

100th Anniversary of the First Flight to Beaver Island

Flying from the mainland to Beaver Island, whether aboard Island Airways, Fresh Air Aviation or private airplanes is so common today, few give much thought to how uncommon it once was.

The very first flight to Beaver Island occurred 100 years ago, a milestone due to a medical emergency, assisted by the U.S. military, in 1923.

Jesse Cole, age 16, was working in the woods on the first Saturday of February when he was seriously injured by a log jammer. He fell unconscious, and could not be revived. Unfortunately, no doctors resided on Beaver Island. An urgent call was made to the U.S. Coast Guard station in Charlevoix, but boats could not make the voyage due to the February weather.



The only possible solution to bring a doctor to the island was by air. Still, 100 years ago, aircraft were few and far between. But some were available far away at Selfridge Field, now known as Selfridge Air National Guard Base, near Mount Clemens, Michigan, northeast of Detroit.

Three days after the accident, a first plane took off but was forced to land near Grayling due to a heavy snowstorm. The next morning, a second plane piloted by Lt. Russell Meredith, a graduate of West Point Military Academy, departed from Selfridge and made a successful 250-mile flight, landing on frozen Lake Charlevoix, where local physician Dr. Robert Armstrong boarded for the last leg of the trip. Fifteen minutes after taking to the air, guided by evergreen boughs laid on the ice in the form of a cross, the small plane landed successfully on Lake Geneserath, not far from the Cole home.

Though Jesse Cole had been unconscious for more than 70 hours, he had regained consciousness shortly before Armstrong arrived. The physician, an 1894 graduate of the University of Michigan's School of Medicine, promptly treated him for a fractured skull and other injuries and declared a speedy recovery would soon follow. Though the original plan was to bring the young man back to Charlevoix, it was deemed impracticable due to his condition. Armstrong and his pilot remained three days before returning to the mainland.

It's worth mentioning there's more to the story. That second plane, a two-passenger Osprey II Army biplane that successfully completed the journey, was the private plane of none other than General William "Billy" Mitchell, a United States Army officer who served in France in World War I. After the war, he was appointed deputy director of the U.S. Army's Air Service.

Mitchell was among the first to grasp the strategic importance of aviation and argued for the creation of a new branch of the U.S. Armed Services. So strongly did Mitchell advocate for the separation of the Air Service from the Army, he was court-martialed for insubordination in 1925 and resigned shortly afterward. Today, he's regarded as the father of the U.S. Air Force.

Though the colorful and controversial Mitchell was in Texas at the time of Jesse Cole's accident, he gave permission for his personal plane to be used for the heroic mission that became the first ever flight to Beaver Island.