Antique Airplanes Bring Back World War I Memories

By Wallace Wood
Sentinel Staff Writer

When James Rogers sees a World War I fighter plane, his stomach tightens and his nerves turn cold.

Even after 48 years, the memory of comrades dead and gone is still fresh. And he can still feel the ground rushing up in crash after crash.

Yet Rogers plans to drive down to Watsonville airport tomorrow and Sunday to the Antique Aircraft Fly-In. Some inner urge compels him to see once again the aircraft that might have cost his life.

Merle Briggs, on the other hand, has few bad memories of flying during World War I. And if he sees a JN-4 "Jenny," a Curtis biplane, or a Thomas-Morris Scout, it will be through the eyes of a man who loved the freedom of the air and the powered kites that gave it to him.

Both these men live in Santa Cruz today, and both are ex-Santa Cruz High school teachers. Rogers, 70, lives in retirement on Escalona drive, and his interests now are music, muzzle-loading guns and his books. Briggs, 71, lives at 5377 Branciforte drive and has had a life-long interest in physical fitness.

Both had a passionate love for the glamorous aircraft created out of fabric, wood and wire.

When patriotism called young men to war in 1917, some of the nation's finest young men were asked if they wanted to fly. Only those with the top grades from the country's finest colleges were given a chance early in that year, and Rogers was one of three servicemen from Aviation ground school at the University of California at Berkeley to join the fledgling eagles from Princeton, Harvard and other colleges in flying school.

Briggs joined while in his junior year at Oregon State college later in 1917.

While Briggs was quickly promoted to first lieutenant and put to work as an instructor training other flyers in Florida, Rogers was sent to England to learn to fly with the Royal Flying Corps.

Briggs chafed under the desire to fly in the war, but never saw combat.

Rogers saw the results of combat almost immediately, and never forgot the ugly lesson. "Per Ardua Ad Astra," or "Through hardship to the Stars," was the RFC's motto, and when the group of 56 Americans arrived for English ground training school, their instructor had ben "Per Ardua."

"His left arm was gone, and he walked with a wooden leg where his right leg had been. The entire rear part of his skull was replaced with a silver plate. He said 'Gentlemen, I hope I can help you, and I hope you listen.' Believe me, we listened! Even then we suddenly began to see what the war was about."

James Rogers

Merle Briggs

Rogers notes sadly that over half of his 168th Aero group died in the air or in crashes before the war was over.

At the time, however, he recalls a surge of pride over winning his wings. After an hour and a half flying a Jenny with his English instructor, he was given the controls to solo.

"I had a very shaky take-off because the instructor had left the ailerons cocked when we landed, and the ship twisted sharply to the left when it left the ground. I overcorrected and headed straight for the hangers. The mechanics and ground crews scattered, but I pulled out of it all right."

Rogers was the first of his group to solo, and was a temporary hero. "I think the English did it deliberately. They wanted us to feel like daredevils," he said.

The daredevils were given the new British ship, the Sopwith Camel, to learn to fliy and fight in. Everyone had heard of the Camel, so named because of a bulge over its engine cowling.

"It killed more men in training than were killed in combat," is Rogers' simple estimation of the famed craft.

The Camel's reputation was gained because of its 135-horsepower Clerget and LeRhone engine. The engine was a rotary, which is to say that its nine cylinders rotated in the cowling around a crankshaft fixed to the

the sound really put the wind up you (frightened you)," Rogers declares.

Many pilots had the wind-up" because of the Camel. It was so sensitive it could be looped and rolled with one finger lightly touching the stick. If left alone, the Sopwith quickly rolled over onto its back, where it preferred to fly upside-down!

Rogers had only one real spat of fighting. That was when the German zeppelins or "zeps" flew over England at night, bombing as they went. "The English would hear us taking off from the airfields and say, 'Well, our boys are after them zeps, so all's right.' Actually, unless there was moonlight, all we did was hold our breath for fear of hitting anything up there."

Yet he crashed and crashed again. Because the disabled ships floated down like leaves, and their frail structure absorbed much impact, Rogers was never hurt. Never, that is, until he collided with a ship that turned in front of him during a formation flight. That crash left him with a bad leg and a hernia, and badly injured the other pilot.

Normally, the commanding officer would force a pilot to fly again immediately after a crash to prevent brooding on the mishap. Because of his injury, however, Rogers had time to think on the dangers of flying and the futility of war. "I got the wind up me, too. Then I hated flying."

The young pilot, his daredevil days gone, became an instructor; then an adjutant at Orly field in France with an experimental unit.

That unit tested new aircraft and tried, unsuccessfully, to develop a parachute for pilots. The Germans, always a step ahead, already had parachutes.

Many aircraft were tried, and many had little or no success against the technically efficient ships with the iron cross on the side. The famed German Fokker D-7s "were awkward, clumsy-looking ships that resembled the wrath of God. They could outfly almost anything we had."

The English Spad was called "the flying brick" because of its solid construction which did not, unfortunately, give way in a crash.

The DeHaviland 9 was a "washout," a "flying coffin," because the gas tank was between pilot and "observer," or gunner. When it was hit, that was the end of plane, and often, of crew.

The American Thomas-Morris Scout, which saw no action, was a copy of the Sopwith Pup, a ship smaller than the Camel with a notoriously undependable engine.

Flying, says Rogers, was a combination of riding a bicycle and sailing. "You became one with the machine. It became automatic to fly. You could tell if one wing was down by the pressure of wind on your face, and balance was a seat-of-the-pants thing."

World War I left a bad taste in Rogers' mouth. He hated the death and destruction, deliberate and accidental. "I saw very early we were not going to solve anything," he concludes.

Rogers became a teacher of history, Spanish and French languages after the war. Briggs became a "barnstormer" in the northwest, flying passengers and performing at fairs until 1922. Then he, too, became a teacher.

Today, Briggs is best known for creating an obstacle course at Santa Cruz High before World War II. Santa Cruz students easily outperformed most other war recruits because of the tough training.

But Rogers has had enough war and flying. "I wish I could forget the whole thing. I wish I could wipe it out of my mind," he says futily.

Yet the fascination of the daredevil days of the young eagles still lights his eyes when the conversation turns to the painful pioneer days of aircraft.

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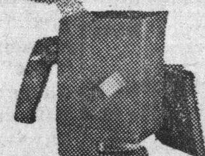

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Daredevil World War I pilot James Rogers of Santa Cruz stands unafraid by the wings of the Sopwith Camel he crashed in 1917. After seehalf of his squadron of American airmen killed that served with the Royal Flying Corps in England and France, Rogers lost his daredevil flair. He crashed 12 times himself, once seriously, and has mixed memories of bitterness and fascination about the "glamour" of aviation's youth.

plane. It had an enormous flywheel effect that pulled the plane to the right. "If you went into a righthand spin, you never came out," the ex-flyer says.

Rogers still curses the RFC flying suit modeled after a cavalryman's uniform. It was uncomfortable, and fit too tightly at the neck.

This was topped by a fur-trimmed leather helmet needed more for warmth than protection. The famed silk scarves were thrown about the neck only on cold days.

Sopwith Camels had no carburetors, and the engine speed was controlled by two pipes: one for air and the other for gas, manipulated in "manette" fashion by the pilot. The mixture was fed to the cylinders through the hollow crankshaft.

If the pilot carelessly left the manette control too lean, the entire charge fired back into his face on starting the engine, leaving him covered with soot.

Once started, the engine was as "smooth as silk — like a gas turbine." Its sound was unmistakeable — a high-pitched whine recognized everywhere in England and Europe.

Once in the air, the pilot was surrounded by musical noises from the engine and the streamlined steel struts that held the wings to the body.

"When you went into a turn,

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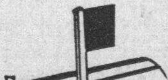

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