

COLLINS INDUCTED INTO AVIATION HALL OF FAME

By Ellen Knight¹

Among Winchester's noteworthy residents was a pioneer in the aviation industry, Paul Fiske Collins (1891-1971), a resident of Winchester for 35 years. He was inducted into the Wisconsin Aviation Hall of Fame in November 2007.



Collins was raised in Stevens Point, Wisconsin and graduated from the Central States Teachers College there. For 35 years, up to 1970, he made his home in Winchester, for two years at 6 Lantern Lane and then 3 Harrington Road.

Collins reportedly made his first flight in a tethered balloon at the St Louis World's Fair in 1904. One of the first military aviators, he enlisted in the Army Air Service during World War I. After a year as a flight instructor stationed in Texas, he served in France as a pursuit flyer.

After the war, he worked as a pilot for the Curtiss Flying Service in Florida and New York, flew exhibitions and stunts, and "crashed" his JN-4 in *Flying Pat*, one of the first motion pictures to feature airplanes," according to the Hall of Fame.

In 1918, the first regular U.S. mail flights began. Three years later, Collins became one of the original airmail pilots hired by the U.S. Postal Service and flew the first scheduled night airmail service between Cleveland and New York. He was the first pilot to fly a transcontinental airmail and passenger service. With the mail service, he logged 3,487 flight hours and 361,689 miles.

From piloting, he went into airline management. He worked for Transcontinental Air Transport, where he met future business partners Gene Vidal (an aviator and West Point graduate) and Amelia Earhart. Collins and Vidal reportedly initiated the concept of "on the hour every hour" service.

The future partners also worked for Ludington Airlines, which operated lines between New York, Philadelphia and Washington. After a break with the Ludingtons, Collins and Vidal teamed up with airport operator Samuel Solomon and Amelia Earhart to found National Airways, based in New England. Collins was company president.

The airline, which began with a capital of only \$10,000, sufficient to buy two Stinson planes, contracted for the Boston and Maine route in 1933. The Boston and Maine Railroad had organized commercial aviation north of Boston to participate in aviation rather than compete with it. The airline similarly contracted for a route in Vermont.

Vidal had to withdraw from the company after a conversation with President Roosevelt led to his being offered the post of director of Bureau of Air Commerce in DC. He did, however, fly on the first commercial flight of National Airways in his new official capacity.



Vidal, Earhart, and Collins

Earhart, whose public image easily attracted attention to the new airlines, was a key figure in marketing the new company. According to Robert Mudge, author of *Adventures of a Yellow Bird* (1969), "They prepared lists of people from each city who were likely prospects for air service or were in influential positions. Each person on the list was contacted by mail and invited to come to the airport on a specified date to meet Miss Amelia Earhart."

At first, the company headquarters were located in a hangar on a hay field at Scarborough, Maine, just south of the Portland Airport, but were transferred to Boston when a heated hangar became available there.

According to a posted history of Northeast Airlines by Guy G. Caron, conditions were difficult. "There was no ground radio north of Boston, no lighted airfields, much less lighted airways, and the instructions to the pilots, as a slogan for survival, was 'fly low and slow.'" Further, "winter conditions were appalling" due to deep and frozen snow.

The Stinsons "were probably the only aircraft in commercial airline service to be fitted with truck chains on the wheel tires. In the spring, the landing fields became marshlands, and in the summer, some of the local communities felt that the flat fields could be put to a better purpose. On one occasion, a complete circus obligingly moved over to make room for the Stinsons to land."

In November 1936, the Boston-Maine/Central Vermont purchased two new Lockheed 10-A Electras which flew additional routes to those the Stinsons took. In 1937, Boston and Maine purchased National Airways' assets, including its airmail contract, and in November 1940, as part of an effort to remove the railroad image, the airline was renamed Northeast Airlines. As such, the airline put Douglas DC-3s into service in 1941.

Collins remained with Northeast as president or chairman of the board through the mid-1950s. As president during World War II, while his son Paul was in the Air Corps, he established the ferry route for warplanes across the North Atlantic.

In 1971, Northeast merged with Delta. In this year, also, Collins died in North Hollywood to which he had moved from Winchester about a year earlier, at age 79.

Collins was a former president of Airmail Pioneers and a member of the Caterpillar Club, an informal association of people who have successfully used a parachute to bail out of a disabled aircraft. In Winchester, he was a member of the Country Club.

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