING PLANE FOR BRIDGE PARTY IN FIRST MID-AIR GAME*. The story summary states, "Society folk play cards half a mile above the streets of the city. The players are so absorbed in the bids that no one pays any attention to the dizzy heights." The film shows three society ladies as they climb aboard a Ford Tri-motor; the plane takes-off; two groups of four ladies play Bridge; the pilot at the controls, poses for the camera; more card playing; a look out the window at one of the plane's engine; another scene of the card game; the plane lands at the Cincinnati airport and taxis to a stop; the ladies deplane. The story's narration stated, "What will these bridge players do next I wonder. Well, here they go on the first aerial card-party ever held. The game has started and everything's quiet."



Society folk hold first bridge game above the clouds—playing hands in complete absorption while speeding in airplane half mile above the city streets.

Nobody's trumped her partner's ace yet. Hey, eyes front there. Look where you're going. They're up 2,000 feet so this game can't be on the level. One of the ladies remarked that if anything happened to the plane they'd all get a grand slam. Here they come down and the winners are collecting their dimes while the losers are thinking how different it might have been. A great looking plane. What a giant. They tell me there wasn't a single argument over the game. Well, you know when themotors are going in an airplane you can't talk. Oh, that's mean, isn't it? I wonder if they played for high stakes."

Of course, no newsreel worth its salt would fail to cover the continuing adventures of Charles Lindbergh...and the Universal Newspaper Newsreel was no exception. *LINDY OFF TO SOUTH AMERICA; TAKES HIS MOTHER TO CAPITOL* was photographed at Roosevelt Field, NY, and the story was released on April 26th. The story line reads, *"the Lone Eagle to open new airmail route to Southern Hemisphere. Mrs. Lindbergh accompanies him as far as Washington, DC. He straps her into the plane with a parachute before taking off."* The filmed action shows Lindy and his Mom, in flying togs, walking up to the cockpits of his Lockheed Sirius plane; they pose for the camera; Mom climbs aboard; Lindy dons his parachute and climbs into the front cockpit; Lindy leans over the cockpit canopy to talk to his Mom; the plane taxis out. While this action is going on the narrator says, "Lindy and his mother. She's got a great chauffeur. As soon as he brings his new plane here from the coast he gives his mother a ride. You know, Mrs. Lindbergh, Sr. is a teacher of chemistry. Well, here goes mamma into the rumble seat with Lindy helping her. A cop tries to help him with his parachute but Lindy writes his own ticket. Only a few minutes now and he'll



Lindy about to starts on a flight to map a new airmail route to South America. His mother, Mrs. Evangeline Lindbergh, accompanied him on the first leg of the trip.

be off on another wonderful flight. That boy just can't stay on the ground. Sometimes I think he's got tender feet. Here's a couple of good-bye close-ups and before they start Lindy looks over to see that his mother is comfy. His plane is bright red and she's a beauty. She skims along and first thing you know the ground is left behind. Lindy's going to blaze a new airmail route from New York to the Canal Zone. And when he blazes 'em they stay blazed. Good luck, Lindy!"

World record stunts also made the newsreel headlines. *LAURA INGALLS LOOPS PLANE 980 TIMES FOR NEW WORLD RECORD* was photographed on May 26, at Muskogee, OK. When the story was released on May 31st the synopsis sheet for that week said, *"Girl pilot stays in the air doing her stunt for 3 hours until finally forced down by darkness. Plucky performer nearly triples her own mark in flight at the dedication of Hatbox Field."* The film images for the story show Ingalls standing in front of her DH 60 Gipsy Moth plane; the plane taxis for takeoff; the crowd as it looks to the sky; the plane loops and loops; a closer view of the looping. The script reads, *"She took her first flying lesson 18 months ago. She's 25, hails from New York, and learned how to fly in St. Louis. She's going up about 6,000 feet to start the day's work while the crowd gets sun-burned Adam's apples. Her old record was 344. It took three hours and 16 minutes to make her 980 loops, but we won't show you all of 'em. You'll have to take the official clocker's word for it. Laura received \$200 for breaking the record and \$1 for each loop over 344. Now her bank account is fatter to the sweet tune of \$1036. Atta-boy, Laura."*

As an interesting side note, the cameraman's production notes indicate that Ingalls landed so late in the day that

he lacked enough sunlight to shoot her close-ups for this story...so they did it the next morning.



Laura Ingalls, young aviatrix, set a new world's record when she looped the loop 980 times.

Speed dashes were in vogue in 1930, and one of the many was documented with the title *RECORD-BREAKING TRANS-U.S. FLIGHT ENDS IN CRASH*.

This story tells of Brock and Schlee and their flight that concluded on June 18th. The fliers flew in a Lockheed Vega from Jacksonville, FL, to San Diego, CA, and back again in record time. Upon landing the plane hit a fence and tipped over onto one wing, narrowly escaping serious disaster. The film sequence shows the plane as it lands too fast on a wet field and crashes; the crowds rush to damaged plane; the fliers crawl out of the plane; the damage; righting the plane; Jacksonville Mayor Alsop congratulates fliers for their speed record. The voice over narration says, "*William Brock and Edward Schlee, finish their round trip across the continent, lowering the record by nearly 14 hours. They made the flight in 32 hours. Home--and over they go! They overshot the field and crashed into a low fence but there was no damage except to the plane. It's funny to think they topped high mountains on their journey and then ended their trip by running into a four-foot fence. Nevertheless, their record*

stands because they'd already passes their starting point at Jacksonville Beach. They had a pretty tough time of it with electric storms and landed once to re-fuel. The boys feel pretty good about their job although Schlee seems a little put out over their mishap. That's O.K. Ed, don't worry about it..."



After setting a new record for a round-trip flight across the U.S., Brock and Schlee crashed into a fence as they were landing at Jacksonville, FL.



Kenneth Hunter, one of the brothers who piloted the *City of Chicago*, takes a break.

Flight endurance records were also the craze at the time, as noted in this July 7th release titled, *ENDURANCE FLYERS BREAK WORLD MARK IN 553 HOURS, 41 MINS*. This, of course, is the story of the Hunter brothers. Kenneth and John, in their second-hand Stinson SM-1, *City of Chicago*, finally landed at the Sky Harbor airport in Glenview, IL, after smashing all records for continuous flight. The action in this newsreel shows the plane in the air; the crowds rush to see the landing and run toward the plane; the plane taxis; crowds outside hangar; the brothers; the Hunter family;

Kenneth and John. The script reads, “Well, it won’t be long now--the last lap--she’s ready to come down--and the crowd is rushing down the field to give the Hunter brothers a right royal welcome--and a nice, safe landing--back home after 23 days in the air--beating the old record by 133 hours. Just imagine droning around and around--traveling fast but not getting anywhere--for 23 days. You’ve certainly got to hand it to the boys, and that old Spirit of Chicago. She’s taxiing in, with Kenneth standing up in the ship. The police had all they could do to keep the crowds back. Tired, dirty, happy--it was a great day for the Hunter family. The brothers will undoubtedly make a great deal of money out of their exploit, and they deserve all they can get. Here they are--Kenneth and John, a couple of regular guys...” The Hunter brothers were aided in this record flight by their other brothers, Albert and Walter. They piloted the refueling aircraft, another Stinson, named *Big Ben*. When the count was tallied, there were 223 aerial contacts that provided 7,630 gallons of gas and 400 gallons of oil to the *City of Chicago*.

Aerial technology innovations were covered throughout the year as indicated by this August 11th release, *NEW AIRMAIL PICK-UP DEVICE SURPRISES OFFICIALS IN SUCCESSFUL TESTS*. At Mitchel Field, NY, Roger Wolfe Kahn demonstrated the new Cabot Device for Postal officials, who required 75 out of 100 perfect pick-ups. The filmed action shows Kahn as he poses for the camera; the Bellanca CH pick-up plane takes off; scenes, from numerous angles, of the plane as it picks-up mailbags from the new device. The narration says, “Roger Wolfe Kahn, son of Otto H. Kahn, the banker, is conducting the test for the new device which permits a plane to pick up mail without slowing down.



Figure 8. Demonstrating the new Cabot aerial pickup. Mail bags, fastened to long reed-like poles, with a cord between them, are picked up by an airplane going at full speed. The plane is being piloted by Roger Wolfe Kahn.

The invention comprises an oblong box mounted on a motorcar. The plane passes overhead and hooks a rubber cord. This catapults the mailbag out for a short distance at a speed timed to match the plane’s. This offsets the jar. Then the bag is drawn up into the plane by means of an automatic winch through a trap door. In the test they only missed once out of a hundred times. They don’t have to speed up the mails as far as I’m concerned. The only mail I get says, ‘Please remit’...”

Then there were the Atlantic crossings stories, such as *WHOLE WORLD HAILS FRENCH ACES AFTER EPOCHAL FLIGHT*, shot mostly on September 3rd at Valley Stream and New York City, NY. French aviator Dieudonné Coste and his flying companion Maurice Bellonte, took just over 37 hours to complete their 4,100-mile nonstop flight from Paris to New York, in a red Breguet biplane named *Question Mark* on September 1-2, 1930. A paper shower greeted them en route to receive the Valor Medal of New York. The newsreel footage shows the French biplane coming in for a landing; taxi; the pilots get out of their cockpits; a large crowd rushes the plane and then follows the pilots; scenes of ticker-tape parade; view of crowded City Hall Square; the presentation of the Valor Medal; Coste; more parade scenes; Coste and Bellonte climb into their plane and take off to Dallas; the *Question Mark* in the air.

The voice over narration says, “*Like a giant bird, the Question Mark swoops down from the skies, the first to make a non-stop flight from Paris to New York, successful on a trip that had previously cost the lives of ten daring pioneers. It remained for Coste, the idol of France, and his companion, Bellonte, to blaze the long trail. Almost hysterical joy greeted the completion of the flight that took seven years to prepare and covered 4,000 miles in 37 hours. The scene was similar to France’s reception to Lindbergh--crowds almost overwhelming the gallant fliers and the photographers’ flashlights resembling a bombardment--a great moment. Coste comes from Gascony, the home of the Three Musketeers and it’s more than romance that gives him the nickname of D’Artagnon of the Air. Everyone wanted to shake the hand of the man whose epic flight was more than history--it was pure literature, the literature of the skies. Manhattan turned out in full force to show the visitors that they’re welcome and the typical New York greeting takes the form of a snowstorm of ticker tape and torn paper that makes Broadway look like a vast cabaret. Their triumphant march through the city is a far different ride from the perils of the long night across the raging Atlantic. And another night of refreshing sleep brings them an entirely different outlook on life. Even the weather joined with the people in a warm, summery*

welcome. City Hall Park is jammed when the fliers arrive to be met by the mayor on the broad steps. Only on rare occasions is the famous Valor Medal of the City of New York presented and there isn't a single doubt that the decoration was well-earned. Coste is the dashing, daring type while Bellonte is reserved and solemn. The police escort clears a path through the crowds and the two birdmen are finally permitted to return to their hotel and a few moments of rest. And now they're ready to take advantage of that offer by Colonel Easterwood of a \$25,000 prize to the flyer who makes a one-stop flight from Paris to Dallas. That's a lot of francs and they're entitled to 'em. And they're entitled to anything else they want--the world is theirs."



Figure 9. Maurice Bellonte, left, and Dieudonne Coste, in the cockpit of the *Question Mark* at Curtiss Field, Valley Stream, NY.

In almost every issue of the Universal Newspaper Newsreel there is a section for short stories called *NEWS PARAGRAPHS*. This one, from November 24th, tells of a new portable blimp mooring mast. The film's action shows a bus with a mooring mast attached on top as it tows a blimp up to lift-off speed; connecting the blimp to the bus mounted portable mast; bus moves quickly off with the dirigible in tow.



Figure 10. Bus acts as blimp's nurse. Portable mooring mast, mounted on bus, to speed up dirigible traffic, proves success in tests, bus racing airship off to fast start, also quick landing.

The script reads, "A new kind of take-off for blimps--there she goes--whup--just like a glider, and it starts a brand-new idea in dirigible groundwork. The blimp is carried to the bus which has a mooring mast on top, supported by a tripod. A new coupling device is then brought into play--in only a few minutes the nose of the ship is fastened to the mast by a mechanic and presto--the trick is done. And she's ready to be towed off home to the hangar. Then the bus scoots off with the big blimp--it's practical, yet it's kind of ridiculous looking--like a tail wagging a dog. When the mast isn't needed it can be folded down out of the way. It's wonderful the things they do these days, isn't it." By the way, the blimp in this story is the Goodyear *Puritan*.

IT'S A WRAP!

Well, there you go...an overview of the aviation activities of 1930, as seen through the camera lens of the Universal Newspaper Newsreel.

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 Web site www.archives.gov/research/hire-help/index.html. Better yet, visit Archives II and take advantage of their self-help video duplication equipment to make a research quality VHS copy. You may also make arrangements with the Motion Picture, Sound and Video Research Room staff to purchase film or digital video copies through their vendor system.

Incidentally, one of the discoveries made during my research were the publicity photographs of many of these stories in the collection and featured in this article. These photos were usually shot by Universal Newspaper Newsreel movie cameramen just before or after they filmed the story. To the best of my knowledge, they have not seen the light of day since they were used to publicize individual stories seven decades ago.

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

Phil Stewart is a video producer and an award-winning author of five non-fiction motion picture-related reference books. His latest, *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. © 2010 by Phillip W. Stewart