

Chapter XXX

The Spirit of American Youth

An outstanding role in the conquest of the air has been played by the youth of our country. Unsparing of time and effort, even of life itself, these courageous youngsters have written largely and indelibly upon the pages of aviation history.

One of their members was Richard E. James, the first boy under eighteen to make a solo flight across the North American continent. Dick was known as a “reading boy.” His love of books, his chief solace when, as a small boy, he was confined in a hospital for a long period as the result of a fall from a bicycle, opened u p a new world to him – a world of wings and of fetterless wandering in the sky.

As he lay in his sickroom, suffering from a double curvature of the spine, he read many books, and the ones that interested him most were those on aviation. Sometimes the nurse would cast a mistrustful look on the open pages and would lay her hand lightly upon his head and suggest that perhaps it wasn’t very good to read such books. He would raise his eyes to her face mutely and, with a vague gesture, would put his beloved books away for the night.

For some time, the attending doctors thought that Dick would be permanently paralyzed, but he slowly began to improve. After being kept in a brace for three years, he was sent by his father. F. E. James, from their home in Flushing, Long Island, to Landers, Wyoming, to “build up.” While there, Dick became strong enough to play on the high school baseball and basketball teams. In 1927, Dick returned to his family in Flushing and continued his studies. Curtiss Field, one of the oldest aviation fields in the United

States, was not far away and Dick, whose interest in aviation had increased with the years, was a constant visitor there.

Much against the wishes of other members of his family, Dick's father backed him in his desire to learn to fly. Captain Fred Becker, one of the country's outstanding aviation instructors, took the young fledgling under his wing. Dick learned to fly in an old D.H. "Jenny" training ship.

At first, Dick encountered considerable difficulty because his legs were so short that he could not operate the rudder bars with ease, but Captain Becker took such a great personal interest in him that he was ready to solo before he had completed ten hours of dual instruction. As soon as he was qualified to handle the ship, he and a group of fellow students at the Flushing High School formed the Flushing Flying Club, which was sponsored by the American Society for the Promotion of Aviation. Weekly meetings were held, at which commercial aviators and former war pilots gave lectures.

Soon after the club had been organized, the society that had sponsored it offered the sum of \$1,000. to the first boy or girl under eighteen years of age to fly across the country alone. Dick told his father that he believed he could make the flight if he had the right plane. Dick's father, who was as ardent a flying enthusiast as Dick himself, procured a Travelair plane with the aid of his business associates, Phillip M. Lahn, Frank Grsoli, Harry Lesser, and John P. Allen. The plane was powered with a Sieman, Halske motor and was to be delivered at the aircraft factory in Wichita, Kansas.

In undertaking this man-size job, Dick felt that the flight would enable him to answer, from first-hand experience, the many questions that were being asked by students of his flying club, most of whom were ambitious to be among the pilots of the future. In

addition, he would be able to determine the degree of safety; of cross-country flying in the lighter type of plane under conditions such as would be met by the scheduled air transport. Without previous preparation other than to bundle a couple of changes of clothes into an old suitcase, Dick left for the factory to pick up the plane that had been so generously provided for him.

One day, in the summer of 1928, Dick arrived in the San Francisco Bay region and called upon me in my office. The boy, who was unknown to me at the time, made an abiding impression upon me at the first meeting by his frankness, his courageous outlook, and his knowledge of the subject dearest to his heart. After telling me of his objective and the story behind it, he wanted to know if I could assist him in the navigation problems so vitally necessary to successful trans-continental flight. I agreed to give him whatever advice and counsel lay in my power.

Like most boys who seek adventure, Dick James had plenty of courage, an abundance of good ideas, and practically no money. He was determined to make the flight no matter how difficult it might prove. (Insert Oakland Post Enquirer Clipping, dated December 18, 1928. "Boy Flyer Lauds Aid Given Here on Trans-U.S. Hop.")

During a test flight at Mills Field, San Francisco, I asked Dick how many hours of flying he had to his credit. "Sixty hours" was his reply. I explained that he should not attempt this hazardous journey until he had built up additional flying time. In this, my friends, Col. E.E. (Monte) Moulton, supervising inspector of the Aeronautics Branch of the Department of Commerce, and Major Frank A. Flynn, U.S. Army Reserve, who was airport superintendent at Mills Field, heartily concurred. After a consultation, Dick agreed to accede to our request. Several local pilots, including Virgil Kline, of Maddux

Airways, gave Dick additional flying time to prepare him more thoroughly for the difficult task ahead. Meanwhile, Dick's father corresponded with me frequently concerning Dick's additional training and all other matters pertaining to the proposed trans-continental flight.

Between flight training periods, as I had done in the case of Sir Charles Kingsford-Smith, I placed Dick in touch with several business concerns in the Bay region that were in the aeronautical field, in order to enlist their aid in making the flight a successful one. As in former history-making long distance flights, George Hearst, the Associated Oil Company of California, the Howard Automobile Company, and others helped the youthful flier to attain his difficult objective. Everyone with whom we came in contact gave Dick all the help and encouragement possible.

I had cautioned Dick on several occasions not to delay his cross-country flight too long for fear that, with winter in the offing, the weather might be against him and unnecessary hardships might result. The time of his departure was finally set for October 30. The weather, although cloudy, was reported to be fair for that day. Flight, navigational and meteorological data had all been attended to and he had been provided with a box of candy to munch on in order to add heat to his system while in flight.

(Insert telegram to Capt. W.B. Voortmeyer from Dick's father, F.E. James)

The late October winds swept over the waters of San Francisco Bay and rattled the windows of the Mills Field Administration building. There was a crowd of well-wishers on hand with the usual sprinkling of pessimists who swore it could not be done and that Dick would never get over "the Hump," as the Sierra Nevada mountains were called. "The Hump" was considered the hardest part of the entire route.

The plane had been rolled out on the apron outside the hangar. A mechanic carefully went over the ship with Dick until both plane and pilot were ready for the grueling task that lay before them. Like a challenge to the clouded sky were the words on the ship's fuselage: "*The Spirit of American Youth.*"

It was late in the afternoon – much too late to take off eastward bound. I informed Dick of this. He glanced skyward at the fleeing clouds and then toward the setting sun and remarked that he would stop at Sacramento before attempting to cross "the Hump" to Reno.

There was a hushed moment of expectancy as Dick, after climbing into the open cockpit, tested the rudder and ailerons and gunned the motor. The air-cooled engine broke into a roar and, with a parting wave of his hand, Dick taxied away. Presently, tail in the air, the ship went lumbering down the runway. It rose into the air with wide-open throttle, banked ever so gently, and in another moment had vanished into the drifting clouds.

According to our instructions, Dick was to follow the regular trans-continental air route, stopping only at fields where arrangements for gas, oil, and other supplies had been made. A copy of Dick's pre-arranged flight schedule had been forwarded to his home in New York in order that the members of his family would know his whereabouts through the trip. (Insert clipping re "Youngest Pilot" Hop Due. "Here are Pilot James and W.B. Voortmeyer, who checked James' instruments and charted his course...")

His flight was a success from start to finish. On his arrival at his destination on the East Coast, he notified me of the completion of the flight and expressed his appreciation to all who had helped him.

Afterward, referring to his flight log, Dick gave me the highlights of his journey. On his way to Reno he had been forced to climb to the 14,000-foot level to get above the clouds. Being in an open cockpit plane, he found it extremely cold at that altitude. From Reno he flew to Elko, Nevada, and thence to Salt Lake City, where he encountered his first blizzard. The blinding storm, which had just descended upon the city, rendered it difficult for him to locate the airfield. The temperature in the meantime had dropped below the zero point and within an hour after he had landed the storm reached terrific proportions. It kept him grounded at Salt Lake City for about a week.

As soon as the weather moderated, Dick flew onto Rock Springs, Wyoming. He remained there overnight and left the next day for Rawlins, where he ran afoul of another snowstorm. Once more, he was fortunate enough to reach the field before the storm struck, but his wings were well covered with snow when he landed. This second snowstorm held him in Rawlins for nine days. As soon as the weather cleared he started out for Cheyenne, but inclement weather conditions forced him to fly south to Denver, where his ship was thoroughly serviced.

From Denver, Dick flew directly to North Platte, Nebraska, where a fresh supply of fuel awaited him. He next headed for Omaha. It was on this leg of the trip that Dick made his first forced landing. Oil line trouble made this emergency landing necessary – a maneuver simulated so often in flight training that the actuality when and if it arrives becomes, for the most part, a mere routine procedure. Engine failure does not discredit in the least the reliability of small-horsepower motors for long trips nor the safety of cross-country flights.

With the first sign of oil trouble, Dick had his landing place picked out. It was Grand Island, a city approximately halfway between North Platte and Omaha. After the trouble had been adjusted he took off again for Omaha, where he stayed overnight and where his plane was given a thorough check out.

His next contemplated stop was Kansas City, but dirty weather between Omaha and that point forced him to land at Leavenworth, Kansas instead. With the first signs of clearing weather he took off again for Kansas City.

Winter had set in by this time. The weather was growing colder and the days shorter, Dick was anxious to get home. In Kansas City the usual calamity howlers attempted to persuade him to give up his hazardous venture, but Dick was determined to go on. Early that night, he left the hotel where he was staying, in order to avoid his well-meaning advisors, and got away to the airport unobserved. He took off for St. Louis, which he reached on schedule. The next morning saw Dick winging his way to Peoria, Illinois, which hop he accomplished without incident.

The Peoria Aero Club, one of the foremost flying clubs in the country, entertained him there in elaborate fashion but Dick, realizing that time and the weather were conspiring again him, cut all receptions short. the next day he again pointed his ship's nose eastward.

Columbus, Ohio was his next stop. He had now entered the home stretch. Doggedly, he pushed on. All went well until he reached Bellefonte, in the Alleghenies, where he broke his propeller in landing. A short while later, equipped with a new propeller, Dick took off on the final lap of his cross-country flight. He landed in New

York in excellent health and spirits, one month from the time he took off from San Francisco. He had stood the acid test of disappointment, hardship, and misfortune.

A thunderous welcome greeted him on his arrival and he was handed a check for \$1,000. by Thomas L. Hill, president of the American Society for the Promotion of Aviation. The boy who had been practically unknown a short time before, suddenly found himself nationally famous. He was feted and banqueted and met many celebrities, including President Coolidge.

There are those who maintain that Richard James' flight added nothing to aviation. Many have since crossed the continent by air, it is true, but it must be remembered that this flight was accomplished by a minor in 1928. Aviation has since outgrown its rompers and, like Dick, has arrived at maturity. In the meantime, radical changes in design and motive power have sloughed off most of the mechanical "bugs" that were the bane of the early aviators' existence. However, America has not ironed out the "bugs" in her attitude toward her heroes. She allowed Dick James to sink back into obscurity because the public wants its heroes showy and spectacular.

Dick was primarily a flight student who taught himself to fly. This boy, a one-time cripple, flew across the country from West to East because of a superb faith in his own ability. All too often the tragedy is that a person who has ability but no financial backing is passed up by industry and business in favor of the person who has little or no ability but is financially able to publicize himself.

Sir Charles Kingsford-Smith and many other able men have been victims of this unfair and short-sighted attitude. When Smith was down and out only buffeting came his way, but once he had reached the pinnacle of success nothing was too good for him. Even

more tragic is the case of an individual like Richard James, whose exceptional ability as demonstrated by what he accomplished as a mere boy of seventeen, but who was forgotten by the crowd after his brief hour of triumph. Yet, even though he was denied lasting recognition at the hands of the public, he will continue to be honored by fliers everywhere for two great qualities – his faith in aviation and his faith in himself.