

Virginia Aviation History Project



The Flying Aces and Squeek Burnett

The following is an excerpt from the book, *You Betcha, Baby!, The Legend of Aviator Vincent “Squeek” Burnett*, written by David Fortuna and Evelyn (Mrs. Squeek) Burnett; published 2008 by John Barksdale. Squeek Burnett was born, raised, and learned to fly in Lynchburg, Virginia. Following a career as a stunt pilot, a military pilot and officer, and a flight instructor, he and wife Evelyn moved back home to Lynchburg. Early on, he was a barnstormer – and a legendary one. With Virginia being the home of the Flying Circus, one of the last remaining bastions of the barnstormers, AND the home of Squeek Burnett, this chapter is particularly appropriate.

The Flying Aces

From 1934 to 1937 Squeek Burnett traveled around the United States with the Flying Aces air circus from Wichita, Kansas. While performing with this group, he perfected the skills he would need to perform a particularly daring and dangerous aerobatic maneuver, called the “inverted ribbon pick-up.” The origins of this precision stunt, for which Squeek would become nationally known, are described here – along with the history of how the Flying Aces came to be.

After World War I surplus aircraft became plentiful and cheap. The same could also be said for the military pilots returning to civilian life. During the 1920s and 1930s a new era in aviation began as these pilots returned from the war. Restless spirits propelled by a keen sense of adventure, they began buying up the surplus aircraft so they could continue their flying interests. One of the most numerous aircraft of the age was the venerable Curtiss Jenny, which could be acquired for as little as \$50 in those days. Powered by an OX-5 engine that was notoriously unreliable, the Jenny was slow and underpowered. Yet it proved to be an ideal aircraft for the needs of these gypsy flyers, since the docile performance and strong construction spared many pilots from the numerous mishaps and crashes that were bound to occur. The Jenny had no brakes and, with bungee cords on the main gear and tail skid, landings could be just as exciting as the stunts they performed.

These first barnstormers were an independent lot, surviving largely on ingenuity and daring stunts. Through the uncharted skies they flew, often without maps or weather forecasts. To tell them which way the surface wind was blowing, they would observe cows, knowing that these animals typically turned their tails to the wind.

Constantly on the go, the pilots' needs were simple. Their aircraft, in essence, was their home. What couldn't be jammed into the airplane wasn't needed, they felt. Usually, they slept under the aircraft wing and cooked on a campfire. These lone figures, bedecked in shiny riding boots and silk scarves, created a romantic image. Often depicted as knights of the air, they would mount their steeds of wood and canvas and disappear into their ethereal land.

They took whatever work was available, performing in air shows and motion pictures. More often, their job was "hopping passengers." They would buzz a town to attract an audience, then land in a nearby pasture in hopes of giving rides to enough passengers to pay for gas to the next town and buy a few meals. In this way, these early barnstormers introduced small-town America to aviation, for at that time, many people had never seen an airplane up close, or not at all. The pilots would thrill spectators with wing walking, parachute jumping, stunt flying, or with any other aviation-related feat they could dream up.

By the mid-1920s, the novelty began to wear off and it became harder to attract paying passengers. In 1926, the United States Congress enacted the Air Commerce Act. This brought an end to the days of the gypsy pilot. For the first time, the Federal government would rule and regulate air commerce. Pilots and mechanics would be licensed and their aircraft registered and certified.

To earn a living doing what they loved, pilots started forming flying circuses or joining established ones. As a result, a number of air circuses sprang up. Some were well organized and successful, such as the Gates Flying Circus, Doug Davis Flying Circus, Mabel Cody Flying Circus, and Fordon-Brown National Air Show. Although most were precision flyers, these daring stuntmen would be labeled, by today's standards, "wild and dangerous" in their search for never-ending thrills. They seemed to have little regard for themselves or their aircraft as they continually tried to outdo one another. Some of the stunts listed by one group of stunt flyers included crashing airplanes into trees and houses, head-on collisions with automobiles and blowing up planes in mid-air, after the pilot parachuted out.



Flying Aces Bronze Plaque

Wesley May was one such daredevil who sought employment with the Gates Circus. After learning that a fellow stuntman, Thornton "Jinx" Jenkins, had narrowly escaped death during a stunt, May sent a telegraph to Ivan Gates that read, "WHEN PRESENT WING-WALKER IS KILLED, I WANT THE JOB." Sure enough, Jenkins was killed a short time later during a stunt, and May was hired to replace him. Unfortunately, May's career was also short lived; he died during a parachuting stunt.

The air show that operated the longest was called the Flying Aces. From 1929 through 1938 this group operated continuously, presenting an air show almost every week for nine years. It all began in 1920, when Jimmie Woods bought an OX-5 Swallow in Kansas and began barnstorming, hopping passengers, and giving flight instructions.

In 1928 Miss Jessie Martin met Jimmie Woods and became his wife after a short courtship. With the onset of winter, the newlyweds headed south to Florida, giving air rides along the way. Business was poor, and the

couple needed a way to attract a crowd. Jimmie decided he needed a wing walker, electing Jessie for the job. With instructors being scarce, it was a feat she was forced to learn on her own, by trial and error.

By spring, the Swallow was beginning to show its age. Jimmie started to head back to Wichita. The couple only made it to Macon, Georgia, where the engine failed on takeoff. With not enough altitude, they caught a set of wires at the end of the field, wiping out the landing gear and driving it up through the wing. The wreckage was crated and shipped to Wichita, while Jimmie and Jessie traveled back by bus.



Jessie Woods and her dog, Chandelle, with Johnny Crowell's Gee Bee Sportster

In Wichita times were tough, without an airplane to fly. But Jimmie was able to convince a good friend, Max Walton, to rent him his beautiful black and cream-colored Travel Air. Lifting skyward, Jimmie and Jessie Woods winged their way southward as Wichita faded in the distance. Slipping serenely across the broad plains of Oklahoma, the Travel Air headed for the Texas panhandle and their first barnstorming tour. Here, they developed and perfected many of the basic acts that would make a name for the Flying Aces. The Texas tour proved profitable enough for them to make a down payment on another airplane, a Swallow T.P. Now with two airplanes, Jimmie decided that paid air shows were the way to go, and he formed the Flying Aces Air Show.



1929 Travel Air

As the Woods barnstormed across America, other pilots joined them and performed whatever maneuvers they and their airplanes were capable of withstanding. Gradually, a regular air show routine began to emerge. By 1934, the Woods had acquired more than a half dozen aircraft, including a Travel Air 4D, an Ryan B-1 Brougham, several Stearmans and Swallows and a hot air balloon, in addition to cars, trucks, and a necessary sound system to add drama to the show. By this time, they also had 15 employees, including pilots, ground crews, and advance publicity men. The Flying Aces Air Circus was a completely self-contained air show that traveled and performed over two-thirds of the United States.

The Flying Aces differed from many other air shows in that they bought newer types of aircraft and maintained them in top condition. Jimmie Woods, an outstanding mechanic, did all of the major work of engine overhauls, recovering and performing inspections. His strict insistence on top quality maintenance became very apparent early in their operations, when Herb Bassett was killed in an accident attributed to poor maintenance. The

aircraft was an Eaglerock, owned by Lilio Benvenuti. This was the only time an aircraft that was not owned by the Flying Aces was used in a performance with them.

Their performance followed a set pattern of acts that lasted about two and a half hours. The show included aerobatics, wing walking, dead engine stunting, skywriting, balloon busting contests, picking up handkerchiefs with the airplane wing tip, bombing an automobile from the air, air racing, and parachute jumping. The Aces also featured ground show attractions such as head-on car crashes, balloon ascensions, and driving motorcycles through flaming barricades. The ground acts were later dropped from the program, because they proved to be more dangerous and caused more injuries than the flying acts.

Jimmie and Jessie tried to keep up with and comply with the ever increasing government regulations that seemed intent on closing them down. Due to their persistence, they were able to act profitably, long after the original barnstormers from the post World War I era had left the scene.



Flying Aces Advance Car

The Flying Aces became a close knit group and considered themselves a family. The participants came to view Jimmie and Jessie Woods as father and mother figures, honoring their roles as general and business managers, air show and maintenance supervisors and coordinators in the highest regard. Jimmie ran a tight ship, which was not always an easy task. His performers were a lively, spirited bunch, prone to “raising a little cane” from time to time. On the night before each performance, Jimmie and his advance man would run a bed

check to make sure the performers were sober and in bed by midnight. The Aces were actually quite good about honoring this request, knowing that their lives depended on alertness, quick reflexes, and each others’ skills.

The air show business was influenced by a number of factors when it came to making a profit – weather, scheduling, and maintenance and equipment requirements. Due to the unpredictable nature of these factors, the air show business was often “feast or famine,” as the saying goes. When times were tough, the Aces would band together, pool their money, and live in light housekeeping rooms while Jessie cooked for the whole group.

Jimmie Woods flew in most of the air shows, while Jessie would perform wing walking feats and make parachute jumps. She never liked jumping a whole lot, and gave it up when the outfit grew large enough to hire full-time jumpers. But she was one of the best and longest-lived wing walkers in air show history. Billed as “Lady Redbird,” her routine included gymnastics as she skillfully maneuvered herself along the top and bottom wings of a biplane. Jessie would also sit on the top wing’s center section as the airplane was flown through barrel rolls, spins, and loops. A hand-held rope, stretched across the top center section, was her only means of remaining on the airplane.

During her long career, Jessie Woods fell off an airplane only once. Luckily, she was wearing a parachute, one of the few times she did wear a chute. When it happened, she was sitting on the top wing of a Travel Air 4D,

and the pilot, who was not a member of the Flying Aces, executed a series of slow rolls, so slowly that Jessie had a difficult time hanging on. The strain became too much, and she fell off as the aircraft was inverted, halfway through a roll. Jessie's closest brush with death occurred during a rope ladder act. The ladder was attached to the landing gear of an Eaglerock and was pulled up against the fuselage bottom for takeoff and landings. After becoming airborne, the ladder was extended as Jessie climbed down to the landing gear and onto the ladder. This particular time, however, the rope used to extend the ladder wrapped around the Eaglerock's tail skid and Jessie was left hanging upside down. She tried in vain to climb back onto the landing gear. "Ping" Vought, who was flying the airplane, yelled out to Jessie, outlining a plan for her to drop off as he stalled the Eaglerock as much as possible over a corn field. Jessie did not like his idea and, with her energy almost gone, finally managed to climb back on the landing gear, where she stayed until Ping landed.

The Flying Aces Air Circus had many regular performers, including several who became the hits of the show. Clem Whittenback was known for his low-level inverted aerobatics. Johnny Crowell joined up with them anytime they were within a day's flying time from his home in Charlotte, North Carolina. Besides being an excellent aerobatic pilot, Crowell's unusual mechanical ability led him to perform several feats that have not been duplicated to this day. He once flew an aerobatic routine, while his hands were tied by ropes outside the cockpit. Other great performers included Jack Huber, America's foremost parachute jumper, and Duke Widiger, "The Falling Meteor," who jumped from a hot air balloon. And, of course, there was Squeek Burnett.



Squeek Burnett in Marietta, Ohio, 1938

As Squeek began to think up more ways to be more daring in flight, one early pioneer that provided inspiration was Lincoln Beachey. Many considered Beachey to be the father of aerobatic flight, and like so many early aviation pioneers, he died at an early age. Beachey was the 27th man to be licensed as a pilot in the United States. Often referred to as "the man without nerves", he was always defying death. At Niagara Falls in June of 1911, he thrilled all by making daring flights over the falls, under the railroad bridge, and down the gorge. At times his airplane wheels actually touching the crests of the waves in the turbulent waters. Following this feat, he set a world's altitude record in August 1911 by climbing his plane to 11,642 feet, until he ran out of gas. He was forced to glide back to earth from that unprecedented height. At various air shows staged in 1911, Beachey continued to invent new maneuvers that thrilled audiences until, on one fateful day in 1911, he crashed. He escaped uninjured, but, tragically, two spectators were killed.

As a result Beachey gave up flying for awhile. But later, he resumed his death-defying aerobatics and in 1913 (the same year Squeek was born), became the first America pilot to loop-the-loop. A French pilot named Pegoud flew the first loop several weeks before Beachey attempted the maneuver. In 1915, Beachey designed and built his own plane especially for aerobatic flight. While Beachey was testing its flight capabilities over San Francisco Bay, the craft disintegrated in the air, and he was killed. Yet, in the span of three years, Beachey won international fame for his flying, a feat that few aviators have achieved in so short a time.

Squeek Perfects the Inverted Ribbon Pick-up

After starting out as a performer with the Flying Aces, Squeek Burnett, with his superb flying ability, became one of the hottest performers in the nation for his famous inverted ribbon pick-up act. Here, described in Squeek's own words, is how he perfected this daring, precision aerobatic stunt.

I (Squeek Burnett) met Charles Abel when we were both members of Jimmie Wood's Flying Aces in the mid-to-late 1930s. Charlie was a National Airline pilot and holder of the world's record for consecutive loops in a glider. He would start his act in a Heath biplane glider at an altitude of 10,000 feet, looping all the way to the ground. He later became my advance man, booking shows for me around the country.

We were shooting the breeze one day between one of my shows, discussing the possibility of originating some new maneuvers, something never before performed in the United States when he made a suggestion that I thought was out of the ordinary. I asked him, "are you out of your cotton-pickin' mind, or do you just want to get me killed, Charlie?" But after talking it over for some time, he finally convinced me to try it.

His suggestion was for me to fly inverted between two poles, 20 feet high, set approximately 80 feet apart. That would give me 20 feet on each side to go between. After several attempts, I found it was difficult to find the poles in an inverted position until I was suddenly right on top of them. Later, in discussing what we should do to make the poles more visible, we decided to go to a grocery store and get a bag of flour (about 25 pounds). This we used to make a perpendicular white line halfway between the poles. This gave me something to guide the airplane in an inverted position. I found it worked perfectly and I was able to fly between the poles without hitting them.



Inverted Ribbon Act Painting

The next question was the ribbon supply, which didn't look too good. We asked a hotel maid who had become very friendly toward us during one of our tour stays if she had any old sheets, whereupon she very graciously supplied me with three. These gave me a lot of ribbons. At times, I would use three ribbons instead of one, cutting one at a time to make the act more spectacular. Thus was born the Inverted Ribbon Act. I premiered it at Port Columbus Airport, Columbus, Ohio, on the 6th of August, 1938. This was the first time an American pilot had performed this dangerous maneuver in the United States. After that it was done at all National air shows throughout the country. Everywhere the stunt was performed it created a sensation and audiences gave me standing ovations.

In January 1940 I flew the airplane (a 1929 J-6-5, 175 horsepower Travel Air) inverted just three feet off the ground during the All-American Air Maneuvers at Miami. The Miami Herald caught the act at the exact moment the tail of the airplane was only three feet from the ground. The photo, titled "Death Takes a Holiday," occupied almost a half-page and underneath the caption read: "The camera caught Squeek Burnett as he attempted one of the most breathtaking airplane stunts ever devised, zooming at 100 miles per hour, Burnett

turned over his plane and skimmed along upside down, between two poles, only three feet above the ground; and the plane is 15 years old!” That photo story was picked up by all of the newspaper wire services

throughout the United States the next day, making the inverted ribbon pick-up famous nationwide.



Squeek performing his ribbon act in Miami

Writing in the Saturday Evening Post eight years later on July 12, 1947, Gus Pasquarella observed: “Flying an airplane upside down isn’t so unusual when you are way up there in the blue, with plenty of room between you and the unyielding earth. But in years of flying, before and during the war, I knew of only one pilot – Vincent ‘Squeek’ Burnett – who was willing to risk his life at inverted flight within 25 feet of the ground. I have been told that Ernest Udett, the famous German stunt pilot, used to do it. Burnett did the mad stunt as a regular feature of air shows before the war. He made the maneuver mechanically possible by having two inverted gas tanks attached between his landing gear vees,

providing an upside-down gravity fill system: for the rest, success in the hair-raising feat depended on miraculous flying skill and something rare in the way of nerves. He would raise the nose of his plane just enough so that the tail would clip the ribbon strung between the poles.”

In spite of getting me to do this death-defying stunt, I always considered Charlie Abel my good friend. He was responsible for getting me nationwide publicity and considerably more loot for my act.

Walter Beech, builder of the Travel Air (and also the Beechcraft), was in the stands watching me perform the inverted ribbon pick-up one day. I was told that he was seen jumping up and down, slapping his thigh repeatedly and yelling, “By God, I can’t believe it is still holding together after all these years. We built a good, solid ship back in those days, eh fellows? And that Burnett’s flying is unbelievable!”

Jessie Woods always had a fondness for Squeek. She would recall him in later years, saying, “There was only one like him. He was an ornery little cuss. He was awfully close to both my husband and me. He was five years younger than me – he was like my little brother. Squeek and I shared a lot of things. He flew the airplane and I did the wing walking, and we had some scary experiences together. I think Squeek was born to fly.”

Jessie remembered Squeek wanting to join up with the Flying Aces. “We were having a show in Lynchburg and Squeek had a Golden Eagle,” she said. “He did things with that airplane that you wouldn’t believe. He started following us around and getting underfoot. I don’t know who taught him to fly. My husband told him that when he got his commercial license, he could join the air show. He got his license the week before we put on a show, and went with us.”

Squeek was also good at improvising when the need arose. “One time, he went to a hardware store and bought a kerosene can,” Jessie said. “He was a darn good mechanic, and he made himself an upside down gasoline tank, so the fuel would flow right when he was upside down. Don’t ask me how he did it, but he did it.”

But Squeek was never one to stay put for long. Jessie once commented, “One time we were showing at a big



Flying Aces Old and New

town that had a military base, San Antonio, and I believe it was Randolph Field. Squeek was getting up real early each day and we couldn’t figure out why. We found out later he was meeting guys from the base up in the air and teaching them aerobatics. They had a rendezvous. That same time, he took me up in an E-2 Cub and we started out flying and headed down to Kelly Air Force Base. He started to land and he took his stick and threw it out of the airplane and started to use his feet on the rudder.”

The scariest ride, however, occurred over Minnesota. “Squeek would haul me for wing walking on the

bottom wing and do aerobatics with me on the top wing. We were doing top-wing aerobatics, and he got upside down and was spinning flat. I was just hanging on by a rope. I thought the end was coming. When he got out of that we were down to maybe 700 or 800 feet. We talked about it and never could figure out what happened. He had no control over the airplane. Somehow, one of our guardian angels set it straight for us.”

Squeek almost met his Waterloo another time in 1935, before he met Evelyn, in a town called Waterloo, Iowa. The Flying Aces were doing a show there. In addition to performing an aerobatic exhibition, he hauled passengers between acts. The young man who helped him load the plane told Squeek that he had just witnessed the damndest cat fight between two women. They were pulling hair and really going at each other until a policeman separated them. The young man said he recognized them as two women who had bought airplane rides from Squeek earlier in the day and left notes for him as they left the plane when their ride was over. It seems that Squeek, always the ladies’ man, had promised both a night on the town. The women had separate apartments, and Squeek had promised to have dinner with each.

Later that evening, an anonymous telephone caller informed him that the girls were going to meet him at the airport when he left the next morning. They intended to get back at him for playing tricks on them. Guilty as charged, Squeek apparently had visions of having his face clawed and his eyes scratched out, so he got up before daybreak and took off before the rest of the crew were supposed to leave. Of course, Jessie never understood why he left so early, but Squeek feared that staying behind would be disastrous. Such was the life of the young and single barnstormer.

By 1936 the handwriting was on the wall. The government became hostile to the Flying Aces operation. The Feds wanted to promote flying as a safe venture to the public, to attract passengers for the airlines. They wanted to squelch any perception of aviation as a daredevil adventure. The government's aim was to close down the air circuses, one way or another, with little regard to the welfare of the performers who made an honest living that way. Jessie recalled, "They had so many rules, it was just choking us. They got very nasty about us being there. They did not want air shows anymore; we were too sensational. All they wanted then was to educate the people to the safety of flight and encourage the growth of business aviation and the airlines. We didn't fit the image. What they did not realize was that there would not have been any airlines if there had not been people like us. We kept aviation before the eyes of the public and showed airplanes and flying to people all over the country who otherwise might not have been aware that airplanes existed."

The restrictions placed on the Flying Aces made it increasingly difficult for them to conduct the air show in a normal manner. Wing walking was completely banned or restricted to a minimum altitude of 1,500 feet, with wing walkers required to wear a parachute. Insurance requirements were drastically raised and waivers were required. The air show had to provide its own fencing, and the acts were moved further away from the crowds.

Looking back on the Flying Aces, Jessie Woods remarked, "We were a unique group, one of a kind. We really broke into the air show business at the wrong time; this was a time when there were many skin-flints and fly-by-night operators who would skip town and leave their bills unpaid. We were very honest and would have civic groups handle the money and sponsor us. We put on a good show and were really proud of it."

In the end, the CAA (Civil Aviation Authority, the forerunner of the modern FAA) made its point. It changed the rules and issued the final ultimatum, "Close up or we will close you up." The Flying Aces last performance took place in the fall of 1938, at Kannapolis, North Carolina, near Charlotte. With the show closing, many of the regular performers had already left for other jobs, and the Flying Aces found themselves without an aerobatic pilot. Jimmie Woods contacted Squeek, who had left the group previously, after three years of flying with them. But, as a favor to Jimmie, Squeek flew from Lynchburg, Virginia, to fill in for the finale. When the show ended, the Flying Aces passed quietly into aviation history. The Flying Aces had compiled a magnificent performance record, having flown in over 480 air shows.

Jimmie and Jessie Woods continued in aviation for many more years operating the airport at Camden, South Carolina, flying at Charlotte, North Carolina, conducting a non-college CPT program at Rock Hill, South Carolina, in 1940 and later in War Training Service. After World War II, Jimmie and Jessie retired to Lake Murray, South Carolina, where they raised many award-winning, fancy bantam show chickens. After Jimmie Woods passed away on January 16, 1959, Jessie moved to St. Petersburg, Florida.

Afterword: Squeek Burnett died on February 28, 1989, in Lynchburg, Virginia. He is enshrined in the Virginia Aviation Hall of Fame. Jessie Woods died on March 18, 2001, at the age of 92, in her home state of Kansas.

Note from the Editor: This is Chapter 4 in an outstanding and well-written book about Vincent 'Squeek' Burnett of Lynchburg, VA. The book is literally a slice of Americana – following Squeek Burnett from his childhood in Lynchburg, through his barnstorming days, his time in the military flying and defending the B-26 Bomber during World War II, and including his life in Lynchburg after retirement. It paints a heart-felt picture of the early days of aviation and the people who made it happen. If you would like to read the rest of the book, contact the publisher, John D. Barksdale, e-mail jdbarksdale@aol.com or by phone (434) 942-2323. Copies are \$20.00, tax and shipping included.