

THE DOLE RACE

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Sources:
Western Flying, Sept. 1927
Aviation, Sept. 1927
Aero Digest, Sept. 1927
Flying, Sept. 1927

Following the success of Lieutenants Lester Maitland and Albert Hegenberger (U.S. Air Service Fokker C-2 "Bird of Paradise," June 28-29, 1927) and Emory Bronte and Ernest Smith (Travel-Air monoplane "City of Oakland" July 14-15, 1927) in flying from California to Hawaii, James D. Dole, wealthy pineapple grower in Hawaii, offered first and second prizes of \$25,000 and \$10,000 for a race from Oakland to Hawaii. The date of take off for the race was set for August 12, 1927; the order of take off to be determined by drawing, and the first and second planes to arrive were to gain the prize money. Because of the short time available to compete for the rich prize, preparations for the 2400 mile race were naturally rushed - a fact that contributed to a total of 10 lives lost and only two planes finishing out of the eight that finally attempted to start.

Government inspectors of the Bureau of Air Commerce did try to eliminate those airplanes which were obviously ill-equipped to cover the distance but had they literally enforced safety regulations the entire field would probably have been eliminated.

In 1927 Government inspectors had only a limited set of airworthiness regulations to enforce - nothing regulated the overload limits of airplanes and qualifications for a pilot's license were sketchy by today's standards. The most serious limitation on the would-be Dole Race entrants was a demonstrated ability to navigate properly. Those navigators who failed a stiff examination conducted by Lt. Ben Wyatt, who had been made available by the Navy for this purpose, or who did not have proper navigation equipment were summarily disqualified from starting. Two entrants, much to their disgust, failed on the navigation.

Unfavorable weather conditions - plus probably the fact that many entrants were inadequately prepared - forced postponement of the race start from August 12 to August 16. The decision provoked protests among those whose preparations were further along and who felt that delay would give their competitors unfair advantage. However, on August 16, 1927, all was ready for the start at Oakland Bay Farm Airport with its 7000 foot hard-packed dirt runway. The first take off was set for 12 noon sharp, and the order of take off, as determined by lot, is given below together with pertinent particulars about the entrants:

1. The Oklahoma - a Travel Air monoplane with a Wright J-5 engine. Pilot was Bennett H. Griffin, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma (in 1949 the manager of Washington National Airport) and the navigator was Al Henley of Bartlesville, Oklahoma. This entrant was sponsored by the Phillips Petroleum Company of Oklahoma City.
2. The El Encanto - Goddard monoplane with a Wright J-5 engine. The airplane had a fuel capacity of 360 gallons and was designed and built under supervision of its pilot, Lieutenant Norman A. Goddard, USNR, of San Diego, California. The navigator was Lieutenant K. C. Hawkins, USN, of Wilkes Barre, Pennsylvania.
3. Pabco Pacific Flyer - Breese monoplane with a Wright J-5 engine. Major Livingston Irving was to fly alone doing his own piloting and navigation. The plane had a fuel capacity of 380 gallons and the entry was sponsored by employees of the Berkeley (California) paraffin companies.
4. The Golden Eagle - Lockheed Vega monoplane with a Wright J-5 engine. John W. Frost of San Francisco was the pilot and the navigator was Gordon Scott of Los Angeles. This airplane carried 360 gallons of gas and was equipped with a radio receiver and direction finder. The entry was sponsored by the San Francisco Examiner.
5. Miss Doran - Buhl Air sedan biplane with a Wright J-5 engine. The pilot was John W. (Augie) Pedlar of Flint, Michigan and Lieutenant Vilas R. Knope, USN, of San Francisco was navigator. A young school teacher, Miss Mildred Doran of Flint, Michigan, went along as a passenger; the only woman and the only passenger in the race. This entry was backed by William F. Malloska of Flint, Michigan.
6. Aloha - Breese monoplane with a Wright J-5 engine. Martin Jensen of Honolulu was the pilot. The navigator was Captain Paul Schyluter of San Francisco, formerly a merchant marine officer. The "Aloha" had a fuel capacity of 400 gallons and a take off gross weight of 4985 pounds. The entry was backed by popular subscription in Honolulu.
7. Woolaroc - Travel Air monoplane with a Wright J-5 engine. The pilot was Arthur Goebel of Los Angeles, a former movie stunt flier. His navigator was Lieutenant William Davis, Jr., U.S.N. of San Diego. Fuel capacity of the plane was 425 gallons and the radio transmitter and receiver previously used with such success by Smith and Bronte was carried. The "Woolaroc" was sponsored by the Phillips Petroleum Company of Oklahoma City and was probably the best equipped plane in the race.

8. Dallas Spirit - Swallow monoplane with a Wright J-5 engine. The pilot was William P. Erwin of Dallas, Texas, a former Army Air Service captain with 8 German planes to his credit in World War I. The navigator was 24 year old Alvin Eichwaldt. The fuel capacity of the "Dallas Spirit" was 460 gallons and the take off gross weight was 5350 pounds.

The following are the other entrants in the race who failed to start:

City of Peoria - an Air King biplane with a Wright J-5 engine. The pilot was Charles W. Parkhurst of Lomax, Illinois, and his navigator was Ralph C. Lowes of Peoria, Illinois. The entry was sponsored by the National Airways System of Lomax, Illinois. This plane was to have started in the sixth place but, at the last minute, it was ordered withdrawn by Government inspectors because it was felt the fuel capacity was insufficient to make the flight.

Frank Clark and Robert Fowler were two entrants who failed to have their planes ready in time. A combination of financial difficulties plus probably inadequate navigational equipment and ability forced their withdrawal.

The Angel of Los Angeles - a Bryant monoplane crashed while on a test flight near Los Angeles, August 12, killing its pilot, Captain Arthur V. Rogers, a former British war ace.

The Spirit of Los Angeles - a twin engined International tri-plane was wrecked on August 11 when it nose dived into San Francisco Bay during a test flight, injuring James L. Griffin, pilot; Ted Lundgren, navigator; and Lawrence Weill, passenger.

A Tremaine low wing monoplane entered and flown by two Naval aviators, Lieutenant George M. D. Covell, USN, and Lieutenant Richard O. Wagner, USN, crashed into Point Loma, San Diego, during a test flight on August 10. Both Covell and Wagner were killed.

Eight starters lined up at the eastern end of the long 7000 foot runway at Oakland Airport on the morning of August 16, 1927. It was a sunny day with slight haze and weather reports over the 2400 miles of ocean to Hawaii had been good. Promptly at 12:00 noon Starter Edward Howard brought down his black and white checkered flag sending the first plane, "The Oklahoma" into the starting circle and down the runway.

As "The Oklahoma" slowly gathered speed her prop blast sent back a dense cloud of dust that obscured her from the other anxiously waiting starters. After a long run of over 4500 feet she finally lifted in the air and the second starter the "El Encanto" was waved into the starting circle. Her take off started at 12:04 p.m. but, after proceeding more than half way down the runway, Lieutenant Goddard began to have trouble controlling his heavily loaded plane. She began to wobble erratically and finally skidded to the right of the runway, chasing a group of onlookers to safety, and slewed around with her right wing torn off and the landing gear collapsed. Goddard and Hawkins climbed out with only minor injuries.

When the dust cleared after Goddard's attempt, it was seen that the runway was not obstructed so without delay the "Pabco Pacific Flyer" was sent on her way at 12:10. Major Irving struggled in vain to get his heavy plane airborne but finally was forced to cut his throttle and apply brakes in order to keep from running off the 7000 foot strip. His airplane was towed out of the way, and the "Golden Eagle" flagged off at 12:29. John Frost let the sleek Lockheed Vega fly herself off and he was airborne without effort at the 3000 foot length and, by the time he crossed the end of the runway had climbed to 200 feet. He turned slowly to pass over San Francisco and was soon lost in the thin haze to the westward.

"Miss Doran" was the next to take off at 12:31 and Augie Pedler had the red and white Buhl air sedan off the runway at the 3000 mark. He gained altitude rapidly and turned westward to follow the "Golden Eagle" two minutes ahead of him. Martin Jensen with Paul Schluter was next in the Breese monoplane "Aloha" and he was airborne easily at 3200 feet at 12:35. The "Woolaroc" followed next at 12:36 and was off in 3000 feet. The last plane left was the Swallow monoplane "Dallas Spirit." Erwin started his take-off at 12:38 and after a 5000 foot run staggered into the air and commenced a slow climb.

While Irwin was taking off, "Miss Doran" and the "Oklahoma" were seen to be returning. Pedler jettisoned most of his fuel in the bay and landed at 12:43 followed closely by Griffen and Henley in the "Oklahoma." Both planes had engine trouble. In the meantime, Major Livingston Irving's "Pabco Pacific Flyer" had been towed back to the head of the runway to make another attempt to get off. ~~The gas tanks were topped off.~~ The gas tanks were topped off again and, with a slight freshening of the breeze down the runway, Major Irving started his second take off shortly after 1:00 p.m. This time Irving stalled off at the 4000 foot mark but failed to stay airborne. His plane got out of control finally and turned over at the end of the runway. It was badly damaged but Major Irving climbed out uninjured except for a cut on his hand.

Now the crowd saw yet another plane returning to land. This time it was the "Dallas Spirit" which Captain Erwin skillfully landed, fully loaded, at 1:15 p.m. His trouble resulted from wind rushing in through the navigator's drift hatch in the bottom of the fuselage and stripping loose the cloth fabric. Eyewitnesses thought at first he was about to lose his empennage when they saw the shredded fabric peeling off.

Pedler made repairs to the "Miss Doran's" engine, refilled his tanks and took off again at 2:03 p.m. Griffin waited for repairs to be effected on the "Oklahoma" until 4:00 p.m. when he finally gave up and left the field, realizing he could not in any case catch up with the others several hours on their way. Erwin likewise was forced to give up an attempt to make another take off, but he shortly announced that he would try for the \$25,000 ~~Easterwood prize offered for the first four~~ stop flight from Dallas, Texas to Hongkong, China.

Of the eight starters on the afternoon of August 16, two crashed on take off; six were airborne successfully but three soon returned and only one of these was able to get away a second time after effecting repairs. Thus, that night, four planes were independently winging their way over the 2400 mile empty stretch of Pacific Ocean while the whole country anxiously awaited word of their progress. Because she was equipped with both a radio transmitter and receiver the "Woolaroc" was able to report her position relatively frequently. At 2:00 a.m. (PST) August 17 the S.S. City of Los Angeles reported via the Army Signal Service that she had sighted what was believed to be the "Golden Eagle" near the halfway mark. At about the same time the S.S. Manulani reported sighting two airplanes believed to be the "Woolaroc" and "Miss Doran" 1200 miles out and near the northern limit of the course.

At 2:53 p.m. (PST) August 17, the "Woolaroc" appeared over Wheeler Field on Oahu and landed amid the cheers of a crowd of 20,000. As Art Goebel and his navigator William Davis crawled out of the cockpit they anxiously asked how many planes had already landed. They were told they were first in and winners of the \$25,000 prize. They were surprised and elated. The flight had taken 26 hours, 17 minutes and 33 seconds.

But what of the other three that had started? The crowd anxiously scanned the skies for signs of another airplane. Finally, after two hours, as people were beginning to leave the field the "Aloha" roared in low from the east, circled once and landed at 4:50 p.m. (PST). Martin Jensen and Paul Schluter received the cheers of the crowd and learned they had taken second prize of \$10,000. Their flight had taken 28 hours and 16 minutes.

"Miss Doran" with Augie Podler, Lieutenant Knope and Miss Mildred Doran and the "Golden Eagle" with John Frost and Gordon Scott were never heard from again. On August 19, with these two long overdue, Captain Erwin with young Eichwaldt took off at 2:15 p.m. (PST) for Hawaii in his "Dallas Spirit," equipped this time with the radio transmitter from Major Livingston Irving's wrecked "Pabco Pacific Flyer." He intended to search along the route for the two missing planes and after arriving in Hawaii would push on in two more stops to Hong Kong. However, less than seven hours later, at 9:02 p.m. Erwin sent a frantic SOS reporting he was in a tail spin. The transmission was abruptly broken off and nothing more was heard nor was any trace ever found of the "Dallas Spirit."

The competition for the Dole Race money cost ten lives; three in pre-race preparation, five in the race itself, and two more in a vain search. Looking back it is remarkable that more lives were not lost. There was much public condemnation of this race and it did much to dim the achievement of Goebel and Davis and of Jensen and Schluter, each flying over 2400 miles of open water and arriving at the same field within two hours of each other.

Certainly the disasters attendant upon this race emphasized the necessity for thorough-going preparation, and excellent navigation. The need for radio equipment was again demonstrated when we consider the respective flights of the "Woolaroc" and "Aloha." Goebel and Davis had both radio transmitter and receiver and were able to give position reports of their progress. Davis also used the receiver to aid his navigation by the use of the radio beacon signals transmitted from San Francisco and Honolulu. The "Aloha" on the other hand had no radio equipment and Jensen stated that they lost approximately three hours when unable to determine their position when approaching Hawaii. This three hour delay very likely cost them the extra \$15,000 they would have gained by taking first place.

The race attempts were favored by excellent weather over the entire route. Only occasional rain squalls were met by the "Woolaroc" and "Aloha." Because Davis was primarily well trained in aerial navigation and able to use celestial navigation in conjunction with the radio beacon signals, Goebel was able to fly the "Woolaroc" the entire route at 6000 to 8000 feet, often above the cloud cover out of sight of the ocean. This altitude doubtless gave more favorable fuel consumption for the speed obtained. In any event they landed with fuel for an estimated additional five hours of flight. As Schluter was primarily a ship navigator the "Aloha" flew at low altitude where he could read wind direction from the water and take horizon sights with his ordinary ship sextant. Had Schluter found less favorable weather he probably would not have been able to use so accurately his celestial navigation above the cloud cover as Davis in the "Woolaroc" was able to do. Also without any radio receiver, Schluter had nothing to fall back on but dead reckoning navigation and had he been forced to rely on that he would have been lucky to hit so relatively small a target as the Hawaiian Islands.