

The Flying Bird of Paradise

by William B. Murphy



THE dawn of a new era in Pacific aviation shone through murky skies over Wheeler Field, Territory of Hawaii. It was 6:29 a.m., 29 June 1927, when the *Bird of Paradise*, a Fokker C-2 tri-motor monoplane, gracefully touched the grassy field, ending the first successful flight from California to Hawaii.

Wearing the silver bars of first lieutenants, Lester J. Maitland and Albert F. Hegenberger pioneered the airplane which 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 Cdr. John Rodgers led his four crewmen 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 ~~GT~~ aircraft, similar to the Army's Fokker T-2. The latter, with Lts. J.A. Macready 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 had been carefully selected. Lester J. Maitland, the pilot, was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 8 Feb. 1899. He had 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. Entering World War II at Clark Field in the Philippines, he escaped

Above: Lts. A. F. Hegenberger and L. J. Maitland waggle the wings of their Fokker C-2 in response to the excited greeting of spectators at Wheeler Field, Territory of Hawaii. This ended nearly 26 hours of flying in the first Mainland-to-Hawaii flight in 1927 (photo Courtesy State of Hawaii Archives).

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 on 30 Sept. 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 World War I, he returned to MIT and was graduated in 1919. During World War II he was Commanding Officer of the 11th Bomb Group at Hickam Field, Hawaii, and the 2nd Bomber Command and Commanding 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 Lindbergh had already proven a month earlier the practicability 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.

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,

Lieutenants Hegenberger and Maitland bring their Fokker C-2 *Bird of Paradise* to rest on Wheeler Field runway in 1927 after completing the first transpacific flight. Eager hands await their debarkation as the flyers cut the power from their motors (photo Courtesy State of Hawaii Archives).



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, 20 June and stopped to have a 70-gallon extra fuel tank installed. While there, Maitland took the opportunity to confer for several hours with Navy Lt. Byron Connell, who had been the pilot with Commander Rodgers in the 1925 crossing attempt in the PN-9.

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

Maitland told reporters that they were ready to go as soon as Gen. Mason D. Patrick, Chief of Army Air Corps, gave the go-ahead. 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—and they wanted as much runway as possible to get off safely with 1,134 gallons of gas.

On 28 June 1927, the morning of the flight, 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.

At 7:09 a.m., PST, ground crew at Oakland hand-cranked the inertia starters on the three Wright Whirlwind J-5 air-cooled motors. The *Bird of Paradise* lifted off after a roll of just 4,600 feet. The weather was clear. The *Bird of Paradise* swept into the air; its takeoff weight was 14,000 pounds.

Air speed was set at 105 mph. The pilot and navigator 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.

Although 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.

Rain squalls hampered sighting of surface ships. However, 500 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



Traditionally reserved for ancient royalty of Hawaii, feather capes were presented at Honolulu to Lieutenants Hegenberger and Maitland by thrilled Islanders in recognition of their historic flight in 1927 (photo Courtesy State of Hawaii Archives).

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.

Ahead, at Wheeler Field, Maj. Henry J. F. Miller, the commanding officer, announced that the estimated time of arrival was 3 a.m., 29 June. 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. After a couple of hours, many gave the aviators up for lost and began to leave.

In the sky overhead Hegenberger had sighted Kauai lighthouse on time but, not expecting an ovation and not wishing to

wake the ground crew, the men circled off shore for three hours at 60 mph. This also made it easier for Maitland to find the field by daylight.

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

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

fantry were also posted around Wheeler to control the spectators.

Despite the drizzly overcast, Territorial Gov. 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 by the 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 travel was no riskier than sea or land travel.

Charles Lindbergh 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 airmen returned to their normal duties shortly afterward and continued their careers in uniform, both serving in combat during World War II. The two quiet airmen had called it an uneventful flight. Yet without fanfare, they had made history. The mighty Pacific Ocean was no longer a barrier to the airplane.

The lonely sky trek of almost 26 hours in 1927 is now slightly more than 4 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 these lieutenants of the Air Corps.



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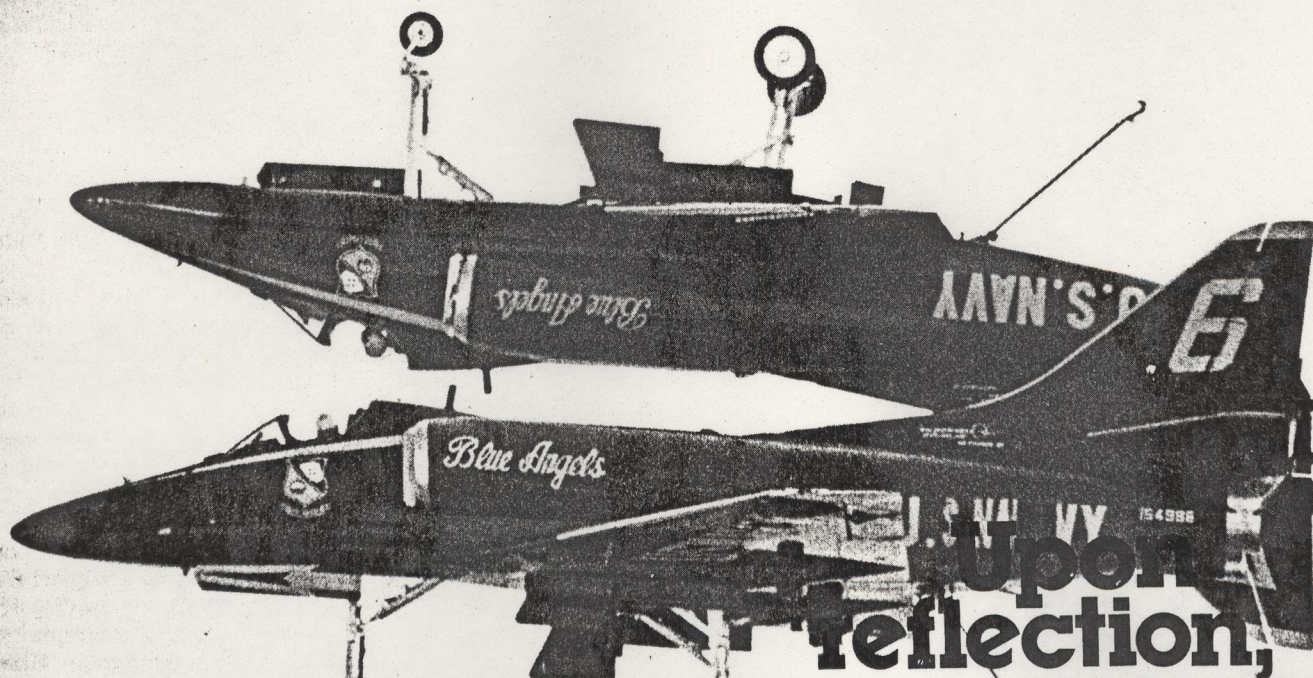
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