

How I Broke the World's Record Jump

by BERT WHITE

As told to Legette Blythe

How it feels to walk out of the door with five miles of empty space yawning below you.

WE WERE 27,000 feet up. That's a long way, too. Three miles back and below us, lay the Cleveland airport, where thousands of folks attending the National Air Races were watching us—or had been until we went out of sight. We were advertised for an attempt to break the world's parachute jump record, which I held. I was out to beat the 24,800-foot record I set on May 25, 1930, over the Mojave Desert.

I looked at George. George Quick of San Francisco was my pilot, and a darn good one, too.

George was beginning to get loggy. I could see that. It was terrifically cold, although our cabin Bellanca was tight and had a heater. We were wrapped up head and ears. The weather folks had given us reports of the temperature for every so many thousand feet. At 30,000 feet up, they had told us, it was fifty degrees below zero. We figured at 27,000 feet that it was at least thirty degrees below. And to a couple of fellows from the west coast, that's cold.

We had been corkscrewing up from the airport in ever widening circles. The climbing was getting to be pretty slow. We were hardly gaining any altitude. The cold was beginning to get under our skins, despite the heavy togs. I had been sucking my oxygen steadily and was feeling first rate, but George, I could see, was getting drowsy.

Then the controls froze up. We couldn't get any higher. That was a cinch.

I looked across at George again. He nodded. I eased over, felt of my straps, gave the old boy a pat on the shoulder, and opened the door. It was as cold as blue blazes. I peaked down below.

Five miles straight down! It's a long way, I'll tell you. I might be a long time getting down there, I thought to myself, or I might take a precious few seconds doing it. I didn't know. If she opened, O. K. If she didn't—well, it would soon be over.

Nobody had ever done a parachute leap—or any other kind, I might add—from such a tremendously high altitude. There were many conflicting opinions about what would happen if one should jump from an airplane five miles above the earth. Of course, since it had never been done, nobody could say positively what would be the result should it be attempted. It was my job to find out.

In making my preparations over a period of more than two months to attempt to break my own world's parachute jump record, I had talked with many noted aviators about atmospheric conditions found in very high altitudes.



Bert White, at the right, is standing beside his pilot, George Quick.

I had asked various flyers about the possibilities of such a drop. I was of the opinion, naturally, that a parachute would function properly many miles above the earth. My old 'chute had stuck with me in a lot of tough places. I was confident she would let me down all right.

Major John A. Macready, famous army flyer, and one of the comparatively few pilots who have done much flying in very high altitudes, was pessimistic about such a jump. "Bert," said he, "I don't think much of trying that jump. It may work and then again it may not. I wouldn't want to advise you that there is no more than the ordinary amount of danger in such a jump."

The major explained that the upper atmosphere is heavily charged with static electricity. You know silk and electricity get along together about as well as a bull pup and a Persian kitty. It was altogether possible, he thought, that the friction brought about by the 'chute's rapid descent through this static electrical field might cause a spark that would set the 'chute on fire. And where would I be, hanging to a burning bag of silk five miles above the ground?

Well, as I opened the door and looked down upon serene old Mother Earth so

far below, I thought about what the major had told me. There's no need denying that. But I was confident my parachute would open and wouldn't catch on fire. And in case it didn't open, I'll have to admit, I had another I would use. If one burned up, perhaps the other wouldn't. Perhaps.

I took a deep draw on the oxygen, clamped my mouth shut and dived out.

It wouldn't be long now at any rate until I would know what was to happen.

The freezing air whipped up past me, stinging the few uncovered square inches of my face like sharp little icicles. I was hurtling earthward at a sickening speed. The thin air was letting me slip through like a bullet. But this was for only a second or so. Clear of the ship, perhaps a hundred and fifty feet below it, I gave the rip-cord a vicious jerk. Now she would burn if she was going to.

She trailed out, filled and billowed into a perfect circle. It was a great and glorious feeling, I'll tell the world.

And then I passed out. The press dispatches said I fainted. Well, probably that was it. Have you ever been on a real, honest-to-goodness drunk? Or have you taken ether? I guess it was somewhere between the two. Anyway, as I floated downward, I floated off.

I had run out of air. That was all. The two lungful I had grabbed from the oxygen tank had given out. And now the air was too light to give me enough oxygen to support breathing.

Perhaps I dropped four or five thousand feet—about a mile, I guess—before I came around. I floated back into consciousness as I had floated off. I was coming out of the ether, rousing out of the drunk. I looked up and there she was, the best looking thing I ever saw.

A lot of pretty sights I have seen. All California has to offer, including the bathing beauties. But the most beautiful sight I have ever cast my eyes upon is a circle of white silk billowing out above me and that parachute letting me down upon Cleveland, Ohio, was as pretty as any of them.

That, I guess, was the greatest thrill of my vagabonding career. I have doubled for Gary Cooper, Hobart Bosworth, Karl Dane, William Haines and a bunch of others, and am lucky to be alive. But that jump to a new world's record, when I didn't know whether my preconceived theories would work out or not—seeing that 'chute unfold above me—gave me my most tremendous kick, I'm certain.

We had taken-off from the Cleveland airport about two-thirty that after-

noon and I figure we were an hour and ten or fifteen minutes reaching the 27,000-foot ceiling.

George and I had determined that I wouldn't land anywhere near the airport. It would be perilous, indeed, to come down among all those planes. They were there by the dozens, doing every sort of acrobatic maneuver. Some of them might not see me, and I might drop gently into a fast-whirling propeller. So we agreed to aim at some field quite a distance from the crowds. For that reason, George flew the ship three miles across from the airport and I was to drift with the breeze back toward it and past it for my landing.

There was a fair breeze, in fact a pretty strong one, and instead of landing anywhere near the airport, I floated thirteen miles onward to a landing, standing upright in a field. It was an unusually deserted place, too, but by the time I hit the ground I guess there were five hundred people there to meet me.

It doesn't take very long to tell about a parachute jump. There's not much to it. Either you come down like a shot—if she doesn't open up—or you come down a little more leisurely. There isn't much time consumed either way. And if you come down the first way you don't tell anything.

The time element in the jump at Cleveland, however, was considerable. The usual jump requires only a minute, or two, or three from the time you dive until you land. The jump at Cleveland took forty-three minutes. In that time I came down five miles, but in doing it, floated sixteen miles across country. I was really moving sideways three times as fast as I was dropping.

And although it doesn't take much time to make a jump and not long to tell about it, it requires much time and considerable thought in careful preparation for the test. Every jump, as a matter of fact, is a test.

But it wasn't a stunt. That is where the general public has the wrong idea about this parachute jumping. "I wouldn't risk my neck," a man will tell you as he cranes his neck to see a fellow bail out, "but if that darn fool is willing to take a chance, just to give me something to look at, well, I don't mind watching him."

But as a general thing, the parachute jumper is like the pioneer in other fields. He is an explorer. He is the man to go there first. He is the fellow to try something. If it works, the world is all the better off for the knowledge it has received. It has learned something that may be of great value. If it doesn't work, there's one parachute jumper less—and the world knows what to avoid. But it doesn't have to listen to the jumper's alibis, that's a cinch.

The jump I made at Cleveland is an example. Nobody knew what would happen. Some of the best flyers thought disaster would overtake a jumper bailing out from such a dizzy

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The Nicholas-Beazley Trainer Gets Certificate



It will be seen that the NB is easily entered and that there is little to obstruct the vision.

A DEPARTMENT of Commerce Approved Type Certificate, No. 452, has recently been granted to the Nicholas-Beazley trainer Type NB-8G. As will be seen from the photograph, this is a high-wing monoplane of neat design. It seats the pilot and passenger side-by-side in a roomy cockpit, easy access being had to the seats through a door and a convenient step.

Both wings can be folded back, swivelling on hinges, so that very little hangar space is necessary. With the wings folded, the ship occupies a space 11 ft. wide, 8 ft. high and 23 ft. long. It only takes five minutes to swing the wings back, and they can be locked securely in flying position. The wings are of the fabric covered wood type with plywood bracing and seven internal compression members.

It is equipped with a five-cylinder Armstrong-Siddeley Genet, Mark 2, engine provided with a supercharger. The American rating of this engine is

80 h.p. at 2,310 r.p.m. A high speed of 110 m.p.h. and a cruising speed of 85 m.p.h. is attained by this powerplant. Fully loaded, the landing speed is 38.2 m.p.h. while the climbing speed is 750 ft. per minute.

NB-8G SPECIFICATIONS

Span37 ft., 6 in.
Length, overall....20 ft., 3 in.
Height, overall.... 7 ft., 9 in.
Weight, empty.....717 lbs.
Useful load493 lbs.
Gross weight1,210 lbs.
Power loading....15 lbs./h.p.

A high arch V-type hydraulic landing gear, equipped with air-wheels, is standard equipment. The control surfaces give exceptional control at low speed, and it has been found that the ship will not spin unless deliberately forced into it by the pilot. It will then come out of the spin of its own accord if left alone. It lists at \$1,790.00.

Clever Work in Ballooning

A UNIQUE free balloon flight, in which the landing was made within 200 yards of the take-off, was made by Captains M. E. McHugo and Orin J. Bushey, Air Corps, at Scott Field, Ill.

The take-off was made with a light surface wind from the east. After traveling about 10 miles toward St. Louis, the pilots sent the balloon up to an altitude of about 4,000 feet, where a northwesterly wind took them to about 15 miles southeast of the field.

Valving gas, the balloon was brought lower into a southeast wind, and this brought the 35,000 cubic foot bag back to the field. The time of the flight was exactly two hours.

Snakeskin for Seats

A NEW use has been found for snakeskin—covering for airplane cushions. A large transport plane, now used on some of the lines of American Airways, is equipped with this new kind of upholstery. Besides its durability, snakeskin is lighter than leather and saves many precious pounds in airplane weight.

Beacons for Southern Trail

TRANSCONTINENTAL night flying over the Southern Trail will soon be made possible by the installation of ground beacons on the Dallas-Atlanta stretch.

Thirty-three new beacons were recently placed in operation on the dark gap between Phoenix and El Paso. Now the airmen will have a completely lighted path extending from Los Angeles to Dallas.

The new ground beacons are operated by electrical solar clocks and automatically turn themselves on and off each evening and morning. They are, in themselves, complete units, able to function properly for a month or more without human assistance.

Army Planes Help with Mail

DURING the recent general strike on the Southern Pacific railroad in Mexico, distribution of mail over the area served by the railroad went on uninterrupted. The government loaned the national postoffice department six Army fliers and four planes to move mail between Guadalajara and Nogales, Ariz., terminals of the railroad.

Prop in the Way

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I picked up my bloody leg, as best I could, and waved it at him.

He didn't even stop to shut the switch, but started under the fuselage—then went back and cut it.

All this takes so much longer in the telling than it did in the happening. It was only seconds, though I have often wondered if Ted hadn't realized that something was amiss—with the shattered prop jerking at the engine the way it was. Very likely he did, and was trying to locate the trouble when he saw me.

How he got all five feet seven inches of me over the three-strand barbed-wire fence and into the coupe, we don't know. All I could think of was that splintered prop, which I had seen as he carried me past it. And that was all I talked about during the two-mile ride to town!

Well, Ted was grounded for six months for "neglect of duty"; my leg was shattered above the ankle and broken four inches below the knee. This kept me in the hospital eight weeks. Both blades of the prop were splintered to the hub, and the trip to California had to be postponed.

I say postponed, but never for one minute did I give up the thought of going. Most persons might have had enough aviation for a while—but not I. It was five weeks after I left the hospital before I could get around a little on crutches, but as soon as I could manage them, I announced—much to my dear doctor's horror—that I was leaving for California the following day. Ted had permission to fly the ship home; it was ready to take the air again, and so was I.

The trip was very like any cross-country trip must be. Most of it was uneventful, though there were moments of anxiety and a few real thrills. Part of the fun was watching the faces of the men at the airports when I climbed out of the cock-pit with a big white cast, crutches and all—to be lifted down from the wing.

Three are the things I learned—be aware of the back end of a mule and the front end of an airplane. It doesn't pay to be "helpful" unless you know what you are doing. And the last—if you once get aviation into your system, you can't get it out.

Bert White

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height. We know there is static electricity up there and we know that silk and electricity do not get along well together. Major Macready, for instance, felt that because of the extreme lightness of the air five miles up, that a jumper coming out of a plane would drop so quickly that an electrical spark might be produced and that this spark might ignite the silken 'chute. Others thought that the bag wouldn't open.

Well, now I know and they know. If the 'chute had produced a spark and ignited, they would know. From this jump we found out that there is quite enough air resistance to open the 'chute and let the jumper down safely and even gently.

There is another angle to it. We did not know what effect a jump from that height would have upon the jumper. Now we know. Of course, as I have said, it knocked me out when I ran out of oxygen, but at the lower level I came out of it and there were no bad after-effects.

After returning to the airport, I said a few words into the microphone, skinned out of my heavy togs and then proceeded to finish my afternoon's job of refereeing the other parachute jumps—a job I have had at all four national air races. I have been chairman of the contest committee each time and have refereed the jumps since the first races at Los Angeles.

They gave me a thorough medical examination and said there wasn't a thing wrong with me. The next day I had a flat feeling about the chest, but another good night's sleep and it had entirely disappeared. So that was something else we learned from the jump.

The other jump I made for a world's record that stood until the recent one, lacked but fifty feet of ending in disaster. I had gone up with Colonel Roscoe Turner and at 24,800 feet I bailed out. The first thing that happened was rather disconcerting, to say the least. When I dived out, the wind caught under the wrist of one of my gauntlets and the darn thing blew off. My hand froze stiff as a poker. And when I landed, I looked around and discovered that I had come down within fifty feet of a 50,000-volt power line. But a miss is as good as a mile even in parachute jumping.

A lot of folks have asked me how I ever got into this parachute-jumping game, anyway. Well, I supposed I just jumped into it.

I was studying medicine at George Washington university in 1925. The army aviation base was at Washing-

ton, and I was always going out there—watching the ships taking off and landing. It fascinated me tremendously.

Pretty soon I got an appointment as a cadet in the Air Corps and they sent me out to Brooks Field at San Antonio, Texas. I had six months of it and figured I was a first class aviator. So I bought myself a rundown Ford and hit out for California and Hollywood. The first place I went was to the Caddo Company's studios where they were engaged in filming the picture called "Wings."

I got an introduction to Howard Hughes, the twenty-one-year-old producer, and as Howard didn't know much about aviation, he gave me a job and put me on the payroll. My work was to scout around and find obsolete ships to be used in making war pictures and others in which old type ships were to be used.

Then, for a while, I did research and technical work, including such stuff as studying the lighting, sound effects and other problems involving the actual filming. We spent fourteen months on "Hell's Angels" and during the time I was getting more and more into the stunting game, and was doing various stunts around the different airports in the neighborhood of Los Angeles.

One of these I particularly remember. It was my closest call. I was hanging by my teeth to a rope ladder swinging eighteen feet below the plane. Ben Lyons was in a ship near us. Suddenly our ship began to lose altitude.

Four hundred feet from the ground I jumped. I had never before worn a parachute. It happened, however, thank my stars, that I had one on that afternoon. I turned loose, dropped, jerked my rip-cord, she opened fast and I struck like a plummet in the oozy mud of a swamp. The mud went over my boot-tops but I wasn't hurt. On that day I developed a sound affection for parachutes.

Then I began doubling for movie stars, and in that work I did some perilous stuff. One time I jumped from a burning dirigible with a woman in my arms. I was rescuing her. She didn't have a parachute. Well, it didn't particularly matter but I rescued her, even if she was a straw-stuffed dummy.

Then I became sales manager and coast representative of a parachute company and had to demonstrate my wares. That's one demonstration job where you don't have to take your customer along. In 1929 I toured the country on a "good-will" tour with Elinor Smith, the plucky little flyer. Recently I gave the folks down home in Rock Hill a scare, I guess, when I jumped from a ship while it was at the top of a loop.

Yes, I have had a lot of close shaves and my share of the thrills. All sorts of thrills and lots of them. But when that silk blossomed out over my head at the National Air Races, and I knew I was on my way down to a new world's record—that was the biggest kick I ever had—I'm certain of it.

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