

# The Greatest Gift

The 1926 Air Corps Pan American Goodwill Flight was a story of triumph, tragedy, and unsurpassed heroism on the part of a young captain.

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**I**N 1926, the Coolidge Administration, like many that were to follow, was intent on improving US relations with Latin America. Air Corps Chief Maj. Gen. Mason Patrick conceived the idea of dispatching a goodwill flight to twenty-three Central and South American countries—an idea approved immediately by the Secretaries of State and War and by the President.

The Air Corps chose the Loening OA-1 amphibian, a new observation plane, for the flight and Maj. Herbert A. Dargue, one of the early Army pilots, as its commander. Five OA-1s, each named for an American city and crewed by two pilots, one of whom was an engineering officer, were to make the 22,000-mile pioneering flight. Among the pilots were three officers who would retire after World War II as three- and four-star generals—Muir Fairchild, Ennis Whitehead, and Ira Eaker. General Eaker is the only member of the flight who is still living today.

## Intensive Training

The expedition, known as the Pan American Goodwill Flight, left San Antonio, Tex., on December 21, 1926, after the pilots had gone through an intensive course in diplomatic niceties, Spanish, meteorology, and geography. They carried whatever maps were available, cruised at eighty-five miles an hour over much uncharted territory and through unpredictable weather without radios or gyroscopic flight

instruments, and did their own maintenance between diplomatic receptions and state dinners.

Bert Dargue, who rose to the rank of major general and who was killed in a crash on December 12, 1941, while en route to Hawaii, recounted the flight in the October 1927 issue of *National Geographic*. His fifty-page article sketched enough high adventure, flying exploits, close calls, humor, and tragedy to fill a book.

## Tragedy at Buenos Aires

The tragedy occurred at Buenos Aires, at about the halfway point of the first aerial circumnavigation of South America. The flight had crossed the Andes from Valdivia, Chile, to Bahia Blanca on the Argentine coast, navigating with rudimentary instruments through very heavy weather. After a stop at Mar del Plata, they flew on to Buenos Aires, where the formation broke preparatory to landing. Major Dargue in *New York* started a descending turn to the left, his attention on an Argentine escort plane that was passing beneath him.

Capt. C. E. Woolsey and Lt. John Benton in *Detroit*, who had been flying on Dargue's left wing, broke left, then inexplicably turned slowly to the right. The two planes collided and spun down, interlocked. As the spinning planes separated, Dargue and Lieutenant Whitehead were able to bail out of *New York*, but Woolsey and Benton went in with their plane.

In his *Geographic* article, Major Dargue wrote: "No man may ever fully explain how disaster came. It was all over too quickly." Perhaps that was all the Air Corps would allow him to say. Fifty years later, General Eaker, writing for the September 1976 issue of *AIR FORCE Magazine*, told a story of unsurpassed heroism in his account of the tragedy. He had been flying on Dargue's right wing and had a clear view of the crash.

At Mar del Plata, where the planes had landed on water, Woolsey's OA-1 had broken a cable that raised and lowered the plane's wheels. Since their first landing near Buenos Aires was to be on water for a reception aboard an Argentine battleship, Woolsey decided to proceed with the broken cable and the wheels retracted. After the reception, the plane would take off from water and fly to an Argentine Air Force base near Buenos Aires. At that point, Lieutenant Benton would climb out of the rear seat and go out on the wing to release the wheels—a maneuver all the crews had practiced in preparation for the flight.

When Major Dargue gave the signal to break formation, Benton took off his chute and went out on the wing. With his eyes on Benton, Woolsey apparently let *Detroit* drift to the right on a collision course with *New York*, while Dargue's attention was focused on the Argentine plane below him. *Detroit's* nose struck the left wing of Dargue's plane.

## "He Elected to Stay"

"Woolsey was sitting on his chute and could have saved himself," General Eaker wrote. "Instead, he elected to stay with the plane, since Benton was on the wing without his chute. I have never witnessed a more courageous self-sacrifice."

Eight members of the flight, which won the Mackay Trophy, landed at Bolling Field, D. C., on May 2, 1927, 133 days after they had left San Antonio. They were greeted by President Coolidge, who presented each man the new Distinguished Flying Cross, which had just been authorized by Congress. The Air Force Office of History has no record of posthumous awards to Captain Woolsey and his friend, Lieutenant Benton, with whom he shared a great adventure and to whom he had given the greatest of all gifts. ■