

The Hunter Brothers of Sparta Illinois

By Robert H. Hayes

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The Sparta airport is named Hunter Field. This article explains who the Hunters were and why the airport is named after them.

The story of the Hunter family begins on a farm northwest of Cutler, Illinois in an area known as Six Mile Prairie. Alexander Hunter was the youngest son of Archie and Mary Hunter. On October 29, 1894, he married Ida Jane Blair. The marriage produced six children, Albert, Mabel, Irene, John, Walter and Kenneth.

In July 1912, Alexander Hunter left the farm on a trip to buy rubber. He was traveling by riverboat on the Big Muddy River. On July 6, 1912 a body was found floating on the Big Muddy River near Murphysboro, Illinois. The body had no identification or money with it. The unidentified body was buried in Murphysboro. Later, the body was identified as that of Alexander Hunter. Alexander's death left a widow, Ida Jane, with six children. Albert, the oldest of the children was 15. Albert quit school after the seventh grade and rode a horse into Sparta to work at the Ford garage. To help support the family, Mabel, 11, the oldest daughter, began teaching school and would ride a horse into Sparta to work as a telephone operator at night. The other four children helped their mother on the farm. About 1915, the Hunter family moved from the farm to Sparta, eventually settling in a house owned by a relative of their mother. That house was located on the northwest corner of Dickey and McClurken Streets. As brothers John, Walter and Kenneth got older they joined Albert in working to support the family. At the age of 16, Albert started working in the Roseboro Coal Mine southeast of Sparta. On June 20, 1917, Albert married Pearl Alexander. They moved to a house across the street from the Hunter home.

The Hunter brothers were well known in Sparta first because of their stunts while riding their motorcycles. In time, all four of the brothers were working as a crew at the Moffat Coal Mine. Each spring, when the mine would lay off most of the miners, the brothers would ride their motorcycles into St. Louis and trade them for newer, more powerful motorcycles.

In early June 1924, on their annual motorcycle shopping voyage to St. Louis, they rode out past what is now Lambert International Airport. At the airport, they saw several biplanes parked by the Robertson Aircraft Corporation's plant. They stopped and inquired about the planes and decided that they would buy an airplane and learn to fly it rather than obtain new motorcycles. Albert, the oldest Hunter brother assigned John, the second oldest brother, to stay at the airfield for a day and take flying instructions. Albert and his other two brothers returned to Sparta. John did just that, after 90 minutes of instruction, John flew the plane to Sparta, navigating by

following the roads they had taken to St. Louis. When John arrived in Sparta with the plane, he landed the plane in a pasture across the street from the house on Dickey Street. That pasture was home to “Blossom”, the family cow. Both John and Blossom survived the landing, but the plane did not fair so well. Landing in a crosswind resulted in damage to the plane. One landing gear of the plane and the propeller were broken. The brothers quickly repaired the plane. Soon, an airplane pilot, by the name of Harlan A. “Bud” Gurney, joined them in Sparta and helped John, Albert, Walter and eventually Kenneth to become accomplished pilots. For the next several weeks, Sparta residents witnessed an almost daily air show as the Hunter brothers learned to perform stunts with their plane.

Soon, the brothers bought a second plane and sold it to “Bud” Gurney. During the summer, Gurney and the Hunter brothers would fly to towns in Southern Illinois and Southeast Missouri and give people an airplane ride for a small fee. Eventually they purchased a third plane, started the Hunter Flying Circus, and gave performances at area county fairs. From September 9 to 13, 1924, they performed at the Jersey County Fair in Jerseyville, Illinois. September 16 to 19, 1924, they performed at the Randolph County Fair in Sparta. Their performance consisted of wing-walking, parachute leaps, changing from one plane to another in mid-air, loop the loops, tailspins and other sensational stunts. In addition to the air show, they also gave passengers a seven to ten minute ride, charging \$3 for each passenger. They used a field just south of the fair grounds for a landing field. Herbert Budd, a mechanic working for the Hunter Flying Circus, performed the wing-walking, parachute leaps and changing from one plane to another in mid-air stunts. The Hunters advertised their Flying Circus and hoped to get billings at other fairs in the vicinity.

Harlan A. “Bud” Gurney was a young man from Lincoln, Nebraska. He came to St. Louis at the invitation of Charles A. Lindbergh Jr. The Robertson Aircraft Company had hired Lindbergh as the chief pilot to fly airmail for Robertson. Lindbergh hired “Bud” Gurney to rebuild Robertson’s small fleet of DeHavilland DH4 aircraft. The DH4 was a war surplus open-cockpit biplane powered by a 400-hp Liberty engine. Lindbergh and Gurney met on April 9, 1922 when both Lindbergh and Gurney sat side by side in the front cockpit of a Lincoln Standard Turnabout on their first airplane ride. Gurney was working at the Nebraska Aircraft Corporation factory in Lincoln, Nebraska to pay for his flying lessons. Lindbergh had paid \$500 to Ray Page, the president of the Nebraska Aircraft Corporation for flying lessons. Both Lindbergh and Gurney became close, lifelong friends.

The Nebraska Aircraft Corporation’s main business was buying up Standard J-1 Army training planes from World War I and converting them for civilian use. The conversion was replacing the 100-hp Hall-Scott engine with a 150-hp Hispano-Suiza water-cooled V8 engine. The first plane the Hunter brothers purchased was Standard J-1 converted by the Nebraska Aircraft Corporation.

In addition to performing in the Hunter Flying Circus, the Hunters used their airplanes to travel to air shows, air races, and just barnstorm around the United States. In October 1924, the Hunter brothers flew to Dayton, Ohio for the air races. On the way back to Sparta, Albert and his passenger, Charles Exiter, planned to stop at Brookville, Indiana to carry passengers and treat the citizens to an air show. As Albert was landing the plane, the engine quit while the plane was still about 200 feet in the air, causing the plane to crash into a cornfield. Exiter ducked his head beneath the cowling in the front cockpit. Because of this, he broke his neck and died in the crash. Albert, flying the plane from the rear cockpit was only slightly injured.

In May 1925, the Hunter Flying Circus put on a big demonstration at a field, about five miles north of Chester. As part of that demonstration, Kenneth Hunter performed his first parachute leap. Charles Hamilton, a local boy from Chester, also made a parachute leap. As Hamilton attempted his leap from the plane piloted by John Hunter, the parachute failed to release from the case, tied to the plane. Hamilton was suspended at the end of a rope, about eight feet below the landing gear of the plane. John Hunter had considerable difficulty keeping the plane from losing altitude due to Hamilton's weight hanging below the plane. After about thirty minutes of circling the field, Hamilton was able to climb up to the bag and unlace the mouth of the bag so the parachute would release. Hamilton landed safely in a wheat field about a mile south of the landing field. After John Hunter landed the plane, it was discovered that the bag had almost torn loose from the plane. Had the bag torn loose, it would have prevented the parachute from opening. When Hamilton returned to the field, he declared that he was ready to make another leap. John Hunter more frightened than Hamilton during the episode, responded that he would not permit another amateur to drop from his plane.

In June of 1925, the Hunter brothers joined the Harry H. Perkins flying circus of St. Louis in a two-day exhibition at Cape Girardeau, Missouri. Two young girls from Cobden, Illinois approached John Hunter and asked to ride in one of the Hunter brother's planes. John agreed to take them up for a ride. The girls took seats in the front cockpit of the plane John was to fly. The plane took off, about fifty feet above the ground it suddenly banked and swerved, crashing into the top of a tree. As the plane fell back to earth, a gasoline tank above the heads of the girls burst, showering both girls with gasoline. The gasoline caught fire and before anyone could rescue them, the girls burned to death. John Hunter, although injured in the accident, attempted, but failed to save the girls. John's injuries consisted of burns to his hands. John reported that, as the plane took off, one of the girls rose from her seat and seemed about to jump from the plane. John was attempting to return to the landing field when the accident happened. John, a skillful pilot, had been doing stunt flying at the show before the accident occurred.

Most people knew Kenneth by his nickname "Beans". After the family moved to Sparta, Kenneth became close friends with a rather stout fellow. They were frequently seen together, and they soon became known as "Pork" and "Beans". Kenneth, being very slender, was "Beans". The name stuck, and Sparta people have since known Kenneth as "Beans".

The Hunter's Flying Circus performed at the Randolph County Fair in Sparta in September 1925. On Saturday, September 19, 1925, the last stunt of the performance was a parachute leap. "Beans" leaped from the plane flown by his brother John, at an altitude of 1500 feet, about a mile south of the grandstand at the fair. A rather stiff wind from the southwest carried "Beans" and his chute towards the assembled crowd in the grandstand. "Beans" was able to descend away from the trees north of the grandstand and made a perfect landing on his feet on top of the grandstand roof. However, the wind caught his partially open parachute pulling him from the roof to the ground, forty feet below. "Beans" landed on his left hand and side. He remained conscious for a short time, but lapsed into unconsciousness. He was carried to the Red Cross Hospital where he was examined by Dr. J. K. Gordon. The prognosis was that he was suffering from shock, but not seriously injured. A later examination by Dr. C. O. Boyton revealed a fractured bone in his left wrist. "Beans" was able to sit up the next day and was unhappy that his doctor would not permit him to fill an engagement in St. Louis on Sunday.

The Hunter brothers returned to Sparta on Saturday, October 9, 1926, after spending the summer in the New York City area carrying passengers in their three planes. They sold one of their planes while in the east.

On April 15, 1926, Charles A. Lindbergh Jr. began the Robertson Aircraft Corporation's contract airmail service between St. Louis and Chicago by way of Springfield and Peoria. The Robertson Aircraft Corporation hired Lindbergh, age 24, as chief pilot for the airmail contract. Lindbergh recruited a number of pilots to assist in the service. John and Walter Hunter joined the Robertson Air Mail service. Their previous association with Harlan A. "Bud" Gurney quite possibly led to their recruitment. Pilots flying airmail had to fly in visual contact with the ground. They flew in all weather, good and bad. Weather reports were not reliable. Often, journeys started in good weather would fly on into bad weather and fog. Radio communication with airports did not exist. The airports were cow pastures with a windsock. The Hunters became good friends with Charles A. Lindbergh Jr. Lindbergh visited the Hunters in Sparta on several occasions. On his first visit to Sparta, Lindbergh rode his motorcycle from St. Louis to Sparta. Lindbergh flew to Sparta for later trips.

Raymond Orteig was a Frenchman who owned hotels in New York City. He offered a prize of \$25,000.00 to the first aviator who could fly non-stop between New York City and Paris. Lindbergh's experience flying airmail was the basis of his attempt to win the Orteig Prize. Charles A. Lindbergh Jr. won the Orteig Prize on May 21, 1927 when he landed the "Spirit of St. Louis" at Le Bourget Airport, just outside of Paris. Lindbergh became an international celebrity as a result. His celebrity status prevented him from ever fulfilling his promise to visit the Hunters in Sparta again.

In 1927, Albert, John and Walter Hunter attempted to build interest in the Sparta community to purchase ground for a permanent landing field for airplanes. An editorial in the Sparta News-Plaindealer on June 16, 1927, endorsed the idea of a landing field near Sparta. On June 30,

1927, another editorial in the Sparta News-Plaindealer challenged an individual or organization to take the lead in securing funds to purchase or lease land for a landing field in the Sparta vicinity.

On October 13, 1927, John and Kenneth Hunter flew home to Sparta from Hackensack, New Jersey where they had spent the summer providing passenger rides in their plane. One of the most pleasant experiences that occurred on that trip was a flight in which a 19-year-old boy had his hearing restored. The boy had become deaf at eight years of age. John Hunter gave the lad a ride during which he made a dive of several thousand feet. Upon landing, the young man could hear. Several months later, the Hunters again visited with the young man and learned that he was still able to hear. The Hunter Flying Circus presented a performance to a large crowd at Freeburg on Sunday, October 16, 1927. Many Spartans attended the performance.

An article in the April 12, 1928 edition of the Sparta News-Plaindealer reported that "Bud" Gurney, now Chief Air Mail pilot for Robertson Aircraft Corporation, created quite a stir in Sparta, when he dipped low over "Blossom's pasture" to wave to the Hunter brothers who were servicing their planes. Gurney was flying airmail to Memphis, Tennessee in a Ryan monoplane, similar to Lindbergh's "Spirit of St. Louis". Many people, thinking it was Lindbergh paying a visit to the Hunters, rushed to the field. By the time they arrived, Gurney had resumed his trip.

About dusk on Saturday, May 5, 1928, an airplane belonging to John Hunter was destroyed by fire after landing in a field along Route 13, a short distance north of Sparta. What is now Route 4 was Route 13 in 1928. John was flying the plane with his two sisters and Marshall Petty as passengers. Gasoline leaking from the fuel tank landed on the hot motor and ignited. John was able to land the plane and he and his passengers were able to escape from the airplane.

John and Walter Hunter continued to fly air mail on routes out of St. Louis. John flew the St. Louis, Evansville, Indiana and Chicago route. Walter continued flying the St. Louis to Chicago route. Kenneth "Beans" Hunter was working at an airport in South Bend, Indiana as a flight instructor.

Endurance flying started on New Year's Day 1929. U. S. Army Air Corps Major Carl Spaatz and a group of fliers set the first endurance record by remaining airborne more than 150 hours in a Fokker C-2A plane named "Question Mark". That record required transferring fuel from a plane to the endurance plane. That endurance flight required 42 in-air refueling and resupply contacts.

Throughout 1929, fliers in Fort Worth, Texas, Cleveland, Ohio and California each surpassed the time aloft set by their predecessors. In July 1929, Dale "Red" Jackson and Forrest "Obie" O'Brine remained aloft for 420 hours and 21 minutes over St. Louis, Missouri, in a Curtiss Robin monoplane named the "St. Louis Robin 1". The Curtiss Robertson Aeroplane and Motor Company manufactured the airplane in St. Louis, Missouri.

In August of 1929, John Hunter participated in an attempt to break the record set by Jackson and O'Brine. John was the pilot of the refueling plane, "Big Ben", which carried gasoline, oil and supplies to the endurance plane.

Starting at 6:52 a.m. on September 30, 1929, John and Kenneth Hunter, piloting the endurance plane, attempted to surpass the Jackson-O'Brine endurance record. They remained in the air eleven days but had to discontinue their flight when a heavy fog made it impossible to refuel the endurance plane. The endurance plane was a Stinson SM-1 Detroit named "Chicago We Will", owned by the Chicago We-Will Corporation.

In early June 1930, John Hunter purchased the Stinson SM-1 Detroit airplane and renamed it "City of Chicago". On June 11, John and Kenneth "Beans" Hunter quietly took off from Sky Harbor Airport at Northbrook, Illinois and began their record setting endurance flight. An article in the Chicago Daily News on June 13 was the first mention of the attempted endurance flight. The support of the flight was well planned but the endurance attempt was not publicized. The experience of the 1929 attempts, led John and Kenneth to enlist brothers Albert and Walter to fly "Big Ben", the refueling plane. The Hunters hired a manager to help them with the business connected with the endurance flight. As the flight progressed over the Sky Harbor Airport, refueling contacts were initially made about every six hours. After more than a week, refueling contacts were increased to every three hours due to a leak in one of the fuel tanks in the endurance plane, "City of Chicago". At each contact with the "City of Chicago", "Big Ben" provided gasoline, oil, food and clean clothes to John and Kenneth. Their mother and sister Irene did their laundry and prepared their meals. John and Kenneth took turns flying the "City of Chicago" and sleeping. On occasions, "Beans" would leave the cabin and scoot along a catwalk to the engine in the nose of the plane, where, he would change sparkplugs and tighten bolts on the engine.

Communication between the "City of Chicago" and their support on the airfield was by exchanging notes. One note from John and Kenneth to their sister, Irene, complained the food they were receiving was not "he-man enough". The note continued: "Give us more hot dogs and hard boiled eggs and less of the fancy fixed duck and chicken".

As the endurance flight continued towards the record set by Dale Jackson and Forrest O'Brine, the flight of the "City of Chicago" began attracting more and more attention. Daily articles in the Chicago newspapers caused large crowds to visit Sky Harbor Airport to witness the event. Many citizens from Sparta made the long trip north to Sky Harbor Airport to cheer the Hunter brothers on. Will Rogers rode along with Albert and Walter on "Big Ben" during a refueling contact with the "City of Chicago".

On Sunday, June 29, 1930, the "City of Chicago" passed the O'Brine-Jackson endurance record; John dropped the endurance plane low over Sky Harbor Airport with Kenneth standing on the catwalk waving to the crowd estimated to be about 75,000 people. Officials at Sky Harbor

Airport offered to get a doctor for their mother, Mrs. Ida Hunter, who seemed a bit faint as she watched the event. Albert's response was, "Aw shucks get her a chair and let her sit down. She's seen things like this before."

On July 4, 1930, brothers John and Kenneth "Beans" Hunter landed the "City of Chicago" after having been airborne for 553 hours, 41 minutes and 30 seconds, establishing a new flight endurance record. John and Kenneth had been experiencing difficulty all day. In late afternoon, an oil screen in the motor clogged. As oil was poured into the motor, it was forced out into the faces of John and Kenneth. The motor began to heat due to the lack of oil. John and Kenneth decided to land the plane before the motor failed. As the "City of Chicago" touched down and taxied down the runway, the crowd rushed toward the plane. John, recalling Lindbergh's experience in Paris, taxied the plane around the crowd and into the hanger. Inside the hanger at Sky Harbor Airport, John and Kenneth were greeted by Lee F. Campbell, Will Keigley, Secretary of the Sparta Chamber of Commerce, Norris R. Lessley and Sparta Mayor W. W. Lynn. John and Kenneth were rushed to the microphones of the national radio networks. They reported that they were tired, but could have stayed in the air for several more days had the oil screen in the motor not become plugged. Following the radio broadcast, the Hunter family, including all four brothers, their mother and sister Irene were taken by a long automobile procession to the "House on the Roof" at the Hotel Sherman in Chicago. There they were guests of the hotel management. After arriving at the "House on the Roof", John and Kenneth enjoyed their first bath in more than three weeks. After bathing, they were required by their manager to sit at a table and listen to long talks. When the talks were completed, John and Kenneth were finally permitted to get some long over-due rest. They were awakened the next morning at 10:30 am for an appearance on stage at the Palace Theatre in Chicago shortly after noon.

The record endurance flight was reported all around the world. Pictures and news of the endurance flight were published in the New York Times newspaper. The July 8, 1930 issue of the St. Louis Globe Democrat featured a front-page article about Sparta, the Hunter brothers and the endurance flight. Many news accounts reported that Albert was the only member of the family that was married. This was quite possibly amusing to John Hunter, who on May 7, 1929 was married to Miss Laura McCarey of Sparta by a Justice of the Peace in St. Charles, Missouri. Laura was teaching school and chose to keep her marriage a secret. In the spring of 1930, John was flying airmail and planning an endurance flight. Laura then thought that announcing their wedding then would attract attention to her while John was a national celebrity.

In the week following the endurance flight, the Hunter family was honored as guests at a number of banquets in Chicago. The banquets were hosted by Will Rogers, Charles S. "Casey" Jones, an executive of Curtiss-Wright, and members of the Chicago Board of Trade. Sister, Mabel, was the only member of the Hunter family not present during the endurance flight and subsequent festivities. Mabel was in a hospital, suffering from tuberculosis.

During that week, the Hunter family appeared three times a day on stage at the Chicago Palace Theater. After that week, the Hunter brothers abandoned the stage to work on their planes. The “City of Chicago” had a new 300 hp Wright J-6 engine, donated by the Curtiss Wright Corporation, installed to replace the original 220 hp Wright Whirlwind J-5 engine. The Wright Whirlwind J-5 engine was the same type of engine that Charles A. Lindbergh Jr. chose for his New York to Paris flight. Both planes, the “City of Chicago” and “Big Ben”, were being prepared to carry the Hunter family to Hollywood, California. The Hunters signed a contract with United Artists to appear in a movie to be produced by Howard Hughes and Sid Grauman.

The record setting endurance flight proved profitable for the Hunter family. In addition to providing the gasoline and oil for the endurance flight, the Deep Rock Oil Company paid the Hunters an estimated \$10,000.00. The Hunter brothers received more than \$7,000.00 from the malt extract company that sponsored the radio broadcast made during their endurance flight. Their share of the gate receipts at Sky Harbor Airport amounted to more than \$3,000.00. They also received numerous other gifts from various merchants in addition to the new Wright J6 engine for the “City of Chicago”.

After the Hunter brothers’ endurance flight, Dale Jackson approached Albert Hunter in Chicago and requested a payment to keep him and O’Brine from surpassing the Hunter’s endurance record. Albert was in favor of making the payment, but John Hunter was adamantly opposed. The Hunters paid no money to Jackson and O’Brine.

On Saturday, July 19, 1930, the Hunter family departed St. Louis in their planes, “City of Chicago”, “Big Ben” and a Travel Air 4000 that Walter purchased on May 6, on their trip to Hollywood California to make a feature film. Herbert Budd, a mechanic and stuntman with the Hunter Flying Circus traveled to Hollywood with the Hunters. While in California, the Hunters stopped at Davis-Monthan Airfield in Tucson Arizona on July 20. Pictures of their airplanes taken at Tuscon are available at http://www.dmairfield.com/people/hunter_bros/index . After arriving in Hollywood, the Hunter brothers appeared on stage at Grauman’s Chinese Theater each day for several weeks.

Having completed their movie contract and stage appearances in Hollywood, the Hunters returned to Sparta, making several stops and appearances on the way home. While enroute, they learned that Jackson and O’Brine claimed that they had established a new endurance record. The Hunters stopped at Lambert Field on their way to Sparta and extended their best wishes to Dale Jackson and Forrest O’Brine. The Hunters stated publicly that they would not attempt to make a world’s record flight in 1930. They did not wish take notoriety from Jackson and O’Brine before they had an opportunity to cash in on their fame. The Jackson-O’Brine claim resulted in a loss of between \$100,000 and \$200,000 to the Hunters. Contracts were in the works that would have paid that amount, had the Jackson-O’Brine flight been delayed several months.

A newsreel film of the Hunter's endurance flight was shown in Sparta at the Grand Theatre on Friday, July 18 and Saturday, July 19, 1930. This was the first time the newsreel was shown outside the larger cities.

The Hunter brothers appeared at the Randolph County Fair in Sparta on September 24, 25 and 26, 1930. During these appearances, they demonstrated refueling the "City of Chicago" from "Big Ben" and other work performed on the plane during the endurance flight. That year, the Randolph County Fair became an "Air Fair" as many aviators from airports throughout the Midwest attended the celebration.

After the endurance flight, both John and Walter resumed their duties flying airmail for Robertson Aircraft Corporation.

On December 24, 1930, John Hunter flew the endurance plane, "City of Chicago", over Sparta for a very special mission. Passengers in the plane were, Miss Ruth Rankin, Miller Stephenson, Rev. James C. Murdock, pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in Sparta and Wallace Stephenson, cousin of Miller Stephenson. As the plane flew over Sparta, Rev. Murdock united Ruth Rankin and Miller Stephenson in marriage. Following the ceremony, the couple dropped announcements of their wedding over the downtown area of Sparta.

John and Kenneth Hunter flew to Washington D.C. in "Big Ben" on February 4, 1931. They were invited to attend a banquet that evening as guests of the National Aeronautical Society. At the banquet, they learned that they were still holders of the world's flight endurance record. The Jackson-O'Brine record claim of July and August 1930 was never officially recognized because the formal report of the flight record was not made properly. A rumor was that the Jackson-O'Brine endurance plane made a secret landing for repairs one evening on a farm in St. Louis County.

On Sunday evening, May 17, 1931, the Hunter brothers dedicated their own flying field located on a farm along Route 13, six miles north of Sparta that was owned by Albert Hunter. An "Airplane Rodeo" was staged to celebrate the event. The rodeo featured a new stunt in which a man was picked from a horse and transferred to an airplane. Three of the planes owned by the Hunters were displayed; "City of Chicago", "Big Ben" and "Old Hisso", the first plane the Hunter brothers purchased and learned to fly.

Walter Hunter, who was now a night airmail pilot for Universal Airways, purchased a Travel Air racing plane that had been flown in the Cleveland Air Races in 1929 by Doug Davis, an Atlanta, Georgia Travel Air dealer. The plane later won a race at Souix Falls, South Dakota. Curtiss-Wright had purchased the plane in January 1930. On August 28, 1930, the wing and a landing gear were damaged in an accident in Des Moines, Iowa. Walter purchased the racing plane, a Travel Air "Mystery Ship", R614K, from Curtiss-Wright in June 1931. Walter moved the racing plane to Curtiss-Steinberg airfield in East St. Louis where repairs and modifications were made. Two more fuel tanks were installed and the engine was replaced with a new Curtiss-

Wright radial engine rated at 600 hp. A new, larger cowling was fabricated by Travel Air engineers and installed around the larger engine.

Walter entered and flew the plane in the Bendix Transcontinental Air Race starting from Burbank California, but lost out when the plane was forced down south of Terra Haute, Indiana. Walter continued with the plane to Cleveland, Ohio where he entered the Thompson Trophy Race. After making some adjustments to the racing plane, on September 6 Walter took off in the plane to fly the racing course for familiarization. As the plane lifted off, the engine sputtered, Walter switched to another fuel tank, suddenly, flames shot back into the cockpit from the engine. The plane was less than 400 feet in altitude, Walter bailed out, his parachute opened just as he reached the ground, landing about 20 feet from the crashed wreckage of his plane. Walter suffered burns on his hands, neck and face. The accident ended Walter's participation in the 1931 Cleveland Air Races. John and Kenneth Hunter flew to Cleveland to watch Walter in the race, arriving just after the accident. The wreckage of Walter's racing plane is now located at the Beech Heritage Museum in Tullahoma, Tennessee. Lowell Bayles won the Thompson Trophy Race in 1931 flying a GeeBee "Z" at an average speed of 236.239 mph.

Alfred Dunlap, a pilot with the Hunter Flying Circus was fatally injured on Sunday evening, October 18, 1931. The Hunter Flying Circus had presented a performance at Harnist Flying Field west of Belleville that afternoon, and was returning to Sparta. Alfred was flying a Curtiss-Wright Junior, with a pusher prop, that was owned by the Hunters. Kenneth Hunter was flying a new Ryan monoplane a short distance away and parallel to Alfred. Both planes were about forty feet above the ground. According to Kenneth, about two and one half miles northwest of Freeburg, Alfred looking at Kenneth, flew into the top of a tree, and crashed to the ground. Kenneth quickly landed nearby, damaging his plane's propeller in the landing. Kenneth removed Alfred from the plane wreckage and Alfred was then transported by ambulance to St. Elizabeth's Hospital in Belleville. Alfred died later that evening from a fractured skull. Herbert Budd of the Hunter Flying Circus was injured in plane crash near Fulton, Missouri enroute to Alfred Dunlap's funeral.

In June 1932, John Hunter won a contract to fly airmail from New Orleans, to Pilot Town Louisiana. John purchased several amphibious planes to fly the mail. On Sunday, June 29, 1932, John Walter and Kenneth Hunter left Chester in three of the amphibious planes enroute to New Orleans. John was flying an Ireland N-1B Neptune powered by a 220 hp Curtiss Wright J-5 engine with a pusher propeller (propeller behind the engine). Kenneth was flying an Eastman E-2 Sea Rover powered by a 185 hp Curtiss Challenger engine with a tractor propeller (propeller in front of the engine). They stopped at Rosedale, Mississippi, on the Mississippi River, for fuel. A storm came up and they were forced to stay overnight in Rosedale. About six o'clock on Monday morning, they prepared to resume their trip to New Orleans. After starting the engine on his plane, John climbed from the cockpit to untie the tail of the plane from the dock. John was struck in the head by the pusher propeller and he fell into the river. John's body was recovered from the river some time later.

John's remains were prepared for burial and arrived back in Sparta on Tuesday afternoon. His body was taken to his mother's home and remained there until after a short service at 2:15 pm on Wednesday. The body was then moved next door to the First Presbyterian Church in Sparta where Rev. James Murdock conducted the funeral service at 2:30 pm. John's funeral was one of the largest funerals held to date in Sparta. John was 29 years of age at his death. Following the funeral, John was buried in Sparta's Caledonia Cemetery.

The St. Louis Post Dispatch issue of August 10, 1932 carried a picture of Kenneth Hunter and the racing plane he planned to fly in the National Air Races in Cleveland, Ohio on September 1. The plane had been designed by Gordon Israel and built at Lambert Field by Israel and Hunter. Kenneth crashed the racing plane on the trial flight at Lambert Field. After the crash, Kenneth decided not to enter the 1932 National Air Races in Cleveland, however, three racing planes that Gordon Israel designed were introduced at the 1932 National Air Race, a Howard DGA-4 "Mike", a Howard DGA-4 "Ike" and "Redhead" a plane built by Israel. Jimmy Doolittle won the 1932 Thompson Trophy Race flying a GeeBee "R-1", averaged 252.6 mph. William Ong, flying the Howard DGA-4 "Ike" placed seventh in the Thompson Trophy Race.

Walter Hunter was now flying for American Airlines based in St. Louis.

The June 28, 1935 edition of the New York Times carried an article that reported that the Key brothers of Meridan Mississippi surpassed the 553 hour, 41 ½ minute World Endurance Record of the Hunter brothers.

Fred and Algene Key finally landed their Curtiss Robin airplane, named "Ole Miss", on July 1, 1935 having been in the air for 653 hours and 34 minutes. Their airplane is frequently displayed at the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum in Washington D.C. The display includes a plaque that states the Key brothers broke the World Endurance Record previously held by the Hunter brothers of Sparta, Illinois.

The September 18, 1936 edition of the Sparta News-Plaindealer reported that thousands of people from around the area were visiting a temporary flying field on a tract of land on the Miller Burns farm north of Sparta. The attraction was a Keystone Patrician tri-motor airplane owned and flown by Kenneth Hunter. Kenneth was carrying passengers in the big plane for a dollar each. The plane could haul 24 passengers. Kenneth reported that he had carried five-thousand passengers in this plane up to September 18. Between May 25 and November 11, 1936, Kenneth logged nearly 60 hours in the Patrician hauling passengers in numerous cities through Illinois and Missouri. When not flying passengers, Kenneth continued to give flight instructions.

In late 1936, Kenneth explored that possibility that he and Albert Hunter might attempt another endurance flight record. By April 1937, a decision was made not to attempt another flight endurance record.

Albert turned his attention to operating his farm and moving houses and heavy equipment, flying only for pleasure. On Tuesday, March 3, 1942, Albert was removing metal roofing from an old steel castings plant near Murphysboro, Illinois. His son Herschel was working beside him on the roof of the plant. Albert sat down on a sheet of the metal roofing; it folded, causing him to fall through the roof to the ground below, a distance of about 30 feet. When Herschel and others reached Albert, he was alive. Albert was loaded onto the bed of a truck and taken to a hospital. Albert died, by the time they reached the hospital, from a broken neck. Albert, 45 years of age, was survived by his wife, Pearl, three daughters, Mrs. Elizabeth Hayer of Sparta, Pauline and Eileen and son Herschel at their home. Two brothers, Walter of Memphis and Kenneth of Burbank, California, one sister, Irene, wife of James Hickerson of Rockport Indiana and his mother, Mrs. Ida Jane Hunter of Sparta. Albert was preceded in death by his brother John Hunter his sister Mabel and his father, Alexander. Rev. L. T. Krebs, pastor, assisted by Rev. Daniel C. Campbell at the First Presbyterian Church in Sparta on Thursday, March 5, conducted Albert's funeral. Albert was buried in Sparta's Caledonia Cemetery.

About 1940, Kenneth started flying Army planes for Curtiss at Curtiss-Steinberg airfield in East St. Louis. Some of the planes he flew were plane designs that were never placed into production. In February 1941, Kenneth started flying Lockheed Hudson Bombers from California to Canada for transfer to the Royal Air Force in England. In early July 1941, Kenneth started working for Lockheed at Burbank as a test pilot. He continued in this role through-out World War II. As a test pilot, Kenneth flew Lockheed P-38 fighters, Hudson Bombers, PV-1 Ventura patrol planes, Lodestar transports and B-17 Bombers as they came off the assembly line. If deficiencies were identified, modifications were made on the planes and they were re-flown for evaluation. On October 18, 1945, the right engine on a Gruman F7F Tigercat twin-engine fighter Kenneth was flying caught fire. Kenneth managed to land the plane and allow his passenger to exit the plane, but Kenneth was burned exiting the cockpit. After recovering from his injuries, Kenneth left Lockheed and secured a job as Chief Corporate Pilot for Kerr-McGee Oil Company in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. The Kerr-McGee Corporation now owned the Deep Rock Oil Company that had provided the gasoline and oil for the endurance flight. Kerr was Governor of Oklahoma and later a U. S. Senator for Oklahoma. The first corporate plane that Kenneth flew for Kerr-McGee, starting in August 1946, was a Douglas DC-3. Kenneth continued flying as Chief Corporate Pilot for Kerr-McGee for nearly 20 years. At 6:00 am on January 15, 1974, the North American Saberliner, NA-265, Kenneth and his co-pilot, Jack Earnest Gardner, were flying from Corpus Christi, Texas to the Will Rogers Airport at Oklahoma City, crashed while making the final approach to the airport. Both pilots were killed and the plane was destroyed. The NTSB report on the accident cited fog and lack of crew rest as the most likely cause of the accident. Kenneth was 65 years of age and had 21,500 hours of flying time with 2000 hours in the Saberliner. Graveside services for Kenneth were held on Friday, January 18 at Caledonia Cemetery in Sparta.

An article in the May 12, 1974 edition of the St. Louis Post Dispatch started by quoting one hanger-boasting pilot to say that the most famous aviator he knew was Walter Hunter. Walter was the only aviator he knew who had performed on stage at Grauman's Chinese Theater in Hollywood.

In July 1980, a lavish weekend celebration was held at the Sparta airport, Hunter Field, to honor the fifty-year anniversary of the Hunter brothers World Record Endurance Flight. Walter Hunter was the only Hunter brother that was able to attend the celebration. Walter retired from American Airlines in March 1966 as their most Senior Jet Captain. Walter lived in Town and Country, Missouri until his death at St. John Mercy Hospital in St. Louis on Tuesday, October 18, 1983. Walter was buried in the Cutler Cemetery.

Walter's career followed the same path as many of the early airmail pilots. As larger planes became available, passengers were added to the airmail flights. Eventually, passengers became to focus of the flights and airmail beame secondary. When Harlan A. "Bud" Gurney was district flight manager for Robertson Aircraft Corporation, Universal Air Lines absorbed Robertson. Gurney then worked for Transcontinental Air Transport until he signed on as a Captain with United Airlines in 1932. More information about Gurney may be obtained at <http://www.amtonline.com/publication/article.jsp?pubId=1&id=6368>

Nineteen Eighty-Three brought to a close the lives of the Hunter brothers of Sparta, Illinois. The Hunter brothers were down-to-earth good honest people that helped pioneer the aviation industry to its place in today's society. They knew and flew with many famous aviators of the early Twentieth Century. They were pilots, aviation mechanics and their adventures brought credit to themselves and their home town of Sparta. They left their mark on aviation history and in doing so, raised the City of Sparta to International prominence. It is only fitting that Sparta's airport be named Hunter Field to honor their contribution. Their story should and must live on!