



PATH of the EAGLE

From little more than one glorified box-kite Pennsylvania-Central Airlines has grown to prosper.

By
KURT RAND

THE first plane was called "Fly Today." Rivals said it was properly named because no one, after a look at it, could believe it would last longer. Publicly they called their route—Pittsburgh to Cleveland—the "Path of the Eagle." Literal-minded pilots, however, dubbed it the "crow's hop."

They carried the mail—with an average of between two and three forced landings a week. The entire staff: pilots, maintenance crews, traffic, accounting and even the barkers for the sight-seeing trips run between mail flights (and, incidentally, the chief source of revenue) consisted of nine persons.

Such is the beginning of our success story. The obvious contrast is to point to Pennsylvania-Central Airlines today—the concern that had its birth in the rickety old "Fly Today." We're blushing because the tale resembles the Horatio Alger epics. But it's true and it's modern. It's typical of the leap from rags to riches (riches of equipment, performance and even, now at last, of rev-

First of PCA's new fleet of Douglasses is shown above on its delivery flight.



This group of Pittsburgh business men, inspecting New York airports in 1926, returned to form the Pittsburgh Aviation Industries Corporation.

enue) that commercial aviation has made in the last 15 years.

But let's get back to the beginning: back to the '20s. The only commercial airport at Pittsburgh was a pasture that Barr Peat, a young farmer, had allowed barnstorming flyers to use as a headquarters. It was about 1,200 feet square, surrounded by trees. Planes were staked down at night and engines occasionally overhauled inside a tent pitched under the trees. This was Bettis Field. It had an allure for thousands of Pittsburghers and a crowd of 10,000 persons wanting airplane rides on a Sunday or holiday was not uncommon. People actually fought to get a ride at \$10 a hop. Naturally such business attracted flies.

One of the early operators there was a McKeesport automobile dealer, Clifford A. Ball. He was quickly convinced that the airplane had wonderful possibilities as a vehicle of commerce. He questioned one of the barnstormers, Charles A. Lindbergh, about his ideas of the future of aviation. Soon afterward, Ball purchased our old friend "Fly Today."

Ball was one of the few men to operate his plane in a businesslike fashion and he soon made enough profits, with several other pilots, to purchase the field and form the Pittsburgh-McKeesport Airport Co. The first building there was a combined signboard, living quarters for Ball's lone pilot (Romer Weyant) and refreshment stand. He immediately understood the necessity of securing commercial contracts to make the airport a success and began soliciting the aid of Pittsburgh businessmen in negotiations with the Post Office Department. His suggestion that it was high time (this was 1925) that Pittsburgh had some sort of airmail service, was coldly received.

But Ball, the auto salesman, was undiscouraged and two years later he succeeded in getting a contract for ferrying the mail to Cleveland. Despite antagonism of many Pittsburgh businessmen he was able to form Clifford Ball, Inc., to take over the contract. Barr Peat and W. B. Phelan, now PCA station man-

ager at Harrisburg, Pa., assisted him.

With their meager funds, raised virtually by blackjacking their friends, they began preparations to open the service on April 21, 1927. First they bought Waco 9 biplanes with OX-5 engines at \$2,500 each. Then they put up a small wooden hangar and bunkhouse for pilots. Their first two pilots were "Curly" Lovejoy and Merle Moltrup. Dewey Noyes was a pilot-mechanic and Bill Livingood was ground crew. Joe Martin, now superintendent of maintenance for American Airlines, was the Cleveland airport manager for Ball.

Although the boys didn't know it at the time, they had picked a route that consistently has some of the worst weather in the entire United States. And this weather problem made itself felt from the start. The opening trip got through on the scheduled time of 2 hours 15 minutes. But rotten weather caused two forced landings the first week of flying and it soon became a common occurrence.

In that first month 900 pounds of mail were transported but, by December of that year, the company carried 2,740 pounds. No one with PCA today will tell how many times the Pittsburgh city telephone directory, carefully wrapped and stamped with stamps bought by airline employees, made the shuttle trip. "Perish the thought of such things," is the attitude of all airline operators today, but everyone in the industry knows that it happened often in the older, more haphazard days when mail was the backbone of revenue—and mail was light.

Altogether the young company carried 19,573 pounds in 1927. By the end of 1929, the mail traffic had expanded to the point where the company had flown 91½ tons of mail. If it is true, as had been reported, that the Post Office Department had authorized the mail contract between Pittsburgh and Cleveland to convince other airline operators that mail could be profitable, the proof seemed to be attained.

Although the company was making money, the post office was constantly increasing its demands for better service



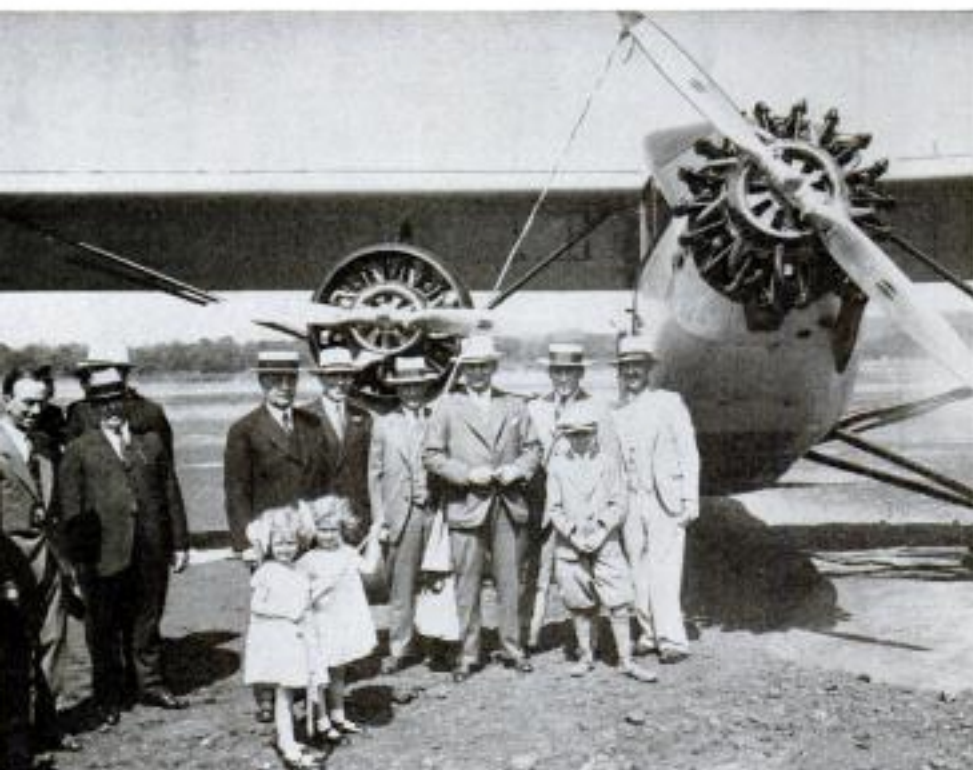
C. B. Monro, PCA head (right), and L. P. Arnold, vice-president, beside new DC-3.



F. R. Crawford, PCA vice-president, helped Monro establish the company.



Operations manager is J. H. "Slim" Carmichael, a veteran airline pilot.



Government and airline officials (above) gathered at Washington on June 8, 1931, to inaugurate mail and passenger service on Washington-Pittsburgh-Cleveland route.



This is the first Waco "9" used by the original predecessor company of PCA. The line was founded in 1927. In the first year the company flew 19,573 pounds of mail.



By 1929 the growing company was using Fairchild "71" six-passenger ships. These planes extended the line from the north into Washington. Note slogan on fuselage.

and better equipment. The route was lengthened and the post office began demanding that facilities for carrying passengers along with the mail be provided. Ball purchased a Ryan cabin plane with a J-5 engine, then a Pitcairn Mailwing with a J-5 and a J-5 Travel Air, which was the company's first plane equipped with landing lights, navigation lights and flares. The "Path of the Eagle" was beginning to be recognized in Cleveland and Pittsburgh as one that humans—normal humans—might take.

Also, Ball's routes had become part of the nation-wide rail and air service. Air-mail from the east coast was trained west of the mountains to Pittsburgh where Ball picked it up and flew it to Cleveland. A connection from the west also was in effect at Cleveland with National Air Transport lines. Also, when the NAT plane was late—as it frequently was—a special night flight would be made.

In those days preparations for any flight were simple. The barnstorming pilots telephoned Pittsburgh and questioned the field attendant about the weather there. The replies would be in such non-technical language as: "Swell weather here, come on through," or "Looks good to me," or even, "I think you can make it. I can see the town lights a mile away."

Remember that they had no light beacons, no radio, and mighty few instruments. Above all no instruments for cloud or fog flying. But they did a surprisingly good and regular job. Without even navigation or landing lights they would hop off and confidently "start through." When field employees at Pittsburgh heard the J-5s or the OX's they'd dash out and light a pile of gasoline-soaked rags in the middle of the field. The glare would guide the pilots down.

There were plenty of "adventures" in those flights. One of the early flyers, "Red" Couples, flew the mail to Pittsburgh one night only to find the smoky city completely fogged in. He tried to let down but found the stuff right on the ground. Finally he climbed back on top and thought things over. He was in a tough spot as he well knew. Worst of it was that he had no idea of his position. Cruising on top of the fog he spied a red glow in the distance. Upon close examination, he discovered the glow was from the blast furnaces of a steel mill in Alliquippa. Never before or since has Pittsburgh's steel industry been so heartily appreciated. Couples cruised around till dawn and a southwest wind shifted the fog so he was able to get down safely.

The first passengers were carried almost a year after Ball's start. On April 28, 1929, a Fairchild FC-2 plane carried four men at a speed of 90 m.p.h. from Pittsburgh to Cleveland, opening a new chapter in the company's existence. That date in 1928 is the day on which the National Safety Council marks as the commencement of the unmatched safety record that Ball's and succeeding companies have made over this route.

About a year later Ball's line extended its route over the Alleghenies into Washington. Bud Baker (still a PCA pilot) took the controls of a Fairchild "71" to fly six passengers to the capital. The "Path of the Eagle" was extending into the eagle's nest.

While Ball's airline was expanding, other phases of aviation were changing. Bettis Field was taken over by a small company that began building a new hangar, but hardly had this work begun when Curtiss-Wright bought the field, graded it and added an administration building. Ball, Inc., had a modern airport for its operations base.

More pilots were added to care for new schedules. Some of them were: Trow Sebree, Harry Sievers, Chris Pickup (now a million-dollar with United Air Lines), Gene Cecil, Clarence Bell (now with Goodyear Tire & Rubber company), Horace Stark (still with PCA), Edmond Q. B. Henriques, Lowell Scroggins and Couples (who still is with PCA). There were others added a little later.

In those uncertain days pilots often had to be traffic managers and even mail and baggage hustlers. Always they were salesmen. One tale is told of a veteran PCA pilot who "got" his man. With one passenger aboard they took off for Washington from Pittsburgh in a Fairchild "71". It was the first time the pilot had flown the plane and he was unfamiliar with the fuel tank hookup. In the air the pilot got into conversation with the passenger and was boasting of the reliability of "modern" engines as compared with those of 1927—when the motor quit cold. The tank used for take-off had run dry.

Frantically the pilot searched for the valve that would allow him to feed fuel from one of the two other tanks to the

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First multi-engined equipment to be used by Pennsylvania Air Lines was this tri-motored Stinson, introduced in 1931. The line carried 7,000 passengers that year.



Another PCA predecessor was Kohler Aviation Corp. (Milwaukee-Detroit). This line used Loening amphibians (above). Below are the first of the famed tri-motored Fords bought by PAL. Central Air Lines soon bought Fords; PAL retaliated with Boeings.



Central replied to PAL's Boeings with a new fleet of tri-motored Stinson "A"s like that directly above. When the two companies finally merged, the Boeing 247D (right) became standard equipment. The veteran Boeings now will supplement PCA's new Douglas DC-3's.



YRAGER

Path of the Eagle

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starving motor. He made the passenger help him, but by this time they were so low a landing was necessary. It was made safely, but the frightened passenger hopped out and begged a ride to town from a passing farmer's hay wagon.

Meantime the pilot had located the elusive valve and restarted the engine. He taxied down the field alongside the hayload begging the passenger to return. Finally, after the pilot taxied up and down the field several times to prove that the motor wouldn't quit again, the passenger was lured back on board and went on to Washington—and later on to the west coast by air.

Shortly after Ball's company began flying the mails C. Bedell Monroe and Frederick R. Crawford formed the Mo-Craw Airplane and Advertising company. The date was November, 1927. This company was formed for the purpose of commercializing the art of flying. It was, in reality, the first venture into the field of air transport of the two men who are now president and executive vice president of PCA.

Inspired by the Ball success, a group of civic-minded Pittsburghers decided to make their city an aviation center. After studying the problem they formed Pittsburgh Aviation Industries Corpora-

tion, as a community enterprise with the program of making Pittsburgh a more important place on the airmail map. Ultimately 200 leading business men and industrial houses subscribed \$1,000,000 for the program. The organization meeting held in December, 1928, elected 58 directors under Chairman George S. Davison, president of the Gulf Refining Co., G. R. Hann became president. Richard W. Robbins, later to become president of Transcontinental & Western Air; Norman Alderdice, son of the president of the National Tube company; and T. J. Hilliard became vice-presidents. Monroe was made secretary and Crawford treasurer.

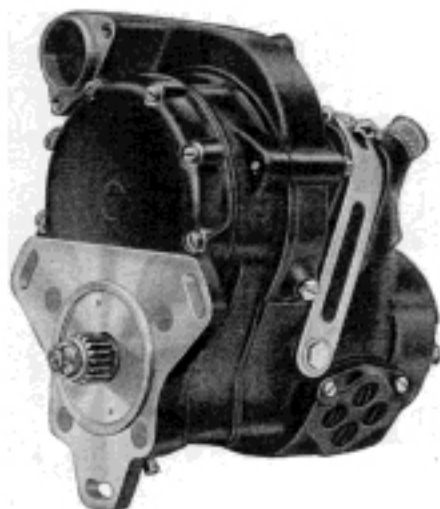
Early in the summer of 1930 PAIC, with Transcontinental Air Transport and Western Air Express, formed Transcontinental & Western Air to bid on a transcontinental air route. The contract was secured and PAIC was given five per cent of the total stock issued as its share. Meantime the assets and mail contract of Clifford Ball, Inc., had been sold to Pennsylvania Air Lines, Inc. In November, 1930, PAIC took over PAL.

The first step was to elect Robbins president. Ball was retained as vice president in charge of operations and Maj. H. S. Martin became executive vice president. Upon the resignation of Robbins, who left to head TWA, Major Martin became president, Monroe executive vice president and Crawford secretary-treasurer.

The year 1931 saw the introduction of multi-engined equipment. A 10-passenger tri-motored Stinson became PAL's standard machine. Patronage quickly increased. In 1930 the monthly passenger average was 95 persons, or less than 1,100 for the year. During 1931, however, some 7,000 passengers were carried. Schedules were increased to three daily round trips between Cleveland, Akron, Pittsburgh and Washington. Early in 1933 a fleet of tri-motored Ford "Tin Geese," (described fully in *POPULAR AVIATION*, February, 1939) the most famous ships of their day, were purchased. These were all-metal planes carrying 12 passengers and requiring two pilots. More than 13,500 passengers were carried that year.

This history has its low point in 1934 and 1935. The abrogation of all airmail contracts by the president and Postmaster-General Farley in 1934 halted PAL, like other operators, in full stride. When the post office turned the mail back to the private operators it was found that Detroit had been added to PAL's route.

Four companies bid on the contract and a new organization, known as Central Airlines, Inc., underbid all others to secure the franchise. Central put a fleet of tri-motored Stinsons into service and Pennsylvania Air Lines, refusing to be frozen out, continued to operate the route as a passenger and express line
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THE "SILENT CITATION" ...a treasured honor

EARLY in 1939, the National Safety Council conferred upon Pennsylvania-Central Airlines Corporation public recognition of P.C.A.'s splendid service to aviation (for flying 70,139,498 passenger miles without passenger or crew fatality in 11 years). Implicit in that signal honor was the silent, but powerfully implied, citation of Bendix-Scintilla Magnetos, which provided the vital spark of ignition through these years.

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only. Simultaneously Pennsylvania Air Lines bought out Kohler Aviation and obtained a line between Detroit, Grand Rapids and across Lake Michigan to Milwaukee. As a result of securing the Kohler lines, PAL won a mail contract for the distance between Detroit and Milwaukee.

Now came a period of bitter competition between Central Air Lines and PAL. The latter ran ahead for a time with the more popular Fords. Then Central opened up with Fords too. PAL replaced its Fords with the then-high-speed Boeing "247s". Loening amphibian single-engined planes, that had been used across Lake Michigan, were replaced with the Fords.

Both companies were losing money hand over fist. Central, however, put into service a new fleet of high-speed Stinsons, CAL cut prices. Central arranged schedules to show the same flying times between all competitive points. Soon air transportation was offered at fares well below rail and Pullman charges. Repeated efforts at consolidation had fallen down, each failure being the signal for a new outburst of rivalry. The pilots raced each other between cities and, finally, the rivalry became so pronounced that airmen of one company ceased speaking to those of the other. For everyone who knows pilots, that meant that the situation was bad.

Finally, however, a consolidation was made and Pennsylvania-Central Airlines

Corporation—the name of the company today—was chosen. The new company assumed control on November 1, 1936. Immediately an expansion program that is continuing today was put into effect.

In April, 1937, a passenger and express service between Pittsburgh and Charleston, W. Va., via Parkersburg, W. Va., was opened but soon discontinued. The company then began flying airmail, passengers and express between Washington and Buffalo via Baltimore, Harrisburg and Williamsport. In March, 1938, Buffalo and Baltimore were linked with Pittsburgh. Then, in rapid succession, came extensions to Norfolk, Va., from Washington and from Grand Rapids into Chicago. In July, 1938, Detroit and Sault Ste. Marie were knit by airmail and passenger service, serving also Flint, Saginaw, Bay City and Traverse City. The extensions and gradual growth brought this little shoe-string operation of the 1920s to fifth place in the country's air transportation industry. From the 1,140 persons carried in 1930 the company has grown to the point where 1939 probably will see 125,000 passengers flown by PCA. The 100,000 mark was reached in October, this year, exceeding the 1938 mark at October by 43 per cent.

From the fly-by-night operation of 1927, the company has grown into a typical modern airline with a staff of over 350 persons including 65 pilots. It has the finest of maintenance facilities, the best of radio equipment and lighting over its routes, trained meteorologists

and reliable dispatchers and operations chiefs. At the threshold of 1940, Pennsylvania Central Airlines seems ready for even more remarkable progress. At this writing the company has on file with the Civil Aeronautics Authority applications for route certificates of convenience and necessity to operate the following routes:

Pittsburgh to Birmingham via Charleston, Knoxville and Chattanooga; Pittsburgh to Brunswick, Ga., via Charleston, Knoxville, Atlanta and Savannah; Norfolk to Knoxville via Elizabeth City, Rocky Mount, Raleigh, Greensboro, Winston-Salem, Hickory and Asheville, all in North Carolina. Grand Rapids to Traverse City; Baltimore to Atlantic City; and from Buffalo up to Toronto, Canada.

A new fleet of 12 Douglas DC-3 airliners went into service the first of the year. These are 21 passenger machines with a crew of two pilots and a hostess. The engines are 1,100 h.p. Wrights and will cruise at 180 m.p.h. New propellers on these planes will make them among the quietest of modern transports. With the Boeings they will provide first class service.

The company's assets, from virtually zero in 1934, have risen to \$978,713 as of June 30, 1939. Out of an authorized capital stock of 300,000 shares there are issued and outstanding some 250,000, distributed among approximately 700 stockholders.

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