

# Raymond Noble Estey (1886-1980)

## Pioneer Aviation Photojournalist; Pre-War RI Naval Militia Aviator; World War I Army Recon Pilot; Commercial Aerial Photographer; Air Power Advocate

*"I am practically sleeping on the telephone at camp as the Tribune is bent upon scooping its rival in town and getting onto the street first. It's a strenuous life, but I live on excitement."*

*"One can readily understand how one airplane manned with a pilot and observer can do the work of 1000 men ...in a few minutes work."*

-Raymond Estey, 1916

Ray Estey was born in Waterbury, CT, October 29, 1886. He was educated in the public schools of Waterbury, and was fascinated by newspaper work from an early age. He learned the basics of photography, and worked part time for the Waterbury Advertiser.

By the 1910 census, however, he is listed as living in Cranston, RI with his grocer father and stepmother Ada C Newell. Even more mysteriously, he is listed in that census as having been married for two years—but there is no sign of a wife. (See sidebar.)

He was working as a photographer for the Providence Tribune, and according to contemporary accounts he first became interested in aviation in 1909. Estey got himself assigned to cover the world's first air race at Belmont Park on Long Island in October of 1910. "All the big names were there . . . including Curtiss and the Wrights," he said. He also made his first flight that week.

The following year, he took many pictures of Harry Atwood's Burgess biplane flights in the New Bedford area.

When Gerald Hanley (of the Hanley Brewing family) acquired his flying boat and brought it to Providence in 1913, Estey covered the ensuing events extensively. He developed close relationships with both Hanley and Curtiss instructor pilot Ray Morris, and for the next four years he flew regularly with Hanley and others, producing a photographic documentation of Rhode Island's entry into the aerial age.

During that time Hanley was also serving as a Lieutenant in the Field Artillery of the RI Army Militia, and he used his seaplane to support his unit during training.

Estey told the Los Angeles Times in 1975 that he learned to fly within about two weeks of his first lesson from Morris in Hanley's flying boat. "After two weeks I was able to handle the plane pretty good, but landing was difficult," Estey said. "We had to be careful about the wind, so we only went up a half an hour at a time in the early mornings and late afternoons."

Of particular note is a set of aerial photographs he took in the autumn



Lieutenant Estey, early 1918

of 1913. His images of downtown Providence, Providence harbor, Bullock's Point and Crescent Park may well be the first aerial photos of this area taken from an airplane. He wrote on the back



Early on, Estey decided to merge his two passions--aviation and photography. In a 1975 interview, Estey described the process. "In those days we had a camera that weighed 60 pounds. I had to turn the camera upside down to get a flat view of the city and then hang out the side to get a clear view. The wind was blowing against my hood and I couldn't hold on very long." The Providence Tribune published a full page spread of these aerial photos on October 26, 1913, entitled "As the Birdmen See Providence."

## Running off With a Rich Man's Daughter



*Estey was quite a handsome young man.*

A crucial event in young Estey's life—and one that may have led to his devil-may-care, death-defying attitude thereafter—occurred sometime around 1905 while he was working as a clerk in the Waterbury Clock Company store. He met and fell in love with a young woman named Mary Louise Clowes, who happened to be the daughter of one of the richest men in the area, George Clowes.

Mr. Clowes was the head of the Randolph-Clowes company, manufacturers of brass, copper and bronze devices, with offices in every large city in the country. He was formerly president of the Waterbury board of trade. On her mother's side she was a member of the famous Blacknall family of North Carolina. The Clowes were truly one of the first families of Connecticut.

Mary Clowes had been given every advantage that a young society belle could desire. She graduated at 19 from a fashionable academy in New York City, after having attended an exclusive preparatory school in North Carolina. Much to her parents' dismay, however, their charming society daughter became infatuated with the stage, and longed for a career on Broadway.

Estey supposedly dabbled in the theater as well, and encouraged her dream. According

to the breathless news reports of the day, the young man wrote a vaudeville sketch for her. The little play opened in Waterbury "and was well received". They took it to New York, and in an understatement the sketch "did not prove to be the success that the young couple had anticipated". Their dream collapsed in a single Sunday afternoon at Keith & Proctor's Twenty-third St. Theater.

Mary Louise was prominent in the younger social set in Waterbury. "Scores of wealthy society men paid court to her, but finally she chose young Estey because she loved him."

Estey was not permitted to call at the Clowes home, so Mary frequently made purchases at the jewelry store "and they quoted passages from 'Romeo and Juliet' across the counter. They hoped for a large wedding, but her father did not approve of the match and would not give his consent.

Undaunted, they eloped to New Haven, where the news reports say "Rev. Thomas Horton made them one yesterday [January 21, 1908]." They notified her parents by telegram. Mr. Clowes said they were not welcome to come home.

Newspapers across the country followed this story throughout the year, with the more lurid and sensational reporting that the couple was in dire straits, living hand-to-mouth in Boston.

In November, Mrs. Estey invited a reporter to visit her to refute those reports. A story in the Des Moines Register of November 22, 1908 quoted her as saying, "It was erroneously reported that we were living in a small back room. Look around and see the beautiful apartments we have. I wish that you would deny that story.

"We are just as happy as we can be; we don't want to be disturbed. Father has not yet forgiven us... I hope the time will come, however, when he will look at our marriage in a different light and give us the parental blessing of his own accord. As I said, we are both seeking to live in our own way in the world, quietly, peacefully and successfully.

"My husband and I are supporting ourselves;

It is untrue that we are seeking a reconciliation with my father. We are now independent of everyone and live only for each other. I am earning handsome sums of money with my pen and my husband is clerking."

They had been in Boston since April. Raymond reportedly first went to work in a jewelry store, but "he gave that up to take a position in a Boylston Street cigar store, where he has been working ever since."

The paper went on to report that their "romantic courtship, crowned by a sensational elopement last January with her actor husband, was one of the most talked-of happenings in Connecticut society last spring."

That was the last published report we have been able to find about this relationship. It apparently died as quickly as it started, and "Mrs. Estey" returned to her family as Mary Clowes. There is no record we have been able to find of their marriage—nor of any divorce.

By the 1910 census, Ray Estey had moved to Cranston and was living with his father and stepmother. He was working for the Providence *Tribune* as a photographer, and had begun to throw himself into the aviation game.

But in that census report, he listed himself as married, since 1908. And when he joined the RI Naval Militia in 1915, he still identified himself as "married" on his enlistment papers. And, in 1940, when he was trying to untangle his VA benefits, he did confirm that his marriage to Keith Cameron in 1925 was his second marriage.

In the extensive Estey archive collections we have acquired, there is no other mention of the Clowes marriage, of a divorce, or even of any interest in the theater.

But tucked in the back of one of his photo albums are two newspaper clippings from 1913, describing the successful Broadway career of Mary Clowes.

Mary Clowes never married (again?) and she died very young, in 1925.

of one of the photos, "Sept 13, 1913: Photos at Providence RI, the first aerial photos taken in the United States by R Noble Estey; they were made from the third flying boat built by Glenn Curtiss piloted by Raymund V Morris, Curtiss test pilot."

The Providence Tribune published a full page spread of these aerial photos on October 26, 1913, entitled "As the Birdmen See Providence."

Over next two years Estey set up his own photo studio at 246 Broad Street in

Providence, and performed assignments for other papers, to include the New Bedford Times. But his passion was aviation, and soon he was doing public relations for the early fliers. "We would try to do any kind of publicity stunt that would attract the public to flying."

Jack McGee was a Rhode Island native and one of the most famous early stunt fliers. By 1915 he was a big name on the performance circuit. He hired Ray Estey as his agent.

Estey was "carrying on negotiations

for the appearance of this thrilling, spectacular event" and "Mr. Estey says that McGee will fly Saturday afternoon at Sandy Beach, hail rain snow blizzard or cyclone."

Estey was still a photojournalist by profession, but he had been bitten badly by the aviation bug, and he looked for a way to scratch that itch. In the fall of 1915 he became aware of a plan to add an aeronautical unit to the Naval Battalion of the RI National Guard.

The state certainly had no funds to

buy an airplane—but young heiress and sportswoman Lyra Brown Nickerson did. She also firmly believed in the future of the airplane, so she telephoned the Aero Club of America and asked how much a plane would cost. After being told \$7500, she sent a check with the stipulation that the funds be used to buy a plane for use by the RI militia.

As a result, Estey, along with several other big names from early RI aviation history, enlisted in the RI Naval Militia. Estey signed up as “landsmen”, the entry level enlisted rank in those days, on November 26, 1915, volunteering for a “special position”. It was no secret that those positions related to aviation, and then getting into aviation was the only reason they enlisted.

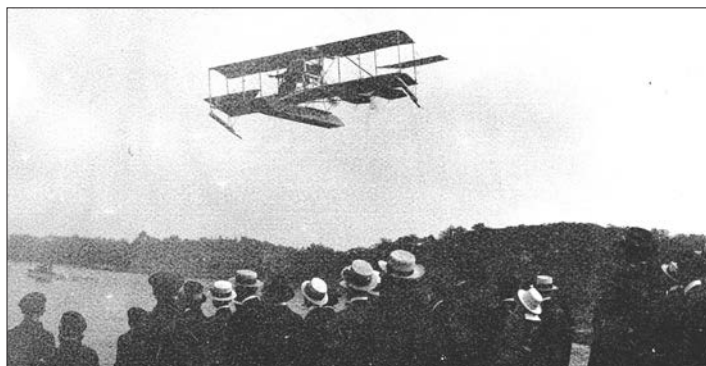
Even though the Aeronautical Section was not official until the following April when it was authorized by the RI General Assembly, the unit got off to a gangbusters start. While the rest of the Naval Battalion was “moribund”, as the governor later described, the initial group of four officers and about 25 enlisted men was very active and energetic.

As was the militia custom at the time, the unit selected its own officers. All the new men officially still held enlisted rank, but internally they created their own command structure. They began training and preparation for the arrival of their own plane, and even hosted an aviation corps dance. Raymond Estey, of course, was a member of the event committee.

On June 29, 1916, The Bridgeport, CT Times and Evening Farmer published a lengthy letter that Estey had penned to a friend in Waterbury a few days earlier. This was at the height of the mobilization of National Guard troops against Mexican guerrillas led by Pancho Villa, who had killed American citizens in raids across the border.

The thrust of Estey’s letter was that he recommended putting 1000 planes on the Mexican border instead of sending ground troops. [Of course, the US military had only a handful of planes at the time, but that was Estey’s point.]

The newspaper introduced Estey as “a member of the aviation corps of the Rhode Island contingent of the National Guard. He is a keen observer, and his comments on the war situation from an aviator’s point of view are exceedingly interesting. He is the official photographer of the Providence Tribune and is a busy man these days.”



Estey’s earliest known aviation photos depict Harry Atwood flying his Curtiss machine in October, 1911 in the New Bedford, MA area.



Estey learned to fly in 1913 in Gerald Hanley’s seaplane, taught by Curtiss instructor Raymund Morris.



This photo appeared in the Providence Bulletin on September 25, 1913. (L-R): Bill Batcher (Curtiss factory mechanic), Gerald Hanley, William Thaw, Stephen MacGordon, and Raymund Morris. Thaw, a student at Yale, was a cousin of Harry Thaw, known for the sensational 1906 murder of architect Stanford White at Madison Square Garden. In less than a year, Thaw would be in France, fighting with the Foreign Legion. He and Norman Prince are credited with organizing the Lafayette Escadrille. Hanley, Estey and Morris were flying near the Newport Naval Station, observing submarines at work, when they spotted another hydro-aeroplane nearing Fort Adams. Thaw, a member of a prominent Pittsburgh coal and railroad family was in the other craft, along with Stephen MacGordon of Chicago. In the breathless prose of the day, the Providence Evening Bulletin described. “...two white-winged hydro-aeroplanes shot over Newport late yesterday afternoon after an exciting aerial trip from Conanicut Island, during which both machines attained a speed of more than 80 miles per hour.” The pilots agreed to return to Providence together. The paper continued, “When both planes came roaring up the bay at terrific speed the shore dwellers turned out in large numbers for a sight new in the brief annals of Rhode Island flying.” After arriving at Hanley’s hangar at Field’s Point, the fliers posed for this photo (taken by Estey).



From bottom, as captioned by Estey: aeronautical sportsman Carl Heinze, Estey, and Robert Simon, who as of March, 1916 was an aviation instructor for the RI Naval Militia. They are posing with the Curtiss flying boat



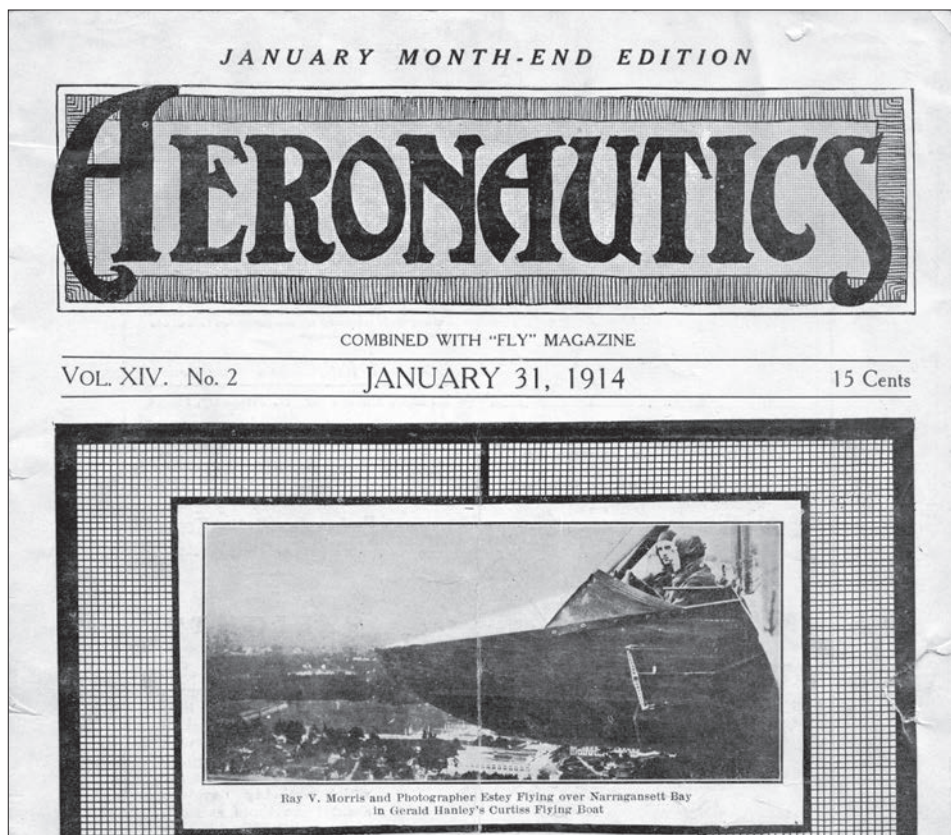
Depicting the past and future, this image shows the venerable USS Constellation, which served as a training ship in Newport from 1894 to 1925.

Estey wrote, "For the last two weeks I have been on the jump and for the past week I am putting 19 hours every day of the hardest work I've ever been called upon to do. I covered [presidential candidate Charles Evans] Hughes the two days he was here at Brown [June 21] and the next day was assigned to the military camp at Quonset Point."

On June 19, newspaper headlines read, "President Calls out Entire Militia for Border Duty; Rhode Island Commands to be Mustered at Quonset Point."

Rhode Island sent a disproportionately high percentage of militiamen to the Mexican border, and the Quonset facility was buzzing with activity. Estey's old friend Gerald Hanley was headed out along with his contingent of Light Artillery Battery A, plus the 1st Separate Squadron, Rhode Island Cavalry, Ambulance Company No. 1 and various support elements.

Those units not headed for the border were also busy preparing for their summer training encampments. Estey wrote, "I have orders to photograph every man in camp and get his address, as well



The January 31, 1914 issue of Aeronautics featured a lengthy article about Gerald Hanley and his early aviation exploits on Narragansett Bay. This dramatic photograph was on the cover, captioned "Ray V. Morris and Photographer Estey flying over Narragansett Bay in Gerald Hanley's Curtiss Flying Boat." At first it appeared to be an air-to-air shot, but the publication noted that Estey had rigged a camera on the wing to get that shot—quite creative for 1913. In the collection of early Estey photographs described here, there is an original of this photo inscribed in Estey's hand. "Raymund V. Morris and Raymond Estey 1500 feet over Crescent Park, RI taking their own photo by means of a Kodak being wired to an end strut and pulling a cord; photographed ourselves Sept 1913."

as writing the special stuff..."

He added, "Our battleplane arrives next Wednesday [July 1st] and will receive its final tests on the Bay." So the Aeronautical Section of the RI Naval Militia was finally in business, and Estey was in the center of the action—both as a militiaman and as a reporter/photographer.

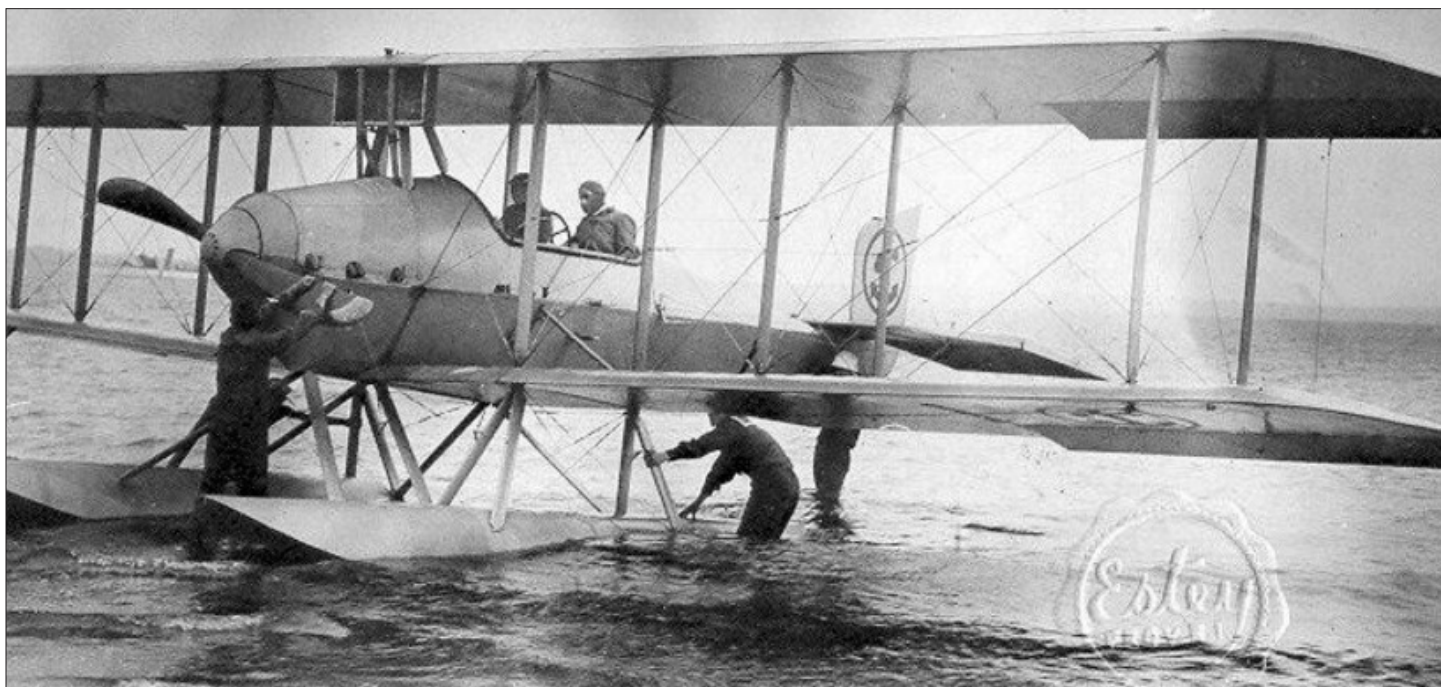
And the two-week summer camp of the Naval Militia was about to begin. This is the best-documented period in the unit's entire history; the "Report Of Tour Of Encampment By Aeronautic Section, Rhode Island Naval Militia July 17 to 29, 1916", has been preserved in the State Archives.



Earliest known photo of the Aero Section, RI Naval Militia. The unit was still a month away from being legally constituted when this photo was taken March 8, 1916, at the Bristol Armory. Estey is second from the left, standing. Seated immediately below him is Ensign Peirce.



Estey was a jack-of-all-trades when it came to aeroplanes



*RI Naval Militia's seaplane was a Sturtevant S4 with a Sturtevant 5A 140 hp engine. Just to the left of the propeller in the background is the naval militia flagship, the converted 500-ton steam yacht USS Aileen.*

During this two week period Estey took hundreds of photographs, many of which have been preserved in the archives described elsewhere in this story. In addition to images of flying and servicing the Sturtevant seaplane, Estey captured the essence of camp life, along with excellent photos of many of the members of his unit. Perhaps most interesting are his pictures of Lyra Brown Nickerson, taken on July 19 when she visited the camp and was taken for a flight in the airplane she had purchased.

Later in the year, Estey learned that he was one of five members of the Aeronautical Section selected to go to Pensacola for aviation training. One officer and four men from each state were to be assigned for three months at the best Navy training stations in the country. They were to receive instruction in airplane construction and navigation, as well as practical work on aeronautical motors and flying.

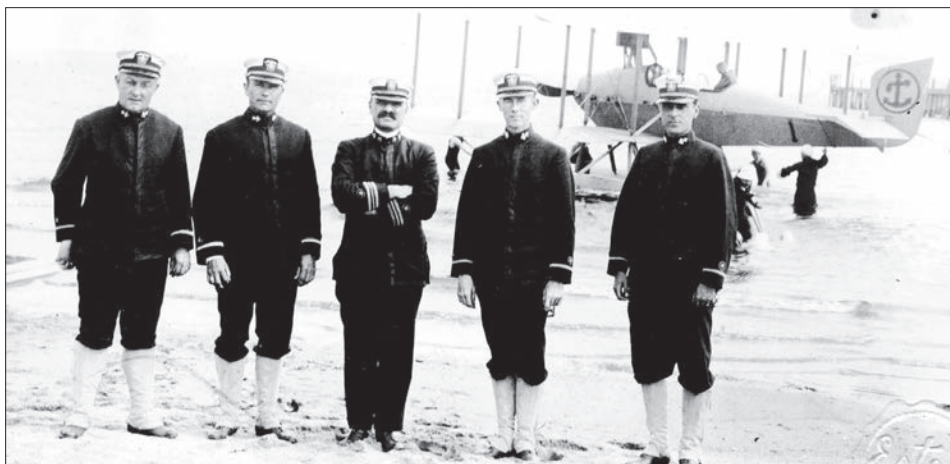
"To Become Aviators", read the headline in the November 25, 1916, *Boston Globe*.

Not exactly.

Estey already called himself an aviator, and he and other militia members were referred to as aviators in news articles of the day. However, it is not clear what that meant. The US Navy did not recognize the ratings and qualifications of the members of the militia's Aeronautical Section. Even



*Estey, above, with the Sturtevant. Below, the Aero Section's four pilots as of June 1916 stand with the Naval Battalion CO, LCDR Gladding, in June, 1916. Ensign Lincoln is to the left of Gladding and Ensign Peirce is on the right. The other two aviators are Ensigns Jesse Park and Roderick McKinnon.*





Side view of the seaplane; in a 1916 letter, Estey wrote, "It is made of steel throughout and ...a special linen covered with a fire and waterproof coating, which forms the wings, tail and rudder. It carries two machine guns, a pilot, observer and gunner; also 50 gallons of gasoline. It is 48 feet from tip to tip of wings with an 8 foot depth, weighs 2000 pounds and is equipped with a 140 hp Sturtevant motor which will drive this big machine 105 mph." Note the Rhode Island insignia on the tail and bottom of wings.



Heiress and philanthropist Lyra Brown Nickerson (R) prepares for a flight on July 19, 1916, under the guidance of Sturtevant test pilot Roderick Wright. The heiress was affectionately called the "Little Major" by the militia for whom she purchased the seaplane. This is one of three Estey photos published July 23rd, 1916 by the Providence Journal in a half-page spread about her flight. She planned to get her pilot's license, but shockingly she died of typhoid fever only a month later. She was 30 years old.



Nickerson was so pleased with Estey's work that she used him for her engagement photo.

the officers who were clearly pilots in the militia had to eventually go through flight school in Pensacola in order to be formally recognized as Naval Aviators.

In its story the Providence Bulletin wrote that "Five members of the first aeronautical section of the Rhode Island naval militia will leave tonight for Pensacola Florida for a three months tour of duty at the government aeronautical training station... It is expected upon their return to Rhode Island next spring that each man will return with a pilots license

and qualified to instruct other members of their unit..."

Again, not so fast. They returned home the second week in March, but while they undoubtedly gained valuable experience and training, none had been afforded the opportunity to earn a flying rating.

Estey went back to Waterbury for a few days leave, and while there he was interviewed by the local papers again. As he became enamored of flying, he also embraced its potential. He was an outspoken advocate for air power, and that outspokenness would embroil him in controversy later on. In March 1917, with war clouds looming, he called for more pilot training and greater use of airplanes against submarines. In a March, 1917 Hartford Courant article, he was referred to as a "quartermaster flier" of the US Navy air service. Under the title "Aviator Estey on Our Present Predicament", he urged young men to enlist in the aeronautical division of the National Guard.

As far back as June 1916 he had been beating the drum for aviation readiness. "Now the time has arrived when this country needs pilots and where are they?" he demanded.

On April 6, 1917, the members of the Aeronautical Division, along with the rest of the naval militia, were federalized and absorbed into the regular Navy, going first to Commonwealth Pier in Boston and then out to Marblehead, MA, where they joined with militiamen from other New England states. Thanks to the intercession of their former CO, Commander Richard E Byrd, the Rhode Island aviators were kept together and allowed to train as a unit.

Being the first Rhode Islanders to be called into service after the declaration of war, they were ready to fight. And the aviators were ready to fly. Much to their consternation, however, there was little if any flying done, and no instruction.

Estey described their frustration: "We with 80 other members [of the Aeronautic Division, RI Naval Militia] were called to the colors April 6 for aeronautic duties only... On April 20 we were sent to the training ship at Marblehead Neck, which is the Eastern Yacht Club. Here we have remained doing absolutely nothing in aeronautics for 73 days and have been a great expense to our government."

Chafing at week after week of inactivity, Estey finally wrote to the Aero Club of America (at whose behest many had joined the militia in the first place) and asked for their help. On June 13 one of the Governors of the Club, Henry Woodhouse, replied saying, "The Board of Governors of the Aero Club has voted today to pay the expenses of 20 men to go to the Lafayette Flying Corps". Estey was invited to go to France as one of the 20, assuming he could obtain his release from the Navy and pass the passenger flight test that determined suitability for flying. Those tests were held in Newport News..

Woodhouse asked Estey to invite other members of the militia from Marblehead "who are not getting flying training and who would like to serve their country by going to France" to fill out the 20 slots.

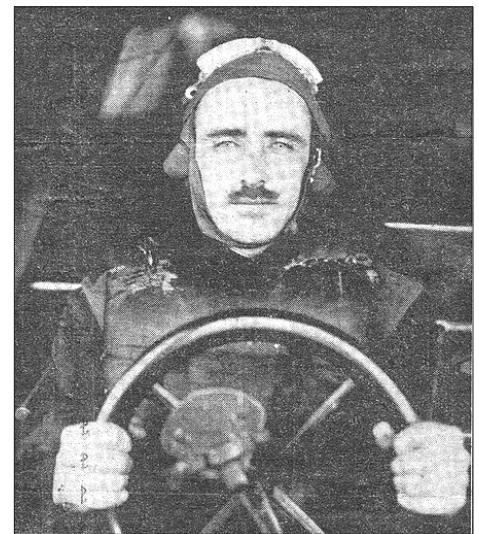
Estey responded on June 18th with a list of names "whom I have chosen from our division to carry the stars and stripes over the German lines". He added that "these men are the best of our division", and that their discharges "have been applied for at the Charlestown Navy Yard, but seem rather slow in coming through."

They were slow because of the reluctance of the Commandant of the Marblehead Aeronautic Station to let his best men go. Once again, Estey's desire to get actual pilot training and be formally designated as a naval aviator ran into a roadblock. This time his nemesis was LT Godfrey L. Cabot, a wealthy industrialist who had founded the Cabot Corporation and also started the Aero Club of New England. He had organized the Massachusetts Naval Militia and had bought an airplane for the unit. While the Aeronautical Division itself was commanded by LT Frank Lincoln of Rhode Island, they and the militiamen from the other states who reported to Marblehead found themselves under Cabot's overall command.

Estey went to the Chief of Staff at the Charlestown Navy Yard and requested a week's leave to get tested while the discharges were being processed. The leaves were granted, but on their arrival at Newport News a telegram from Cabot awaited, ordering them to return to Marblehead at once. Fortunately, the CO at Newport News was sympathetic. He reached out to the Navy Department



*Pensacola training group, December 1916 to March 1917. Estey is seated on the right front row.*



*Above: Estey stands guard duty at Marblehead, cJune, 1917. The photo on the right shows him at the helm of a Curtiss Flying Boat, and was published in the Waterbury paper when he left for France.*



*After Estey and his mates won their discharge battle, local Navy leadership did an about-face and encouraged public recognition of the departing men. On July 13, 1917, the entire unit took a train to nearby Newburyport, where they were met by a brass band, marched to city hall, and then to a local estate where the departing men were served lunch. Estey is front row center, sitting in front of their Rhode Island commanding officer, LT Frank Lincoln.*



Estey's temporary residence permit from the Lafayette Flying Corps, allowing him to stay in France in order to join American aviation.

in Washington and made sure that they were able to complete their test before returning to Marblehead. All four passed, and were accepted into the Lafayette Flying Corps. But there was still the issue of getting their Navy discharges.

Cabot apparently had dreams of developing and commanding a major Naval Aviation unit in the coming war, and resented Estey's efforts, implying that Estey had circumvented channels in order to get their discharges.

Estey, feeling he had nothing to lose, sent a telegram directly to Assistant Navy Secretary Franklin D. Roosevelt, briefly describing the problem and asking that Roosevelt approve their discharges so that they might "sail on the next steamer to join the Lafayette Flying Corps in France."

He followed up with wires to the representative of the Lafayette Flying Corps in the US and to Allen Hawley, President of the Aero Club of America, asking them to intercede

with Roosevelt on their behalf. "Lieutenant Cabot trying to block us," he wrote. "Other militia members are on verge of mutiny under these conditions."

In another letter he reiterated that he and many other had enlisted to fly, and that opportunity had been denied them at every turn. "We are National Naval Volunteers who left our businesses and very good positions, because we believe that our country needed us and 1 million more."

"As I stated we are getting no action [at Marblehead] and the way opened to us to the firing line through the Lafayette Flying Corps in France. We enlisted for action, Sir... We have but one goal to reach... that is to carry the Stars & Stripes to Berlin and the sooner we do this the better for humanity."

"I sincerely trust that you will... aid us... not that we may quit and give up, but to enable us to go on to France and take up the fight for which we enlisted."

Newspapers added additional pressure, stating, "Many of these men enlisted in the aeronautic divisions of the militia... last year with the understanding that they were to learn to fly at the earliest opportunity but now... notwithstanding the fact that they had enlisted for that purpose, are not getting the training."

"Seeing little prospect of getting this training, these men, who are already versed in the theory and mechanics of aeronautics and are anxious to be in active service, applied to the Aero Club of America for assistance in joining the Lafayette Flying Corps in France, where they can take up their flying training immediately and then go to the battle fronts."

The combination of public, political and command pressure finally yielded results. Estey and his companions did finally get their discharges on July 16, and they were scheduled to sail for France on July 23.

Estey was immensely proud of this accomplishment, and deservedly so. He accomplished his goal of getting to France, not just for himself, but for the other men of his unit. The approval of the discharges for Estey and his three colleagues opened the door for others.

Before his departure Estey was able to visit his mother and sister in Waterbury, where he was once again featured in the Waterbury American—this time with a photo of himself behind the controls of a flying boat. The piece was entitled,



Estey in basic pilot training at Tours, France, October, 1917. The aircraft is a French Caudron.



*Lieutenant Estey in France, 1918*

“Waterbury’s Soldier of the Air”, and once again he was introduced as “Flight Lieutenant”.

He apparently did one final op-ed as well: “...an interesting interview concerning the part that airplanes are to play in the war.”

There is one photo of Estey standing in front of the RI Naval Militia seaplane, inscribed “With sincere appreciation for all you have done for our boys. R. Noble Estey, Lafayette Flying Corps, France.”

He did jump the gun just a bit; the inscription is dated July 8, 1917. But he wasn’t quite there yet, and life was about to deal him another twist.

They sailed for France on July 23 aboard the SS Chicago. Estey wrote, “She’s an old tub, but there’s a warm spot in my heart for her.” She got them safely to France.

They reported to Lafayette Flying Corps HQ in Paris on August 5. There they received stunning news from Dr. Edmund Gros, who ran the LFC operation in France. While Estey and his group were enroute, the decision had been made to shut down the program. Pilots already serving with French units would be transferred to the American Expeditionary Force, and no new pilots would be accepted for training.

This must have been an unbelievably difficult blow for Estey, after all the struggles he had gone through to get this far. He and the others were provided



*At war’s end*

temporary accommodations in Paris, and were issued identity cards authorizing them to stay for the purpose of “rejoining American Aviation”.

So Estey and his group enlisted as aviation cadets in the US Army Air Service on August 27, 1917.

On September 1 he was sent to Tours for flight training, and in February, 1918, to Issoudun, where he completed the course in March.

On February 26, 1918, he was one of 23 aviation cadets recommended for commissioning as First Lieutenants, “All passed flying tests and enlisted in France...with ground school requirements waived on account previous military service...”

At last, Ray Estey was a rated pilot in the US military.

He was then assigned to the 99th Observation Squadron, and on March 18 left for the front. He flew photographic reconnaissance missions with that unit until he became Chief Photographic Officer. Estey’s 99th Aero Squadron (Corps Observation) was assigned to the Toul Sector of the French Western Front on 22 June.

Toward the end of August the Squadron was shifted to Souilly, arriving two days before the beginning of the St. Mihiel offensive.

During the entire drive his squadron operated over the sector, photographing and carrying on artillery spotting work.



*Visiting his mother in Waterbury, 1919*

## “ASPA” WANTS YOU



### *As a Member of* **AMERICA’S GREATEST AIR SOCIETY**

The American Society for Promotion of Aviation was organized by 12 ex-service aviators at the Army and Navy Club, New York City, in 1925.

Our objects as incorporated are to “arouse and maintain interest in aviation” and eventually to

### **“Make-America-Supreme- in-the-Air”**

We can accomplish our objectives by having a landing field or airport in every town, and by training red-blooded Americans in the art of flying.

We have organized over 300 aero clubs throughout the United States, and will co-operate with YOU in organizing a club in YOUR community.

You can participate in this great movement by becoming a member of THE A. S. P. A., and, as our representative, work for aviation in your community.

### **Join Aviation’s Great Fraternity —ENROLL NOW!!!**

MEMBERSHIP fee ONE DOLLAR, which covers the cost of silver wings, membership card and literature of the A. S. P. A.



Secretary,  
The ASPA,  
522 5th Avenue,  
New York City,  
N. Y.

Yes, I am interested in aviation! Please enroll me in the American Society for Promotion of Aviation. I enclose membership fee of One Dollar. Please send me my wings.

Name.....Dept. M

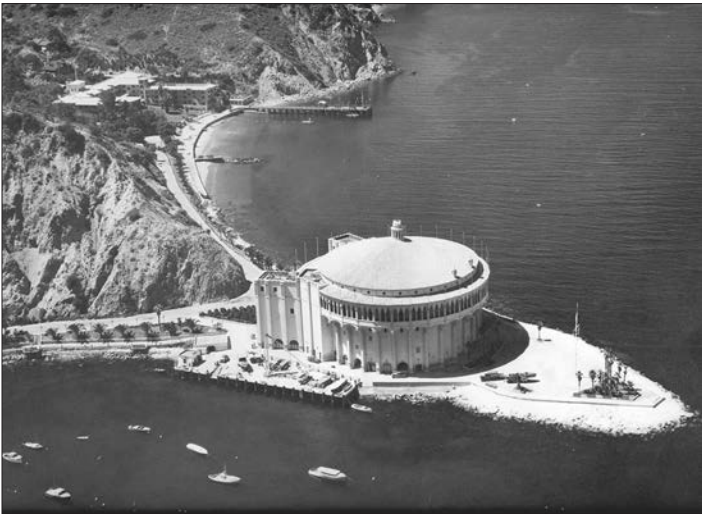
Address.....

City.....State.....

*Estey was very active in this group in the 1920s*



*William Hirschfeld (L), a former German flier during World War I, was manager of the Leroy Thompson airport in Bethany CT in 1930. The local newspaper generated a somewhat fanciful story about how he and Estey had met in the skies over France. Their mutual involvement with Szekely Aircraft Co. brought the two men together again. Estey was eastern sales manager, and Hirschfeld was a test pilot. [This aircraft is the one-of-a-kind Clark Robinson Special, manufactured by Cairns Aircraft in Naugatuck, CT and equipped with a Szekely engine.]*



*Estey transferred his skills as a military aerial photographer during WWI in France to the Southern California area for Watson Airfotos, Long Beach, CA during the late 1930s and into the 1940s. The top photo shows the famed Casino on Catalina Island, taken May 3, 1939, was completed in 1929 at a cost of \$2 million, under the direction of William Wrigley, Jr. While the landmark no longer operates as a casino, it remains a popular events venue today. The classic photo of the Hotel Laguna in Laguna Beach is dated April 1941.*

They also participated in the Meuse-Argonne offensive until the Armistice was signed. At the beginning of the Argonne offensive Lieutenant Estey was made Adjutant of the Air Service of the Fifth Army Corps.

After the Armistice he was ordered home, arriving at Hoboken on Feb. 17, 1919. He was honorably discharged June 5, 1919, and accepted a commission in the Reserve Corps, which he maintained well into the 1930s.

On August 1 of 1924 he married Canadian-born Keith Cameron in New York City. The couple sailed for Europe on their honeymoon five days later.

He changed his legal residence from Rhode Island to New York in 1925, and continued his work in aerial photography. He was also very active in veteran and airpower issues; some of those lobbying posts apparently were salaried positions.

One such organization was Aviators Post Number 743 of the American Legion in New York, whose membership was limited to those who earned pilot, observer or balloonist wings during the war.

In 1925 twelve former WWI military aviators got together and organized the American Society for Promotion of Aviation. Their mission was to “arouse and maintain interest in aviation” and eventually to “Make America Supreme in the Air”. Ray Estey was one of the 12 founding members; he had already been preaching that mission since before the war.

An advertisement for membership said they could accomplish their objectives “by having a landing field or airport in every town, and by training red-blooded Americans in the art of flying.” Annual membership cost one dollar, “which covers the cost of silver wings, membership card and literature of the A. S. P. A.”

Later that year, Estey became a highly vocal and visible supporter of Colonel Billy Mitchell in his famous court martial. Estey made national news by writing a letter to President Coolidge critical of the way the situation was being handled. Lieutenant Estey declared that “Colonel Mitchell may be 100% insubordinate but he’s 1000% right.”

He asserted that Colonel Mitchell’s cause would be pressed by 5000 wartime aviators in this country “regardless of the court martial findings”.

Pouring gasoline on the fire, Estey and three fellow leaders of American Legion Aviators Post 743 sent a public appeal to President Coolidge “to allow Colonel Mitchell, now detained in Washington under technical arrest, to visit New York as guest of honor” at their Armistice Day banquet, arguing that “Hundreds of men who served under Colonel Mitchell during the war will appreciate your favorable action in this matter.”

Estey knew how to stoke the fire.

For the next four years, Estey was involved with a number of very visible American Society for the Promotion of Aviation (ASPA) activities, such as a 1928 tour of southern cities to promote airport development. The famed aviator Captain Roscoe Turner of Birmingham was to command a Sikorsky transport biplane from Roosevelt Field, Long Island, to Miami, Atlanta, New Orleans and Birmingham. Lieutenant R Noble Estey was his copilot.

In 1927, after Charles Lindbergh’s successful return from his transatlantic flight, Estey and his group offered the Lone Eagle \$100,000 annual salary to head ASPA—an immense



*Estey and his wife's family, Christmas, 1955. Ray is standing in the back. His wife, Keith is sitting to his right and her sister, Gladys is to his left. Jan Daoust is behind the crib, in front of Keith. Jan will be coming in from Colorado to accept the award on Estey's behalf.*

amount in those days. (By comparison, the great Babe Ruth, heading the Murderer's Row of the 1927 Yankees, earned \$70,000 that year.)

By 1930, the ASPA had organized over 300 Aero Clubs throughout the United States. However, as the depression deepened in the early 1930s, aviation (especially general aviation) suffered more than other sectors of the economy. The ASPA cut back its activities and eventually ceased operating.

Estey redirected his efforts to helping to speed relief for unemployed war veterans (said to number as many as 50,000 in New York City alone).

A committee of 13 former servicemen initiated a national movement to get Congress to pass a law that would enable war veterans to cash their insurance policies before 1945, which was the date of maturity of these policies. Estey was named secretary, and spoke at a number of rallies on this topic.

Keeping his hand in the business world, he was involved in several marketing and sales efforts, to include promoting armored cars and armored vests. A March, 1930 story in the Waterbury Sunday Republican Magazine described Estey as the eastern sales manager for Szekeley Aircraft. That company produced three-cylinder radial engines built to power small aircraft, as

well as a light, inexpensive aircraft known as the Flying Dutchman. The Szekeley company filed for bankruptcy in March 1932.

Little more is known about Estey's life and business career for the rest of the 1930s. In 1938 Estey retired from the Air Corps Reserve, and by 1940 he was managing a golf course in Gardiner, New York, about 15 miles west of Poughkeepsie and 80 or so miles north of New York City.

On August 26, 1941, the Brooklyn Eagle reported on a big air pageant scheduled for September 7 to honor all fliers with Brooklyn connections who flew in WWI. Estey was one of honored invitees.

That was probably his last hurrah in New York, because he and his wife had decided to move to California. They had made several trips there over the years, and Estey had taken on some California aerial photography jobs. The Santa Ana Register of February 3, 1941 reported that the couple had "motored out here a short time ago from New York, this time with a view to making their home in California. Driving up and down the California coast line visiting different communities they finally decided on Laguna."

The paper reported, "During recent years Estey has been specializing in



*Photo taken when the Los Angeles Times interviewed him in 1975. He was already blind.*

aerial photography, in which connection he plans to associate himself with a Long Beach concern. He also has done considerable writing on matters connected with aviation."

The Esteys settled in a hillside home overlooking the Pacific. He registered for the draft in April 1942, declaring himself to be retired, and maintained a surprisingly low profile during World War II.

Estey worked for Watson Airfotos out of Long Beach. "He took many aerial photos of Laguna Beach and the surrounding area", says former Laguna resident Taryn Armstrong, who helped rescue the Estey archives. "His coastal pictures are remarkable," said Armstrong. "They really showcase the beauty of the area before it was so (some would say overly) developed."

Many of Estey's photos were for postcards sold to the public. Others appear to have been works commissioned by private parties or companies.

The Esteys apparently aged gracefully and quietly. By 1974 or so, however, both Ray and his wife Keith were apparently losing their eyesight and were unable to live without assistance. They moved from Laguna to Costa Mesa, where they had apparently made arrangements for private care.

Records show that Mrs. Estey died in Costa Mesa on February 1, 1975. Ray died on March 9, 1980. Both their cremated remains are interred at Pacific View Mortuary in Corona del Mar.

## Saving the Estey Archives

As we unraveled the threads of Estey's life in an attempt to locate a living relative to accept his award, we were stunned to learn that much of his photo and document archive had been rescued—in two different places, five years apart, by people who did not know each other. Here's how that happened.

In 1974, 12-year-old Rich Palmer of Costa Mesa, California, lost the sight in his right eye in a baseball accident. He was distressed and miserable. Old friends at school now made fun of him because he had to wear large safety glasses.



*Rich Palmer in 1974*

Every weekend, he would go with his grandfather to mow the lawn at his great aunt's house. She took care of a boarder, an old blind man named Ray Estey.

"My grandfather introduced me to Ray," Palmer says now. "Looking back, I think he told Ray about my losing my eye. He probably thought Ray would show me my world hadn't ended.

"Being blind didn't slow him down one bit, and he was proud of that. Blindness was something Ray and I had in common."

Estey, Palmer recalls, liked to sit on a hard metal dining chair and "fly in his head." He would hold his cane like the stick of an aircraft and rock from side to side. "I'd walk in and ask him, 'Where ya at, Ray?' And he would start on a story."

The two spent an hour or so together every week for about three years, and at some point Estey told the boy that since he had no children, he wanted Rich to have his photo albums and documents after he died.

Then Palmer moved away. He did not see Estey during the last two years of Estey's life.

"My great aunt didn't tell me he had [died], and we found out about his passing in the newspaper," Palmer continues. His aunt didn't know Ray had asked the boy to take care of his papers, so she cleaned out his room and thrown all his stuff in the trash.

"My grandfather and I drove across town as fast as we could, and rescued them from the garbage cans!"

For almost 35 years, Ray and his wife had lived in Laguna Beach. But by 1974 both were in failing health, and both were going blind. That's when they moved to Palmer's great aunt's house.

Steve McNamara was just out of college when he and a friend rented the Esteys' old house in Laguna Beach. The broker said there was some trash in the garage left by the previous occupants. She asked them to add it to the garbage for pickup.

"I had the impression that the previous owner had died, and that no one really cared about what was left behind," McNamara remembers. "But I realized that the pictures and WWI documents had historical value, and that I should save as much as I could."

What he chose is a great representation of Estey's life as photojournalist and aviator, and his passion for aerial photography. The saved images include photos of the less-developed California coastline of the 1940s and 1950s.

What McNamara did not know was that the previous occupants were still alive. And that even though he left a wealth of material behind, Ray Estey had taken the bulk of his collection with him to Costa Mesa.

We first came across Estey's name in 2006, when Gerald Hanley was nominated and we found early



*Rich Palmer today. The top picture shows a portion of the Estey archive he rescued,*

photos bearing Estey's name. Over the next few years, I came across photographs bearing the Estey mark while researching other nominees from that era. For the longest time I never even knew his full name — just the "Estey" on his photos.

The centennial of World War I changed that. We concentrated on researching and honoring local men and women who made noteworthy contributions during that conflict.

Listed as a pilot with the 99th Aero Squadron (Corps Observation) was Raymond Noble Estey of Providence. The fact that he was also the unit's chief photographic officer was telling.

This had to be the same Estey — but what was his story?



*Rob Tholl (left); Steve McNamara (center); and Taryn Armstrong worked together to save a significant portion of the Estey collection.*

Google searches produced an intriguing post on a World War I aviation blog, made by someone who had “a collection of original R. Noble Estey photos and documents, with pilot rosters from 1917-1919 and other stuff.” By a stroke of good luck the poster, Taryn Armstrong, still had the same email address she had used many years before, and our dialog began.

Armstrong was living in Alaska when Steve McNamara asked if she would take over the stewardship of the Estey material he had salvaged from Laguna Beach. The archive had survived storage in McNamara’s mother’s attic while he lived for a while in Hong Kong, and he was delighted when Armstrong — a Laguna Beach native he had met in the 1980s — agreed to take it on.

Rob Tholl, an aviation historian from Morristown, New Jersey, was researching Estey’s unit, the 99th Aero Squadron; he had responded to Armstrong’s post several years earlier. “Taryn agreed to send me the material so that I could scan what she had pertaining to the 99th Aero,” says Tholl. “In return, I promised to organize and catalogue the rest of the archive and help determine where it should end up.”

“A few hundred emails and several players later, RI Aviation Hall of Fame surfaced,” Armstrong

says with a laugh. “And now you know the whole history of how this archive was saved and catalogued, destined for bigger and better things in Rhode Island!”

But there was more to the tale.

We found Rich Palmer through genealogical records, albeit indirectly. The Esteys had no children. But Ray’s wife, Keith Cameron, is listed in a couple of family trees on Ancestry.com, so I emailed the owners of those trees in hopes they could direct me to a living descendant.

A few days later, I received this email: “Hello Frank. My name is Cindy and I live in So. California. Steve forwarded me your email through Ancestry as Great Uncle Ray was married to my great aunt on my maternal grandfather’s side.”

A place to start, at least! And in her next email Cindy Edgerton added some exciting news: “There is a guy in So. California who says his grandfather introduced him to Ray a few years before his death in 1980... He had a huge collection of Ray’s photos, letters, telegrams, etc. (which apparently Ray gave to him).”

“Ray’s collection belongs in Rhode Island, where it all began for him,” says Palmer. “For me it’s personal, as he was my friend. I looked at the Smithsonian and feared Ray’s work would be lost in the bottomless pit of their archives.

“I like the idea that not only would

Ray be inducted into the Rhode Island Aviation Hall of Fame, but that he’d be honored back where it all began — the place where many of his pictures were taken.

“I’ve kept his collection safe for over 40 years. I believe putting the collection back together will provide for fuller understanding of Rhode Island aviation history.”

Thanks to Palmer, McNamara, Armstrong, Tholl and others, we now we can reunite Ray Estey’s archives here in Rhode Island.

Palmer, now 55, is a graphic artist and photographer who lives in Vista, about 40 miles southeast of Laguna Beach. Ray Estey was the reason for Palmer’s 35-plus year career in photography, imaging, and graphics.

Armstrong, now retired, lives with her Alaska-born husband on Table Rock Lake in Missouri, where they collect classic cars, travel, and spend a lot of time on their pontoon boat.

Tholl is now 66, “almost retired” from an advertising career. He is a private pilot, who owns a Cessna 170B, and is one of the air show announcers at the Old Rhinebeck, NY Aerodrome

McNamara moved to the Pacific Northwest and launched a dot com company after a long career at an international advertising agency. He and his family live in Eugene, Oregon where he hikes, cooks and gardens.