A Tenderwing in the High Air: Sensations and Observations of a ...
By RICHARD WIGHTMAN,
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A Tenderwing in the High Air

Sensations and Observations of a Confirmed Groundling on an Aerial Passenger Liner Between New York and Washington

By RICHARD WIGHTMAN,
Vice President of the Aerial Touring Association.

BEFORE Sept. 19, 1919, only five civilians had made a continuous airplane flight from New York to Washington. Army and navy men had done it, the aerial mail had been in successful and profitable operation for more than a year between the two cities, but only five general citizens—and no woman—had ventured over that air path. Then the order changed. A new vogue was born. From Mitchel Field at Mineola a great seven-ton plane rose on sturdy wings into the arching blue carrying fourteen people, ten men and four women, bound for the National Capital, with nine of them wondering whether they would ever get there!

The five who did not wonder were Alfred W. Lawson, designer and owner of the air liner; Charles Cox, the pilot; Vincent Buranelli, engineer; Andrew M. Surini, chief mechanic, and Charles Schory, engineman, constituting the crew. These had sailed the ship over the high course from Milwaukee, making five stops, and knew her to be a dependable air lady, with some temperament, but no ill-nature—so long as you kept her dressed and fed and didn't interfere with her natural or, shall we say, scientific, program of performance.

A tenderfoot is defined as one who is not yet hardened to the life of the plains, so a person who is not yet hardened to the life of the air must be a tenderwing. The word isn't in the dictionary yet, but I fancy it will be there some day soon. Aeronautics is already bulging all sorts of books with new words.

Well, I was a tenderwing, an air greenhorn, a hater of altitude—one of those fellows who feel safest when he's down low, and constitutionally inclined to pitch over the railings of high hotel balconies, or steady himself with a clutch at saplings on the tops of tall mountains. The steeple-climbing business had always been absent from my vocational calculations. But now all of a sudden, and literally out of a blue sky, I was invited to leave the earth around good old solid New York, climb up into the air a couple of miles, and beat it for Washington at ninety miles an hour!

In the course of a fairly adventurous life, during which I have adhered closely to the planet of my birth, I have received and accepted many invitations. People have asked me to make speeches, to attend week-end parties, to sit in a poker game, to pick out a present for the departing clergyman, and, in the former and popular days of degeneration, to take a drink. All of these invitations have carried a certain element of peril, but usually I have been game and accepted without fatal results. I live to tell the tale.

But this particular invitation was different from the others. It sounded different and operated on me with strange effect. It made me swallow hard, and something was the matter with my hair. No, my hair didn't stand up. It remained seated, but tingled at the roots and seemed to squirm around and tangle and pull. My heart was also affected. Hitherto it had been a stuntless heart, behaving in a regular and exemplary manner. Now it climbed upward in my chest two or three times and fell back exhausted. It was pretty nearly all in. But there was that confounded aerial invitation looking me straight in the eye and waiting for an answer.

It wasn't waiting patiently, either. Air things are quick and demand quick response and co-operation or else you're out of it. So, desiring to be in all the new swims, and not wishing to be set down by certain aerial experts as a ground piker quite beneath their distinguished notice, I resolutely gathered together all my inner belongings classically called guts, puckered my lips into a forced smile, and answered strongly and as nonchalantly as possible into the ear of the waiting invitation, "Certainly I'll go to Washington—certainly! When does the old boat start?"

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The Lawson Airplane with Its Passengers on Its Arrival at Bolling Field, Washington, from Mineola, L. I.

That was three days before the flight—my first flight. On each of these days I prayed for unpropitious weather which no aerial navigator would dare to tackle; by night I dreamed I was the stick of an exploded rocket and rapidly approaching the earth on the return journey, falling straight down. My eyes took on an absent stare, my memory failed, my appetite practically disappeared. In the restaurants I ordered things I had never eaten before, and once asked the waiter for a pen when what I wanted was pie.

On the night before the ordeal I left a call for 4:30 A. M. I was bound to be at Mitchel Field on time and ahead of time. As a matter of fact I was the first passenger to arrive. The Lawson air liner, with her ninety-five-foot spread of wing, rested on the sward like a great green beetle asleep in the morning dew. One of the mechanicians was fussing around her, tightening up this, loosening up that.

I sat on a pile of canvas and lit my pipe, reflecting on my past life. The sun came up. It was the same faithful old sun! I wondered if we were going to continue to be friends and go on together just the same, or if I would soon drop out of the fellowship. "Drop out" struck me as being rather good, and I smiled sadly in the direction of the giant beetle. My past life, bad as it had been, grew relatively unimportant. It was my future life, not so much the quality of it as the tenure of it—in this mortal body—that was bothering me. I wanted to stick around my accustomed haunts a little longer and couldn't see any special use in the air travel proposition. Railroads were good enough, and steamships and automobiles. But when the other passengers arrived and we laughed and joked together, mildly pitying the poor dubs who were thronging the outside of the ropes and couldn't go, I felt better and began to perk up with a sense of aerial importance.

Besides, I never had my picture taken so many times as I did that morning. All prominent people like to have their pictures taken, including Presidents and Generals. And right here let me say, please, that taking pictures of air travelers about to get aboard will soon be over. In a few months the novelty will be worn thin, and the news value of the thing lost forever. There is no particular lust for photographs of obscure citizens about to enter a railroad train. Their used to be, but there isn't now. If the oncoming army of aerial tourists want their pictures taken they will have to get it done in a gallery or be snapped on the lawn.

We were due to "take off" at 8 o'clock, but the telephone at the Weather Bureau informed us that it was raining and blowing in Washington, which was hard to believe, for we were amid glorious sunshine, the leaves of the trees scarcely stirring, the wind funnels on the hangars unbellied and limp.

We waited a little, but nerve, with an airman, is nerve.

At 8:30, when Lawson gave the word, we climbed into the cabin, the fourteen of us, and seated ourselves in easy wicker chairs with cushions and back-rests of green leather. Each passenger had his own individual window. The window was not glass, for glass has a way of breaking and cutting people. It was of celluloid, slightly amber, to ease the eyes from the sun, but perfectly transparent.

In the two front chairs, each behind a wheel of the dual control, exactly like the wheel of a motor car, sat Lawson and his young pilot, Charles Cox, late of the Royal Air Force, and skilled in the manipulation of heavy air machines. They were dressed like a couple of business men out in their automobile to drive around the block—no leather coats, no helmets, no leggings, no goggles. Cox was bareheaded and wore a pair of light kid gloves to aid his grasp of the wheel. Often during the journey we watched those gloved hands and knew that upon their movements hung our safety, though in no greater degree than one's safety hangs upon the movements of the hands of one's chauffeur guiding a motor car along unfamiliar roads and in the midst of city traffic.

We taxied across the field for a few hundred yards on pneumatic tires as large around as your thigh, and then Cox turned and said over his shoulder, "She's stepping up." If he hadn't told us we wouldn't have known it, but we were in the air, the green field sinking beneath us.

About this time one of the crew walked along the aisle tossing boxes of bon bons into our laps exactly as the train boys of the old days used to do when we rode on the "accommodation trains" which stopped at all the little stations.

With a furtive glance through my celluloid window I took my box of candy and slowly broke the wrappings. It took me a long time to extract the first bon bon. I didn't feel like making any quick motions. My legs were crossed and somehow it seemed better to keep them that way. If I shifted them the thing might tip over and we'd all spill out!

I had carefully decided before starting that I would sit in my chair inert, like a sack o' meal, but before very long it occurred to me that it would be more sensible for me to sit there like a human being, and even get up, stretch my legs, and walk around and enjoy myself, taking my slice of the fun. And so it was. We were sailing the air ocean on an even keel.

Occasionally the nose of the ship would tip up a little or down a little, but never so much as when your rowboat is going against the waves.

Sometimes Cox would lean on his wheel as a motorist does when his car is going slowly over a smooth road and he is sure of everything. Sometimes he would steer with one hand, putting his other arm around Lawson. Sometimes he would look back at us and smile as a father on the front seat of an automobile turns around and smiles at his children "in behind."

As the plane rose higher and higher and the earth beneath looked like a

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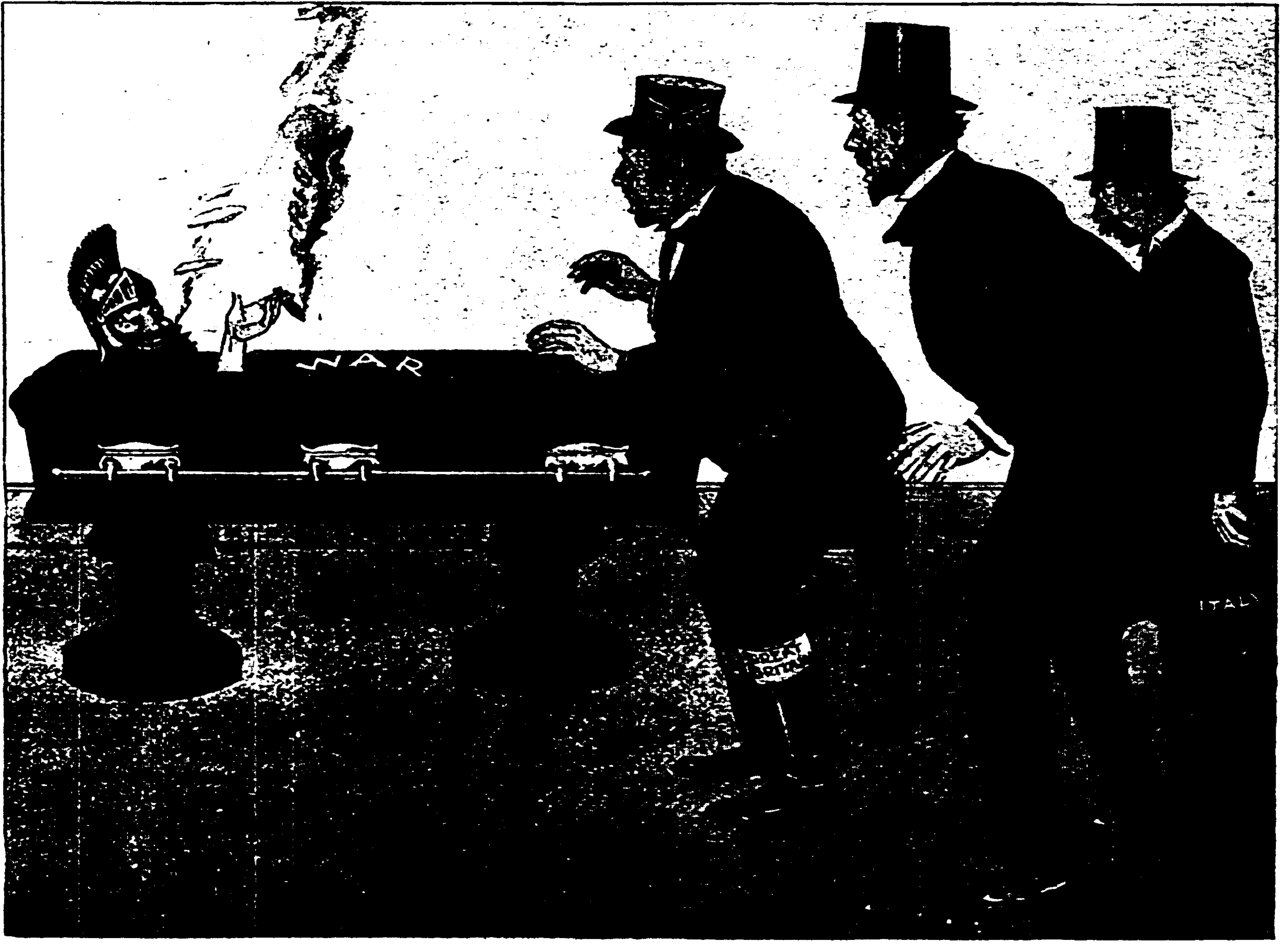

Rather Embarrassing for the Pall-Bearers

A Tenderwing in the High Air

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patchwork quilt made apparently of green and yellow fields about the size of postage stamps, I tried to analyze my feelings, but they seemed normal, so there wasn't much to do in that direction to take up my time. Hence I began to write, and wrote until my fountain pen was dry, occasionally looking out of my individual window at what was below and beyond, and there was no terror in it. In one small half hour the Unusual had become the Usual. With the common human faculty of adaptation I had automatically and without conscious effort become at home in the air.

My ease of mind was still furthered by the steady purr of the two 400-horsepower Liberty motors, the unintermittent whir of the propellers, and the smiles and amiable conversation of the passengers and crew who had gathered strangers and suddenly become friends by a lift into the sky.

As we passed over New York City at a height of 6,000 feet it seemed something other than the largest city in the world. No longer was I walking along its canyons of commerce, hot and jostled. I could not even see the canyons. They had apparently healed as wounds are healed, or been drawn together as seams are drawn in a finished garment.

Occasionally some great building could be identified, but it was such a funny little building. I wondered if Mr. Woolworth had even seen his famous structure from my altitude. If he had, he must have laughed, for it resembled a toothpick, clean and white, just taken out of its box. And the great banks and financial institutions of Wall Street and lower Broadway, where were they? Oh, they were there all right—like the baby's building blocks in a nursery. The overgrown Bedlow girl on the Island of Liberty was there, too, as big as a penny doll, waving some little thing at us. I guess it was a torch. So far as size went, the big liners in the harbor could have been bought for 10 cents and pulled around in a tub by a thread.

Over New Jersey the smokestacks of the great factories looked like rows of clay pipes stood on end, and smoking like fury with no man sucking them; the Princeton bowl was as a wedding ring, and the cemeteries patches of green velvet, on which some prodigal dentist had scattered his stock of nice false teeth.

This sort of journey gives one a feeling of superiority and independence. You have left all your little worries below. The important buildings and affairs of the earth over which you are passing seem very unimportant. You don't care what you are passing over. You don't care where the roads go or where the rivers run, or where the tracks are laid, for you are independent of them all, faring on the free wide way named "Whithersover Ye Will."

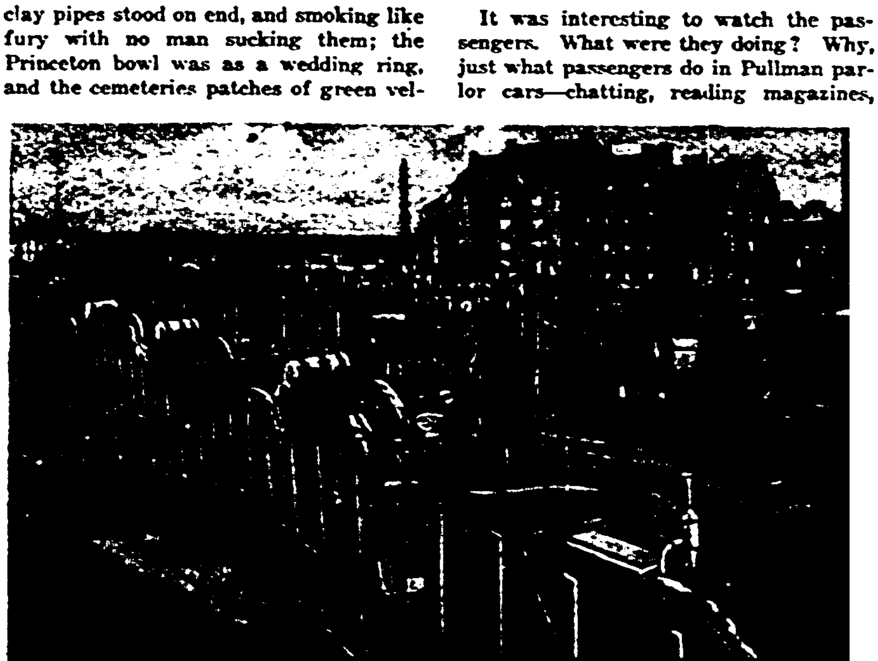
It was interesting to watch the passengers. What were they doing? Why, just what passengers do in Pullman parlor cars—chatting, reading magazines, knitting, writing, munching caramels, looking out the windows, walking up and down the aisle. One of the women curled up in her chair and went to sleep for an hour, and an air-traveling fly lit on her nose and tickled her into wakefulness, but she soon dozed off again.

As for me, I kept on with my writing. When going to Mineola in the early morning on the Long Island Railroad I had tried to do a little of it, but the train jiggled so much I had to give it up. On the air liner I found that I could write as comfortably and legibly as in my own New England study, thus becoming, as it were, a pioneer in aerial authorship. A woman artist on board drew cartoons of her fellow-travelers which have since been published in a magazine.

And so we journeyed without jolt, jar or shock—no car dust or smoke, no station waits, no heat or fret, no "brushing off" at the end of the trip, no porter to tip. I have traveled to Washington by train many times but never so quickly, comfortably and happily.

From the time of our leaving Mineola till we arrived at Washington I didn't see a human being below engaged in a peaceful pursuit or any other kind of a pursuit. They must have been too little for me to see, for we passed over their farms and stores and *some* of them must have been around there somewhere.

And the gist of the new truth about aerial travel is this: Over our heads always and always has been a path as safe and scientifically dependable as the steel rails over which we have been accustomed to travel, but we have not known how to use it till now. The roughness of railroading lies in the fact that it is a proposition of steel on steel. And the softness and smoothness of aeroplaning lies in the fact that it is a proposition of air on canvas.



From Illustrirte Zeitung.

German Industry Working for the Entente Allies—Trainloads of Motor Ploughs Destined for France.

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