

FLYING THE CHRISTMAS MAIL

After serving with the 129th Regiment of Infantry on the Somme, Hill 304, northwest of Verdun and along the Meuse, I returned to the United States as a casualty. I attended a College of Pharmacy and Chemistry expecting to follow that line of endeavor, one I had started before entering the Service. However, repeated hospitalization at Veteran and private hospitals forced me to take up outside work in the year of 1924. This was the year that the Airmail placed its transcontinental route in continuous operation, and I was assigned a station at McGirr, Illinois, fifty miles west of Chicago. It was an emergency field consisting of forty acres for landings, a fifty foot tower in one corner of the field, and the revolving beacon-light which it supported. At the base was a small shed housing an individual gasoline electric generator which furnished current for the building and beacon-light. The boundaries of the field were outlined by the ordinary barn lantern--one being placed every two-hundred feet. Our chief means of communication was the telephone.

These fields were spaced each twenty-five miles apart and attended by a man known there as caretaker. There was one of these fields between my station and the Maywood field at Chicago. We reported for duty at six p. m. and worked til daylight.

July 1, 1924, the regular flights across the continent started. Our section was marked NF, which meant that portion of the route where the planes would do night flying in their regular course.

As a large portion of our fellows were ex-service men, their sense of duty ran high. We were aware of the fact that the time had come when it was necessary to demonstrate to the people as well as a congress that the mail could be flown on regular schedule day in and day out, from coast to coast. Weather and darkness could therefore be no obstacle.

December 24, 1924 was a drab winter day with a low gray overcast; the horizon was only dimly outlined; visibility was cut to a few miles by a blue haze. The last minute Christmas rush was on both the stores and the Air Mail and extra sections were called upon to help transport the surplus packages. I reported for duty as usual and lighted my field lights, then started the generator and beacon, prepared my fire and then went outside to check the weather. The temperature was dropping constantly and a light fall of snow had set in. This information was telephoned to the operations hangar at Maywood field. They in return informed me that two sections would be leaving there within an hour. We had a system whereby each plane flew directly over the fields and the caretakers would telephone to the next field ahead when the ship had passed safely. That caretaker would then watch for the approaching plane and if it failed to appear, check was made to locate it.

Rube Wagner and Clarence O. Gilbert were the pilots due out that night and their planes were serviced and waiting. After a careful check of the weather along the entire route to Iowa City they took off with the Christmas mail.

The telephone bell on my desk rang. It was operations at Maywood. "Two sections out at 11:05, five minutes spare. Gilbert and Wagner." I acknowledged the call, checked the time, turned off the motor generator, threw the beacon on the plant's batteries, and went outside to listen for the

hum of the Liberty engines. The snow was increasing gradually, the temperature nearing zero, and the night seemed black as ink. 7:20--7:35--7:30 --and at 7:35 the first plane should have appeared. Then at 7:40 the whine of a motor----and finally there appeared through the snow a pinpoint of red and green light barely three hundred feet up. God, how those boys could fly! And it was Christmas Eve too--truly a modern Santa Clause.

A burst of light from two of the plane's landing lights over the field seemed to say, "hello, buddy, everything O. K." I tried to wish him a visible "good luck" with a wide sweep of my flashlight. I immediately telephoned the information to the next field west that one section had passed my station.

By this time the wind had increased to a howl that warned of increasing velocity. I went back outside and waited for the second section. 7:50--7:55--8:00----fifteen minutes overdue! This time when I called the next station west, Franklin Grove, I told the caretaker that the second section had failed to pass my station and asked him to pass the word along to the other fields who would then keep a sharp lookout for it. Then I called operations, Maywood, with the information that the second section had failed to pass. Then there remained hours of agonized wondering and of fervent hopes. The storm had increased to a near-blizzard.

At 11:00 the telephone rang, and I heard the startling news that the second section, Wagner, had arrived at Iowa City O. K. ! The voice said, "The first section has failed to show up. We have checked all fields west of McCirr and only one section has passed them. Two sections have passed Aurora (the first field east to McCirr). Will you please start an immediate search?" I said I would do everything I could, and as quickly as I could.

Alice Eakle Marks

I turned away from the phone. The howling wind, blowing snow, the now subzero temperature all seemed messengers of despair. And indeed there was despair in my heart. I thought of an injured pilot lying helpless--probably bleeding to death--no, freezing to death--anything might have happened-----and there were twenty-five storm rocked miles of country to be searched. I called my substitute on duty, asking him to take of the station.

Then I called scores of farmers that lived on each side of the dirt-gravel road that ran directly east along the course, and found that not scores, but hundreds of them responded, offering themselves for the search, unselfishly.

The first clue to the lost plane's whereabouts was the result of a call to Kaneville, a hamlet 13 miles east of our field. Two planes had been heard in that vicinity. I requested the telephone operator there to have a search started from that point. As there was a Christmas Eve program in progress there, most of the people were in the church and did not know of the lost plane. The motor of my car had been running outside our little shack and as I prepared to head east to conduct the search, my telephone jangled again. Once again operations, Maywood, was calling. Breathlessly I put the receiver to my ear. This time the news was that Iowa City had radioed Maywood that Wagner had seen Gilbert's lights at a forty-degree angle when he had passed between Kaneville and McCirr. It seemed that Gilbert had either landed or was preparing to land somewhere in that stretch between the two places. I hung up the receiver and started down the east road. Gradually our fears for the worst were becoming a reality. At 1:00 A. M. there was now

word from the ill-fated plane. If he had landed safely, we would surely have had a telephone call from him by now.

About 2:00 A. M. I stopped at a lighted farm house to get warm. There I learned that the male population of the immediate country side was out in full force. On leaving the car to explore the fields on either side, I soon found this to be true. When topping a small hill, or coming to the edge of a ravine, I would see the lanterns of one man, or even groups already there ahead of me. But even constant touch with operations at Maywood by phone, brought no new clues. At 4:00 A. M. the snow stopped, but the wind and cold were sever. During the 5:00 A. M. conversation with Maywood, I was informed that a relief plane piloted by Randolph Page with Chief Mechanic Tom Scully as observer, was taking off at daylight.

We continued on with our lanterns and at Daybreak reached Kaneville, cold and hungry. There a boy about 12 years of age said that he had seen the plane make a wide circle the night before. Some of the natives shook their heads knowingly and insinuated that the boy had had a pipe dream, but I could not help but believe him. I knew that the pilot would make a circle on a night like that only in case of trouble.

The relief plane passed overhead going west. Another hour passed--then a farmer and his wife, who, upon noticing how extraordinarily busy the telephone line had been, had listened in. They grasped small bits of conversation about the missing plane, and the farmer immediately went outside to look for it. After progressing but a short distance something directly ahead caused him to stop silent in his tracks.

Fate sat grinning close by while the farmer stood horror stricken, looking at the gruesome wreckage of the plane--only eight-hundred feet feet from his own home. It lay there flopped on its back in a plowed field, pitifully still and desolate. The farmer acted quickly, and notified the Kaneville operator and the Maywood field.

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By this time I had noticed the tail light which was still burning and consequently the wreckage, from the road we were on. The news then, traveled fast and the searching parties met at the plane. The relief plane, piloted by Page, landed in a nearby field. A close inspection of the wreck failed to yield the pilot's body, however, and so a second search was started for the remains of Clarence O. Gilbert.

These men who had battled the frigid night through again scattered in all directions, forming a large ever-widening circle around the plane. Finally a half mile away they came upon the body of the modern Santa Claus. His enemy had been the merciless storm--it had driven the thick snow into his face and cockpit. It had buffeted the plane on every turn. It had obscured the very essential and all-important lighted flares of the airways below him. It continued with relentless force until Gilbert, unable to rely on his sense of direction, balance, or altitude, had decided to relinquish the plane to the unyielding elements and, if possible, save his life. As he had stood up in the cockpit preparing to use his last safety device, the parachute, hoping that he would land safely, he paused long enough to perform his last official act--that of cutting his ignition switch and thus preventing a fire which would destroy the mail upon crashing. With this gallantry and courage, he stepped over the plane's side into the sea of blackness below. And with that step something happened that removed the name of Clarence O. Gilbert from the active rolls of the Air Mail forever.

As his broken body lay motionless on the frozen ground, his former enemy, the snowstorm, repented and tenderly spread a light coverlet of snow over it. The silken shroud lines still fastened to the harness around his body told a tragic tale of misfortune. His chute had opened above the plane on the tail surfaces had cut the shroud lines in two rendering the parachute useless. Tears? Yes...a few. Those of us from the service knew that this wouldn't be the last. Other fellow-workers would be found in this same manner on prairie and hillside before Mr. and Mrs. Public were convinced that the mail could be flown successfully.

After covering the body gently with a blanket furnished by a farmer and posting a guard we turned to the mail. Gilbert had died trying to get the mail through. It shouldn't be hard for us to carry on despite heavy hearts and numb fingers. The Modern Santa Claus would not rest easy if he knew that some child's Christmas gift was being delayed.....or it might even be some badly needed supplies.....the cargo was always a mystery to us.

Since only one sack was torn the entire cargo was loaded in the relief plane and taken back to Maywood to be rechecked ~~and flown from there~~. Pilot Page flew it to Iowa City and Omaha. Chief Mechanic Scully waited with the body until the ambulance arrived.

Clarence O. Gilbert's cargo of mail flew again westward that morning and the plane that carried it dipped its wings as it passes the tragic scene and finished with a farewell zoom as its parting salute to the fallen comrade.



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