

The First Federal Aviation Inspector

On May 20, 1926, President Calvin Coolidge signed the Air Commerce Act of 1926 into law. The act instructed Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover to foster air commerce; designate and establish airways; establish, operate, and maintain aids to air navigation (but not airports); arrange for research and development to improve such aids; license pilots; issue airworthiness certificates for aircraft and major aircraft components; and investigate accidents.

Three months later, on August 11, 1926, William P. MacCracken, Jr., took office as the first Assistant Secretary of Commerce for Aeronautics, becoming the first head of the Aeronautics Branch. The Aeronautics Branch was FAA's first predecessor agency.

In selecting his staff, MacCracken hired Ralph Gregory Lockwood as the first federal aviation inspector on December 6, 1926. Once hired, he immediately went to work helping the new organization draft the first federal safety regulations in the country. His title was supervising inspector, and he earned a whopping \$5,000 per year in salary. It is interesting to note, Lockwood made his first official inspection of an aircraft the day after he was hired, and before this country even had aviation safety regulations in place. On December 7, 1926, he inspected and tested a Stinson Detroiter before its delivery to Canadian Air Express.

A native of Kokomo, Indiana, he was a World War I pilot, first joining the Canadian Royal flying corps in 1915 and then serving in the Royal Air Force. Once the United States declared war on Germany in April 1917, Lockwood returned to the U.S. to join the U.S. Army Air Corps. He earned a number of honors for his wartime service – the Bronze Star, British Military Cross, French Croix de Guerre, Canadian Volunteer Ribbon and Victory Ribbon with six stars, the British Service Ribbon and Asiatic-Pacific Ribbon with three stars.

He left the Army Air Corps in 1919, and then served as a civilian test pilot, for the Army at McCook airfield near Dayton, Ohio. As a test pilot, he set a number of aviation speed records in the early 1920s.

The Aeronautics Branch issued the first federal aviation regulations on December 31, 1926. Once those regulations became the law, Lockwood became a very busy man as aircrews, pilots, and aircraft were now required to be federally inspected. He was also responsible for accident investigations.

As an interesting aside, the Aeronautics Branch issued the first federal pilot license to MacCracken in April 1927; the second license went to MacCracken's deputy Clarence Young; Lockwood received the third federal license.

During fiscal year 1927, which ran from July 1, 1926, through June 30, 1927, the Aeronautics Branch hired 15 men to work as inspectors, hoping to increase that number to 50 during the following year. By fiscal year 1929, the Aeronautics Branch had established 9 district or regional offices to oversee inspection and accident investigation responsibilities.

By 1929, with the Branch's basic organization in place, Lockwood left the agency to become the executive engineer for Fairchild Airplane Manufacturing Company in New York. Within a few

months, he was promoted to assistant operations director for the airlines owned by the Aviation Corporation of which Fairchild was a subsidiary. By 1930, he was the chief of operations for Colonial Airways System, another unit of the Aviation Corporation. He subsequently became the general superintendent of the Aviation Corporation.

He left the Aviation Corporation for Eastern Air Transport, where he worked as the airline's chief engineer. While there, he developed a muffler that the airline installed on its Curtiss Condor aircraft that reduced noise by 70 percent.

After two years with Eastern Air Transport, he served as the chief engineer for Pan American Airlines in South America from 1932-1934. There he assisted in mapping the routes used by the airline's trans-Pacific clippers.

Among his myriad other positions, he worked for a while as the aviation director for the Gulf Oil Company, owned and operated Georgia Air Service in Atlanta prior to WWII to train pilots for war service. He later became the operations manager for the Flying Tiger Line, where he also flew flights to Honolulu and Tokyo.

When Lockwood left the Army Air Corps after World War I, he joined the military reserves. As a result, he was recalled to service multiple times and served during World War II and Korea. He retired from service in 1954 as a colonel. After his death in 1972, he was buried in Arlington National Cemetery.