The Donald H. Gordon Personal Papers SDASM.SC.10057

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Donald H. Gordon was an earlier aviator from San Diego. Items in this collection, from 1909 to 1968, with one article from 1982, include biographies on Donald H. Gordon, correspondence, affidavits, notes, newspaper clippings, and photographs and relate to his life in aviation.

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The materials in this Collection were donated to the San Diego Air and Space Museum.

Biographical / Historical
Born in New Britain, Connecticut in 1883, at three years old Donald H. Gordon moved with his mother, father, and three brothers to the Bostonia area of Southern California. As a child Gordon watched as his oldest brother built a framework of bamboo, stretched a sheet of paper over it, and jumped off the barn with it. While that attempt was a failure, it spurred Gordon’s interest in flight.

During his 20s, Gordon began studying the work of others and by 1908 he had completed his own glider. A true pioneer for the time, Gordon was able to sit in the plane and control it instead of hanging in it and shifting his weight to control direction. Gordon’s aircraft was a biplane with a controllable front elevator, not dissimilar to the plane of the Wright brothers. The wings of Gordon’s plane measured 28 feet and the length of the plane measured 18 feet.

In 1909, after the success of the glider, Gordon added a 2-cylinder Curtiss motorcycle engine to the aircraft. The plane, with the seven horsepower engine and a three wheel landing gear was light enough that Gordon could lift the entire machine himself. Though Gordon was able to get a few “hops” from his aircraft, he ultimately was unable to sustain flight. When the plane crashed, Gordon took the opportunity to obtain a 4-cylinder Curtiss engine which could nearly double his horsepower. Gordon’s a new biplane (a tractor) had a conventional tail, no front elevator, a two wheel landing gear, ailerons, no dihedral, and his seat was in the rear. Using this plane, Gordon could fly all around his 40 acre field. In doing so, Donald Gordon became the first person west of the Mississippi River to successfully fly a powered aircraft.

Between 1912 and 1914, Gordon built a monoplane, arranged like Santos Dumont’s “Demoiselle”. It was externally braced, had a high wing, and outrigger tail and the pilot seated under the engine and wing and very close to the ground. Using a 4-cylinder water cooled engine of 40 horsepower, Gordon was able to fly successfully around a large field in Ramona, California.

Once WWI started, Gordon stopped working on planes and attempted to join the Air Service, but was rejected on account of his increasing deafness. After the war Gordon bought a Wright-engine, but never built a plane for it. He later donated the engine to the then named San Diego Aerospace Museum. Donald Gordon lived out the remainder of his life on 160 acres on Palomar Mountain.
Box 01
Folder 01 - Gordon Biographies

Folder 02 - Correspondence between Donald H. Gordon and Major George E.A. Hallett

Folder 03 - Correspondence between James H. Gordon and Major George E.A. Hallett
Folder 04 - Correspondence, Miscellaneous


Folder 05 - Miscellaneous, Notes, and Affidavits

Physical Description: 1. Handwritten notes and questions for Donald Gordon. 2. Four affidavits confirming the flight of Donald Gordon. 3. Copy of affidavit to San Diego Junior Chamber of Commerce from E.H. Bates. 4. Handwritten note on mono plane and St. Louis engine. 5. Handwritten note to call Waldo. 6. Handwritten note to Elmo from George Hallett and typed portion to EB from E.N. Pickerill. 7. Two handwritten notes, one with the phone number of Jackson C. Roether and the other concerning Hall and Waldo. 8. Copy of a handwritten note of plane parts. 9. Handwritten note to call Porter, James Tank. 10. Card in memory of Donald Hazen Gordon, and the address for his memorial service.

Folder 06 - Magazine and Newspaper Clippings


Folder 07 - Photographs