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Century Of Flight – Part V

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NOTE: This is the fifth of 10 Ramblin' columns I'm writing from July 5 to Sept. 6 about the first 100 years of flight in Iowa.

Arthur Collins got lost flying to St. Louis but helped the United States of America find its way to the moon.

Between times, his radios became an integral part of flight closer to home and factored prominently in the Allied victory in World War II.

In 1910, the first Iowan (Art Hartman) flew a heavier-than-air craft from Iowa soil (Burlington), which is why aviation enthusiasts are celebrating a century of flight in Iowa. It's also why I'm writing about it Mondays from July 5 through Sept. 6.



Art Collins became a pilot early in his career, hanging out in the 1930s with a group of fliers known as the Aviation Country Club at a grass landing strip near C Avenue and Blairs Ferry Road NE in Cedar Rapids. But radios were his main interest, from experimenting with crystal sets at age 9 to communicating with a Greenland expedition in 1925 at age 15 to setting up his first radio "factory" in his basement.

In the mid-'30s, after he'd built radio equipment for Admiral Byrd's Antarctic expedition, Collins was working on two-way radios. He'd installed a prototype in a two-place Porterfield plane and was flying to St. Louis with Walt Wirkler, an early employee and pilot. When the radio malfunctioned, Collins crawled into the fuselage for half an hour to fix it.

As darkness fell, Collins emerged to ask "Where are we?" Wirkler wasn't sure, but followed a river Collins thought was the Mississippi. Turns out it was the Illinois River, so they landed in Freeport, Ill., instead of St. Louis.

"He was the boss," Wirkler chuckled in a 1977 Gazette interview.

Collins certainly was, even though he'd never toot his own horn. He guided Collins Radio to modest prosperity by 1940 with sales of \$722,000. Then World War II broke out, the company developed much more sophisticated radios for the military, 36 or more new employees were hired each week. Soon Collins Radio was in 23 buildings in Cedar Rapids. By 1944, it employed more than 3,000 people and sales hit \$47 million.



World War II, of course, took aviation to a new level. Through the '30s, barnstorming aviators continued to entertain spectators, regulations were enacted and airplanes began carrying passengers and cargo on regular routes. On Dec. 7, 1941, the Japanese demonstrated the potential of air warfare by bombing Pearl Harbor.

All 276,000 Iowans who served in the war were heroes, although some became more famous than others. Among the aviators were Bill Reed of Marion, a P-40 "Flying Tiger" ace who shot down or destroyed 16 Japanese planes before he died when his plane crashed, and Paul Tibbets, who lived in Cedar Rapids as a child and scratched his

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mother's name, Enola Gay, on his B-29 before it dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima on Aug. 6, 1945.



In Germany, Dr. Alexander Lippisch, who had watched Orville Wright fly over Berlin in 1909, helped develop the world's first rocket plane, the Messerschmitt ME-



263 Komet that once flew 625 miles per hour. He was more interested in his Delta Wing (tailless aircraft), however, and after the war became director of aeronautical research at Collins.

Into the 1950s, Collins Radio equipment reached new levels of sophistication with autopilots and navigations systems. Into the 1960s it provided communications systems for the Mercury, Gemini and Apollo space missions.



On July 20, 1969, when Neil Armstrong became the first man to set foot on the moon and said over Collins equipment, "One small step for man; one giant leap for mankind," Art Collins heard it on TV at home with his wife and two small sons. He had turned down an opportunity to appear on CBS TV with Walter Cronkite.

"He just whooped," said his wife, Mary, in a 1994 interview, seven years after he died. "The kids didn't know what he was whooping about, but they whooped, too."

Many Iowans have gone into space, among them Walter Cunningham of Creston who orbited the earth 163 times on Apollo 7 in 1968, Loren Shriver of Payton who became the pilot of the space shuttle, Discovery, in 1985,

and Peggy Whitson of Beaconsfield who spent six months on the International Space Station in 2002.

For a century, Iowans have been flying further, faster and higher. Only the sky is the limit.

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