Air and Space this Week

Item of the Week

Roscoe Turner, Barnstormer, Air Racer, DFC Recipient

Originally appeared September 27, 2020

[KEY WORDS: Roscoe Turner Barnstorming Air Racer DFC Gilmore Flying Lion]

Roscoe Turner was a flamboyant pilot and air racer during the barnstormer days between the World Wars. He set a number of speed records, and cultivated a dramatic image as handsome and colorful daredevil pilot who flew with his pet lion. Named Gilmore.

Famed aviator Roscoe Turner would have been 125 years old this week. He was born on 9/29/1895 on a small farm near Corinth, Mississippi. From earliest childhood, he had an inordinate fondness for speed, whether it be trains or cars or later, airplanes. He faced great opposition from his father, who wanted Roscoe to focus on the great effort needed to wrest a living from the soil.

Roscoe didn't want to be a farmer, and ran away from home when he was 16. He made a small living driving things, and by the time of WWI he had become an expert mechanic. He tried to enlist in the Aviation Signal Corps, but was turned down for lack of the necessary education credentials (he had only finished the tenth grade). He did get into the Ambulance Corps, and served two years, moving into aviation too late to see combat.

After the War, Turner was a principal in The Roscoe Turner Flying Circus. They barnstormed the country giving shows of daring aerobatics. Turner was also adept at marketing and public relations, and expanded his aviation show repertoire to include specialty items, such as outfitting one of the Circus' planes as a flying cigar store and transmitting live radio shows while aloft.

Turner's promotions led to his becoming a flying movie stuntman, with a role in Howard Hughes' *Hell's Angels* and other films. He also became involved in Nevada Airlines, which earned him more recognition and the courtesy title of "Colonel." Turner used his growing fame, and the title, to augment his image. He made a military-style uniform for his public appearances, and grew a devil-may-care heavily-waxed moustache.

Perhaps the greatest of Turner's marketing efforts was the deal he made with the regional Gilmore Oil Company. Their corporate logo was a lion. Turner convinced Gilmore management to purchase a fast Lockheed aircraft and use it to make Gilmore Oil better known to the public. He acquired a lion cub that he named Gilmore (of course), made a special parachute and harness for him, and the two of them flew all around the country. A man looking the part of a heroic aviator, flying around with a lion, generated considerable public interest. For a few years, Turner actually flew several record flights and in several air races with Gilmore aboard,

ending only when Gilmore grew too big and heavy to fit in the plane (I suspect toothiness was a factor, too!).

Turner's long-standing need for speed now asserted itself ever more strongly. His early attempts at air racing were unsuccessful; he just didn't have an aircraft that was competitive with the most advanced available and in use by others. But his Gilmore fame led to better funding for racing, and he began racing in earnest in the early 1930s.

Turner set a number of records during this period, and won a more than a few air races. His principle competition was noted flyers Wiley Post and Jimmy Doolittle. His racing career reached its zenith when he began winning the biggest races, culminating with victory three Thompson Trophy races, in 1934, 1938, and 1939. He is the only person to have won the Thompson three times.

After the third Thompson, Turner retired from air racing. War clouds were on the international horizon, and Turner knew that pilots, and aviation mechanics, would soon be in great demand. So he founded the Roscoe Turner Aeronautical Corporation in 1940, and opened a school in Indianapolis to train aviation personnel. This endeavor was very successful, and would prove to be an important national military asset. During WWII, Turner volunteered to fly combat, but was told, truthfully, that his efforts in producing pilots and mechanics was a far greater contribution than any one combat pilot could make.

Turner's contributions to aviation and the war effort were recognized in 1949, when the U.S. Congress awarded him the Distinguished Flying Cross, one of only nine, and the last, civilian to be so honored. The other civilian DFCs went to the Wright Brothers, Charles Lindbergh, Wiley Post, Amelia Earhart, Glenn Hammond Curtiss, Jackie Cochran, and Eugene Ely.

The Roscoe Turner Museum opened in Indianapolis in 1970, but was short-lived. The Smithsonian acquired its artifacts and papers, and a stuffed Gilmore, in 1976. Turner served as an honorary official with the Indianapolis 500 for many years. He passed away on June 23, 1970.

In addition to appearing in the aforementioned *Hell's Angels*, Turner was portrayed in film twice. The first was in an Australian TV mini-series in 1991, entitled, *The Great Air Race*, in which he was played by Barry Bostwick. The second was 2004's *The Aviator*, starring Leonard DiCaprio as Howard Hughes and Raymond Ducasse in a small role as Turner, attending the premiere of *Hell's Angels* with Gilmore.

References

Glines, Carroll V., 1999, Roscoe Turner: Aviation's Master Showman, Smithsonian Institution Scholarly Press, ISBN 13: 978-1560987987

National Aviation Hall of Fame: https://www.nationalaviation.org/our-enshrinees/turner-roscoe

Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roscoe_Turner

Airport Journals article: http://airportjournals.com/roscoe-the-lionhearted

The Gilmore Oil Company: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gilmore_Oil_Company

Gilmore the Lion: https://airandspace.si.edu/collection-objects/gilmore-the-flying-lion/nasm_A19730933000 and
https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/magazine/1987/07/12/gilmore-king-of-the-cold-storage-vault/9265534f-f5a8-4a96-94e8-1ddb9474612d

Aviation Oil Outlet: https://aviationoiloutlet.com/blog/roscoe-turner-gilmore-the-flyin-lion

Turner in the Movies: https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0877846/mediaviewer/rm2221539584

Last Edited on 27 September 2020