Omen of Death

Racing aviator Harold Neuman was roaring around the grandstand pylon at 240 m.p.h. when he collided with a sea gull. The gull was killed, but its body tore a big hole in Neuman's wing. The flier managed to make a quick landing without injury to himself. The incident, however, was a bad omen.

It took place on Wednesday, Feb. 14, 1934, first day of the Pan-American Air Races at Shushan Airport (now New Orleans Lakefront Airport). The event was to dedicate the new $4 million terminal. It attracted such fliers as Roscoe Turner and James H. Doolittle and included races, parachute drops, wing walking, aerobatics and skywriting.

About 8:30 p.m. on that same date, Capt. W. Merle Nelson, a 36-year-old Los Angeles stunt flier, took up his “comet plane” to give the large crowd a spectacular exhibition of night flying.

Attached to the wing struts of his biplane were 18 rockets, which discharged a steady stream of fire. To make the sight even more impressive, the entire airport was plunged into darkness for the event.

Nelson was one of three American aviators who had flown with rockets on their planes. The other two had been killed performing the stunt. The glare was so brilliant that Nelson wore welder's goggles, and he still was temporarily blinded and had to fly the plane by feel until his vision returned after the rockets had burned themselves out.

Nelson's comet plane, trailing fire, went through a loop about 600 feet over the crowd. The flier was trying to right it when it went into a nose dive. It crashed, instantly burst into flame, flipped over and skidded to within 200 feet of the grandstand.

Strapped in the cockpit by his safety belt, Nelson was burned alive. Nelson, well aware of the dangerous nature of the stunt, had left a letter to be opened in the event of his death. In it he asked that his body be cremated and the ashes be scattered over the field by a flier from the air. His wishes were carried out.

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On Friday a young Brooklyn woman, Erjs Daniels, only parachutist of her sex at the show, was blown into the lake close to the sea wall following a jump in gusty winds. Her collapsed chute draped itself over the wall. Members of the ground crew raced to the spot on motorcycles and used the chute to haul Miss Daniels out of the water just when she was on the point of drowning.

Also that day the same Harold Neuman who had run into the gull was racing the home pylon in an air race when his motor conked out. He came down fast. Seeing that he might crash into the stands, he deliberately headed for a big puddle. Spray shot into the air, the propeller gouged mud and the plane turned over. Cars, motorcycles and fire engines raced to the spot. But the first one there was Mrs. Neuman, carrying the pilot's child in her arms. Neuman rolled out of the cockpit with nothing more than a scratch on his nose.

Approximately 10,000 people were watching on Saturday when pilot C. L. Kenily of Chicago took parachutist Ben Grew up for a jump. Grew, also of Chicago, was at 55—the oldest American parachutist. He made his jump, but the chute caught on the tail of the plane. The craft plummeted into the lake, killing both Kenily and Grew.

The next day, with no further casualties, the show ended.