

The Thirteen Black Cats

by Ed Betts

TWA has another anniversary this week besides the 40th of international service. Although April 17 will be officially recognized as TWA's 60th anniversary (along with Western Airlines) the predecessor Aero Corporation was founded on February 3, 1926. Part and parcel of this milestone is the story of the 13 Black Cats, a movie acrobatic team. Included with this group of Hollywood stuntmen was one of TWA's founders and later an executive vice president, Paul E. Richter, Jr.

The group was first organized in 1924 with 13 members, headed by Bon MacDougall. Their home base was the Burdett Airport located at Western Avenue and 102nd Street, now the site of a huge department store complex. Their uniform was a black sweater with the cat and number 13 patch on the front, and their names on the back. Originally the group was made up of pilots, motion-picture stuntmen and automobile racers who wanted to "corner the market" on all movie stunt work that involved airplanes, automobiles and motorcycles. They advertised that they defied all superstition and the odds and their services were also available for air shows or meets and any other audience that would pay their fee.

Except for trains, they would supply the equipment needed and their fleet consisted of war-surplus Curtiss "Jennies" and "Cannucks". Until 1927, when it became a law, they used no parachutes.

Supposedly each member's name would add up to a total of 13 letters; if it didn't he was given a nickname that would (no explanation was given for Richter and Goebel not meeting this requirement). At one time actor-aviator Reginald Denny was a member of the group, and one account says that Jack Frye, later president of TWA, did some work for them.

Founders of TWA

These were the years of barnstorming, which most of the pilots did between jobs with the studios, trying to make a living or at least pay for their gas and oil. 1924 is the year that Jack Frye learned to fly, became an instructor and used his "fortune" to become a partner with Burdett Fuller (1/2 interest in a "Jenny"). One of Frye's first students was Paul Richter who had left the family ranch in Colorado to learn to fly. Whether or not it is true, it makes a great story—on Paul's first solo (solo, with a passenger?) flight he had Bon MacDougall aboard the "Jenny".

Once in the air, and much to the amazement of the fledgling pilot, Bon climbed out of the cockpit and spent his time "wing walking" from tip to tip. After a safe landing, Paul was offered a job and membership in the 13 Black Cats. Such work is far from steady, Paul's main source of income was as a flight instructor with the Burdett Flying School. Another "graduate" of the school was Walt Hamilton.

In February 1926, Frye, Richter and Hamilton were among the founders of the Aero Corporation of California and the following year, they formed their Standard Airlines. Another of their students with

the same 1926 seniority was Lee Flanagan.

In October of 1926 the 13 Black Cats made the headlines in the LA press when they performed one of their daring acts before the horrified eyes of 79,000 spectators. This was during the half-time of the USC-Stanford football game held at the coliseum. The plan was: with MacDougall the pilot of the "Jenny" and "Fronty" Nichols perched atop the left (upper) wing and "Spider" Matlock atop the right wing they would swoop right over the stadium rim and "buzz" the playing field. Nichols and Matlock each had a football, painted in the school colors, that they were to toss towards the crowd. Unfortunately, just as they approached the stadium, the radiator broke and spewed the scalding water over the windshield and goggles of MacDougall. He raised his fist, the signal of distress, and the two wingwalkers were making a hasty retreat to the cockpit just as they flew over the crowd with the stricken plane and made an emergency landing on a vacant lot several blocks away.

In early 1929 the 13 Black Cats disbanded—there was too much competition. The price for a simple parachute jump had come down from \$80 to a mere \$10 by some free-lance daredevils who were willing to risk their lives for a fast buck. The future seemed to be more stable or safe in the airline business carrying mail and passengers.

Black Cats Prices:

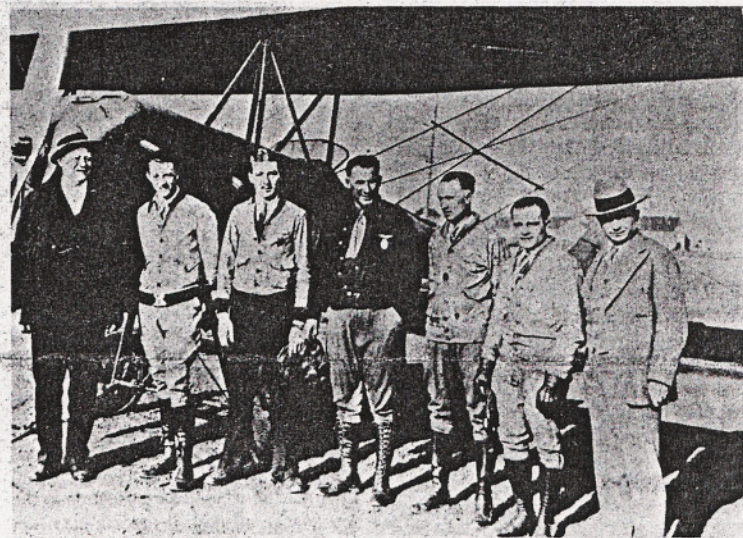
Crash ships (fly into trees, houses, etc.)	\$1200
Loop with man standing on center section	150
Loop with man on each wing, standing up	450
Ship change	100
Upside down ship change	500
Change-airplane to train	150
Change-automobile to plane	150
Change-speedboat to plane	250
Change-motorcycle to plane	150
Parachute jump	80
Parachute race-two jumpers	150
Parachute jump-ocean landing	150
Double parachute jump-two men on one parachute	180
Fight on upper wing-two men, one knocked off	225
Upside down flying	100
Delayed opening parachute-over 1000 feet	150
Crash automobile into train	150
Plane goes down in spin to crash	1200
Plane spins down on fire, does not crash	50
Blow plane up in mid-air, pilot chutes out	1500



The "Cats" in action. Daredevils disbanded in 1929.



The famed "13 Black Cats," Hollywood stunt team that included one of TWA's founders and later an executive vice president, Paul E. Richter, Jr., Pictured are (standing): Albert Johnson, "Bon" MacDougall, Art Goebel, "Fronty" Nichols and Paul Richter. Kneeling: Herd McClellan, Sam Greenwall and "Spider" Matlock. Greenwall was a famous newsreel cameraman and Goebel later won fame as a racing pilot, winning the "Dole" race from Oakland to Honolulu in 1927. Kansas City TWAers are well acquainted with the Goebel Hangar at the old Kansas City Municipal Airport.



The founders of Aero Corporation of California on February 3, 1926 include Jack Frye (second from left) and two other future TWA executives, Walter Hamilton (fourth from left) and Paul Richter (sixth from left).

Singled Out for Service

Don Adams' team of quality assurance observers has been on the prowl again this winter. Disguised as passengers, they've recognized the following employees for

performing their jobs in an outstanding way:

Inflight services; Karen Mabli, LAX; Charlotte McPherson, ORD; Steve Schmidt, STL; Libby Shaw, LAX; Bonni Sink, STL and Michael Pritchard, JFK.

Reservations; Karen James, STL; Myr Stanke, CHI and Karen Wills, STL.

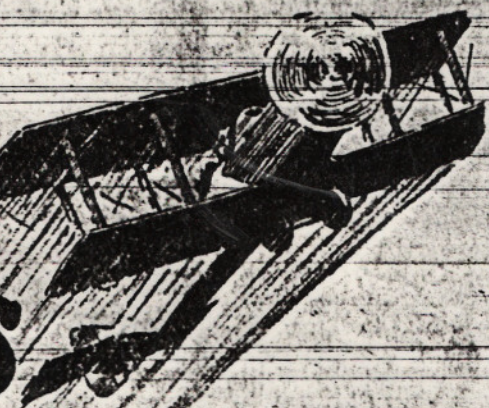
Airport Operations; Denise Giannios LGA; Don Harvey, SFO and Les Pryor STL.

Golf Tourney

The second annual TWA/Los Angeles Open will be held on the Las Verdes course on March 6-7. Check local bulletin boards for posters and registration forms, or call either Jerry Ward at (213) 646-0946 in Los Angeles or Paul Rueter in St. Louis at (314) 429-9540.

TWA

1926



Sets New Altitude Record for Pacific Coast **RICHTER WINS!**

Goes up **17,846 feet**

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WINTER

CALPET

BUNDLED in furs like an arctic explorer, Paul E. Richter, flyer for the Aero Corporation, took off in his plane "Eagle Rock" at Clover Field, Sunday, Nov. 7—cheered by one of the greatest crowds ever assembled at an aviation meet.

Up and up he circled until he was completely lost to sight. An hour and a half later he returned, with his barograph indicating a height of 17,846 feet.

In competition with six other crack flyers he had won the handsome silver cup and a cash prize, offered by the California Petroleum Corporation and had set the first official altitude record on the Pacific Coast for 100 H. P. planes!

His feat was a signal honor for himself and his company—a tremendous new impetus for western aviation and an outstanding triumph for Winter Calpet.

At nearly four miles above the earth, Winter Calpet had to function at far colder temperature than any California motorist ever has to encounter. And Richter's report is one of perfect performance!

Winter Calpet is the scientifically developed/specially refined gasoline of the California Petroleum Corporation—the highest-grade winter gasoline that a \$125,000,000 corporation can produce.

Keep your tank full of Winter Calpet—that cold-weather, never-chill, start quick and never-sputter Winter Gasoline!

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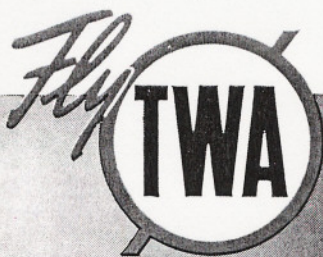
WHY TWA IS KNOWN AS

*The Airline
Run by Flyers*

From the President right down,
every one of TWA's top operating
officials is an experienced li-
censed pilot!

The man shown above is Paul E. Richter, Executive Vice-President of TWA. Jack Frye, TWA's President is the only executive head of a transcontinental airline who is a licensed airline pilot. Other flying executives of TWA include Operations Vice-President, Larry Fritz, and Chief Engineer, Tommy Tomlinson.

These flying executives know planes—and men. And they see to it that TWA has the best of both. That's why you'll sense the difference in TWA's service the minute you step aboard.

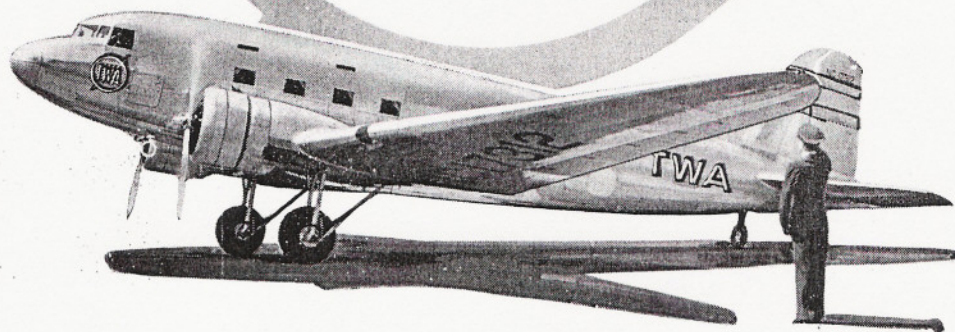


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