

SAGA OF THE GREATER ROCKFORD

A UNIQUE RECORD FLIGHT BETWEEN ILLINOIS AND SWEDEN ENDED IN FAILURE
BUT HELPED ESTABLISH THE GREAT CIRCLE ROUTE - BY HOWARD CARTER

1893, his parents wanted Bert to enter the ministry but he had a rebellious streak with no desire for such a life. He attended Rutgers University and soon became completely consumed by the new science of aeronautics. As a young man, Hassell began hanging around the Curtiss flying field at Hammondsport, New York. He was soon helping clean the early Curtiss pushers while doing just about every other lowly task in order to learn more about aviation. He began taking flying lessons and after just a few hours of dual control he was sent solo in the wood and fabric contraption on 15 June 1914 and was soon in the employ of Curtiss as an instructor and factory pilot.

It was not uncommon at the time for newly-minted aviators to become instructors, passing on their limited knowledge

to an entirely new generation of individuals that wished to conquer the sky. The government began issuing pilot's licenses (none had previously been required) and Hassell received license number 20, signed by Orville Wright. While with Curtiss, he became very interested in the company's flying boats and was soon demonstrating the Curtiss F boat to prospective customers. On one such flight over Lake Michigan, the young pilot ran into trouble. "I was holding the ship close to the water when a huge wave broke under me," Hassell would later write, "and kissed my tail section and forced the nose into the lake. The next thing I saw was more Lake Michigan herring than the local fisherman at Waukegan ever knew there were in the lake."



Fish Hassell and Shorty Cramer with *The Greater Rockford*.



The Greater Rockford shortly after completion. Note the registration 5408 atop the wing.

A dramatic view of the skeleton of *The Greater Rockford* and the Greenlandair Sikorsky S-62N OY-HAH that was used to recover the *Stinson Detrioter*. Constant winds had turned the *Detrioter* on its back and torn off the tail section.

trend. Thompson expressed his thoughts to Fish — a flight from Rockford to Stockholm, Sweden, could result in the same massive publicity that St. Louis benefited from when the *Spirit of St. Louis* touched down at Le Bourget that previous May.

Why Stockholm? It must be remembered that in the early part of the 20th Century many residents of the American Midwest had Scandinavian roots and strong connections with the "home" country. Thompson had quite cleverly planned out a flight that would take full advantage of the fact that financing for such an aerial

expedition was being offered by a group of Swedish-Americans in nearby Chicago. The flight plan would roughly follow the path undertaken by 11th Century Norwegian explorer Leif Ericson. This route would go from Labrador to Greenland, Iceland, and on to Scandinavia — reversing the intrepid explorer's route. Now, all Thompson and his backers had to do was find an aircraft and a pilot qualified for such a record-breaking endeavor.

Thompson viewed Fish Hassell as a friend and also knew of Fish's aeronautical background. Born in

Descending out of layers of freezing cloud, Bert "Fish" Hassell and Parker "Shorty" Cramer knew they were in trouble — big trouble. Hassell probably reflected back to the day during October 1927 when he discussed a record flight with Barney Thompson, editor of the *Rockford Daily Republic* newspaper back in Illinois. Following Charles Lindbergh's stunning record flight to Paris, a massive wave of "air-mindedness" swept America and almost every city government was trying to figure out how to capitalize on this new



Bert Hassell with the *Detrioter* after it had been painted in the distinctive blue and yellow Swedish color scheme.