

The Aero-Sportswomen

by JOAN THOMAS

JUST AS Jeanette Rankin will go down in history as the first woman to be elected to Congress, so will Phoebe Fairgrave Omlie be known as the first woman aviation executive in any Government. She is, Special Assistant for Air Intelligence, National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics.

It is a notable honor, but one that is richly deserved. No other woman holds such a record for continued and steady advancement in the aviation industry. A record that has developed with, and passed through, all the colorful stages of the industry from the barnstorming days of 1912-25, to the present highly-developed and complicated transportation systems and manufacturing interests.

It was in 1919, when President Wilson visited St. Paul in the interests of the League of Nations, that Phoebe Fairgrave, then a highschool student, was so thrilled by the aerial demonstration put on in honor of the President, that she determined then and there to learn to fly.

"I hadn't given a thought to aviation until that day," she said, "but suddenly, as I watched those planes I wanted to fly."

And, acting on the sudden urge, this slim youngster—barely five feet tall, and weighing less than one hundred pounds—arrived at the field and announced that she wanted to buy a ship. W. A. Kidder, president of the company, took one of his crack pilots aside and told him to take her up and to do every stunt that he knew, to make her so sick that she would never want to see a flying field again.

Obedying instructions, Major Miller, a former war-time flyer, looped and rolled, went into tail spins and power dives, let the ship fall off one wing and then the other, and then threw in a couple of tight spirals for good measure. Coming down he grinned back



Mrs. Phoebe Omlie, one of America's pioneer women pilots, just after the completion of the Fourth National Reliability Tour.

at his passenger and wanted to know how she liked it.

"Fine," she said, "I'll be back tomorrow with the money for the ship."

She bought the ship and learned to fly when she was 18 years of age. Her first instructor, Lieutenant Vernon C. Omlie (whom she married two years later) was seriously interested in the development of commercial aviation, "but in the meantime, we flyers have to eat," he said, in reply to a question as to why he took part in the flying-circus stunts. "I know we will have to pay for it later, because the more difficult and dangerous we make it look the harder it will be to get the public into the air. But at present it is the only thing to do."

Phoebe thought it over and decided that she would go into the same game. Thus began this amazing career of parachute jumping, wing-walking and stunt flying. At 20, she owned and was the star performer in the Phoebe Fairgrave Flying Circus. She was the first woman to ever attempt a double parachute jump and she established a world's altitude-record jump from the dizzy heights of 15,200 feet.

But always with an eye to the future, the Omlies gathered information and studied possible sites for future commercial bases for aeronautical activities. In 1921 they concentrated their work throughout the South where they thought the climatic conditions and slower railway communications offered an ideal section for developing a mode of transportation that would be of benefit to the entire population.

In 1923, they organized the Mid-South Airways Co., Memphis, Tennessee. Mrs. Omlie acted as instructor in flying, aerodynamics, meteorology and

(Concluded on page 184)



Mrs. Frances Marsalis (left) and Helen Richey who set a new women's endurance record of 9 days, 21-hours and 50-minutes in their plane, "Outdoor Girl."

Aero-Sportswomen

(Continued from page 160)

aerial navigation. And in 1927 she was awarded the first Transport license, and Airplane and Engine mechanics license ever granted to a woman in this country.

When the Omlies established their commercial field they definitely gave up the circus and stunt-flying exhibitions. The devastating Mississippi floods in 1927 gave them an opportunity to demonstrate the worth of aviation to the South. The airplane was the one sure way into that vast flooded area.

The Mid-South planes flew from daylight to dark, patrolling the river with inspectors and photographers in search of levee breaks. From Dorena, Missouri to Vicksburg, Mississippi, a distance of 300 miles, it was the only transportation. They maintained an air mail service between Little Rock and Memphis. It was dangerous work flying land planes over long reaches of water and Phoebe did her turn with the rest.

In the Fourth National Reliability Tour in 1928, competing for the Edsel Ford Trophy, Mrs. Omlie entered her tiny Monocoupe against Eddie Stinson, Frank Hawkes and many other famous flyers in high-powered ships. She was the first woman to enter such a race. The men pilots tried to talk her out of it and failing in this, they insisted that she take a mechanic with her.

"A mechanic?" she retorted. "If I take a mechanic they'll say *he* flew the ship over the bad spots. No, I'll be my own mechanic and I'll fly the ship myself!"

At Marfa, Texas, Mrs. Omlie had a slight accident, landing in a high wind and turning sharply near the hangar, she upset. The damage was slight and

no one was injured, but it was the sort of an accident to unnerve a flyer.

"Quitting, Phoebe?" asked the men. "Not on your life," came the answer. "I'm going through."

"Then for Pete's sake take a mechanic with you," said Stinson, "we don't want any funerals on our hands."

"Sorry Eddie," Phoebe answered, "but your wife is riding with me tomorrow and there won't be any room."

There was no more talk about quitting after that and Mrs. Omlie brought her little red and black plane back to the starting point. Not the winner, it is true, but she did finish the whole gruelling distance—nearly 7000 miles that had taken them to 32 cities and across fifteen states; that had carried them over the deserts of the Southwest and the Rocky Mountains.

When women were first permitted to race under the rules of the Federated Aeronautic Internationale organization in 1929, Mrs. Omlie entered the National Air Races.

She won the CW class race of the Derby from Santa Monica, California to Cleveland, Ohio, that year and the FIRST WOMEN'S AEROL TROPHY race. The next year, in a newly designed ship, she entered and won the Women's National Air Derby from Washington, D. C., to Chicago. And all closed course cabin races of the 1930 races. In 1931 she won the Women's Division and the "National Sweepstakes" for both men and women in the National Air Derby from Santa Monica to Cleveland.

"Of course, I am proud to have been chosen for this position in the government," she said, "and I hope that I may always deserve the confidence of the people who made it possible for me to enter this phase of aeronautics."

"I was appointed as Special Assistant for Air Intelligence to help work out plans whereas our industry might come into its own as far as its financial structure is concerned. In the reorganization, the plan is to have *more* flying and *less* regulation."

Anyone with a record like that might be excused for being egotistical but Phoebe Omlie is not. She is as modest as she is courageous.

END.