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Walter H. Beech Enshrined In Aviation Hall of Fame

Walter H. Beech, co-founder of Beech Aircraft Corporation, on July 23, 1977, was enshrined in the prestigious Aviation Hall of Fame.

During formal ceremonies at the Dayton, Ohio-based organization, Mrs. O.A. Beech, Chairman of Beech Aircraft, accepted the gold medal award on behalf of her late husband.

Inducted into the Aviation Hall of Fame at the same time were four other outstanding aviation pioneers, Lawrence D. Bell, Will Rogers, James McDonnell and Alan Shepherd.

Mr. Beech was chosen by the organization's nominating board "for his outstanding contributions as a pilot, instructor, practical aeronautical engineer; and for co-founding Travel Air Manufacturing Company and later Beech Aircraft Corporation which designed, manufactured and sold high-quality, top-performing aircraft for private, commercial and military use that were generally unexcelled in their class; and for his career-long advocacy and activities touching almost every facet of privately-owned and business aircraft use."

Mr. Beech was presented to the organization by retired U.S. Air Force Lt. Gen. James H. Doolittle, who paid a glowing tribute to his long-time friend and colleague in these words, "His story is, indeed, the story of the American way of life: success in a chosen field by a dedicated individual who prepares himself well for it and continues to give that extra effort to assure the excellence of his achievements and who, in the end, gives far more to the world than he takes from it."

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WALTER H. BEECH -- AIR PIONEER

Among the pioneers of aviation, the career of Walter H. Beech stands out as one reflecting an extraordinary combination of vision and realism. He not only foresaw the role of the airplane far into the future but he translated that foresight into reality, producing a line of outstanding aircraft incorporating his innovations and bearing his name.

Mr. Beech devoted his life to aviation -- his career as pilot, instructor, engineer and manufacturer extending over 30 years -- to become the leading advocate of the privately-owned business airplane. His daring, his leadership and his contributions to the industry have insured him a prominent and permanent place in the annals of flight.

Walter Herschel Beech was born in Pulaski, Tenn., on Jan. 30, 1891. He was the son of Cornelius and Tommie (Hay) Beech.

As a youth he showed mechanical aptitude, performing man-sized repair and installation work in sawmills and municipal power plants.

The fever of flying caught him early and he made his first venture into the field of aeronautics while a 14-year-old farm boy. Using his mother's new bed sheets and a wooden frame, he built a glider. While his attempt to fly ended disastrously for the glider, the incident did not lessen his enthusiasm for flying.

After attending public schools and Giles College in his native city, he was employed by an automobile company in Minneapolis, Minn. For two years he traveled in Europe as a sales representative for this same firm.

While in Minneapolis, he made his first recorded solo flight. The flight was

made in a Curtiss pusher-type biplane which he and a companion had purchased in a wrecked state and assembled in a workshop outside the Beech home.

On July 11, 1914 -- just 11 years after Orville Wright flew the Wright Flyer for the first time at Kitty Hawk -- Mr. Beech, with little instruction from the previous owner, flew the craft from a meadow on his first try. From that moment on, flying became his prime interest.

In 1917, he offered his services to his country by joining the Aviation Section of the United States Army Signal Corps. As a pilot and engine expert, he was assigned to Kelly Field, Texas, where he instructed young fliers and was recognized for taking part in record-setting ferrying operations.

At the close of World War I hostilities, he remained in the service where, as an instructor, he continued to give student fliers the benefit of his flying and mechanical experience. He received his honorable discharge in June, 1920.

For a year, Mr. Beech joined in the barnstorming and exhibition flying that focused the attention of much of the nation on aviation in its early stage. In war-surplus Standards and Jennies, he visited nearly every state. Flying under all kinds of operating conditions, he gained valuable insight into flying techniques and equipment design which were to guide him in his later career.

In 1921, he began an association of nearly 30 years with Wichita, an oil-prosperous booming south central Kansas city. The second of the early airplane firms to be established in Wichita had produced the Laird Swallow, a three-place tandem open-cockpit biplane. The president of the company offered Mr. Beech a position as test pilot and demonstrator and he promptly accepted.

Believing that the best way to sell an airplane was to demonstrate what it could do, Mr. Beech flew the Swallow in air meets throughout the nation. In 1921 and 1922 he won the first of the trophies, awarded for his skill in aerobatic contests and races, which now fill a large case in Beech Aircraft's corporate headquarters.

In 1923, with the reorganization of the Swallow Airplane Manufacturing Company, Mr. Beech became a principal of the firm, in charge of all field work. As his contributions to design and sales rose in importance he was advanced to vice president and general manager.

Despite the company's success with the Swallow, there arose a dispute over the question of whether metal or wood should be used to frame the New Swallow fuselage. Mr. Beech was one of those favoring metal, in opposition to the president.

Determined to prove the advantage of the metal frame, Mr. Beech and others resigned from Swallow. Mr. Beech then organized, in 1924, a new airplane company in Wichita.

In a space just 30 feet square, in a leased portion of an old planing mill building, Mr. Beech and his group went to work to produce their new airplane, which was unnamed at first. At the suggestion of a Wichita businessman the name Travel Air was eventually adopted.

Early in 1925, the first Travel Air was completed. A three-place open-cockpit powered by an OX-5 engine, it incorporated many of the design principals which Mr. Beech had proved in his barnstorming and racing experience.

Mr. Beech led the Travel Air Manufacturing Company in producing airplanes with the very latest equipment and design advantages. In 1925, he was instrumental in the company's designing of the first commercial airplane with liquid-cooled engine completely faired-in, a concept which was followed on all Travel Airs from that time on and was adopted throughout the industry.

Mr. Beech's zest for competition was expressed in every aspect of the enterprises which he directed. He demanded perfection -- and he got it. Whatever was accomplished under the name of Beech had to be the very best. Nothing less was acceptable.

It was a design competition, in fact, which sparked the creation of the

famous Model 5000 Travel Air, the first aircraft built to airline specifications. It became the first unit of a National Air Transport's airline fleet operating day and night between Chicago and Dallas.

Mr. Beech also took up a personal campaign of promotion by competing in air meets. Most notable of his many victories in Travel Airs was the sensational winning of the 1926 Ford Commercial Airplane Reliability Tour. In a Travel Air equipped with Pioneer instruments, and with Brice Goldsborough as navigator, Mr. Beech demonstrated to the world the practicability of flying "blind" on instruments. He led the 12-day tour of 14 cities over 40 entrants to bring home the \$7,000 Edsel Ford Trophy.

After adding the J. H. Turner Trophy and the Flint Air meet to his string of victories, Mr. Beech devoted more and more of his time to the manufacturing end of the business, turning over the racing of Travel Airs to others.

In 1927, after producing more than 200 biplanes, Mr. Beech turned out the first Travel Air monoplanes. Their success exceeded even that of his biplanes.

Two dramatic performances added much to the reputation of Beech-designed monoplanes. First was the winning of the 1927 Dole Race. To prove the reliability of the monoplane design, Art Goebel, with co-pilot William Davis, flew the Phillips Petroleum Company's "Woolaroc" Travel Air 5000 from Oakland, Calif., to Wheeler Field, Hawaii, to capture the \$25,000 first prize.

The second outstanding victory was won in 1929, when Mr. Beech instructed designers to prepare for the year's races. The result was the Model R Travel Air, later named the "Mystery S," a low-wing monoplane with a top speed of 235 miles an hour. Entered in the National Air Races' 50-mile Thompson Trophy closed course free-for-all, the "Mystery S," piloted by Doug Davis, won at an average record speed of 194.9 miles an hour. This marked the first occasion on which a civilian airplane had defeated a military aircraft in speed competition.

Showing their heels to nearly all comers in racing events and setting

endurance and altitude records, Travel Airs reaped tremendous popularity. Production boomed, reaching approximately 1,000 units in 1929, to make the Travel Air Company the world's largest producer of both monoplane and biplane commercial aircraft.

Late in that same year, the Travel Air Company entered into a new organizational setup. Mr. Beech merged his company with the Curtiss-Wright Corporation. Mr. Beech became the president of Curtiss-Wright Airplane Company and vice president in charge of sales of the Curtiss-Wright Corporation.

In 1930, Mr. Beech was married to Olive Ann Mellor, his secretary and office manager at the Travel Air Company. She had joined Travel Air in 1924. To them were born two daughters, Suzanne (Mrs. Thomas N. Warner), in 1937, and Mary Lynn (Mrs. William L. Oliver, Jr.) in 1940.

Mr. Beech's duties with Curtiss-Wright took him to New York City; but he did not take to the life of a big city executive. Accustomed to being on the front line of designing and manufacturing, as well as selling, he resigned from Curtiss-Wright in 1932, still moved by his ambition to build the finest airplanes.

In the darkest year of the great depression, when business spirits generally were as low as prices, Walter H. Beech and Olive Ann Beech moved back to Wichita. They brought with them a handful of employees from Travel Air and in April, 1932, established the Beech Aircraft Company. Mr. Beech was the President and Olive Ann Beech was Secretary-Treasurer.

In small quarters in a depression-closed Wichita factory, Mr. and Mrs. Beech and their staff went to work. Their objective was to design and build a five-place closed cabin biplane with the luxury and comfort of a fine sedan and a top speed of 200 miles an hour.

Determination and many hours of creative hard work were rewarded on November 4, 1932, when the first Beechcraft, the Model 17R, was proudly displayed at the Wichita municipal airport. The appearance was unique, for Mr. Beech had taken advantage of

the aerodynamic features of a little-employed design, the negative stagger wing.

During flight test, Beechcraft No. 1 met or exceeded all design objectives. The prototype Beechcraft Model 17R was eventually sold to the Ethyl Corporation and at the Miami Air Races in January, 1933, it captured the Texaco Trophy. This was the first of dozens of triumphs which Beechcrafts were to post down through the years.

Early in 1934, Beech Aircraft became a full-fledged airplane manufacturer and Mr. Beech moved his company back to the familiar surroundings of the former Travel Air Company factory.

With his reputation riding on the wings of his new airplane, Mr. Beech boldly but confidently put it to the rigid test of competition. In 1936, at the urging of Mrs. Beech, he arranged for aviatrixes Louise Thaden and Blance Noyes to fly a Beechcraft Model 17 against the nation's best in the Bendix Transcontinental Speed Dash.

The Beechcraft and the ladies performed to perfection. They not only won the nation's most famous cross-country race, beating their nearest competitor by almost 45 minutes, but also set a new transcontinental speed record for women and earned a \$10,000 cash prize.

More and more records fell to the Beechcraft Model 17 and the slogan, "It takes a Beechcraft to beat a Beechcraft" made the rounds of aviation circles. Desiring versatility to please a wide range of customers, Mr. Beech produced a variety of Beechcraft Model 17 versions, ranging in top speed from 150 to 240 miles an hour, the latter powered by a 650-horsepower engine.

With design and performance features years ahead of its time, the Beechcraft Model 17 has become a classic among the world's aircraft. More than 780 commercial and military units were produced through 1948 and more than 100, affectionately nicknamed "Staggerwings", are flying today.

Never satisfied with past performance, Mr. Beech in 1935 set the wheels

turning on preliminary engineering for the No. 2 Beechcraft, the twin-engine monoplane Model 18. The new seven-place airplane, to be known for many years as the "Twin Beech," was rolled from the factory doors for its first flight on January 15, 1937.

Mr. Beech's first twin-engine Beechcraft was an immediate success. It had a top speed of more than 200 miles an hour with impressive cabin dimensions and weight-carrying ability.

To boost interest in the Beechcraft Model 18, Mr. Beech took part in the most impressive victory ever registered by a commercially-licensed airplane in racing competition. On January 6, 1940, a standard Beechcraft Model 18, with H. C. Rankin as pilot and Mr. Beech as co-pilot, captured one of the most prized of all aviation honors, the Macfadden Trophy.

The route of this famous flight was from Lambert Field in St. Louis, Mo., to Miami, Fla. The distance of more than 1,800 miles was covered in 4 hours, 37 minutes, at an average speed of over 234 miles an hour.

Flown throughout the world in every kind of commercial application, the Beechcraft Model 18 became known as the standard of the industry.

From 1937 to 1969, when the last "Twin Beech" was delivered, more than 1,800 commercial Beechcraft Model 18s and advanced Super 18 versions were produced. Its 32-year civilian and military history constitutes the longest continuous production record of any aircraft.

As war clouds gathered ominously throughout the world in 1939, Beechcrafts were called upon to perform in new roles. Late in 1940, military orders began to flood the company and Mr. Beech ordered all commercial production suspended. Beechcraft Model 18s were equipped as bomber and gunnery trainers and Beechcraft Model 17s were procured as personnel transports for the U.S. Army and U.S. Navy.

So perfectly did the Beechcraft Model 18 configuration meet military requirements for trainers that more than 90 per cent of all United States

bombadiers and navigators learned their skills in versions of the "Twin Beech".

At least 50 per cent of the Army's multiengine pilots received their transitional training in Beechcraft AT-10s, a predominately plywood airplane, so constructed to save scarce metal.

Employment increased phenomenally, from 235 employees in 1939 to more than 2,000 in 1940, more than doubled the next year, doubled again in 1942 and reached a peak of more than 14,000 early in 1945.

During World War II, more than 7,400 military Beechcrafts were delivered to the armed services. Mr. Beech proudly flew the flag indicating five Army-Navy "E" Awards for efficiency received by his company -- an honor accorded to only five per cent of war contracting firms.

With the war's end, Beech Aircraft was faced with the difficult assignment of transition from wartime to a climate of peacetime production. To put his company in a strong position for post-war business, Mr. Beech focused production refinements on the Beechcraft Model 17 and Beechcraft Model 18 and pushed design efforts on a new single-engine airplane.

Just two months after the surrender of Japan, an eight-place Beechcraft Model 18 was introduced. It was the first post-war commercial airplane to be licensed. Also, a new and advanced version of the Beechcraft Model 17 rejoined the civilian fleet.

The company made its biggest post-war news with the introduction of the third airplane to bear the name Beechcraft, the all-metal, four-place Model 35 Bonanza -- distinguished by its V-tail. Hundreds of the new craft were ordered even before it was flown and nearly 1,000 were delivered during an eight-month period in 1947.

Two headline-making flights in 1949 helped to put the Beechcraft Bonanza in the spotlight. Bill Odom, flying the "Waikiki Beech," smashed non-stop records for aircraft in the Bonanza category when he surpassed an 11-year-old record by flying from Honolulu, Hawaii, to Oakland, California. Later in the same year, Odom broke

his own record, flying the "Waikiki Beech" from Honolulu to Teterboro, N.J., setting a new world record for all light planes.

In 1977, Beech Aircraft observed 30 years of V-tail Bonanza production by sponsoring a nationwide tour of the 10,000th Bonanza Model 35. Two additional models, the larger Bonanza 36 and the conventional-tail Bonanza 33 also are currently in production. Total Bonanza deliveries exceed 13,000.

In 1949 and 1950, as a sharp curtailment of business volume was felt throughout the nation, airplane sales slowed down. Employment at Beech Aircraft plummeted to 2,200 and the company turned to non-aircraft production of corn harvesters, and a variety of aluminum assemblies for consumer items to help retain a nucleus of experienced employees.

Even in these troubled times, Mr. Beech put two new airplanes on the drawing boards. One was the Beechcraft Mentor, a single-engine trainer, first flown on December 2, 1948. The second was the Beechcraft Model 50 Twin-Bonanza, announced in July, 1949.

The two-place tandem Beechcraft Mentor was ordered into production for the Navy and the Air Force; was produced under license agreements to Argentina, Canada and Japan; and was chosen by 12 foreign nations as a primary trainer.

The Beechcraft Twin-Bonanza became a popular airplane for industry. Adopted by the Army as the L-23 (U-8), the rugged Beechcraft saw service in Korea and became the backbone of Army Aviation utility aircraft.

In 1950, with commercial Beechcraft production looking up, with two new airplanes drawing acclaim during testing and demonstration, and with a backlog of \$50 million for military production on the company's books, Walter H. Beech's success-crowned career came to an end. Active to his last day, he was stricken with a heart attack and died suddenly on the evening of November 29.

The reigns of Beech Aircraft were then taken up by his widow, Olive Ann Beech, who had worked closely at his side as secretary-treasurer and director for 18 years.

Mr. Beech's contributions to his company, his community and his nation were paramount. His life was an example of the American success story -- the dedicated individualist who succeeded in a competitive field.

He played a major role in making Wichita "The Air Capital". He brought the city fame as a pilot. He helped it to weather a great depression. His company added to its role as a defense facility during World War II. His Beechcraft airplanes, sold around the world, made the name of Wichita known in far-away points of the globe.

He was a busy man, active in industrial, aviation, pilot and scientific organizations. Despite his schedule as an executive, he often toured production lines, greeting employees and commenting on their work.

He was extremely proud of and close to his daughters, who often speak of their memories of his cheerful disposition.

While Mr. Beech loved to hunt and enjoyed all sports, airplanes and flying remained his first interests. Under his direction there were developed -- and approved Type Certificates obtained on -- more than 80 different types of aircraft. He amassed some 10,000 hours of flying time.

There is much at Beech Aircraft today which speaks of the spirit of Walter H. Beech: a large pedestal and flag pole erected in 1941 by grateful employees and dedicated to Walter H. Beech and Olive Ann Beech; the 15-foot high stone Walter H. Beech memorial, erected by employees in 1951 and dedicated on November 11, with Lt. Gen. James Doolittle giving the dedicatory address; and a trophy room in the corporation headquarters, maintained by Mrs. Beech, in which are displayed many of Mr. Beech's trophies and models of the airplanes with which he was associated.

But of even greater tribute is the Beech Aircraft Corporation of today, now under the leadership of Olive Ann Beech, Chairman of the Board and Chief Executive Officer, and Frank E. Hedrick, President. The thousands of square feet of factory buildings, the Beechcrafts flying in all parts of the free world, are a monument

to his vision and pioneering spirit. The memory of Walter H. Beech will live in the hearts of men as long as there are airplanes and the men to fly them.

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