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## BIRD OF PARADISE

The "Bird of Paradise" flew out of murky skies into Wheeler Field, Territory of Hawaii, June 29, 1927, ushering in a new era in the Pacific. It was 6:29 a.m. when a U.S. Army Air Corps Fokker C-2 tri-motor monoplane landed on the grassy field. The two-officer aircrew consisted of First Lieutenants Lester J. Maitland, pilot, and Albert F. Hegenberger, navigator.

The first successful flight from California to Hawaii

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would end Hawaii's isolation. Within half a century, the day of the passenger steamer was gone and thousands of air travellers would follow the trail blazed by the two U. S. Army Air Corps fliers.

Dreams for such a daring flight dated back to the early 1920s when ever-lengthening distance flight records tested man and machine over the somewhat safer environment of the continent.

Technically the first crossing of the Pacific was in 1924 when Army Air Service pilots made their Round-The-World-Flight. But these doughty fliers encountered less ocean expanse by taking the arctic route across Alaska and the Bering Sea.

The Navy's Commander John Rodgers led his four crew men from San Francisco Bay to within 250 miles of Hawaii in 1925 before running out of fuel. Unable to make rendezvous with a refueling destroyer on station, they stripped the wing fabric of their PN-9 flying boat to make sails. After a privation of nine days with no food and little water, they made landfall on Kauai, thus completing the first air-sea transit, if not the first non-stop flight, to Hawaii.

Planning for the Maitland-Hegenberger flight began in earnest in September 1926 when the contract for the Fokker transport was let. This was a regular GI aircraft, similar to the Army's Fokker T-2. The latter, with Lieutenants J. A. Macready

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and O. G. Kelly at the controls, had set a distance record of 2,516 miles and a duration record of 36 hours over Dayton, Ohio, in 1923. The "Bird of Paradise" had newer motors (not engines), a metal wing and a few other advancements in technology, but otherwise was a standard military transport.

Maitland and Hegenberger were carefully selected.

Lester J. Maitland, the pilot, was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Feb. 8, 1899. He earned his wings and commission at Waco, Texas, in 1918. In 1923 he set a world's speed record at Dayton, Ohio, piloting a Curtiss R-6 at a speed of 236.587 mph. Starting WWII at Clark Field in the Philippines, he escaped to Australia and later led the 385th Bomb Group in combat in the European Theater. He achieved temporary promotion to colonel and after retirement assumed the rank of brigadier general in the Michigan National Guard. Later he turned to the ministry and is now an Episcopalian minister in Red Bluff, California.

Albert F. Hegenberger, the navigator, was born in Boston Sept. 30, 1895. After starting at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, he enlisted in the Aviation Section of the U. S. Army Signal Corps in 1917 and took flying training at Ellington Field, Texas. After WWI, he returned to MIT and was graduated in 1919. During WWII he was Commanding Officer of the 11th Bomb Group at Hickam Field, Hawaii, and the 2d Bomber Command and Commanding

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General of the 10th Air Force in China. After the war he became Commanding General of the 1st Air Division in Tokyo. He retired in 1949 as a major general. Coincidentally, he resides in Maitland, Florida.

Hegenberger had been a pioneer in the development of "avigation" as aerial navigation was called at that time. Serving as an engineering officer at McCook Field (now part of Wright-Patterson AFB) he and a few others worked to get driftmeters, compasses, sextants and other navigational aids of the day adapted to use in flight.

Both airmen had once served at the old Luke Field in Hawaii and each had often said that he hoped some day to come back to Hawaii in a plane, little realizing that they would actually be the first to perform such a feat.

Without such aids as single sideband radio, airways communication, radar and the countless other devices of the modern Air Force, the duo had to rely upon skill and careful planning. They could have taken the easy way out. They could have flown from Hawaii to California, but that would have proven little. Charles Lindberg had already proven a month earlier the practicality of reaching a land mass as a destination. Maitland and Hegenberger were to prove the feasibility of navigating to a tiny island in a big ocean.

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It required courage. If they deviated from course four degrees, the "Bird of Paradise" would miss Hawaii and fly on into oblivion.

In mid-June, 1927, the countdown began as Maitland and Hegenberger rolled their Fokker off Wright Field, Ohio, to head for California. Riding with them were technicians who made final adjustments as the plane crossed the country in a series of hops.

They arrived at Rockwell Field, San Diego, California, June 20 and stopped to have a 70-gallon extra fuel tank installed.

While there, Maitland took the opportunity to confer for several hours with Navy Lieutenant Byron Connell, who had been the pilot with Commander Rodgers in the 1925 crossing attempt in the PN-9.

So far very few people knew of the proposed effort, but when Maitland and Hegenberger landed at the Army's Crissey Field at San Francisco, June 25, throngs were waiting to cheer them. The War Department had announced the flight.

Maitland told reporters they were ready to go as soon as General Mason D. Patrick, Chief of Army Air Corps said to. He said they planned to fly out of Oakland Municipal Airport because its runway was longer than Crissey's. It was a mile and a quarter in length and the pilot wanted as much runway as possible to get off safely with 1,134 gallons of gas.

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As it was, the "Bird of Paradise" lifted off at the Oakland airport after a roll of 4,600 feet.

That was at 7:09 a.m. PST, June 28, 1927. In Hawaii, then 2 1/2 hours earlier than California, it was 4:39 a.m.

Earlier that morning the pilot and navigator had climbed into the tri-motor for last minute departure preparation. They carried little food as they preferred fuel to food for the payload. They packed two gallons of drinking water, some thermos bottles of coffee and soup, a few sandwiches and chocolate bars. During the flight they misplaced and never found their coffee -- "the only mishap of the entire flight," they were to say later.

The ground crew hand-cranked the inertia starters on the three Wright Whirlwind J-5 air-cooled motors. The weather was clear as the "Bird of Paradise" swept into the air. Its takeoff weight was 14,000 pounds.

They set air speed at 105 mph and noticed a slight fog over the bridgeless Golden Gate as they left the West Coast behind and headed out over the broad expanse of the Pacific.

While losing the coffee thermos bottles was the only mishap, the two birdmen had a few other problems. The new earth induction compass failed shortly after takeoff, and Hegenberger had to navigate by dead reckoning the rest of the way, relying on celestial and solar observations.

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Rain squalls hampered sighting of surface ships. However five hundred miles out, the duo flew over the SS Sonoma and Hegenberger verified they were on course. A little over half way there, Hegenberger again verified his calculations by radio contact with the SS President Cleveland, 1,000 miles off Hawaii.

To get above the clouds for star sightings that night, they climbed to an altitude of 10,200 feet. Soon one of the motors sputtered and died. Maitland diagnosed the problem as ice forming in the carburetor and descended to 4,000 feet to get to warmer air. The ice melted and the motor, its propeller turning idly in the wind stream, started again.

At Wheeler Field, Major Henry J. F. Miller, the commanding officer, announced that the estimated time of arrival was 3 a.m., June 29. Island residents and military people turned out by the thousands bringing picnic baskets under their arms to welcome the intrepid fliers. But three o'clock came and went with no sign of the aircraft.

In the next couple of hours many gave the aviators up for lost and began to leave.

Hegenberger had sighted Kauai lighthouse on time but, not expecting an ovation and not wishing to wake the ground crew, they had circled off shore for three hours at 60 mph. This also made it easier for Maitland to find the field by daylight.

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The many people who remained were watching the eastern skies for the Fokker, and were surprised to sight it over the Waianae Mountains to the northwest coming in from Kauai.

When he saw the throngs of people still on hand to welcome them, Maitland wagged the wings in salute, circled the airdrome and made an easy landing.

It was 6:29 a.m., HST June 29. They had completed a 2,407-mile flight in 25 hours and 50 minutes and achieved a milestone.

As the "Bird of Paradise" rolled to a stop, crowds clamored around it. Horse-mounted military police formed a cordon to protect the plane. Two battalions of soldiers from adjacent Schofield Barracks' 21st Infantry were also posted around Wheeler to control the spectators.

Despite the drizzly overcast, Territorial Governor Wallace R. Farrington and the few high ranking generals and admirals in Hawaii in those days were among the dignitaries in the reviewing stand.

Maitland and Hegenberger were feted in Hawaii by military and civilian community alike. Feathered capes of the Hawaiian Alii--the royalty--were presented amid appropriate ceremony at a banquet at Waikiki's plush new Royal Hawaiian Hotel.

Maitland told the banquet guests that the flight was not a stunt, but a scientific experiment to demonstrate that air

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travel was no riskier than sea or land travel.

Lindberg called the flight an outstanding feat of airmanship that helped turn aviation into a profession based on skill, knowledge and planning.

The War Department decorated both fliers with the Distinguished Flying Cross and they were awarded the Mackay Trophy for 1927.

The intrepid fliers returned to their normal duties shortly and continued their careers in uniform, both serving in combat during World War II.

The two quiet airmen called it an uneventful flight. Yet without fanfare, the two military aviators had made history. The mighty Pacific Ocean was no longer a barrier to the airplane.

The lonely sky trek of 26 hours in 1927 is now slightly more than four hours from the West Coast, and hourly flights connect Hawaii with the Mainland, Asia and the Western Pacific, living testimony to the meteoric advance in aviation triggered by two lieutenants in the Air Corps, Lester J. Maitland and Albert F. Hegenberger.