

Retro Ramblings

By: Douglas Love, Grand Trustee, Napa Parlor #62

For millennia, humans have dreamed of flight. From ancient myths like Daedalus and Icarus to the designs of Leonardo Da Vinci, to Superman, humans have always wanted to fly like a bird. Almost every culture has stories of human flight. With the first human flight in a balloon by Etienne Montgolfier on October 15, 1783, the dream of human flight was realized, if not exactly like a bird. As early as 559 CE, attempts had been made at heavier than air flight, using a variety of kites, wings, and gliders, most with varying degrees of failure. The first manned glider flight was in 1853, and Otto Lilienthal made the first controlled glider flight in 1891. Lighter than air flight progressed, with the invention of the blimp in 1852 and the zeppelin in 1900, but heavier than air, powered, controlled flight remained elusive. It wasn't until the Wright Brothers' flight on December 17, 1903 that powered, controlled, heavier than air flight was achieved.

With the Wright Brothers' success came an aviation explosion. Militaries around the world were interested in the new-dangled hydroplanes. Balloons had been used in military roles as early 1794 and by the American Civil War, had come into regular use as observation platforms. Balloons had two distinct disadvantages however, they were large and to be effective observation posts, they were tethered in place, making them rather conspicuous targets for the enemy. Airplanes suffered from neither of these drawbacks, they were small, fast, and maneuverable; making them perfect for reconnaissance missions. The US Army purchased a one of a kind Wright Model A for the Signal Corps in 1909, marking the beginning of military aviation. In 1909, the French Air Force was established. In 1910, the Imperial German Army established the Imperial German Flying Service. In 1911, the US Navy purchased it's first plane, the Italian Air Force was founded, as was the Imperial Russian Air Service. In 1912 the Royal Flying Corps was founded.

This was the era of "Those Magnificent Men and their Flying Machines". Competitions were held beginning in 1909 and many early speed and endurance records were made. There was growing fascination with these flying machines and those who flew them. The first Aeronautical Competition in the United States was held in Los Angeles in 1910. A year later, the Italians sent the airplane to war in the Italio-Turkish War of 1911, where they used airplanes for reconnaissance and bombing missions. It wouldn't be long before airplanes became a staple of warfare.

In 1914, the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Austro-Hungarian Empire, plunged the Europe into World War 1. This was when aerial combat came into its own and armed fighter aircraft, bombers, and reconnaissance aircraft were developed. The term "ace" was introduced for the first time, by the French to describe a pilot who had five or more victories. Certain planes became legendary, the Fokker DIII, the Albatross, the Sopwith Camel, the Fokker DR 1, and the Nieuport 17. This is when pilots became famous, Manfred von Richthofen, Max Immelmann, Ernst Udet, Eddie Rickenbacker, Rene Fonck, Werner Voss, and a young pilot named Hermann Goering.

When the war ended, many of the pilots who survived went on to help develop faster and safer planes. Air shows and competitions became popular and the airplane once more captured the public's attention; particularly in the United States. In 1919 the US Navy Seaplane NC-4 completed the first trans-Atlantic flight from Long Island to Lisbon. As early as 1911, the US Postal Department experimented with using airplanes to transport mail and on May 15, 1918, the US Airmail Service was established. The creation of the airmail service accomplished two goals, the faster and more efficient transport of the mail and the expansion of civil aviation which, in turn, led to the training of new pilots.

There was a problem, due to the lack of aeronautical aids to navigation, especially those suited for night flying, airmail was placed on trains at night, adding valuable time to its delivery. A solution was at hand, in 1923, Congress authorized the Transcontinental Airway System, a series of concrete landmarks, beacons and emergency airfields that would stretch from coast to coast. By 1925, the airway extended from New York to San Francisco and by 1933 the airway was complete covering 18,000 miles and consisting of 1,500 beacons. This “highway in the sky” reduced the delivery time of transcontinental mail to be reduced by two business days.

In 1928, Standard Oil built five aviation beacons on the west coast as part of the system. They were located in Seattle, Portland, Mount Diablo, Los Angeles, and San Diego. The Mt. Diablo beacon is the only one still remaining and functional. The signal to light the beacons was given by Charles Lindbergh on April 15, 1928. Originally atop of a 75 foot steel tower, the light was moved to the top of the summit building by the Civilian Conservation Corps in April of 1941. The Mt. Diablo beacon could be seen for 150 miles and was one of the terminal beacons for the Transcontinental Airway. The beacon remained in service until December 8, 1941, when it was extinguished as precaution against a possible Japanese attack. It remained extinguished until December 7, 1964 when Fleet Admiral Chester Nimitz attended a memorial relighting ceremony to honor those who lost their lives at Pearl Harbor. He suggested the beacon be lit every December 7th as a memorial. Since then it has been lit, every December 7th as a memorial to those who lost their lives on that terrible day. Beginning in 2022, it is also lit on Memorial Day and Veteran’s Day. By 1973, the Transcontinental Airway System was obsolete and it was dismantled. While many of the concrete arrow landmarks still survive, the beacon on Mt. Diablo is one of the few surviving operational relics of the beginning of commercial aviation routes.

GETTING THERE: Starting at 414 Mason St. Get on I-80E from 5th St. Continue on I-80E. Take I-80E to CA 24E. Stay on CA-24E to I-680N and take the Ygnacio Valley Road exit. Turn right onto Ygnacio Valley Road. Turn right onto Walnut Avenue. At the traffic circle take the 1st exit onto Oak Grove Road. Turn left onto North Gate Road. Continue onto Summit Road. The trip to the Summit Visitors Center is 40 miles long and takes about an hour and fifteen minutes. The Summit Visitors Center is open daily from 10 am to 4 pm.