

# The Higgins' family history newsletter

BERTRAND BLANCHARD ACOSTA (1895-1954)

## Who is Bert Acosta anyway?

by John Higgins Van Horn

Ever since I was a little kid, I remember my mother telling me that I was related to Bert Acosta. I always thought that was really cool, but I never knew who he was. I looked for information about him at the library, I asked my teachers if they had heard of him, but I was never successful in finding anything about this wonderful aviator. Its kind of funny, I think that I felt like I was telling people a lie when I would tell them about the great Bert Acosta. I can't even remember exactly what I told them, other than he flew across the Atlantic shortly after Charles Lindbergh did. I guess I thought it was this made up story that my family passed onto me. Time passed and I guess I forgot about him. Years later, about two years ago, I think I was talking to one of my cousins, either Christy or Robin, and they told me that this guy, who I understand is Bert (Norberto) Cisneros, who had made contact with them to let them know that they had a long lost aunt and he wanted to "introduce" her to them. Both Christy and Robin are granddaughters of Bert Acosta. Their father, Bert Acosta Jr. married my aunt, Anita Lillian Higgins, and Christy and Robin are their children.

I think I decided to google Bert Acosta after hearing their story and WOW there was a ton of information about him. I found an article on him on Wikipedia, that reported the following: "*Bertrand Blanchard Acosta (January 1, 1895 - September 1, 1954) was an aviator who flew in the Spanish Civil War in the Yankee Squadron.[1] He was known as the Bad Boy of the Air, and was a heavy drinker. He was divorced twice and received numerous fines and suspensions for flying stunts such as flying under bridges or flying too close to buildings.*" I found the article by Norberto



*Bertrand Blanchard Acosta*

Cisneros, printed on the next few pages; there was a museum in the United States, the Aviation Hall of Fame & Museum of New Jersey and a museum in France, Musée America Gold Beach. They both had information about Bert Acosta and his transatlantic flight in 1927. I even found articles written about him in the New York Times and Time Magazine. After all these years I finally found out who this guy was, yes he did exist. A little time passed and it was the spring 2007. As I mentioned earlier, I found the Musée America Gold Beach had information about Bert Acosta and it turned out that they were selling special commemorative envelopes in honor of the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the flight of

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**BERT ACOSTA: GENIUS OF EARLY AVIATION** by  
Norberto Cisneros [cisnart@inreach.com](mailto:cisnart@inreach.com)

Bertrand (Bert) Blanchard Acosta was born in San Diego, CA, on January 1, 1895. In his resume to the Navy he wrote he had been "learning to fly in 1910 - Personal research constructing experimental and research work in heavier-than-air aircraft". In other words, he built his own plane and at the age of 15 years flew it. From that time on, flying was in his blood. He became Aviation's most gifted natural pilot ever to come down the road. Elinor Smith, the record setting Aviatrix, who knew Bert said, "Bert didn't fly an airplane, he wore it." Such was his reputation as a pilot.

He was a multi-task aviator; flew all of the light planes in the 1910's and 1920's - up to the first heavy Transport Planes; laid the first Air Mail routes while carrying Air Mail; was considered to be the first true light aircraft Test Pilot as well as the first heavy Air Transport Test Pilot (as acknowledged by his peers); an aircraft mechanic; a record setter; a barnstormer; an Aeronautical Engineer; a Flight Trainer; an inventor; and a military and passenger aircraft demonstrator.

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**TRI-MOTOR FOKKER**

Time Magazine published **FOUR MEN IN A FOG** on July 11, 1927, which is an article about Commander Richard Evelyn Byrd along with Lieutenant Noville, Lieutenant Balchen and pilot Bert Acosta who flew across the Atlantic a few weeks after Charles Lindbergh made his famous trip.

The flight crew on the America flew over France for "five hours" and eventually decided to "drop into the sea than to crash into unyielding, un known, fog-blanketed land," Commander Byrd reported. Bert Acosta was described as "more of a daredevil...than a pilot" in this article.



**VU LE WHO WHAT?**

In June 2007, I made several phone calls to France, trying to get copies of the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary commemorative envelopes printed by the Musée America Gold Beach. Between their English and my poor French, I was unsuccessful and finally had to contact the sister museum in New Jersey to get the curators e-mail address so that I could put the request in writing.



## Portal of the Folded Wings

The Portal of Folded Wings is a Museum and Shrine to Aviation, located at the Valhalla Memorial Park in North Hollywood, Ca. For further information, please contact John Torres, Director, at [john.torres@sci-us.com](mailto:john.torres@sci-us.com), phone, (818) 763-9121.

10621 Victory Blvd. North Hollywood, CA, 91606

The picture below is a memorial tablet dedicated to Bert Acosta at the Portal of Folded Wings, near the Burbank International Airport, in Southern California.



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He was also the Chief Pilot on Cmdr. Byrd's 1927 "America's" Transatlantic Flight. It was a weight record of a first time lift off and was what set Bert apart. Only his many years of experience flying heavy Transport Aircraft, coupled with his extraordinary ability, was he able to guide the heavy tri-motor on that too short and too muddy runway until they were airborne. It was the heaviest load (7-1/2 tons or 15,000 lbs) of plane, cargo and crew any pilot had ever lifted and part of that load was a piece of Betsy Ross' flag and 150 pounds of mail; and was the first Transatlantic Transport Flight to deliver Air Mail to Europe.

Other mail services:

1918 - After the Armistice, he was instructed to survey and map the nation's first Airmail routes. He flew in and out of 60 American towns and villages. His routes were implemented and Airmail was instituted in this country. The Air Corp pilots took over and delivered the mail after that. Acosta said, "Establishing Airmail routes was my most outstanding accomplishment (at the time)."

1920 - 7/29 - With Captain Eddie Rickenbacker, he laid the first Airmail routes from

NY to San Francisco. In September of that year regular mail flights began.

1920 - 8/28 - With S.C. Eaton, Bert flew from New York to Oakland, CA. They delivered the first Transcontinental Airmail (100 letters delivered) in the record time

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The envelope above is a picture of an envelope that pilot, Bert Acosta, signed. He and three others delivered the first piece of airmail to the US Ambassador of France in 1927. This envelope was sold on e-bay in the last few years and I believe is currently owned by Jean Pierre Dupont.

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the America. At first, I thought that France was issuing a stamp, but it turns out that the museum that was issuing a commemorative envelope. The picture on the bottom of page two is a one of the items I received from Jean Pierre DuPont of Ver-sur-mer, France..

Earlier this year, I helped my sister Mimi move from Sunland, California to Bedford, Texas. I flew to Burbank where my sister picked me up. She had recently discovered the Portal of Folded Wings and asked me if I would like to see it. Of course, I was excited and off we went. It is located only minutes from the Burbank Airport in North Hollywood. There museum happened to be being cleaned by a local boy scout troop that day, but Ron Dickson, who volunteers there, allowed my sister and I to take a tour any way. I think this is one of the best-kept secrets in the LA area. Ron Dickson encouraged my sister and I to put some information together about Bert Acosta. He was one of the individuals memorialized there that they did not have pamphlets to distribute to the public. So this is a shout out to anybody who wants to take up that job. Thanks for taking the time to read about my family history. I am a new comer to genealogy and decided to start publishing information that I have found. Even though Bert Acosta is not a Higgins, he is a member of the Higgins family and his transatlantic flight which came to a conclusion on July 1, 1927, seemed only

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of 36 hours and 40 minutes. The first scheduled Transcontinental Airmail Flight didn't occur until the following September.

1921 - 1-23 - First Transcontinental Air Mail Flight - Started San Francisco - arrived Hazelhurst Field, New York - 2,629 miles - 33 hours 20 minutes avg. 104 mph.

Admiral Richard E. Byrd wrote in a letter to Cmdr. G. O. Noville, Radio Operator on the 1927 Transatlantic flight: "I had for him much affection as a friend, and great admiration for him as one of the great fliers of all time. On the Transatlantic Flight of 1927 he demonstrated his greatness in connection with the most remarkable take-off in history, and at the controls of the plane as we fought through three storms over the Atlantic."

Bert's life was full and interesting, if not tragic, replete with good times and bad times. After his best years of flying were over and his alcoholism could not be controlled, in a sanitarium in Spivak, CO, on September the 1st, 1954, at 1:15 p.m., cancer did what his restless heart never could, it took him home to a well earned and everlasting rest.

**Bert Cisneros may be reached at [cisnart@inreach.com](mailto:cisnart@inreach.com)**

# Bert Acosta, 59, Ex - Flier, Dies

Aviation Pioneer Flew with  
Adm. Byrd in Historic  
Atlantic Flight

DENVER, Sept 1 — (AP) Bert Acosta, 59, veteran flier and race car driver, died today in the Jewish Consumptives' Relief society sanatorium here after a two-year illness.

Acosta started flying a self-built plane in 1910 and 11 years later set a new flying speed record of 176.9 miles an hour. He flew with Admiral Richard E. Byrd and Bert Balchen across the Atlantic shortly after Lindbergh's epic 1927 flight.

He later became a test pilot and aviation consultant, but collapsed in 1952 on a New York sidewalk with what was diagnosed as an advanced case of tuberculosis.

#### To Scatter Ashes at Sea

Relatives said after cremation here Acosta's ashes will be scattered over the Pacific Ocean near Los Angeles by Cmdr. George Neville. All services, they said, will be private.

Acosta was born in San Diego, Calif., Jan 1, 1895. His father was a mining engineer, a member of an early-day southern California Spanish family. His mother was of Irish extraction.

He was 10 years old when he built his first plane in a small barn. Shortly afterward he went to work at an aviation firm south of San Diego.

In 1914, he went to Toronto, Canada, to teach cadets for the Royal Flying corps and the Royal Naval Air service. When the United States entered World War II, Acosta was summoned by the U. S. Army Signal corps to instruct American cadets on Long Island, N. Y.

#### Won Speed Trophy

After the 1918 Armistice, he made the first air mail survey of the nation in German Junkers, then worked with Glenn H. Curtis in developing high speed planes for the Navy. He won the Pulitzer speed trophy in 1921 at Omaha, Neb., by flying a Navy plane 174 miles an hour over a closed course, a new world record.

Acosta continued research work until April of 1927 when he and Col. Clarence P. Chamberlin of Shelton, Conn., surpassed the existing flight endurance record by staying aloft over Long Island 31 hours, 11 minutes and 20 seconds.

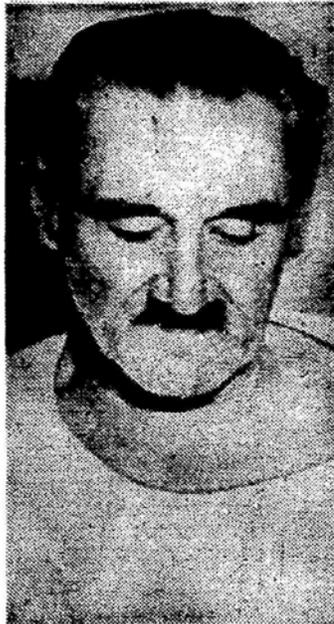
The following June 29, after a month of tests and load calculations, Acosta, Byrd and two others took off from an especially-built runway at Roosevelt Field, N. Y., in their tri-engined plane, "The America" and headed for France.

#### Land in English Channel

Storm, fog and wind enveloped the craft. After passing over Paris without sighting it, the fliers finally landed in the English Channel and made it to shore in a rubber boat. They became the first aviators to span the Atlantic in a multi-engined aircraft.

Through the 1930s Acosta worked with several firms in flight research and tests. His last flight as a pilot was in 1946 in Texas. Ill health and leg injuries plagued him thereafter.

Acosta was twice married and was the father of two sons and two daughters.



BERT ACOSTA

## Acosta Well Known To State Residents

Acosta was a pioneer in Connecticut's commercial aviation. In 1924, when he was a resident of Naugatuck, Acosta, Gus Parsons and Gus Graf established Colonial Airlines with headquarters at Bethany Airport. They sold their interests in the company in 1926 to the Eastern Air Transport company.

The colorful aviation enthusiast had his ups and downs with the state's law-enforcement authorities over his flights in Connecticut. Acosta served five days in the New Haven county jail in January, 1925, after being convicted of reckless flying. Reports that he attempted to fly a small plane beneath a bridge over the Naugatuck river at Naugatuck never were substantiated. Officially he was charged with flying too low over the bridge.

Acosta was arrested Sept. 18, 1930 in Wilton after he landed his plane in the town and was found to have no license for flying. Wilton authorities do not recall the outcome of the case.

In November, 1936, Acosta and two companions landed at Valencia, Spain, to aid Spanish loyalist forces in the civil war in that country. When he returned to the United States in January, 1937, he was charged by federal agents with violating the country's neutrality by serving loyalist Spain.

Facing a fine of \$1000 and imprisonment for three years, Acosta was acquitted. He never returned to Spain.

Col. Clarence D. Chamberlin of Ripton road, Shelton, who with Acosta set a new flight endurance record in 1927, said last night he was shocked to learn of his longtime friend's death. He described him as "one of the finest and greatest test pilots of the 1920s." Col. Chamberlin said he first met Acosta when the latter at 15 years of age already was carving a niche for himself in aviation history.

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fitting to be shared in my first Higgins Family History newsletter, which is for the month of July. As far as I understand, Bert's daughter Gloria is his only surviving child. He does have grandchildren and great-grandchildren scattered all over Southern California. It is interesting to note that my aunt Anita, who married Bert Acosta's son, Bert Jr. in Long Island, New York, is interned right up the street from his "final resting spot." She is buried at the Hollywood Hills Forest Lawn, along with her mother, Helen Olivia Higgins (Sand), her sister Dorothea Van Horn (Higgins) and her brother-in-law Jan Garber Van Horn. Anita's memorial tablet is pictured below. If you would like further information regarding either Bert Acosta, the Higgins family or have comments or corrections to this newsletter, please feel free to write me at [jhvanhorn@gmail.com](mailto:jhvanhorn@gmail.com). Thanks again for taking the time to read this article!

John Higgins Van Horn

Anita Lillian Acosta is buried at  
Forrest Lawn in Hollywood Hills.





The picture above is the America , a tri-motor Fokker, where it landed in the sea at the village of Ver sur Mer, France on July 1, 1927. This picture is on display at the Musée America Gold Beach. For further information you may contact Jean Pierre Dupont at the following e-mail address:

[jean-pierre122@wanadoo.fr](mailto:jean-pierre122@wanadoo.fr) and the museum's website is <http://www.goldbeachmusee.org.uk/>

*This newsletter was written for the Higgins Family, descendants of Orrell Arcularius Higgins (1893-1954) of Brooklyn, New York. This is the first of hopefully many newsletters to come. If you have any ideas for future subjects or would like to contribute a story, please contact John Higgins Van Horn at [jhvanhorn@gmail.com](mailto:jhvanhorn@gmail.com). This specific newsletter was written in inspiration and is dedicated to my favorite cousin, Tim Whelan, of Southern California.*