

Unique is Milt Hersberger's airline—smallest in existence—in Ohio's Lake Erie region. Here the folks have to take a plane or stay at home



Air Cabbie of Put-In Bay

by CAROL HUGHES

ONE MORNING about seven o'clock the telephone rang at the lonely Island Air Terminal at Put-In-Bay, Ohio.

"That you, Milt?" asked a quivering old voice.

"Yes, Elmira, what's wrong?" asked Milton Hersberger.

"Would you take over to Kelley's Island 'afore you set out for your run and bring Lem home? He's done got hisself killed."

Milton Hersberger went out and removed the seats in his tri-motored Ford ship. A few minutes later he took off to bring Lem home. To him it was just a routine flight. He has flown as many as seven dead bodies in a three-weeks' period from one or another of the five islands his plane frequents. He has evened the score with the Grim Reaper by taking as many expectant mothers out to hospitals on the mainland to restore the island population.

Hersberger, probably the busiest airman in America today, is a one-man airport. After 20 years of all types of flying he hit the jackpot in the smallest airline in existence. Located in the Lake Erie region of

Ohio, Milt's passengers *have* to fly or stay at home. They fly. All of them, from babies to grandmothers.

Hersberger's stake in the air industry consists of five planes, hangars, and landing fields. He's based at Put-In-Bay, Ohio. His full run is only 14 miles as the crow flies. As Hersberger flies it's 70. He touches five islands in the Lake Erie region with a total population of less than one thousand souls.

It works like this. Every night when Farmer Reuben Becker says his prayers he ends with "praise the Lord for Milt Hersberger, and take care of his planes." Farmer Reuben has a herd of dairy cattle on Kelley's Island. Each spring when the ice around the island is a frozen shifting mass, too thick for boats, too mushy for sleds, the farmer's cattle start getting lean. Reuben gets on the phone: "Milt, can you fly me over a few bales of hay?"

"Sure," says Milt, "you order it—I'll bring it."

Out go the seats in the big Ford ship and in goes a ton and a half of baled hay. Farmer Reuben's critters are safe, and so far the prayers

have worked for Milt's welfare.

Milton Hersberger is a former barnstormer, passenger hopper, stunt-flying-fool. For 10 years he was a hit-and-miss flyer, hopping here and there, not commercially ambitious; not too much concerned with the future.

One day he hopped into Sandusky, Ohio, and started hawking passengers. The local airport had seen some flying, but seldom any like Milt's. His daredevil fame spread around the state and airmen, generally, conceded he was "hot stuff."

The Sandusky airport made Milt Assistant Airport Manager and things began to look pretty good. Then winter set in. The snows began to fall. Fog drifted in. The lake became a clogged, floating mass of ice. Almost a thousand island people drew their belts in— isolated for the winter. Milt was grounded for lack of business: "What a hole," he said, "somebody ought to start an airline for those people—this is murder."

Suddenly it occurred to him that he was that somebody. He could fly. He owned a second-hand Waco and a Travel Air. Mrs. Hersberger's only comment on that project was: "What! *A home?*" For seven years her address had been "Somewhere in the U. S. A.—contact all airports." To date, nothing had ever settled Milt.

The Flying Hersbergers flew in and landed in a cow pasture at Put-In-Bay. "Our first hundred years were the hardest," recalls Milt. There were no landing fields; no airports, no home and no friends. The Islanders were skeptical, indifferent and definitely not air-

minded: "Monkey business," said the residents, "you can't fly in this weather."

They didn't know Milton Hersberger. He could and he did. Milt never does anything by halves—once he has decided to do it. He parked his planes out in the open and set about clearing the fields. The Hersbergers invested their complete life savings in 50 acres of land at Put-In-Bay and the remodeled farmhouse they built for a hangar. The first year was a blank, except for the summer when Milt went back to hawking passengers.

The second year he wangled the mail service and that was the test. The mail had to go through. Twice a day, regular as a clock, the rattling old Waco hummed over the islands. The happy shout: "Here comes the mail," became island routine. Milt bought some more orchards, cleared up some more farmland, and cast an eye toward all five islands. Now his run began at Port Clinton, went into Kelley's Island and then touched the farthest point of Lake Erie, North Bass, which hugs the Canadian border.

ONE DAY Father Charles Haley, a Catholic priest serving all the islands, came over to the airport: "I've been watching your planes go over," he said, "flying right on schedule. I wonder if I might come along on Sunday mornings, for passenger rates? I could make my Mass on time."

"Sure thing," said Milt, and got himself a regular commuter. The islanders began to brag: "Our priest flies!"

One night a harried farmer called long after midnight. The night was

black and threatening with storm: "I hate to ask you, Milt," he said, "ain't never used your planes or spent no money with you, but I got to have a doctor here right away or my little girl is a goner."

"Don't worry," said Milt, reassuringly. "He'll be there."

He was there. The story flew among the islanders. A few days later venerable old Will Haas, telegrapher for Put-In-Bay for half a century, called Milt on the telephone: "Say, what happened to that plane you been wiring about," he wanted to know, "when you goin' to git it?"

"Never, I guess," said Milt, "I can't seem to rake up the money."

"How much?" asked Haas.

"Oh, lots—a thousand dollars to start with," said Milt, and went back to his flying.

Things looked bad. The planes were deteriorating and the steady runs didn't allow much time for repairs. Just as the axe was about to fall Milt got another telephone call: "Got that money," said Haas, "come on over and take it."

"What money?" asked Milt, in no mood for the miraculous.

"That plane money you was talking about," said the old telegrapher, "pay it back when you git it, come on and take it."

Milt took it. He wanted that additional plane more than anything in the world. Henry Ford had just decided that manufacturing trimotor planes was bad business. He shoved those he had on the market, cheap. Milt went down to buy one.

It was a beautiful job. It cost 55 thousand dollars. Milt made installment arrangements and said he'd take it. "Fine," said the dealer,

"when do you want it delivered?" "Right now," said Milt, "I'm delivering it."

The dealer looked at him skeptically: "Ever fly one of these ships?"

"No," said Milt, "but they're all just a bunch of trucks, fly one and you fly 'em all." He crawled in the pilot's seat, and took her off the field. The dealer stood with mouth wide open.

A school teacher on North Bass Island explains it: "The first time I crawled into that plane, I was loaded in with a crate of chickens, a small piano, a re-capped tire, one preacher and three housewives. We took out over the frozen ice flying 85 miles per hour with me fully prepared to die. My stomach didn't settle back in place for three weeks. Now, Milt could load me in with a herd of cattle, and I expect it any day, but I wouldn't even look back. He's just tops."

HERSBERGER's name on the islands today has the same meaning to the residents that Mr. Anthony's has to people with problems. Everybody has flown with him at one time or another, from a four-day-old baby to an 86-year-old grandma. The people who once scoffed now consider him their own Knight Errant. When the war broke, Milt wanted to go off and do his duty. The Island people blew their tops. It was unheard of—they couldn't live without him. Peculiarly enough, the complexion of the islands might change if it were not for Milt's airplanes. No doctors, no preachers, and seldom any mail.

Milt was born in Anderson, Indiana, of poor farming parents. One day as a lean, gangling youth he

went into Richmond to see one of "them new flyin' contraptions." A daring pilot was hopping passengers and Milt was enthralled. Like a would-be elephant tender at a circus he hugged close to that plane, running out to rub it off every time it flew in, and tenderly feeling its surface. Finally, he went for a ride and the die was cast. Milt refused to go home.

He became the pilot's helper and the pilot taught him to fly. Milt never went back. He stayed in Richmond where other planes came and went, and pretty soon Milt was a pilot, earning his own money—and good money too—at the age of 21. He found himself a girl named Thelma, married her, and set out with his own plane to barnstorm the country. Occasionally he settled down, flying routes between Pittsburgh and Cleveland or Podunk to Green Corners, but always moving on—looking for that right spot.

Now, at 42, he's settled and thinks his future is long and bright. Milt looks like Spencer Tracy, works like a tractor, and flies when even a bird is grounded. He hauls everything from a load of sheep to a bone for a ritzy dog. There are no fancy suits around his airport, no helmets. Just a man in a pair of overalls or an unpressed suit.

Milt is no show-off. But beyond the routine of his mail route, passenger and freight hauling, and his special charter trips—he can, and does, take up the thrill riders and they always get a run for their money. He stopped keeping track of his logging time after 10 thousand hours, but it's all on the record. Mrs. Hersberger sees to that.

One of the island's most charm-

ing hostesses, Thelma looks like a dark-haired poetess in her old flying jacket and simple sports clothes. Talkative, natural, her knowledge of flying stumps the experts. She doesn't fly. Her job is keeping the books, sending out bills, taking care of transportation forms, and entertaining the country's airmen who drop in at any time to see Milt. He's known all over the United States by all the old-timers. They still come to marvel at his skill and to enjoy his good company.

"You see why I don't fly," explained Mrs. Hersberger, setting out champagne glasses on the big kitchen table. "My job is just as important as Milt's and my title much bigger. I'm Vice-President in Charge of Petty Cash, General Manager in Charge of the Headache Department and Town Shopper for the Island Elite—and I love every job I have." She means it and is as vivacious as a debutante. "I may get a promotion," she went on, "First Lady in Charge of All Plane Cleaning."

That's if the war continues long. Milt formerly had five assistants, two pilots, a conductor, a plane hostess and "Curly," chief mechanic. Now there's only Milt, Thelma, and a little high school girl who acts as plane hostess, and mechanic Curly.

Air Transport magazine says of Curly (Ralph Kieffer): "He can do anything with a plane from completely overhauling an engine to fabricating an exhaust pipe from an automobile fender."

Flying a typical day with Hersberger you take off at 8:40 a.m. from Put-In-Bay headed for Port Clinton—that's the base at the

mainland, and mail pickup. On board eight or ten passengers fill the first rows of seats. Luggage is scattered up and down the aisle. Housewives are going over for shopping, a salesman is out for orders. Leaning against the wall, reading his morning paper, is the island doctor back from a night's trip. Rubbing shoulders close by is the Island priest reading his scripture. In the back where seats have been removed are three crates of fish, a sewing machine going in for repairs, and several assorted packages. The two largest commodities shipped by plane are wine and fish.

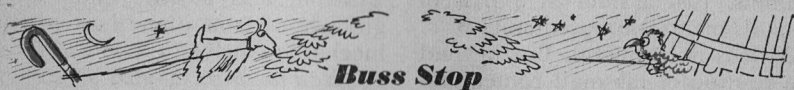
At the end of a day Milt's record reads: 20 take-offs and landings; a total of 28 passengers; cargo including 122 cases of wine, several tons of hay, four thousand pounds of corn, groceries, luggage and mail. He has flown in to Port Clinton, out again; over to Kelley's Island, up to Green Island, and into North Bass, then home to Put-In-Bay. Not once but twice, and on odd runs sometimes as many as six a day.

The wine rides for one-tenth of a cent per pound mile. The fish ride for two cents a pound net weight.

The passengers pay \$2.00 (plus tax) or on a three-day pass \$3.43. Odd packages fly for 25 cents and *Milt is making money*. He now owns his five ships, all his hangars and bases; 10 thousand dollars' worth of equipment and his maintenance bases.

In all of his 14 years of service Milt has missed his run only about six days. He has flown through fog so thick that Mrs. Hersberger, who stood waiting on the field, could only hear—not see—his plane, until it taxied onto the field. Death has written but one entry in the log book. That was in December of 1937. One ship of the airways fleet plunged into the icy waters bringing death to three people. Milt was not flying the ship. He has flown on other days to rescue parties when nothing moved but his plane. He drops food to marooned fishermen, and locates stalled cars.

One pilot who came out to apply for a job with Milt vignettted the business with an acid remark. After loading 10 cases of wine, a half ton of fish and a bale of hay, he walked off the field muttering: "You don't want a pilot, what you need is a derrick that flies."



A BOY AND A GIRL were walking along a shady road in the moonlight. The boy was carrying a large pail on his back, a chicken in one hand, a cane in the other and leading a goat. They strolled along silently until they came to a large tree. "I'm afraid to be walking along here with you," said the girl coily, "you might try to kiss me."

"But how could I," protested the boy, "with all these things I'm carrying?"

"Well," she answered, "you could stick the cane in the ground, tie the goat to it and put the chicken under the pail."

—Banana Peelings