

The AMERICAN LEGION Weekly

AUGUST, 1919: P. 19

Six Miles Up in the Air



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Roland Rohlfs ready for his six-mile flight straight up

A Battle with the Spirit of the North Wind

By R. WILLIAM RIIS

SIX miles in the air and your gasoline all gone—if the airplane you were piloting were in that dilemma it would be a red letter day in your life, provided you got down safely. Yet to the man who has actually been there it is nothing unusual. He has done it before and intends to do it again.

On July 30, 1919, Roland Rohlfs, chief test pilot of the Curtiss Engineering Corporation, drove his plane to the height of 30,700 feet, thereby establishing a new official world's record. Had his gasoline held out he believes he could have beaten Adjutant Casale's unofficial height of 33,176 feet. It is simple in the telling, but accomplishing it was quite otherwise. The story of his flight reads like the sagas of Vikings of a bygone day, only it is replete with the dangers of the higher air, dangers with which men of other ages have been totally unfamiliar.

A sunny, blue sky, flecked with a few feathery cloudlets, seemed to offer an excellent opportunity for Rohlfs to make his long-planned flight. Early in the afternoon, his chosen machine, a Curtiss Wasp triplane, originally designed as a two-place machine-gun fighter, was wheeled well out to the center of Roosevelt Field, where it was surrounded by a group of Rohlfs' friends and by officials. Rohlfs, swathed in layers of clothes till he looked like a mammoth cocoon, climbed stiffly into the tiny cock-pit and fastened the straps securely about his waist.

"All clear?" he asked.

"Clear," replied the mechanics who were turning the propeller.

With a final touch to his helmets he threw on the full four-hundred horsepower of the twelve cylinders. The ex-

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Roland Rohlfs

plosions of the motor rose to an ear-splitting roar as the airplane gathered speed along the field. In twenty feet the wheels began to leave the ground, the little plane rose gracefully, surely, steadily and turned in a great arc along the edge of the field. Up, up, it circled, becoming smaller and smaller, till the eyes of the watchers on the ground had to strain to follow it. Now it ducked into a little cloud, which seemed to vanish at the touch of the whirling propeller. At fifteen thousand feet it was an almost invisible speck, swinging between the horns of a young crescent moon that hung in the western sky.

"He'll hook himself if he isn't careful," remarked one of the watchers. The next instant the drifting speck vanished, and the watchers walked back to the hangar to await the outcome.

MEANWHILE, Rohlfs kept his controls heading up, always up. As he rose, the north wind, which on the ground had been a pleasant thirty-mile breeze, increased steadily in velocity till it became a sixty-mile gale. As he passed the 20,000-foot level, still climbing, the wind reached an eighty-mile rate, while the thermometer, under the touch of the blast, showed a rapidly falling mercury. Beneath him a matchless panorama opened out, with Long Island lying, a narrow strip of land, between the flashing ocean and the sound. On up, always up.

Then came the first hint of trouble. The pilot became aware that the engine, which had been running smoothly and powerfully, was not giving the full number of revolutions per minute that it was capable of. Something was wrong with the gasoline supply, or with the new kind of gasoline he was using. He was forced to take to the hand pump to give the laboring cylinders a full supply. That helped, and he went on up. Twenty-five thousand, twenty-seven thousand, twenty-eight thousand feet, the barograph recorded his steady rise.

Now the Spirit that lives in the North Wind determined that this adventurous little speck of humanity should trespass no farther. For countless ages the winds had played alone and unchallenged through the vast reaches of space, and here was a mere man daring them in their home, driving his tiny ship on frail cotton wings across their pathless heights. He must be stopped. With a rush of speed, the wind roared down upon him, bit savagely through his layers of wool and fur, and fastened wintry fangs on his body. Worse, it laid icy fingers on his engine and chilled the very fire that was carrying him upward. Down went the mercury, passing twenty below zero, twenty-one below, twenty-two below, with no signs of stopping. The gale was howling at ninety miles an hour through the screeching stays, and the engine began to hesitate uncertainly. Something must be done, and quickly.

REACHING out over the cowl, Rohlfs tried to cut the rubber pipe which

Roland Rohlfs

carried water to the engine, thinking that if he could stop the functioning of the cooling mechanism the motor would throw off the grasp of the cold. But his thick clothes hindered him, and he was unsuccessful. While the plane still climbed slowly, he devised another plan.

Slowly and laboriously he began to cut strips from the cushion on which he was sitting. His goggles and helmets interfered with his sight, and the two pairs of thick gloves impeded his hands, yet he worked away till he had several pieces of cloth ready. Then came the trial.

Dropping the controls he climbed forward to the engine and tucked a strip of the cushion across the face of the radiator, so as to shut out the cold. Laughing with glee, the wind tore away the cloth and whirled it into space. Again he tried, and again the merciless wind snatched away his handiwork. A third time, while the plane flew with no guiding hand on the controls, he attempted to block the foe, but to no avail.

Struggling back to his seat as hastily as possible, he strove desperately to think of some other method. The purple ink of the barograph was trailing along the 30,700-foot line, while the mercury, under the Arctic attack of the hundred-mile hurricane, was cowering down at twenty-five below. His feet were numb with the cold which was creeping over him. Was this paltry height to be the ceiling of his flight? Far beneath him lay the world. Southward and eastward the wide Atlantic reflected the sky's deep blue, with Montauk Point, one hundred and ten miles away, stretching slim fingers into the sea. North and westward rolled the hills of New England and the Appalachian ranges, looking low and flat from his altitude. It all seemed so still and tranquil and sunny, it must be easy to go up a mile or two higher.

BUT a new element had to be considered now. He had been nearly half an hour at this altitude and his oxygen would not last much longer. In that rarified atmosphere he could not survive long without it. In addition the wind was steadily bearing him out to sea, and his gasoline was nearly gone. There was nothing for it but to descend.

It necessitated a quick descent, which was exactly what he wished to avoid, because of the dangerous effects on the human system of too sudden changes in atmospheric pressure. However, it had to be done, so it was done. Down he sped, while the earth seemed leaping up to meet him. Down, still down, in sweeping spirals, making skillful allowance for drift, he dropped down out of the strongest wind and the bitterest cold into quieter and more friendly regions. Down, and always down, till with a last spiral he brought the triplane gently to earth, slowed its rush across the field, and stopped. Overwhelmed by the sudden quiet, he dropped his head into his hands.

In the group which rushed across the

Roland Rohlf's

field to him was his wife.

"How high?" she cried.

"Thirty thousand, that's all," he answered.

Then did his wife show the spirit of the eagle's mate.

"Oh, what a shame!" she exclaimed.



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