

## ALOFT OVER NEW YORK



World Fliers in formation approaching New York, led by Major General Mason M. Patrick, Chief of Air Service, September 8th, 1924. Photo by 14th Photo Section, Air Service, U. S. Army.

SMITHSONIAN NATIONAL AIR AND SPACE MUSEUM (NASM 92-1715)

The three planes of the First World Flight approach New York not long after passing over New London on Sept. 8, 1924. The Chicago, whose co-pilot was Lt. Leslie P. Arnold, is at left.

# New London's pioneer aviator

A century ago, Lt. Leslie P. Arnold was part of the first flight around the world

**Editor's note:** This story was drawn mostly from "The First World Flight" by Lowell Thomas and the archives of The Day. Go to [theday.com](#) and click links to see original stories.

By JOHN RUDDY  
Day Staff Writer

**T**he Lyceum Theater in New London was a place for drama, usually the fictional kind.

But on Dec. 30, 1924, a century ago Monday, every seat was filled by the promise of real-life adventure. When a young man in a military uniform walked onstage, "thunderous applause rocked the house for several minutes," The Day reported.

The man's name was Leslie P. Arnold, and for much of the year, local people had been following his exploits in the newspaper. An Army pilot, he had been part of one of the biggest milestones in aviation history: the first aerial circumnavigation of the earth.

Arnold wasn't just a name from the headlines. He was a New Londoner and a friend of many of those greeting him with cheers. A few months after spanning the globe, he had come home to tell how it all happened. But he



NATIONAL ARCHIVES

Lt. Leslie P. Arnold, left, and Lt. Lowell Smith stand in front of their plane, the Chicago, at McCook Field in Dayton, Ohio, in September 1924, near the end of the flight around the world.

protested that he wasn't there to give a speech.

"I am just going to talk to you," he said.

There was plenty to say. The six-month odyssey had been full of peril and triumph, and Arnold himself performed one of its most heroic feats.

Maybe best of all, he had put his

hometown on the route of the historic flight.



Thirteen years earlier, Arnold, then 18, had been on that same stage, one of several locals who landed small parts in a touring production of "Brewster's Mil-

lions," a Broadway hit.

Amateur acting was one thing Arnold was known for in his New London youth. Athletics was another. In 1909 he was named captain of the Bulkeley School basketball team and was later on several community teams.

He also played football and was part of the 1910 Bulkeley squad that beat rival Norwich Free Academy for the first time after 35 years of losing.

Off the field, Arnold was a sometime junior member of the Second Story Club, a group of men who spent their off-hours socializing above a doctor's office. There he shared ideas and conversation with architects, physicians, mechanics and an aspiring playwright named Eugene O'Neill.

After leaving Bulkeley to work, he bounced around before landing at the New London Ship & Engine Co., now Electric Boat. He was there when the United States entered World War I in 1917.

That fall, Arnold made a life-changing decision: He joined the Army to study aviation.



# Around the world in 175 days

Lt. Leslie P. Arnold, an Army pilot from New London, was part of one of aviation's grandest achievements



SCOTT RITTER/SPECIAL TO THE DAY

## Arnold saved his plane between Greenland and Labrador

### FROM A1

Trained and commissioned a lieutenant, Arnold sailed for France, but the war ended before he saw action. He did occupation duty in Germany and ferried planes to the coast for shipment home. One burst into flames as he took off, and he managed to hop out as it hit the ground.

"I told you before I left that I was going to have a bang up good time, and I sure had, with a lot of experience thrown in," he wrote his mother.

Back home, Arnold took part in tests to show planes could sink battleships. He also flew exhibitions for the Army and in 1920 was nearly killed when his plane struck a building at a county fair in Kentucky.

Two years later, he again cheated death. In Norfolk, Va., he was asked to fly as an observer on the Roma, an Army airship, but declined. The Roma crashed and burned, killing 34 of the 43 people aboard.

Arnold made several long-distance flights, and in August 1923, when a bomber squadron passed over New London, he was thought to be flying one of the planes.

That was a preview of a bigger event a year in the future.

"As we roared over my home at ninety miles an hour, I'll be darned if they didn't blow the riot call: I could see they were doing so by the continuous jet of steam," he recalled. "I got a big kick out of this!"

Three weeks later, the six men arrived in Seattle. Four of them, including Arnold, completed their journey around the world after 175 days and 26,345 miles.

■ ■ ■

As the Winnie Mae landed on a Long Island runway in 1931, pilot Wiley Post completed a round-the-world journey in just eight days, a new record. An airship, Graf Zeppelin, had made a 21-day circumnavigation two years earlier.

The Army aviators' six-month adventure was receding into the past. In 1927, Arnold left the Army. The next year, he opened a car wash in Long Beach, Calif., called Arnold's Auto Laundry. He also married Priscilla Dean, a silent-movie star.

But he was drawn back to aviation and retired as an Eastern Airlines executive.

"To fly around the world now all you have to do is telephone an air-line office and make your reservation," he once said.

By the time Arnold, 66, died in 1961, his achievement had faded into the history books. But just afterward, he and his fellow pilots were the men of the hour.

In 1925 Congress made them the first peacetime recipients of the Distinguished Service Medal, and they won the Mackay Trophy for the year's best flight. The Connecticut legislature gave Arnold a ceremonial sword, and his plane went to the Smithsonian.

In mid-December 1924, when Arnold regaled a packed Woolsey Hall in New Haven, the Day called for a welcome in New London, adding a suggestion:

"Don't bring him to death with oratory."

The planes came together in a week. The Lyceum canceled a performance to host the event, and 20,000 people were thought to be waiting for a ticket for one of the theater's 1,100 seats.

On Dec. 30, the stage was filled with officials from the city, Army and Navy. Shepard and Swanson's orchestra prepared to play the national anthem. Then Arnold appeared, and the place erupted.

Everyone wanted to hear what he had to say. And boy did he have a story to tell. jruddy@theday.com



Above, on Dec. 31, 1924, the day after he spoke about the around-the-world flight at the Lyceum Theater in New Haven, Lt. Leslie P. Arnold was sworn in as an honorary Boy Scout at City Hall. Below left, Arnold's plane, the Chicago, is seen in float-plane configuration. Below right, Arnold in 1921.



NATIONAL ARCHIVES



SMITHSONIAN NATIONAL AIR AND SPACE MUSEUM (NASH 79-14376)

Once the cheers died down at the Lyceum, Arnold was introduced by Bulkley's former principal and eased into his story, eventually seating himself casually on a table.

When the Army decided to attempt a flight around the world, it chose four pilots and four co-pilots/mechanics. The Douglas Aircraft Co. customized torpedo bombers for the expedition.

The four Douglas World Cruisers were named Seattle, Chicago, Boston and New Orleans, and Arnold was Chicago's co-pilot.

On April 6, 1924, the planes took off from Seattle and headed east. Disaster struck as the flagship, Seattle, hit a mountain in Alaska. The two pilots, including the group's commander, survived but were out of the flight.

The remaining planes traced the Aleutian Islands and grazed the Russian Far East en route to Japan, becoming the first to cross the Pacific. After a celebratory welcome in Tokyo, they headed south and landed in a storm at Kushimoto, a refueling stop.

Arthur Hodges, a sailor

on the support vessel USS Pope, was in for a surprise when the pilots came aboard for the night. Hodges was from New London and recognized Arnold.

"We had a great chat about our old home and we exchanged local papers," Hodges wrote his mother.

The fliers continued south through China and India, then turned west to the Red Sea, the Suez Canal and Europe.

After taking off from Ivigtut, Greenland, Chicago's engine began to sputter over open ocean.

"The cold hand of failure suddenly tried to clasp us down," Lt. Lowell Smith, Chicago's pilot, recalled. "... Our motor-driven gasoline pump failed, and five minutes later our wind-driven pump also gave out."

A reserve fuel tank held 58 gallons of gasoline, enough to reach land, but it had to be fed into the

Boston was forced down in rough seas by an oil pump failure. The pilots were rescued, but the plane sank while under tow.

A prototype was pressed into service as the Boston II, but the gap in their journey meant the two men would not complete the circumnavigation. They left the New Orleans and Chicago, which continued on to Iceland and points west.

After taking off from Ivigtut, Greenland, Chicago's engine began to sputter over open ocean.

"The cold hand of failure suddenly tried to clasp us down," Lt. Lowell Smith, Chicago's pilot, recalled. "... Our motor-driven gasoline pump failed, and five minutes later our wind-driven pump also gave out."

A reserve fuel tank held 58 gallons of gasoline, enough to reach land, but it had to be fed into the

engine manually with an emergency "wobble pump."

"Les was already stripped to the waist," Smith said. "He laid hold of that handle and pumped with it for dear life."

Arnold pumped 40 strokes a minute, almost once a second, for either three or four hours, by varying accounts.

Arnold's right arm had become a part of the engine, a news story said. "He lost all sensation, all sense of pain."

Recounting the crisis at the Lycéeum, Arnold was less dramatic.

"I would pump until I was tired," he said, "then would look down into the water and pump some more."

When the Chicago landed safely at Icy Tickle, Labrador, an exhausted Arnold had saved his plane and kept himself and Smith in the race to circle the city.

"Congratulations, Les," it began. "Your old home town wants you to fly over for your trip to Mitchel field. Do what you can. We rate it more than New Haven does. You never played football on a New Haven team. We are all proud of you. Good luck."

Two days later, Arnold replied: "Thanks for messages. We arranged flight past New London about 1 o'clock."

"Word spread, and by the appointed hour, the waterfront, the Mohican Hotel roof and other vantage points were full of people. Drivers got out of their cars and looked up.

At 1:25, the planes appeared over Groton, with the Chicago flanked by New Orleans, Boston II and seven other aircraft. As they moved toward New London, fire alarms, factory whistles and steamboats screamed in welcome.

Arnold was aware of the din as he spotted the city's fire alarm whistle.

North of Scotland, misfortune struck again as the

plane had to be refueled.