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*Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum Archives*

### Harold E. Morehouse Flying Pioneers Biographies Collection - Holderman, Russell

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40 Years A Flier ROCHESTER TIMES-UNION 14 Sat., May 9, 1953

[[Image]]

[[caption]]'EARLY BIRD'--Russ Holderman as a flier in the World War I era

Career Covers All Stages  
of Aviation's Saga

[[Image]]

[[caption]]VETERAN OF 40 YEARS IN THE AIR: Russel F. Holderman today is chief pilot for the Gannett Newspapers. Pictured in his office at the airport, he displays stick and string gadgets which was used to measure air speed in early flying days.

'Early Bird' Holderman: 22,000 Hours in Air  
By Harry Schmeck  
Times-Union Staff Writer

He was 18 years old and weighed 110 pounds.

An "aeroplane" was a contraption that looked like a box kite and "might" fly, if conditions were perfect.

Aviation was 10 years old.

That's the way things were when Russell F. Holderman, now Gannett Newspapers chief pilot, made his first solo flight.

It was just 40 years ago--early May of 1913--at Mineola, L.I.

Holderman had learned the delicate art of "grass cutting"--taxiing a cantankerous Curtiss pusher biplane up and down a flat piece of meadow at 25 mph to get the "feel" of flying.

His instructor decided Russ was good enough to solo, though he told the boy to keep the Curtiss down to an "altitude" of 10 feet.

\*\*\*

TODAY after more than 22,000 hours of flight in all kinds of aircraft and all kinds of weather, Holderman still can remember that first venture into the sky.

"I buttoned my sweater, turned my cap peak backwards, waved at my instructor and pressed the throttle," he recalls. "Power took hold of the plane and pushed it forward."

Then things began to happen. Instead of lifting gradually from the ground, the clumsy biplane hit a bump and took to the air at a dizzy angle, climbing 50 feet in one surge.



"Fear gripped me for a moment," Holderman says. "Somehow I leveled off. Then fear released me and I felt free, like a swimmer who has just come to the surface after a long deep dive." He brought the skittish craft down to the required 10 foot level and guided it in a straight line across the field.

"My trouser legs slapped against my spindly shins like a line of washing in a wind," Holderman remembers. "My eyes watered; my heart pumped rapidly, my hands perspired and my brain sang strange, thrilling songs."

He landed at the end of the field and turned the Curtiss around for the return flight--turning an airplane in the air was too tricky for beginners.

\* \* \*

HOLDERMAN'S FLIGHT had taken only a few minutes and controlled the craft's movements by shifting body position.

After learning to fly in 1913, he had to give up flying for four years. His parents considered it too dangerous. They bought him a motorcycle and he took up racing and stunt riding.

World War 1 brought him back to aviation--the way of life he has followed ever since.

\* \* \*

HOLDERMAN SERVED as an Army flying instructor at the same field on which he first flew. After the war he joined that small band of courageous pilots who first flew the U.S. Air Mail.

He shares, with an ever-diminishing circle of veterans, first-hand knowledge of early mail stories that made that service an airman's legend.

He remembers the daring Max Miller, first pilot to fly the air mail officially, and one of the first to die in that service; and Mike Eversole, who was dismissed from air mail flying for purposely crashing a flying death-trap that the government wouldn't scrap in spite of pilots' protests.

Holderman served the air mail as pilot, chief flying mechanic and finally New York terminal manager. In 1920, he bought and rebuilt an old Curtiss Jenny, a World War training plane of the same type he had flown in the service. Shortly afterwards he quit the government air mail service and went into business with his new plane, taking passengers on short rides and giving flying instruction.

\* \* \*

WHEN HE MARRIED Dorothy Harris in June, 1921, newspapers reported that the young couple were going on the "world's first honeymoon by airplane." His wife later become one the world's top woman glider pilots.

The Holdermans flew, sold real estate and airplanes in Florida in the famous land boom there in the 20s. It was there that Holderman took

baseball's famous John J. McGraw on his first airplane ride.

In 1928 they moved to Le Roy at the behest of the millionaire Donald Woodward, who sponsored Holderman in establishing the D.W. Airport there. By the following Spring the D.W. had expanded its facilities to 14 airplanes and its staff to six instructors.

\* \* \*

HOLDERMAN'S NEWSPAPER career started in 1934 when he sold Frank Gannet his first airplane and agreed to pilot it on a part time basis. Holderman gave up the Le Roy airport in 1936 and became a full time newspaper pilot.

With photographers and reporters from The Times-Union and The Democrat and Chronicle, Holderman has helped report some of the biggest news stories in the East by air.

He has covered floods, fires, airplane crashes, wrecks. He flew to New England to bring out photographs of the disastrous 1937 hurricane. Later he escorted "Wrong Way Corrigan" across the skies of New York State after Corrigan's famous transoceanic flight in a small plane.

He has piloted Gannet airplanes on errands of mercy, delivering medical supplies and bringing the desperately ill to hospitals.

In 1940 he took time off to enter a New York to Miami passenger plane race and entered another 25-mile pylon race while he was in Florida. Holderman brought back to Rochester \$2,500 in prize money and a gold trophy. He lost the first race by 36 seconds and won the second.

IN WORLD WAR 2 he flew light, unarmed airplanes along the Atlantic Coast on submarine hunts with the Civil Air Patrol. He has held a commission as lieutenant-commander in the U.S. Naval Reserve since the mid-30s.

Today Holderman is one of the few surviving members of the Early Birds, an organization of pilots who soloed before 1916. He is probably the only one to hold a Civil Aeronautics Authority instrument rating.

This Spring and Summer, Sperry Gyroscope Company is honoring Holderman on his 40th year of flying by using his photograph in advertisements in leading aviation and business magazines.

Holderman has seen aircraft develop from shaky kites to miracles of engineering complexity, capable of supersonic speeds and non-stop flights that span continents and oceans.

He has seen their instruments develop from the single piece of fluttering string of pre-World War 1 days to all the modern complexity of radio, radar, gyrocompass, and Loran.

Holderman has been a part of American aviation through 40 of its 50 years. He has taken part in its development from risky "outdoor sport" to a gigantic enterprise vital to our economy, a bulwark of our defense.

Now beginning his 41st year of flying, the veteran aviator has no thought of quitting the air. To him, America's destiny is in the skies. While he is able, Holderman will stay a part of that destiny.

His motto, he says, is "I don't want to be the most spectacular pilot, just the oldest."

[[array of 4 Images]]

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