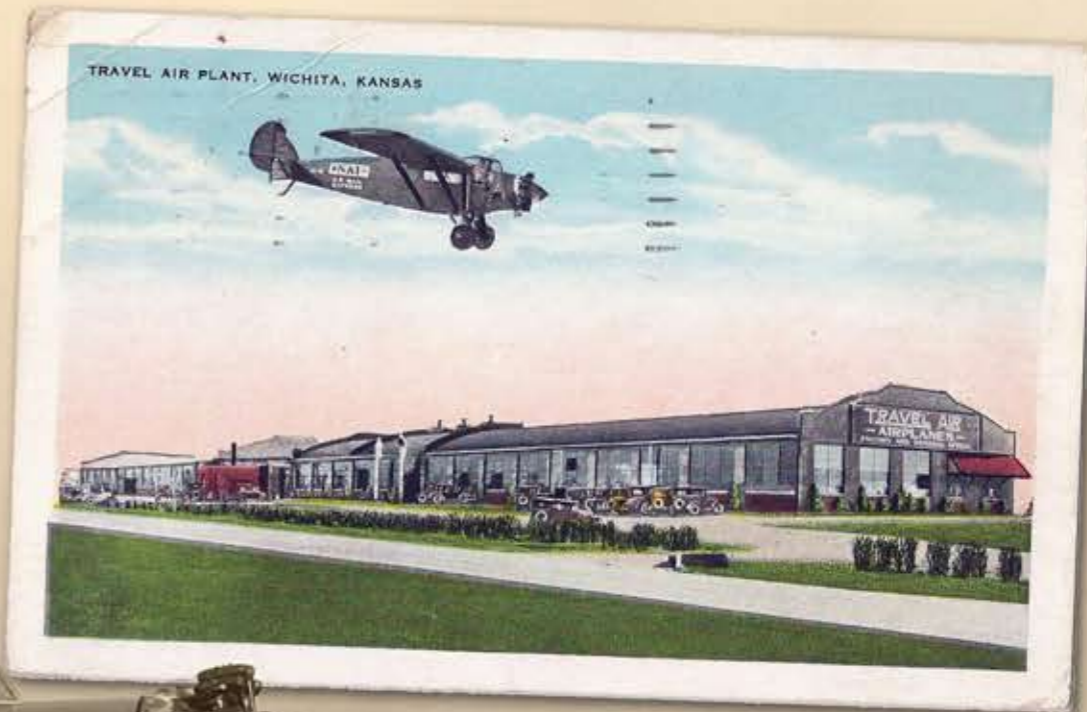


BY TRAVEL AIR TO HAWAII

THE ILL-CONCEIVED DOLE AIR RACE OF 1927 WOULD BECOME KNOWN BY MANY NAMES INCLUDING "PINEAPPLE DERBY" AND "DEATH DERBY." THREE TRAVEL AIR MODEL 5000 TRANSPORTS WOULD BE MODIFIED AS UNLIKELY RACERS AND GAIN FAME WHILE MAKING WALTER BEECH AN AVIATION FORCE TO BE RECKONED WITH - BY MAL HALCOMBE



Vintage postcard illustrating the Travel Air factory with a Model 5000 overhead.



Art Goebel poses with Travel Air 5000 Woolaroc. The aircraft combined the talent of Walter Beech, Lloyd Stearman, and Clyde Cessna and pointed the way toward modern aerial transportation.

By any standard, the 1927 Dole Air Race to Hawaii was a disaster. The sky road to the starting point at Oakland Airport in northern California was littered with wrecked aircraft and dead pilots. Capitalizing on America's sudden "air-mindedness" following Charles Lindbergh's flight to Paris, pineapple king James D. Dole announced on 25 May 1927 that he would put forth a prize of \$25,000 for the first aircraft to fly from Oakland to Honolulu (there was a \$10,000 prize for second). Dole also had visions of Lindbergh participating in the event to create even more public excitement. Fortunately, Lindbergh had better things to do. The start for the Dole Air Race was scheduled for August 1927, thus giving individuals that wished to participate an absolutely minimal time period in

which to prepare specialized aircraft. Some of the punch was taken out of the event when, on 28 June 1927, US Army Air Corps Lieutenants Lester Maitland and Albert Hegenberger piloted an Atlantic-Fokker C-2 tri-motor named *Bird of Paradise* from Oakland to Wheeler Army Airfield on Oahu following a relatively trouble-free flight to become the first airmen to cross the Pacific. Pilot Ernie Smith and navigator C.H. Carter had arrived at Oakland a bit earlier than the Army tri-motor and the pair hoped to parallel the Air Corps flight. They would use a Travel 5000 named *City of Oakland* but had mechanical difficulties and took off two hours after the Army pilots. They returned to Oakland with a damaged windscreen. Apparently, the two men had an argument after the windscreen

failed as Smith wanted to press on but Carter said he would activate the emergency fuel dump valve if the flight continued. Back at Oakland, Carter quit the enterprise while Smith got a new navigator by the name of Emory Bronte. The pair departed for Hawaii on 14 July. After 26 hours and 26 minutes in the air, they ran out of fuel and crash-landed in trees on the island of Molokai. They thus became the first civilians to cross the Pacific to Hawaii by air but did not reach the target goal of Wheeler Field. Making the flight across the Pacific was a daring proposition but if one were a betting person, certainly the odds would favor a three-engine aircraft backed by the US military compared to a single-engine plane being crewed on a limited budget by two civilians. However,

both made it across — albeit in different stages of repair. What was the Travel Air 5000 and why was it suited to make a nearly impromptu jaunt across the Pacific? Looking nothing like a racing aircraft, the Travel Air 5000 was a big, boxy monoplane with very little in the way of streamlining. However, the aircraft embodied the talents of many famous early aeronautical designers. The first 5000 was designed by Clyde Cessna, who wanted to break away from the biplanes that dominated American civil aviation. The prototype Model 5000 was powered by an Anzani radial of 110-hp and this left the machine distinctly underpowered. Accordingly, the design was modified by a team including Cessna, Lloyd Stearman, and Walter Beech beginning in the fall of 1926. The

second aircraft was fitted with a Wright J5C radial, similar to what Lindbergh had used in his *Ryan Spirit of St. Louis*. Taking a page from the Anthony Fokker design book, the fuselage was built from welded steel tubing while the broad wings were of wooden construction and the whole airframe covered in Irish linen. The passenger cabin was a box-type affair with the pilot's cockpit placed atop the fuselage and ahead of the wing leading edge in an enclosed cockpit. Capable of carrying four passengers, the Model 5000 was also built with another market in mind — carrying the air mail. The first eight production aircraft were acquired for air mail contracts and for passenger service while the prototype was sold to Pacific Air Transport in April 1927. Those first eight production machines would go

to National Air Transport to fly on the Chicago to Dallas route along with other planned air mail routes. The boxy fuselage of the Model 5000 had a big advantage for those wishing to span the Pacific — lots of extra fuel could be crammed into the space once occupied by passengers while smaller fuel tanks could be fitted into the wing. Getting some sponsors, Smith managed to make a deal with Pacific Air Transport and purchased the aircraft, which did not carry a civil registration but the plane was identified by its construction number of 160. Quickly modified to have fuselage and wing fuel tanks plus a larger oil tank and a position for the navigator along with a celestial port, surviving photos show this particular aircraft to be somewhat crude in finish. On 28 June 1927, a crowd estimated