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FILE TITLE: MSgt Harry A. Chapman: -1st Recipient of the Cheney Award

Reviewed by:

AFEHRI Representative G.R. Akin date 6 Dec 97

EPC Representative Y. R. Akin date 11 Dec 97

Scanner Operator Sally Rodia date 11 Dec 97

APPROVED BY: Gary R. Akin

GARY R. AKIN, CMSgt, USAF
Director

Air Force Enlisted Heritage Research Institute

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MSgt Harry A. Chapman: 1st Recipient of the Cheney Award

Roma, the world's largest semidirigible, was in trouble. On its test flight from Langley Field, Va., on February 21 1922, this revolutionary airship of the up-and-coming air age had developed steering difficulties.

Nearing home port, the gaint airship suddenly dipped its metal nose into high tension wires. Flaming hydrogen erupted from the gas bag. The *Roma* blazed from stem to stern.

Only 11 of the 47 passenger and crew survived the crash. A sergeant was one who did. He had slashed an opening in the flaming fabric and, although severely burned, risked his own life to rescue four others from the catastrophe.

For his heroic efforts, MSgt Harry A. Chapman, U.S. Air Corps, became the first recipient of the Cheney Award. He received the bronze disk that symbolizes the award from President Calvin Coolidge at the White House on April 26, 1928.

* * *

Much publicity is noted for the recipient of Cheney Awards; however, it is a little-known fact that the the individual for whom the award is named after, Lt Bill Cheney, was once an enlisted man.

A few days before the U.S. entered WW I, Bill Cheney, a freshman at Harvard, terminated his studies to enlist in the service. Already equipped with prior flying experience, he was assigned to one of the first aviation groups sent overseas. In less than a month he was selected, as a first sergeant, to be among those sent from France to Italy to set up the 8th Aviation Instruction Centre at Foggia.

Between learning to fly the big Italian *Capronis* and instructing others, he received his commission.

On January 20, 1918, a low fog hung over the spur of Italy's boot. Two American-piloted planes on training missions groped the way through the over-cast. Suddenly they emerged from the clouds on a collison course. Unable to avoid each other, they rammed violently and crashed to the ground. The first American blood had been shed on Italian soil. Dead were Lt Oliver Sherwood, Cadet George Beach, and Lt. Cheney.

Lt Cheney's mother and sister were designated as beneficiaries. Using the insurance proceeds, jointly set aside a trust fund. Their desire to honors acts of heroism involving aircraft incidents resulted the Cheney Award. The award is presented annually for an "act of valor, extreme fortitude, or self-sacrifice in a humanitarian interest performed in connection with aircraft," but not necessarily of a military nature. Both active and reserve members are eligible.

The Cheney Award

It has been called the peacetime Medal of Honor, yet it has honored deserving airmen who have offered themselves in sacrifice for others in both times of peace and armed conflict.

The award is a memorial. It is the perpetuation of a memory of a young man who answered his country's call to arms. He volunteered, he trained, he served, he shared his skills with others and he died.

His name was William H. Cheney and the award is the Cheney Award. In the spring of 1917, Bill Cheney was a promising freshman at Harvard University. With American involvement in the European war imminent, young Bill Cheney travelled to Newport News, Va., to enlist in the United States Army. From there, he was ordered to the School of Military Aeronautics in Urbana, Ill., to complete the formal aviation training he had started as a boy during school vacations. On July 25, 1917, he was designated as the honor graduate of the class and ordered off to war in Europe.

Immediately after his arrival in war-ravaged France, he was detailed to receive combat aviation training from the more experienced French pilots. Some 30 days later, his tiny American unit was dispatched to Italy. There, acting as first sergeant, William H. Cheney led the first contingent of American troops to march through an Italian city at Turin.

The presence of new allied troops in France and Italy was a stimulant to the war-weary nations who had suffered through that first "war to end all wars." Cheney's group of aviators were pressed into learning "... to fly the big Italian bombers, the Capronis, and [they also began to instruct] the less advanced American fliers." On October 18, 1917, the young aviator was honored as the first of his "... command to complete his Italian Military Flying Brevet..." Five weeks later, he was commissioned a first lieutenant in the Aviation Section of the Signal Officers Reserve Corps.



"... for an act of valor or of extreme fortitude or self-sacrifice in a humanitarian interest, which shall have been performed in connection with aircraft; but said act shall not necessarily be of a military nature."

*by George E. Hicks
Director, Museum Affairs
Airmen Memorial Museum*

Throughout the fall of 1917, the 20-year-old officer shared his considerable skills with newly-arriving pilots, taking time off only for a Christmas celebration in Rome. By the first of January 1918, the growing American garrison had formed the "8th Aviation Instruction Centre of the American Expeditionary Forces." The constant

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influx of new arrivals also necessitated the construction of a second training facility at the opposite end of the great plain that served as their airstrip.

Despite the cold winter weather, flight training continued in earnest, with individual units sharing the grassy runway that separated their

garrisons. On January 20, 1918, the engines of the biplanes were warming in preparation for the morning training sorties when "... a very low cloud of fog" blew in from the Adriatic Sea. The pilots, in a hurry to get into the air, took off into the mist in an effort to get above the weather. Apparently, pilots at either end of the field had made the same decision. With their vision instantly obscured, two planes converged and collided in mid-air. Lt. William Cheney, Lt. Oliver Sherwood and Cadet George Beach all perished in the crash.

In the years following the Armistice that ended the First World War, the Cheney family sought to preserve the memory of the aviator, honor his contribution and perpetuate his name. Using the monies paid by the War Risk Insurance, Mrs. Mary Lyon Cheney Schofield and Mrs. Ruth Cheney Streeter, mother and sister respectively, created an endowment to memorialize the young pilot -- The Cheney Award.

The award was fully supported by the Chief of the Air Corps, Maj. Gen. Mason M. Patrick, and was first presented on the 10th anniversary of the air crash.

It remains as one of the ironies of history that the first award was given to a young airman who risked his life so that others might live within a few miles of the location where young Bill Cheney enlisted in the Army Air Corps.

Following the First World War, the U.S. Army continued to experiment with aircraft and the "lighter than air" dirigibles. Unsuccessful in their attempts to purchase one of the German Zeppelins, the Army concluded a contract and ordered an Italian "semi-rigid" airship. The dirigible was little more than a huge hydrogen filled envelope -- more than 400 feet in length -- with a "rigid metal skeleton" frame. After testing the ship in Italy, the Army crew disassembled the craft and packed it for its ocean voyage to Langley Field, Va.

After initial testing on the Virginia peninsula, the mammoth airship flew to Bolling Field outside of Washington, D.C., for a formal christening. The new airship was considered to be the key to the future of aviation. Military strategists posed a list of challenges that included "... long distance reconnaissance flights, photographic missions, coastal patrol work and the carrying of supplies for heavier-than-air units."

Shortly after its formal christening, on February 21, 1922, amidst the cold mist of Hampton Roads, Va., the Roma took off for a test flight with a party of 45 officers, enlisted men and civilian dignitaries. Equipped with new Liberty engines, the huge hydrogen-filled dirigible left Langley Field at one o'clock in the afternoon. Spectators in nearby Phoebus, Va., and the garrison at Fort Monroe, watched in awe as the behemoth plowed through the overcast skies.

The planned route took the Roma across the Hampton Roads waterway toward the Norfolk Naval Air Station. The airship was cruising at a speed of approximately 55 miles per hour when the vibrations or the weight of the newly-installed Liberty engines apparently caused the airframe to buckle. The structural failures made the aircraft virtually impossible to maneuver. Captain Dale Mabry began an emergency descent near the U.S. Army Quartermaster Intermediate Depot near Norfolk, shortly after two o'clock in the afternoon.

Witnesses reported that the emergency descent was rapid. Apparently, the pilot was totally without the capability to control the dirigible. At 2:10 p.m. on February 21, 1921, the metal nose of the airship Roma struck high voltage electric wires, instantly igniting the 1,167,220 cubic feet of hydrogen.

MSgt. Henry A. Chapman, of the 19th Airship Company, was one of the crewmen engulfed in the holocaust of the exploding gas. Despite the hell that raged around him and the severe burns that he endured, Sergeant Chapman worked feverishly in "... helping to extricate those still trapped in the blaz-



The first recipient of the Cheney Award, MSgt. Henry A. Chapman. Photo courtesy of Ruth Cheney Streeter.

ing ruin ... until the last possible moment." Eleven people survived.

At the White House on April 26, 1928, President Calvin Coolidge presented the first Cheney Award to MSgt. Henry A. Chapman for his extreme heroism and self-sacrifice. The award of the bronze medallion, a design suggested by Lt. Cheney's sister and sculpted by Gerome Brush, feature "... a symbolical representation of an in-

trepid aviator riding the winged winds."

The Cheney Award has indeed symbolized self-sacrifice by airmen from the ranks of the commissioned and the non-commissioned. The award is usually conferred in the spring of the year. The actual presentation is made by the President, the Commander in Chief of the Forces, or by the highest available official designated to represent the President. The bronze medallion is accompanied by a certificate and a "gift of not more than five hundred dollars."

Sources Consulted:

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The dirigible Roma lifts off, never to return. USAF photo.

When
 Valor is
 Always
 Act

Roma, the world's largest semidirigible, was in trouble.

On its test flight from Langley Field, Va., on February 21, 1922, this revolutionary airship of the up-and-coming air age had developed steering difficulties. The rudder was not functioning properly.

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More than 48 years later in October 1976, Capt. Regina C. Aune, a U.S. Air Force nurse, received the same award for similar heroism. Gen. David C. Jones, Chief of Staff, made the presentation in the Pentagon (see "By Death Undaunted," page 24.)

The award is presented annually for an "act of valor, extreme fortitude, or self-sacrifice in a humanitarian interest performed in connection with aircraft," but not necessarily of a military nature. Both active and reserve members are eligible.

The award itself is a memorial to 1st Lt. William H. Cheney.

A few days before the U.S. entered World War I, Bill Cheney, a freshman at Harvard, terminated his studies to enlist in the service. Already equipped with prior flying experience, he was assigned to one of the first aviation groups sent overseas. In less than a month he was selected, as a first sergeant, to be among those sent from France to Italy to set up the 8th Aviation Instruction Centre at Foggia.

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Lt. Cheney had subscribed to the full amount of World War I Risk Insurance. His mother and sister were designated as beneficiaries. The women, Mrs. William H. Scofield (Mary Lyon Cheney), his mother, and Mrs. Thomas W. Streeter (Ruth Cheney), his sister, using the insurance proceeds, jointly set aside a trust fund of \$15,000 for the award. Their desire to honor acts of heroism involving aircraft incidents was supported by Maj. Gen. Mason M. Patrick, then Chief of the Air Corps.

The award consists of three components: an honorarium of not more than \$500, a medal, and a certificate. The medal is struck annually and bears the recipients' name. Suggested by Mrs. Streeter, the medal's design depicts an intrepid aviator riding winged winds.

Over the years the award has gone to pilots and passengers, enlisted men and officers, ground crew members, aircrew members, and just plain people who were willing and able to do whatever was necessary at the time.

That's all it takes to become a hero.

Or a heroine.

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2 WEATHER
 In a tactical

7 JACK FRANK
 They gave

13 AIR FORCE
 The people

15 MOUNTAIN
 The people

16 COCHRAN
 Reminiscences

23 HERE'S
 The people

24 BY DEATH
 In the face

32 SHORT
 The people

34 THEIR
 For many

40 MY KIND
 Yokota's

42 TO ALL
 A Panarr

FRONT
 BACK

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