

DEDICATION OF CLARENCE A. GILBERT MEMORIAL
PLAINVILLE, KANSAS
SATURDAY, JUNE 10, 1967
Remarks of Congressman Bob Dole

IT IS A PLEASURE FOR ME TO PARTICIPATE IN DEDICATING THIS MEMORIAL TO CLARENCE A. GILBERT, THE FIRST PILOT TO LOSE HIS LIFE IN NIGHT FLYING AFTER TRANS-CONTINENTAL AIR MAIL SERVICE WAS INAUGURATED IN THE UNITED STATES IN 1924. THE MEMORIAL WAS COMMISSIONED BY GILBERT'S WIDOW, MRS. EDWARD MURPHY, NOW OF BARDSTOWN, KENTUCKY, AND WE ARE ALL PLEASED AND HONORED THAT SHE AND MR. MURPHY ARE HERE TODAY. WE ARE ALSO HONORED WITH THE PRESENCE OF MEMBERS OF THE GILBERT FAMILY ---- GILBERT'S MOTHER, MRS. ROSE GILBERT; BROTHERS HARLAN AND JUDGE JAMES GILBERT; AND A SISTER, MRS. ETHEL SHEPARD. TO MRS. MURPHY, TO MEMBERS OF THE GILBERT FAMILY, AND TO THEIR MANY FRIENDS, LET ME STATE AGAIN THAT IT IS AN HONOR AND A PRIVILEGE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS DEDICATION CEREMONY.

WHEN CLARENCE GILBERT BEGAN FLYING FOR THE AIR MAIL SERVICE, THE STORY OF MAIL TRANSPORTATION ACROSS THE UNITED STATES HAD ENTERED UPON ITS LAST CHAPTER. THE PERIOD FROM 1918 TO 1927, WHEN THE UNITED STATES POST OFFICE DEPARTMENT OPERATED THE AIR MAIL SERVICE, WAS A PIONEERING ERA FILLED WITH MANY DISASTERS AND ACTS OF COURAGE, VISION, AND ULTIMATE TRIUMPH OVER THE INDIFFERENCE OF MEN AND THE OBSTACLES OF NATURE.

THE THIRTY-DAY TRIAL OPERATION OF THE PROPOSED CROSS-COUNTRY AIR MAIL SCHEDULE BEGAN ON JULY 1, 1924. THE TRANS-CONTINENTAL ROUTES, ESPECIALLY THOSE REQUIRING NIGHT FLYING, REQUIRED MUCH PREPARATION. EMERGENCY AND TERMINAL LANDING FIELDS WERE EQUIPPED WITH ROTATING ELECTRIC BEACONS, BOUNDARY MARKERS, AND TELEPHONES; AND SEVENTEEN PLANES EQUIPPED WITH LUMINOUS INSTRUMENTS, NAVIGATION LIGHTS, LANDING LIGHTS, AND PARACHUTE FLARES WERE PREPARED FOR NIGHT OPERATIONS.

-2-

THOSE MEN WHO FLEW THE MAILS UNDER THE DIRECTION OF THE UNITED STATES POST OFFICE DEPARTMENT GAVE THE SAME OBEDIENCE AND UNQUESTIONING FAITH WHICH ONE ASSOCIATES WITH THE MOST DESPERATE QUESTS OF MANKIND. THE STORY OF CLARENCE GILBERT'S LAST FLIGHT IS FAMILIAR TO MANY OF YOU HERE TODAY. FOR OTHERS, LET ME REVIEW IT FOR YOU BRIEFLY.

DECEMBER 21, 1924, WAS A DRAB WINTER DAY WITH A LOW, GRAY OVERCAST. THE HORIZON WAS ONLY DIMLY OUTLINED, AND VISIBILITY WAS CUT TO A FEW MILES BY A BLUE HAZE. THE LAST-MINUTE CHRISTMAS RUSH WAS ON, BOTH IN THE STORES AND IN THE AIR MAIL; AND EXTRA SECTIONS WERE CALLED UPON TO HELP TRANSPORT THE SURPLUS PACKAGES. CLARENCE GILBERT WAS ONE OF TWO PILOTS CHOSEN TO FLY THE MAIL WEST THAT DAY. HE TOOK OFF FROM CHICAGO ON SCHEDULED TIME; AND AS HE FLEW WEST, HE ENCOUNTERED A BLINDING SNOW STORM WHICH OBSCURED THE VERY ESSENTIAL FLARES OF THE LIGHTED AIRWAYS BELOW. IT IS ASSUMED THAT CLARENCE GILBERT, UNABLE TO RELY ON HIS SENSE OF DIRECTION, BALANCE, OR ALTITUDE, FINALLY DECIDED TO RELINQUISH THE PLANE TO THE UNYIELDING ELEMENTS, AND IF POSSIBLE, SAVE HIS OWN LIFE. HE PAUSED LONG ENOUGH TO CUT THE IGNITION, THUS PREVENTING FIRE AND SAVING THE MAIL. HE THEN STEPPED OVER THE SIDE, BUT HIS PARACHUTE HAD OPENED TOO CLOSE TO THE PLANE AND THE TAIL SURFACES CUT THE LINES, RENDERING HIS PARACHUTE USELESS. HIS RESULTING DEATH WAS THE FIRST FATALITY SINCE NIGHT FLYING HAD BEGUN IN JULY OF THAT YEAR. AIR MAIL PILOTS HAD FLOWN 1.2 MILLION MILES WITHOUT A MISHAP.

MUCH CREDIT SHOULD GO TO THOSE INTREPID AVIATORS WHO FROM MAY, 1918, ONWARD FOUGHT THE BATTLE OF FLYING THE MAILS. THESE PILOTS WERE TRUE ADVENTURERS. THEY RETURNED TO THEIR JOBS DAY AFTER DAY, COOLLY WEIGHING THEIR CHANCES. IN A TIME WHEN MOST MEN PLODDED FROM HOME TO OFFICE AND OFFICE TO HOME, THIS SMALL GROUP WAS SET APART BY AN OCCU-

-3-

PATION WHEREIN EACH DEPARTURE BORE THE CHANCE THEY MAY NOT RETURN. LIVING IN THIS FASHION, AT A NERVOUS TENSION, THEY DEVELOPED A SEPARATE CODE, AN ATTITUDE OF DISINTEREST TOWARD THEIR OWN DANGERS AND DARING.

BY 1927, JUST THREE YEARS AFTER GILBERT'S DEATH, THE POST OFFICE DEPARTMENT HAD OPERATED THE AIR MAIL SERVICE FOR A SUFFICIENT LENGTH OF TIME TO DEMONSTRATE CLEARLY TO THE PUBLIC THE PRACTICABILITY OF COMMERCIAL AVIATION. THE POST OFFICE DEPARTMENT WAS WILLING TO INVITE PRIVATE ENTERPRISE TO ENTER THE FIELD AND EVENTUALLY TAKE OVER. BY DECEMBER 31, 1927, THE POST OFFICE'S INTERESTS WERE COMPLETELY CLOSED OUT AT ALL FIELDS. WITHOUT THE EXPERIENCE AND THE SACRIFICE OF BRAVE AMERICANS SUCH AS CLARENCE GILBERT, THE UNITED STATES WOULD HAVE BEEN NINE YEARS BEHIND THE REST OF THE WORLD IN ESTABLISHING OUR OUTSTANDING AIR TRANSPORT SERVICE.

YES, CLARENCE GILBERT WAS IN EVERY SENSE OF THE WORD A "PIONEER" AND A "HERO". THEREFORE, IT IS BOTH FITTING AND PROPER THAT WE PAUSE TO DEDICATE THIS MEMORIAL TO HIM TODAY. I KNOW THAT THE GILBERT FAMILY AND THEIR FRIENDS JOIN ME IN THANKING ALL OF YOU FOR YOUR HELP, YOUR INSPIRATION, AND FOR YOUR PRESENCE HERE TODAY. THANK YOU.