

Elliott Springs ensured aviation took off in S.C.

In 1920s he pushed for an air squadron for the S.C. National Guard

In November 1923, Capt. Elliott Springs of Fort Mill very much wanted a paved road from his home to the N.C. state line. (This would be the present S.C. 160, which runs in front of the White Homestead, a house Springs had inherited from his grandfather Samuel Elliott White.)

Thomas L. Johnson of Rock Hill, a member of the S.C. Highway Commission and supporter of Springs' cause, was in Columbia and wished Springs to appear at the meeting and testify. Springs and his wife, Frances Ley Springs, an accomplished aviator herself, flew down to Columbia. They were protesting the proposed route as laid out by highway engineers.

Springs told a State newspaper reporter the reason he missed the meeting. He said he could fly to Columbia from Fort Mill in 50 minutes, a distance of approximately 100 miles. But it took another 50 minutes to find a safe place to land the plane.

The State reporter quoted Springs: "Why doesn't Columbia establish a municipal landing field? I can fly from Fort Mill to any point in South Carolina in an hour and a half, but after I get there I must turn around in the air and go back home, because of no safe place to land. I was over Rock Hill, Lancaster and Kershaw Monday afternoon and

NEARBY HISTORY

Louise Pettus



started to come on to Columbia. I fly all about, but when I want to come down, I have to make for my field in Fort Mill."

And, most interesting of all Springs' observations, he added, "I could go to Charlotte, but now that field has been turned over to polo, and it is no longer available."

Two weeks after his failure to get to a Columbia meeting, the Fort Mill Times was reporting that Springs was over Greenville when one of his plane's engines conked out. He managed to find a back yard in Spartanburg large enough for him to land "without further mishap than slight damage to the plane."

At every opportunity, Springs would state that flying could never be labeled as safe unless there were proper landing places. He compared flying in 1924 as similar to the "same predicament the automobile was in at the times the roads were impassable and garages and filling stations were many miles apart."

Elliott Springs took the lead in establishing an air squadron for the S.C. National Guard. At that time all military aviation was under the direction of the army. Springs worked hard to persuade legislators in both the state and national governments to establish an independent air force.

Capt. (later Col.) Springs not only had the interest and will to

tackle those who had the power but was an accomplished aviator. He had served in the British Air Force during World War I and was officially credited with shooting down 11 enemy planes, making him the third-ranked U.S. aviator. He received the British Distinguished Flying Cross, pinned on him by the Duke of Windsor.

In March 1919, the U.S. War Department selected 10 aviators, two of them posthumously, to carry the title "military aviator" and automatically advanced their rank to captain in the Army. Springs was one of the 10.

Immediately after the war, Springs was with L.W.F. Airplane Co. as a test pilot. In August 1919 he participated in the first cross-country air race between New York and Toronto. All during the 1920s, Springs was writing novels with aviation themes and his acclaimed nonfiction "War Bird."

His abilities as a stunt pilot were constantly in demand. One Armistice Day, Springs had 11 requests and performed at four sites. But of all his stunts, there is one that turned Springs' performance into a not-to-be-forgotten legend.

That was the day in 1923 when he flew under the Buster Boyd Bridge, which spans S.C. 49 between York and Charlotte. It was a spectacular feat.

Others would never forget seeing him fly his plane sideways between the two smokestacks of his father's Lancaster Cotton Mills.

Louise Pettus is a retired Winthrop University history professor. Her column appears Sundays.

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