

FINAL FLIGHT

Reconstructing an Early Airmail Accident

Dave G. Stiff

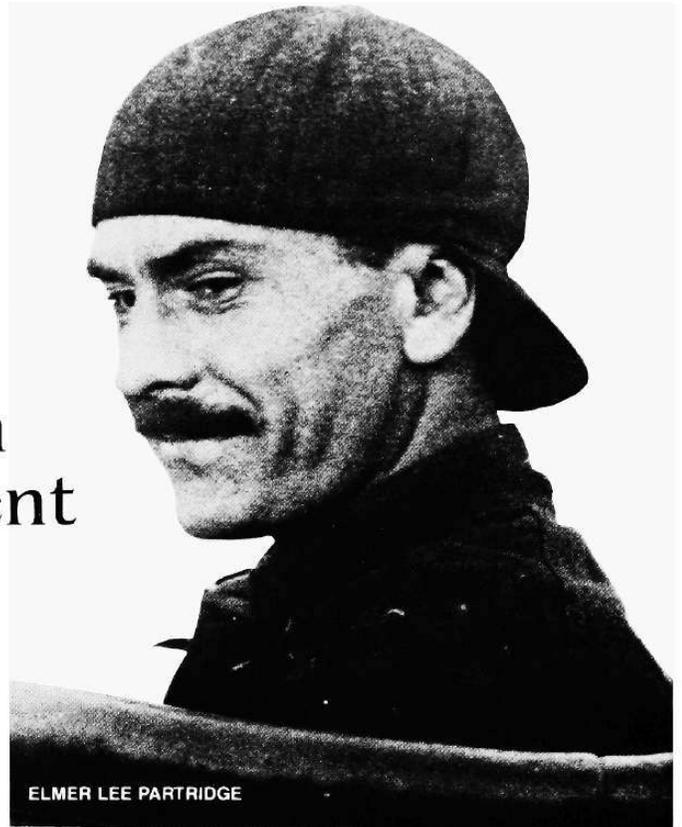
WHEN an early airmail pilot crashed his plane into a field and survived, it was said that he “bought the crop” that was damaged. But when the pilot did not survive the crash, it was said that he “bought the farm.” Elmer Lee Partridge bought the farm by crashing his plane into Albert Stiff, Sr.’s cornfield while trying to inaugurate the airmail service between Minneapolis and Chicago. Why the plane crashed was a mystery to those who investigated the accident.¹ My investigation 60 years later includes further interviews of those who were at the crash site, research in newspapers, and a possible solution to the mystery.

On June 7, 1926, the Minneapolis Civic and Commerce Association staged a brief celebration at Wold-Chamberlain Field, inviting businessmen and the general public to mark the beginning of regular airmail service. Several hundred people were at the field, but “because of the high wind and dust, efforts at oratory

¹ *Minneapolis Journal*, June 8, 1926, p. 6; *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, June 8, 1926, p. 2. All newspaper citations in this article are for the year 1926.

² *Minneapolis Tribune*, June 6, p. 2; *Journal*, June 7, p. 1, 6; *St. Paul Daily News*, June 7, p. 1; *Pioneer Press*, June 5, p. 1. The St. Paul Airport, later named Holman Field for ace pilot Charles “Speed” Holman, is presently called the St. Paul Downtown Airport.

³ *Pioneer Press*, June 5, p. 1, June 7, p. 1, June 8, p. 2; interview of Errol Stiff by the author, Aug. 13, 1977. All taped interviews with various members of the Albert Stiff, Sr., family, here and below, are in author’s possession.



ELMER LEE PARTRIDGE

were abandoned and officials shook hands with the pilots” as the mail pouches were loaded. In St. Paul a large parade wound through the city to the airport to officially welcome the planes coming from Minneapolis and those coming from Chicago due in about the same time. There were military battalions, two bands, and a unit of mail carriers in the parade. Since all the carriers were involved, there was no mail service that Monday.²

Some of the publicity stunts at St. Paul included sending a glass box made at the Ford plant to Henry Ford in Detroit; breaking an inaugural bottle “not champagne, but a bottle of water from Minnesota’s Ten Thousand Lakes”; sending a bottle of Minnesota water to Secretary of the Treasury Andrew W. Mellon; sending candy made in Minnesota to many dignitaries; and filming of a “picturization, showing St. Paul as the center of the nation’s air routes.” Three newsreel companies were scheduled to film the celebrations. There were also to have been some aerial stunts by the 109th Observation Squadron but the flying ceremonies were, according to one observer, “sort of half-way cancelled” because of the wind.³

The inaugural flight necessitated more than one plane because of the great amount of mail waiting to be sent to Chicago. Each plane in Charles “Pop” Dickinson’s service could carry about 600 pounds of cargo, so

Dave Stiff, an amateur historian and writer from Minneapolis, is the grandson of Albert Stiff, Sr., into whose cornfield pilot Partridge crashed.

two planes were scheduled each way. Reports the next day show that less than 1,000 pounds were sent from the Twin Cities.⁴

But the one factor not planned for in this resumption of the airmail service was the high-velocity wind that whipped up throughout the weekend. The National Weather Service recorded 35-to-38 mile-per-hour northwest winds, and the Sunday sky was copper-colored from the dust and sand. The sun took on a grayish-red shade, and Errol Stiff remembered that it was a windy, dusty, terrible, low-visibility day. "It was just like a storm without the thunder and lightning so far as the wind velocity was concerned."⁵

Because of the strong winds, William "Billy" Brock, one of the Chicago pilots, had difficulty making headway from Chicago. Though his days-old Laird Swallow biplane could go 100 miles per hour, at times he covered only 35 miles per hour. "Brock encountered snow, sleet and hail by turns . . . great pieces of hail beating his windshield for miles. Dropping to lower levels to dodge the snow and hail, he found the wind harder to fight, and also ran into dust storms." Remember that this was in an open cockpit plane! Completing the trip without mishap, Brock "high-tailed it in" on Sunday.⁶

Merrill K. Riddick left Chicago shortly before Brock. Flying plane number 3, a Hispano-Suiza-powered, closed-cabin, rebuilt monoplane, he made it past Milwaukee to Watertown, Wisconsin, about halfway to Madison. There he wired the Chicago offices that, because of the erratic motion of the winds, he had become airsick and could not continue.⁷

Elmer Lee Partridge, 38, airplane builder, the designer who built plane number 3, and a pilot for the Dickinson line, was sent out from Chicago to meet Riddick and continue the flight. Riddick by then was re-

covered enough to accompany Partridge to Minneapolis as a passenger. They flew to La Crosse on Sunday and stayed overnight with plans to continue on the next morning.⁸ Though not originally scheduled, Partridge was now committed.

When they left La Crosse at 8:00 the next morning, Partridge was "at the stick." Riddick said, "The engine was working smoothly but the heavy wind and sandstorm were causing trouble." Riddick lay down in the back of the plane, but the plane bounced so much that he sometimes was thrown to the top of the cabin. "I had ridden in all kinds of planes for the past 10 years. . . . But that trip Monday was the worst experience I have ever had. As we were running short of gas at Hastings, I concluded the best thing to do was get off and rest up a bit, then come on to the Twin Cities where I would take the plane back with Partridge."⁹

It seems that their route would be to follow the Mississippi River to Hastings. But with the horizon obscured, as other pilots reported, Partridge did not have clear landmarks. Continuing to follow the river, he flew up near Elk River, turned around, and aimed for Minneapolis. Brock said that Partridge actually flew over Wold-Chamberlain at one point "about noon, but

⁴ *Journal*, June 6, p. 1, June 7, p. 10; *Pioneer Press*, June 8, p. 1.

⁵ National Weather Service records, June 7, 1926, Wold-Chamberlain Airport; *Pioneer Press*, June 7, p. 1; *Journal*, June 7, p. 13; Errol Stiff interview.

⁶ *Journal*, June 7, p. 1, 10; *Tribune*, June 8, p. 2; *Pioneer Press*, June 7, p. 1.

⁷ *Tribune*, June 8, p. 1; *Journal*, June 8, p. 6; *Pioneer Press*, June 8, p. 2; Noel E. Allard, *Speed, The Biography of Charles W. Holman* (Chaska, Minn.: n.p., 1976), 30.

⁸ *Tribune*, June 8, p. 1.

⁹ *Pioneer Press*, June 8, p. 2.

PLANE NO. 3, seen here just after it landed at Wold-Chamberlain field on June 7, 1926; note the damaged right wheel.



when he saw the concrete drive encircling Wold-Chamberlain Field, he thought he was flying over a lake and continued on his way, landing in Robbinsdale. There he learned of his mistake." He ran low on fuel and landed in a farmer's cornfield near Robbinsdale, tearing up his right wheel. He obtained fuel, got directions, and finally arrived at Wold-Chamberlain at 12:55 P.M.¹⁰

Brock met Partridge, who described the flight as the bumpiest he had ever had and declared himself to be "just about all in." He agreed to Brock's suggestion that he take only the Twin Cities' mail intended for Chicago and points beyond while Brock would carry mail destined for intermediate points. This would give the exhausted flier a nonstop trip to Chicago.¹¹

BROCK hopped off from Wold-Chamberlain between 2:45 and 2:55 P.M., using scarcely 300 feet of runway and rocking from side to side as he gained altitude into the northwest wind. He arrived in St. Paul on time and took off again at 3:20 P.M. for Chicago.¹²

Following Brock's departure, Partridge took off two or three minutes later with "even less of a run, seemingly up almost as soon as his plane was squarely into the wind. He swung to the west after gaining some altitude and kept a westerly course until he passed from view," apparently planning "to bring his machine around at such an angle that he would have a tail wind."¹³ We can surmise that Partridge may have wanted to follow Brock into St. Paul, but as Brock was quickly lost to sight in the dust storm, he may have been lost to Partridge's sight even before the latter took off.

Partridge circled west of the field, possibly looking for Brock, and was then seen to circle slowly to the south and was lost to sight in the dust cloud. The next sighting was about a mile west of the village of Nichols. As he turned toward St. Paul, he flew northeastward along Sibley Memorial Highway (Highway 13).¹⁴

"According to L[ouis] DesLauriers, who was working in a field directly in line with the aviator's path, Partridge was having no trouble when he passed directly overhead. . . . But as he looked at the plane . . . suddenly it seemed to quiver and started to plunge from side to side." Everest A. Tousignant, a farmer



PILOT William "Billy" Brock

nearby, also saw the plane about 1,000 feet up. And S. J. Letendre said the plane was almost standing still in the air because of the wind.¹⁵

Martin E. Stevens had been watching for the plane and said that "the wind would change his elevation from time to time." He also noticed that "The wind was swirling in uneven gusts that tossed him about. Partridge tried to turn north, with the wind at his side." Stevens saw the plane "plunge into a tailspin." But DesLauriers said, "After going up a little way, the plane started to fall. It did not go into a tailspin, but seemed to totter from side to side and once a gust of wind nearly overturned it." The plane wavered and dipped, went side to side, and then seemed to shoot up for a few moments before beginning to go down. Stevens got into his car and had gone no more than 110 yards when the plane swung back (east to west) across Sibley Memorial Highway and plunged to the ground at a steep angle.¹⁶

The witnesses on the ground saw something white and square fall from the plane shortly before the crash. The papers dismissed these reports as unconfirmed rumors. Inspection of the plane afterward did not reveal that anything was missing. But just in case, farmers

¹⁰ *Journal*, June 7, p. 1, June 8, p. 6; *Tribune*, June 8, p. 1; *Daily News*, June 8, p. 8.

¹¹ *Journal*, June 8, p. 6.

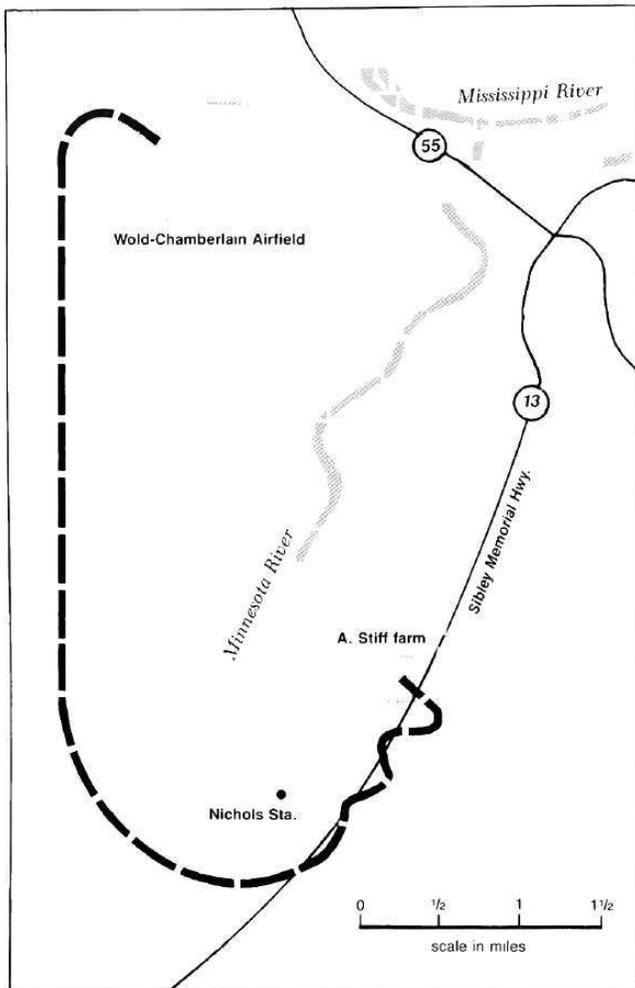
¹² *Journal*, June 8, p. 6; *Daily News*, June 8, p. 8.

¹³ *Journal*, June 8, p. 1, 6.

¹⁴ *Tribune*, June 8, p. 1.

¹⁵ *Pioneer Press*, June 8, p. 2; interview of S. (Sig) J. Letendre by the author, Sept. 28, 1977, tape in author's possession.

¹⁶ *Pioneer Press*, June 8, p. 2; *Journal*, June 8, p. 6; *Daily News*, June 8, p. 1.



THE PATH of Partridge's final flight

examined the area over which the plane flew but did not find anything. They apparently assumed—incorrectly—that whatever fell went straight down. That object, a piece of fabric from a wing, was blown farther east by the wind and was found days later some distance away on the back fields of the Bill Burrows' farm quite a way from the buildings.¹⁷ There was no follow-up newspaper report of the find, however.

Photographs taken by Quentin Stiff and the newspapers show the wing coverings torn and broken; they also show all the ailerons and wing flaps to be accounted for. The initial investigations by William A. Kidder, manager of the Twin Cities office of the airmail service, Dakota County coroner O. W. Engelbret, and Riddick did not reveal the cause of the plane crash. A number of theories were put forth: Partridge had become airsick and lost control of the plane; the plane went down while Partridge was looking elsewhere trying to get his bearings; heavy winds caused the pilot to lose control; "Partridge's ship . . . may have developed



A POLICEMAN examines the wreck of Partridge's plane; note the presence of the tail ailerons.

a hidden weakness which gave way in the terrific wind"; or, the fuselage was pushed past its capacity.¹⁸

BOTH Riddick and Partridge had said the engine was working smoothly throughout their trip from Chicago. Examination after the crash showed the engine still in very good condition, even though it had plowed three feet into the clay ground, almost to the crankshaft. The engine was going full blast with both magnetos open when the craft hit.¹⁹ And while the condition of Partridge may have been a factor, the final actions of the plane lead me to believe that this was not a major cause of the crash.

Partridge was flying a rebuilt monoplane to which had been added a set of lower wings for extra lift. A picture of plane number 3 is strikingly similar to the Bellanca CF which outraced, outclimbed, and outglided all the biplane competition in the 1922 Monmouth, Illinois, Midwestern Flying Meet. Remember that Partridge's plane was four years old. This closed-cabin monoplane was said by the pilots who flew it to be "a rare combination of stability and maneuverability. . . . Open the throttle a little and the plane will

¹⁷ *Pioneer Press*, June 8, p. 2; *Journal*, June 8, p. 6; interviews with Quentin and Orlin Stiff, Aug. 13, 1977. Nichols, a train station at the intersection of the railroad and Cedar Avenue along the Minnesota River, was a shipping point for cattle and farm products. It has since been abandoned and discontinued; Warren Upham, *Minnesota Geographic Names* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1969), 167.

¹⁸ *Journal*, June 8, p. 1, 6; *Tribune*, June 8, p. 1; *Pioneer Press*, June 8, p. 2

¹⁹ *Pioneer Press*, June 8, p. 2; Orlin and Quentin Stiff interviews.

slightly nose up and begin to climb." It could lift more than its own weight in fuel and cargo. "For climb, speed, gliding, weight-carrying and ease of operation under all conditions of practical flying, she is years ahead of any plane in the world today."²⁰

The buoyancy and bouncing experienced by Riddick and Partridge during their flights and the very short take-off at Wold-Chamberlain could well have been the extra lift being compounded or magnified by the high winds. Even though the pilot was experienced and the builder of the plane, he was unable to prevent the craft from moving erratically in the unexpected 40-mile-per-hour winds. To counter such uncontrolled motion, Partridge needed to gain control by revving the engine to full power.

The covering of the wings was linen, not metal. An example from another plane in the same wind gives us the final clues. Pilot Dan Kiser left Chicago that same

²⁰ *Tribune*, June 8, p. 1; Edward Jablonski, *Man With Wings: A Pictorial History of Aviation* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1980), 114; Richard P. Hallion, *Designers and Test Pilots* (Alexandria, Va.: Time-Life Books, 1983), 39-43.

²¹ Quentin Stiff interview; Perham C. Nahl, "Six Pilots: How They Carried Out the 1926 CAM-9 Inaugural," *Airpost Journal* (New Haven, Conn.) 47 (June, 1976): 328.

²² *Daily News*, June 8, p. 1; *Pioneer Press*, June 8, p. 2.

Monday with mail for the Twin Cities; he was forced down by winds at Rio, Wisconsin. "According to Kiser, the control wires on his plane stretched three to four inches from the wind strain and the struts stretched, too; when the linen of one wing began to rip, he decided it was time to land while he could still fly the plane." The relief pilot "helped Kiser sew a patch on the wing."²¹

The last thing to consider is the final motions of the plane. The plane seen going northeast but when it hit the ground, it was facing east.²² That requires a right turn drop from its altitude of nearly 1,000 feet to achieve impact at a steep angle. From the ground, that may have looked like the start of a tailspin, especially the right turn and nose-down angle the plane had to have taken, although it did not turn a full 180 degrees.

My conclusion is that the wing covering from the bottom right wing's lower edge came off, its width being about equal with the length. That caused the plane to lose some lift on that side, dropping that wing and necessitating compensation—a side-to-side or tottering motion. The Bellanca-like plane rose up slightly as the engine speed increased but the right wing drag turned the plane. The wind, now at the side (northwesterly on a plane going northeast) caught the underside and nearly flipped it over, pushing it to the right. The plane

A CROWD gathered in the Stiff cornfield views the damaged fabric on the upper wing of Partridge's aircraft.



sideslipped and, with the engines now at full throttle and no wind to slow it, went straight down to the ground nose first.

AFTER THE CRASH Sig Letendre hopped into his car and was the first to the scene. Partridge was found bent over by the wings which had fallen on his back. His head was on his knees and his legs were bent underneath his body. Partridge was still breathing but the safety belt, taut because the seat had been moved forward, could not be unfastened to remove the pilot. Letendre then used his pocketknife to cut the safety belt. Partridge's heart was still beating even though his skull was fractured and face lacerated.²³

Stevens arrived and tried to move the wings out of the way. When that failed he went to his residence and called for an ambulance from St. Paul. Partridge was dead by the time a doctor and ambulance arrived. He died about 20 minutes after the crash while still in the plane.²⁴

Elizabeth Ann (Mrs. Everest) Tousignant had earlier called Quentin Stiff to tell him about the plane crash on his family's farm. DesLauriers called Wold-Chamberlain to tell them that the plane had crashed and that the pilot was dead. Errol Stiff, who was at the St. Paul airport with his parents and thousands of other people, said, "Sometime in the afternoon the extra papers came out, [saying] that the plane had fallen into the DesLauriers' farm. As it was time to go, we thought we'd go home and see the airplane wreck."²⁵

"We came up into the yard and up the hill by the house. There was a big crowd in our cornfield by the big oak tree near the highway. So we went there to see what they were looking at. Dad sure didn't want people running around in his cornfield.

"The airplane was there! DesLauriers had called in about the wreck and the papers got the names mixed up. We went up there just as they were taking the guy out of the plane."

The gasoline tank had been dripping fuel for some time. Quentin Stiff said that, because of the threat of fire, he dragged the two mail sacks from the plane and had to keep unthinking people with cigarettes from the wreckage.²⁶

After the plane was inspected, Kidder ordered the wreckage burned and the motor taken to the Minnea-

polis field to be sent to Chicago. Orlin Stiff brought the tractor and hayrack from the farm, and with help from the bystanders the wrecked plane was put on the hayrack and pulled down to the lower pasture. The engine was taken to the old machine shed where the brothers made a crate for it. Albert Stiff and his sons made arrangements to haul the engine to Minneapolis but were never paid a promised \$50.00 for the effort. After that, the plane was burned, leaving only the metal frame. The brothers used the remaining metal for this and that around the farm.²⁷

The body of Elmer Partridge was sent Monday evening to Meeker Funeral Home in South St. Paul for the county coroner's examination. The verdict was accidental death. On Tuesday a sister in Chicago wired authorities to send the body there for burial. Riddick was on the train as a guard of honor. Partridge's funeral on Thursday, June 10, at the Montrose Cemetery in Chicago included a convoy of planes scattering flowers over the procession as a last salute from fellow fliers.²⁸

Partridge's death was not an isolated tragedy. As the editor of one newspaper noted, the mail would continue to fly, symbolizing "human triumph over the obstacles nature interposes." The focus of those inaugural flights was a celebration of the airplane's advantages over the train in carrying commerce and the mails. How, then, were Partridge's two airmail sacks finally taken to Chicago? They arrived the next day—by train.

²³ Letendre interview; *Pioneer Press*, June 8, p. 2.

²⁴ *Pioneer Press*, June 8, p. 2; interviews with Albert, Jr., Orlin, Quentin, and Errol Stiff.

²⁵ Letendre interview; *Journal*, June 8, p. 6. For the quotation here and below, see Errol Stiff interview.

²⁶ *Journal*, June 8, p. 6; Quentin Stiff interview.

²⁷ *Journal*, June 8, p. 1; *Pioneer Press*, June 8, p. 2; *Daily News*, June 8, p. 1; Quentin, Orlin, and Errol Stiff interviews.

²⁸ *Journal*, June 8, p. 1, 6; *Pioneer Press*, June 9, p. 4; *St. Paul Dispatch*, June 8, p. 1, June 11, p. 1; *Tribune*, June 11, p. 1. Here and below, see also editorials, *Pioneer Press*, June 9, p. 8; *Journal*, June 9, p. 12.

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