THE MAN WHO GAVE BROWARD WINGS

by Jim Reynolds

Merle Fogg eased the control stick back in his little biplane. It rose from the ground and soared over the bay towards Fort Lauderdale beach. People near Las Olas Boulevard heard the engine chugging and looked up. They saw sun sparkling from the wings, marveled at the wonder of flight and the daring young man who braved the sky.

By 1928 Merle Fogg had become one of the best known and best liked residents in Fort Lauderdale. He was the operator of the city’s first flying service. The rides he gave thrilled residents and gave them their first taste of flight. Time and time again he demonstrated the utility of his primitive craft by performing aerial surveys, taking photographs of the city, transporting passengers around the state and teaching residents to fly.

Fogg was a visionary who believed in a bright future for aviation, and although he would not live to see it happen, he would begin a series of events that would take aviation in Broward County from the era of the barnstormer into the jet age.

Fogg was born on May 26, 1898 in Enfield, Maine to Leslie and Alberta Fogg. He served in the Army during WW I, although he never saw combat. After he was discharged, he studied engineering and graduated from the University of Maine.1 But Fogg was smitten with aviation, an avocation not endorsed by his father. Leslie Fogg did everything he could to deter his son from becoming a pilot. In 1922, Merle traveled to Okeechobee, Florida. He reportedly told his parents that he merely wanted to winter in a warmer climate, but he was really there to take flying lessons from Ralph De Vore of Clearwater. His parents were made aware of his activities when he shipped an aircraft engine back home.

After learning to fly, Fogg barnstormed around Florida for about a year before flying his biplane
to Maine, to barnstorm in his home state. It was a glamorous, dangerous way to make a living. An account in the Lewiston, Maine newspaper relates that both Fogg and his wing walker, George “Daredevil” Sparks, were nearly killed when at an altitude of nearly 1,000 feet, Sparks walked out to the wing tip, lost his grip and nearly fell from the plane. As he tumbled over, Sparks wedged his ankle to a lift strut and hung suspended from the biplane. Although he didn’t have much altitude, Fogg dove toward the ground and made a sharp turn, flipping Sparks towards the wing. Sparks grabbed a flying wire and pulled himself aboard. Fogg finessed the controls to end the dive before crashing into the ground.

Fogg returned to Florida around 1925, this time to Fort Lauderdale. The city was in the middle of a land boom and he was hired to fly a seaplane owned by land developer Tom Bryan. Bryan was also a state representative, and with Fogg as his pilot he was possibly the first lawmaker to commute to Tallahassee by air.

Fogg also opened a base for his land plane. His tiny airfield was tucked into a spit of land just north of Las Olas Boulevard, were it meets the Intracoastal Waterway. Its primitive wood hangar was visible from the road. Big bold letters over the door proclaimed, “Merle Fogg Flying Service.” When he was on the ground working on his plane, motorists tooted horns and waved as they went by. Merle must have liked the attention because he always waved back.

One of his young admirers was Dwight L. Rogers, Jr. Rogers, who is now 85 years old and is still an attorney in Fort Lauderdale, remembers, “I saw him land a few times and it was great, really great!” Rogers said that Fogg’s landing strip was only about a block long. “It was surprising that he could take off in that distance, but he could. . . he was certainly a well-liked person.” Fogg’s friends in Fort Lauderdale knew he could be counted on when there was trouble. After the devastation of the 1926 hurricane, he flew a hasty trip back from Maine and presented himself to the City Commission offering his services and his plane for whatever emergency service or relief work that might be needed. He told the commission, “Gentlemen, I can move anywhere, anytime. I will count it an honor for you to call on me.” An aerial survey and photographs taken from his plane helped to detail the extent of the storm’s damage.

Fogg wasn’t the first aviator to fly from Fort Lauderdale. As early as February 13, 1920, a newspaper report told of preparations to open a landing field the following week in the northern part of the city. While he wasn’t first, Fogg’s name would become the one most remembered as Broward’s pioneer aviator. One of his best friends and roommate was August Burghard, a reporter for the Fort Lauderdale Daily News. Later in life Burghard would coauthor “Checkered Sunshine,”
a history of the city. In it he wrote, “Fogg was locally loved as the operator of a flying service, a unique vocation, and because he was a personable, outgoing young man. Among his exploits were the flying of the first airplane from Maine to Florida and setting down the first land plane on Andros Island and the island of New Providence (Nassau).”

What Burghard fails to mention in the book, is that the landing in the Bahamas was totally unplanned and nearly ended Fogg’s life. A February 7, 1927 front page story in the Fort Lauderdale Daily News and Evening Sentinel relates that Fogg and his passenger R.G. Mills made a forced landing, coming to a stop in the mud flats at Andros. Mills had enlisted Fogg’s help in an aerial search for a missing barge that was owned by a company Mills represented. Far at sea and with night fast approaching, they made the decision to land on Andros and go back to Fort Lauderdale the next day. It did not go well. The nose of the plane flipped into the mud and for four days Mills and Fogg tried unsuccessfully to free it. With no provisions, they nearly starved, subsisting on a little water drained from the planes radiator, strained through their shirts. They were rescued by a sponge fisherman passing the island in a boat. The fisherman gave them water and food and helped right the plane. Fogg straightened the propeller and flew to Nassau for gas before heading back to Fort Lauderdale.

Fogg's aerial antics earned him a nearly legendary reputation. It was said that he once lassoed a deer from his plane, but how he did it was never explained. He used his biplane to flush birds in the Everglades and herd them to waiting hunters on the ground, and when his friend Burghard was sick, Fogg flew over the hotel were he was staying, cut the engine, and yelled down to ask what he wanted to eat. Fogg landed, got his friend’s selection, and drove to

Merle L. Fogg standing by his WACO 10 Biplane. The engine was a 90 horsepower Curtiss OX5, water-cooled World War I engine that was used in the old Curtiss Jenny plane.

Fogg’s original landing strip ran along the north side of Las Olas Boulevard from 23rd Avenue to the Intracoastal Waterway. The strip was tiny and it was not very safe.
the hotel to deliver the meal. His name was so tied to aviation that any plane that flew over Fort Lauderdale usually produced the comment, "There goes Merle."

When he wasn't flying, he drove around town in a top-down Reo roadster with his Collie puppy named "Oscar" in the back. One resident remembered that children "worshipped" the young aviator.

On May 20, 1927, the world held its breath and waited for news on the fate of another young pilot by the name of Charles Augustus Lindbergh. When he landed in Paris the following day, his transatlantic solo flight made him an instant hero and convinced many that the airplane was no longer just a novelty, but could be used to travel quickly to distant places. Lindbergh's celebrity rubbed off on Fogg. Some of the children in Fort Lauderdale no longer called him "Merle." Instead, they greeted him with, "Hi, Lindy."

By 1928, Fogg had a lot to look forward to. He owned land in Dade, Broward and Okeechobee counties. He had the tidy sum of $1,600 in the Broward Bank and Trust,7 and his reputation as a dashing, young aviator made him a sought after bachelor. (In a hand written letter to Miss Mildred Hyle in Gainesville, Georgia, he quipped about the attention, "Ha! Ha! Almost had to spank another girl the other night. Guess had better get an assistant - too strenuous work for a slim joker."8)

Ticket from the 1930s

Merle L. Fogg and cameraman R. B. Hoit, took aerial photographs for real estate developers and surveyed the damage to South Florida after the 1926 hurricane. Photo courtesy of the Fort Lauderdale Historical Society
At left, a Waco Biplane sits at Merle Fogg's landing strip in Fort Lauderdale. A single home in what is now the Lauderdale Isles neighborhood can be seen in the distance in the image on the right.

Burghard was to be married in June, and Fogg was to be the best man.

On May 1, 1928, Fogg made several flights, and in the afternoon flew A.W. Erkins to Miami to film a movie of the Shriners Parade. As they passed over Fort Lauderdale beach, bathers waved their towels, and Fogg raised an arm out of the cockpit and waved back. Erkins related that on the way to Miami the plane's engine sputtered, but Fogg got it running again and they "had a fine trip." Later in the day, two student pilots showed up at Fogg's hangar to use his Waco biplane for a trip to West Palm Beach. At first Fogg declined an invitation to join them, but after getting a flying jacket for one of them, he impulsively jumped into the front cockpit with 22-year-old Thomas Lochrie. The other student, C.S. Nelson, was in the rear cockpit, and would be at the controls during the flight. The trio lifted from the ground at 4:30 p.m., planning to be back in Fort Lauderdale a short time later.

As they approached the landing strip in West Palm, something went terribly wrong. The plane went into a spin and crashed in the Huffman orange grove about 100 yards east of Military Trail. Nelson would survive his injuries, but Fogg and Lochrie were crushed by the plane's engine and died in a matter of hours after being rushed to Good Samaritan Hospital. Fort Lauderdale was stunned by the news. At just 29 years of age, a cherished friend and the man some called their "city's hero" was gone.

His body was returned to Fort Lauderdale's Griffith Funeral Home. Two thousand people from every walk of life passed by his casket. After the service, his body was taken to the Florida East Coast train station for a final trip back to Maine, where he was to be buried. Nearly 1,200 mourners joined in the procession. As the funeral cortege left the chapel, seven aviators flew overhead in their biplanes, dipped wings in a final salute and showered the procession with hundreds of roses.10

Three days after his death, the Junior Chamber of Commerce discussed plans to redouble its efforts to establish an airport in Fort Lauderdale. Fogg had been a member of the Junior Chamber and

The Belvedere landing strip in West Palm Beach is where Fogg and his students were headed when they crashed into the Huffman orange grove about a hundred yards east of Military Trail. Photo courtesy of the Historical Society of Palm Beach County.
was among those calling for a permanent airport to replace his make-shift field. A report on the meeting said, "No more fitting and lasting tribute could be paid Fogg than the creation of a local flying field, bearing his name." On May 1, 1929, exactly one year to the day after his death, 5,000 people attended the dedication of Merle L. Fogg Airport. It was located on the site of the Southside Municipal Golf course, which had closed in December, 1928. Only a minimal amount of work was needed to convert it into an airport. Trees and bushes were cleared from the perimeter of the course and its bunkers were leveled. Its unpaved runways were the former fairways, suitable for the planes of the day. It was hoped that Fogg Airport would attract an airplane manufacturer to the city, but that never materialized. In the tough economic times of the 1930s, there was little flight activity and the untended airfield grew high in weeds. During WWII, Fogg Field (as some called it) was acquired by the federal government, and was greatly expanded as Naval Air Station, Fort Lauderdale. It was used to train aircrews in the Avenger torpedo bomber. After the war, it was acquired by Broward County and in 1953 Mackey Airlines began the first scheduled passenger flights. Last year 17 million passengers hurried through the airport first created to honor Merle Fogg. It is now known as Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International Airport.

At the 1929 dedication ceremony of the Merle Fogg Airport (left to right), Judge Edward Heimburger, Fogg's best friend August Burghard, Albert Erkins and Fogg's parents, Leslie and Alberta Fogg, laid flowers at one of the two memorials to Fogg. The other memorial is in his hometown of West Enfield, Maine.
The Merle Fogg memorial marker was erected on the No. 2 putting green at the closed South Side Golf Course, site of the newly dedicated “Fogg Field.” The marker was moved by the Himmarshee Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution from its airport site, to the site of the Las Olas landing strip around 1958.

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Since 1988, Jim Reynolds has served as the Public Information Officer of the Broward County Aviation Department.

Prior to that, he had a 25 year career in broadcast news, including 13 years as a reporter for Channel 10 in Miami, assigned to cover events in the Greater Fort Lauderdale area. He is the recipient of two Florida Emmy Awards for excellence in journalism.

He is a commercial pilot and has written for a number of aviation trade publications.

Jim has a long association with Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International Airport. In the 1950s he took his first flying lessons in a cloth-covered Piper Tri-Pacer. On one of his solo flights, he was told to be very careful because an airliner was expected to land that afternoon.

Notes
1 "Airplanes Can Land Here Next Wednesday," Fort Lauderdale Sun-Sentinel, 13 February 1920, clipping file at Fort Lauderdale Historical Society Archives.
3 "Airplanes Can Land Here Wednesday," Fort Lauderdale Sun-Sentinel, 13 February 1920, clipping file at archives of the Fort Lauderdale Historical Society.
4 Weidling, Philip, Checkered Sunshine, (Tallahassee, University of Florida Press, 1966), 163.
7 Letter in the Archive of the Fort Lauderdale Historical Society
8 Broward County Court Record, Fred B. Shippy, County Judge, Application for Letter of Administration, 21 May 1928, Recorded in Book 3 Administration Record, 265. Collections of the Broward County Historical Commission.
10 “Last Tribute is Paid to Flyer by Entire City,” Fort Lauderdale Daily News, 5 May 1928.