Collier's

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# I got up Early

## By Frank Coffyn

*as told to*

## W. B. Courtney

***There's no frontier left like the one crossed by the men who first flew in heavier-than-air machines. It was high adventure then to leave the ground. Every flight was an exploration into a new and mysterious element. And the men who flew—proud, swaggering, valiant young men—were adventurers to their finger-tips. Here one of them, Frank Coffyn, shows you what it was like then***

DUVAL LA CHAPELLE was my good friend. I am sure you have never before heard of him. Besides Orville Wright and myself there are not three other living men whose eyes might glisten at the sound of his name. Yet, I should like to tell you about Duval La Chapelle; for in him, to my way of thinking, were embodied all the virtues and foibles, all the heedless and romantic loyalties, of the entire flock of earliest birdmen. He was the oneness of an obsessed brotherhood. His slight figure was a composite likeness of the rowdy, posturing, swaggering, egotistic and valiant young men who, a quarter of a century ago, were marked by turtle-neck sweaters and checkered or plaid caps. (You turned the cap backwards for ascending.)

La Chapelle was a Frenchman, of course; and a mechanic. A good French mechanic. Ask any Yank pilot who flew with the French in the war; or buttonhole a veteran motor-race driver. He will swear to you that *better* mechanics than *good* French mechanics do not walk on mortal ground. A good French mechanic has no eye for women nor palate for food or wine. In him all the gusto and masterly aptitude of his normal compatriots for things of the flesh are sublimated in a spiritual passion for cold steel. For him hot oil affords the most subtle and exquisite fragrance—a cam shaft is poetry in motion, and the rhythm of tappets is the song of the Lorelei. That was La Chapelle to a crossed T, and I did not

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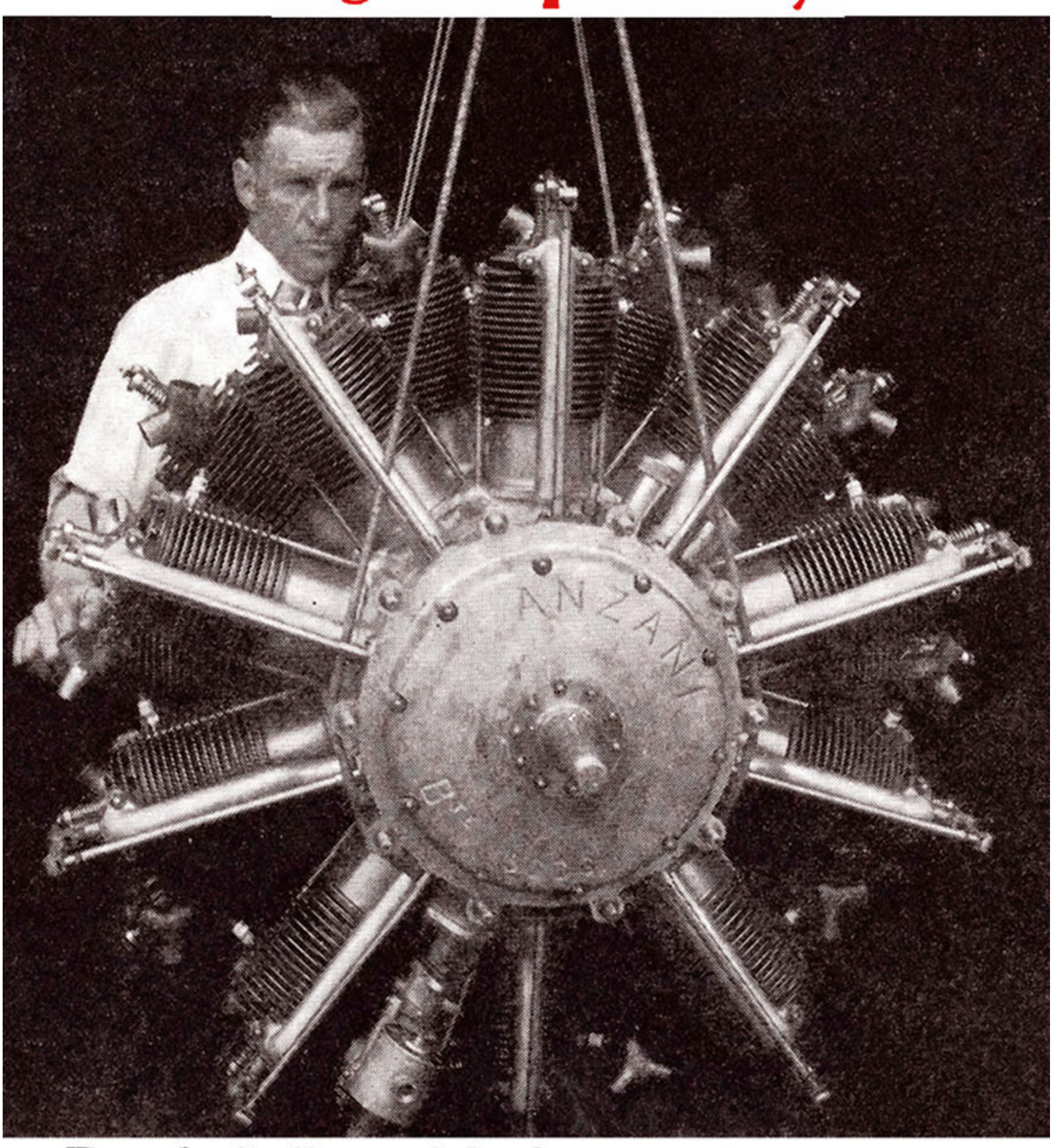


**Frank Coffyn with the twentycylinder Anzani motor, imported by Robert Collier in 1913, which would propel a ship at the amazing speed of eighty miles an hour.**

think we were going to be friends, for he gave me hell within an hour after our first meeting.

It was my second day in the barn which the Wrights used for a hangar, near Dayton, Ohio. La Chapelle was next in authority there to the Wrights themselves when it came to laying a finger on the engines. He told me to take off a water pump to repair leaks and to key the shaft arm. I misunderstood him, and filed the shaft too much. Well, you should have heard that Frenchman! I figured the damage was a little less than tragic, and I asked him please to let me try to remedy it. When I was through he was pleased with the result. I had gone without lunch to finish the job, and he gave me one of his oranges.

After that we became friends, and talked as friends do. Part of his pay for services as mechanic was flight instruction. I have never known a man so eager to fly. But one day he was fumbling for a tool on his bench and it happened that I looked at him closely and then I noticed something. "Duval," I said, "you're nutty, if you go on!"

"Shut up!" he said, and he was very excited. "Frank, don't you ever say that to anybody—don't you do it!"

I did not say a word to anybody and he went on to solo. When you flew solo in those days you were an "aviator." So Duval La Chapelle was now an aviator, and very proud. Then late one afternoon Wilbur Wright stood talking to us as we watched La Chapelle flying. It was a beautifully clear, warm evening; and you get plenty of light at dusk out in that flat Ohio prairie country, with so much sky around. We could see La Chapelle was fixing to come down.

There was no carburetor on our old twenty-five horsepower, four-cylinder, four-cycle, Wright engine; thus, no throttle. Our take-off speed, flying speed and landing speed were practically the same. You could wangle a

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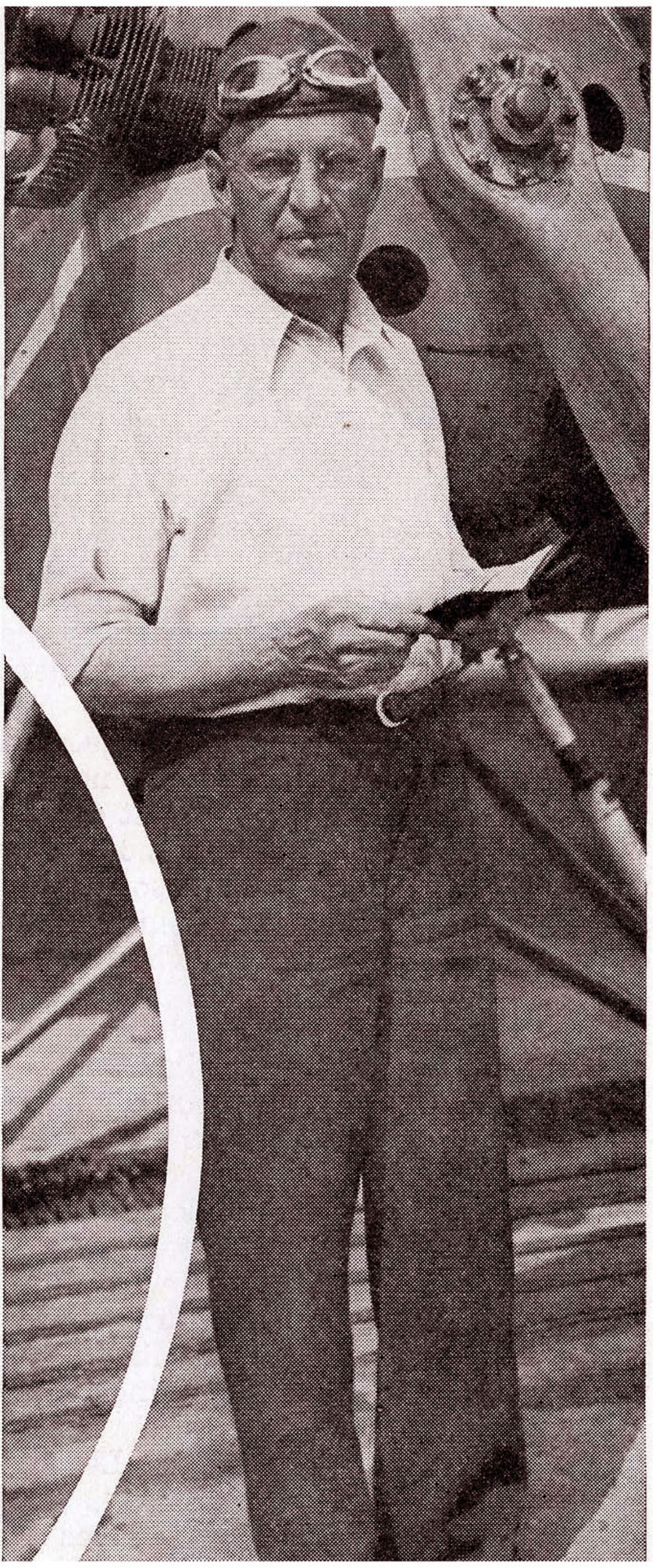

**A recent picture of Coffyn**

little acceleration or deceleration by advancing or retarding the magneto. None of the flexibility of a normal power landing of today, when you can play with your throttle to amend or improve your approach.

## A Handicapped Birdman

Our gliding efficiency was so trivial that the instant you retarded the magneto you started for the ground hell bent. If you saw you were going to make a bad one you might be able to "catch" it and go around again—provided you had some altitude left, provided your engine took the sudden advancement of the magneto.

Well, you could see that uncertainty bothered La Chapelle that evening, but he managed to keep up and started to circle the field again. "What is the matter with him?" exclaimed Wilbur. "He was coming right down into the barn. Why doesn't he come down out in the middle of the field, where he has room?" I remember that while La Chapelle put-putted around I talked vaguely of some brave theory that he was demonstrating how you could with safety land a plane precisely with reference to your objective, so that you

needn't waste a lot of time wheeling it in afterwards from the far ends of the field. If Wilbur or the others paid any attention to what I was saying, they forgot it when La Chapelle started to come down again.

He was plunging directly toward the hangar. It did not seem that he could miss it. We all yelled and scattered, for we were in the danger zone. He missed the hangar and landed all right. Wilbur was all set to lecture him, but when he got close to La Chapelle he suddenly looked shocked, and a little foolish. He did not know what to say. Then the others came around, and they also saw what I had discovered weeks ago. Only now it was worse. La Chapelle had cataracts on both eyes. From one eye the sight was virtually gone; the other was about half useful.

I am a South Carolinian, and a direct descendant of Trystam Coffyn, one of the three original owners of Nantucket Island. My father was a banker. He came up from Charleston to be vice president of the Phenix Bank in New York. Through him I met Andrew Freedman, the great banker and philanthropist. Freedman knew how stirred I was by the newspaper accounts of the two wonderful brothers who built flying machines in their old bicycle shop in Dayton. He said, "I know Mr. Wilbur Wright, and the next time he calls upon me I shall call you!"

I couldn't eat or sleep for weeks. One day Freedman sent for me. There was a tall, thin, bald man, kindly in an indifferent, ministerial way, in his office. Freedman said to him, "Mr. Wright, this is the young man I was talking to you about." The man who always will be my hero shook hands with me. You felt about Wilbur, from the first, that you had known him a long time; no matter how long you knew Orville you had an uneasy feeling each time you met him that you had never been introduced. Wilbur was no more talkative, no friendlier outwardly, than Orville; but he was charged with reticent affections.

## A Man of Few Words

That winter day in New York, soon after New Year's of 1910, I told him that I wanted to be an aviator. I am ashamed of my hundreds of tumbling words as I recall his gentle few. He told me they intended to establish a field and school at Dayton in the spring. "Come out," he said, "and we'll see how we like each other!"

That was the first time I met Wilbur Wright. The last time was more than two years later; and what a lot of water had spilled over the dam meantime! I was a veteran flyer; ex-captain of the Wright exhibition and stunt team. I was flying my own ship—a Wright, with twin pontoons—making a lot of records, giving free shows to downtown New Yorkers, usurping the Upper Bay and the rivers for my airdrome. Wilbur had never seen his plane with pontoons. One day he showed up at Pier A, North

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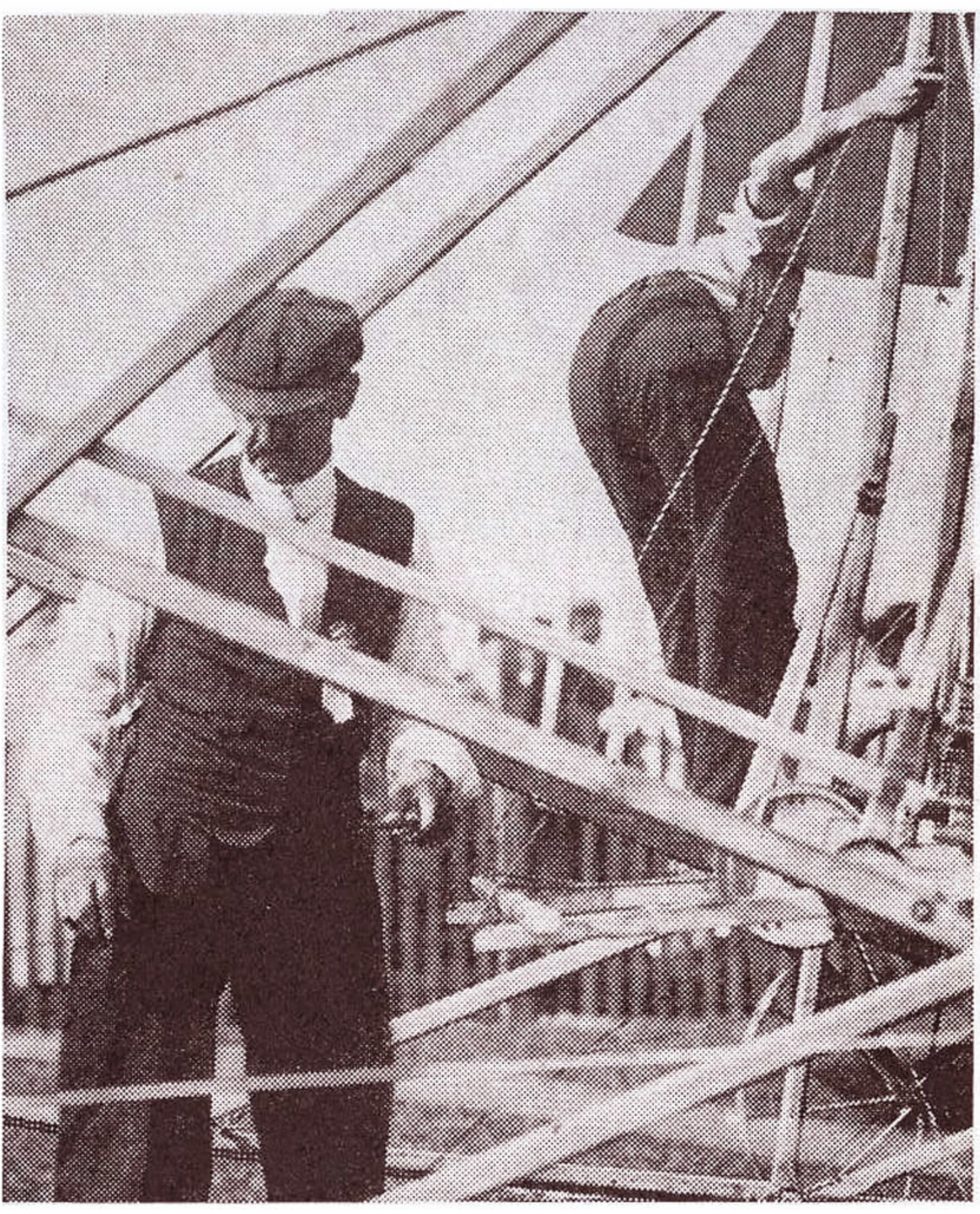

**Duval La Chapelle inspecting an early ship before flight**

River, my headquarters. He said it was his first visit to New York in some time and he had come right down to see how the plane behaved with pontoons. We talked a long while. You had to watch his face, for he left most of his talk unspoken.

"Frank," he said, "when you finish this flight, let's sneak up to White's and have a quiet lunch." I put the ship through its tricks, proud because I knew Wilbur's eyes were upon me; but when I came down I found the pier cluttered. Word—not from him, certainly, for he detested crowds—had got to the Aero Club that Wilbur was in town; and now he was hedged in by its officials, each trying to stand beside him in front of the cameraman. It was like that whenever he visited New York.

My berthing took attention for a brief spell; but when I came up on the wharf it was just in time to hear the head dignitary clear his throat, while cameras clicked and reporters made notes, and extend a formal invitation to Wilbur to lunch at the Aero Club. My hope sank; I wanted so much to have that visit alone with him. Wilbur listened, glancing at me in that politely inscrutable way of his, but made no remark until the nabob had finished. Then he said: "No. I'm sorry. I have already made arrangements for my lunch." And he linked arms with unimportant me and off we walked, leaving that crowd on the pier.

## America's First Flyer

I have my pictures of Orville, too; only those are burned in a different place, the mind instead of the heart. It was on May 10, 1910, that I first saw him. I had reported at the factory, in search of the job Wilbur had vaguely promised. Mr. Russell, the manager, told me to go out to the field, which had just been established out upon the prairie at a trolley stop called Simms Station, which was nothing more than a pair of rural free delivery mailboxes nailed to a crossroads post. When I got

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on the trolley in Dayton I saw Orville sitting alone up front. I recognized him from newspaper pictures.

I went forward and sat down beside him, and told him my name and that I was going out to his field. He said that Wilbur had told him about me and he was very glad I had come, and for seven miles he did not say another word. He said that this was where we got off, and I did not see the barn which they were using for a hangar until we got quite close to it. It was just an ordinary small farm barn, of gray, weather-beaten planks, at one end of an ordinary cow lot. Orville introduced me to other would-be aviators—La Chapelle, Ralph Johnstone, Arch Hoxsey, Walter Brookins and Davis. Then we all helped wheel the biplane out, and had our picture taken standing in front of it with Orville. He borrowed my topcoat, to have his picture taken, and forgot to give it back, and I had to ask him for it next day.

The last time I saw Orville was in December of last year, at the unveiling of the Memorial to the Wrights on the beach at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, to commemorate the thirtieth anniversary of the first flight by man. I had not seen him for fifteen years or more. He shook hands and said "Hello, Frank," and that was all. I was the only old Wright flyer there, and the newspaper photographers wanted Orville to have his picture taken with me, but he said no. People talked—but you have to know Orville, to understand that he did not mean anything by that. He is unaccommodating in personal matters because he has a horror of ceremony and show. It is not a pose, cultivated and put on; it is something in his veins, almost an illness. I guess I was the only one there who knew how much it distressed Orville to be in that pilgrimage at all.

Several traits Orville and Wilbur shared in common—among them, stubbornness; odd and sudden likes and dislikes, springing from their Puritan blood. You have heard of Lincoln Beachey, of course. By common accord—even among the earliest birds, who are a jealous and temperamental lot of rugged individualists—he is the seven-tailed bashaw of flying; the laureate of the men who wrote aviation history in the skies. In days when business men retired upon getting $5,000 in the bank Beachey was paid that much for single appearances. He flew for Curtiss; and he made Curtiss. But first he had tried the Wrights. He showed up at Simms Station, and asked them to teach him to fly. He was rough and ready and forward in manner, and he rubbed the brothers the wrong way. Moreover, he had batted around corners of life that were disquieting to an old-fashioned preacher's uncompromising sons. And so the Wrights refused to teach flying to the man who became the greatest flyer of all.

Aside from instances in which they let prejudices distort their judgments,

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the Wrights were exceptionally competent business men. The canniest I ever dealt with. We "student birdmen," as the Dayton papers called us, expected, of course, to work in return for our instruction. None of us, I am sure, bargained for the full routine that the Wrights exacted. We worked a daylight day; we beat the dawn, and overlapped the dusk—four to nine, roundabout the summer solstice. We did not mind the "early" and "late" hours, for those were the usual flight periods. The Wrights, their own meteorologists, had learned that wind ordinarily does not "come up" until an hour or two after the sun, and that it dies down about the same time before nightfall. First thing upon arriving at the field at four A. M.—sometimes we slept on cots in the barn, having been too worn-out to go home the night before —we all would hurry into the open, wet our fingers, and hold them up to determine whether any wind was blowing, and from which direction it came. It makes a funny picture, to think of it now; the solemn Wright brothers and their four or five sleepy pupils all holding wetted fingers aloft and trying to look wise. The same thing was repeated, come four in the afternoon. If the wind was light, or absent, we flew, deciding priority for the day by coin flips.

## Good Business

My remembrance of the Wrights as good business men always resolves into the scene in the hangar on the night of June 4, 1910. In less than a month they had whipped together the first Wright Exhibition Team; and billed us throughout the country. We were to leave early the next morning for Indianapolis, there to begin our tour. Yet neither brother, up to now, had said a word to us about pay. All packed and ready to go, we were handed contracts. All flying was to be at our risk; each was to receive $20 a week, living and traveling expenses, and a $150 bonus for each day of flying. All prizes, trophies, winnings of any description were to go to the Wrights immediately. Afterwards, we figured those contracts were rather one-sided; but caught thus suddenly at the last minute, and in the enthusiasm and excitement of youths embarking upon adventure, we had little choice but to sign. I know that I, alone, turned in to the brothers more than a quarter of a million dollars; and that our team won far more than a million dollars for them on those contracts.

There were five of us in that original Wright team. I, being oldest, was regarded as captain. Walter Brookins, the youngest, just turned twenty-one, was the best flyer. We two are the only ones living today. Arch Hoxsey, Al Welsh and Ralph Johnstone were killed before their contracts ran out. Brookins "jumped" his agreement, because of a financial disagreement. I was the only one to last through the contract. We were a strange and fatalistic lot. We

made record after record—of duration, altitude, and distance—and were regarded by our fellow citizens of the day, I suspect, as freaks.

Many of my fondest and most exciting memory pictures are of the South. It was there I lived through my first tail-spin. I was giving instruction to Army officers at Palm Beach, in a twin-engine ship. Lieutenant Call, one of my pupils, unknown to me before I took off and for the benefit of some admiring visitor, tightened the chain sprocket wheel of one propeller. When I was several thousand feet up, giving instruction to Lieutenant Ellington—whose brave memory was perpetuated in the name of the Army field at Houston, Texas—the chain snapped. The propeller on the other side, still going full blast, pulled the ship instantly into a dizzy gyration. Years later I learned it was a flat spin. That moment I had no idea what it was. I only knew that Ellington and I were pressed down in our seats, as if by giant nails, while the ocean spun below too fast for our eyes to follow and our ears were filled with a horrible screeching of wires and wind.

## The First Amphibian

I worked the controls as best I knew, to offset the good propeller's sidewise pull. The ship would not respond. So I shut off the motor and, against every inclination of my senses, I did the thing which I have always believed in—I pushed the stick forward, to head the nose down. Blind luck!—it was the very thing to do. The ship leveled off not sixty feet above the water. I managed to fetch it down on an even keel. We floated there, six miles offshore, for nearly eight hours before they got a boat out to us.

In Aiken I gave Richard Harding Davis, noted author, his first ride. He worked for Collier's then, and described his flight in the September 16, 1911, issue; the first personal account of a flight by a staff writer for any magazine. Which reminds me that of all the amateur sportsmen and laymen interested in early flying the most colorful personality, and helpful ally, was Davis' boss, Bob Collier. He was on the international polo team, a crony of the Whitneys and Belmonts and Hitchcocks. I met him at Aiken, gave him his first ride, and later I worked as his pilot. He bought planes and experimented with motors. He lived for speed; and although some of his air exploits were spectacular rather than thoughtful, many gave point and purpose to aviation in its aimless years.

Thoughts of Bob Collier impel me to turn my picture album to its New York harbor pages; for it was there I did much of my flying in his employ—and there I did many things on my account which I would not do today! I chased the Italian ship Ancona down the bay with a belated passenger—the first transfer of its kind. I decided to fly under the two East River bridges—

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Brooklyn and Manhattan. Veteran rivermen warned me against it. They spoke of mysterious air currents and pockets, that would suck me up to destruction against the bottom of whichever bridge I tried first. Little Elinor Smith, who was not yet born in 1912, unless my arithmetic is more gallant than accurate, was the next to do it, twenty years later.

I took the first movies ever taken from an airplane. It was for the old Vitagraph Company, and the idea was Commodore J. Stuart Blackton's. Pictures taken with the hand-cranked camera proved too jerky, so we secured a special camera to the leading edge of a wing and ran it by electric batteries next to my seat. I could snap the camera on and off at will. Blackton thought more of that camera than of me or my plane. He had bought it for $3,000 in England. I made several trips —over downtown New York, the Statue of Liberty, and places of similar note— and took many shots that were compiled into the first multiple-reel travelogue, or "scenie," as it was called in those days. It was shown all over the world.

## A Flyer's Worst Fright

Forever indelible memories are virtually all I have left. Of all my hundreds of material trophies and prizes, but one remains—a pair of garters. And the story of how I got those brings up the worst fright, the most helpless moments I lived through in all my years of flying. The villain was the usual Desperate Desmond of the air—the wind. Several of us, from various troupes, were flying in an Aviation Meet at Grant Park, on the Chicago waterfront. This was in August, 1911. One day I had lunch with Badger, of Captain Baldwin's group. Afterwards I took up John T. McCutcheon, famous newspaper cartoonist, who had been assigned to draw some funny pictures.

As I flew McCutcheon toward the park, Badger, who had been drinking, dove in ahead of us and was killed directly in front of the grandstand and right under our eyes. I banked away, to spare McCutcheon the aftermath, and headed out from the park just in time to see St. Croix Johnson crash to his death on the lake's edge—this, also, right under our eyes. I landed as soon as possible with McCutcheon, who was terribly upset and drew no funny pictures of his first aviation experience.

The last day of the meet was designated a benefit for the families of Badger and Johnson. It was a wild, gusty day and only three of us with Wright ships would fly. I made the mistake of going out over the lake. The gale was offshore, and when I turned I found I was not only not getting back —I was actually being forced backwards in the air. That is the one experience which I cannot recall even now without cold shivers. I felt sure that I was doomed to go down in the lake far from shore and all hope of rescue. I

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saw my colleagues, who had circled over the town, land. I was alone in my fix. Minute after minute the ship fought, and retreated. Luckily, I had two thousand feet altitude. I knew the chances were great that the ship would come apart if I dove it from that height; but there was nothing else to do. Holding the stick forward with all my strength, and with the engine going full blast, I made a power dive that carried me to the edge of the park before I leveled off, and mechanics grabbed my wings.

There was a Dayton man among the thrilled spectators. He was so tickled with this performance of the home town's product that he sought me out and presented me with the pair of garters. They are of gold, and I have never seen another pair like them; nor have I ever worn another pair since I got these. They have sawteeth but they do not tear my socks; and it is nice to have something left.