

The Chicken and the Egg and a Good Yoke, too!

By Daniel J. Demers ©2015



From left: Hap Arnold, Tooe Spaatz, Victor Hirtzler, and the chicken

SOMETIMES REALITY IS MUCH FUNNIER THAN THE GREATEST FIGMENTS OF our imagination.

In August of 1919, World War I had been over for less than a year. As part of American demobilization, numerous military bases were closed and vast numbers of pilots and support personnel of the Army Air Service were discharged. With ever-shrinking military budgets, the competing branches within the Army successfully fought off increased expenditures for the military air service, effectively shrinking it to near extinction.

The Army Air Service spread its meager personnel and resources around the country. Major Edward “Hap” Arnold was sent to San Francisco as the Commanding Officer of Crissy Field, located at the Presidio. In this position, he was in charge of “Army flying on the West Coast.” His assistant was Major Carl “Tooe” Spaatz. The two “joined forces to keep military aviation in the public eye.” They were assisted in their endeavors by General Hunter Liggett, who had commanded the American First Army in France and was now Commanding General at the Presidio. Liggett was one of the Army’s few ground officers who appreciated and understood the importance of military aviation. At the time, Petaluma, California boasted that it was the chicken and egg capital of the world — producing 20 million eggs a year and 400,000 fryer chickens per month. The city lay a mere 30 miles from San Francisco but was accessible only by boat, since no bridges yet spanned San Francisco Bay. The small rural community provided San Francisco with the vast majority of its culinary fryer chickens and eggs.

As a part of their public relations campaign, Arnold and Spaatz, in conjunction with the *San Francisco Bulletin*, decided to fly to Petaluma during that city’s annual Butter and Egg Days Celebration. Spaatz talked a local celebrity chef, Victor Hirtzler, into flying with him to Petaluma to pick up a prize White Leghorn layer hen. The hen, in turn, was expected to lay an egg, which would be cooked by the chef as the plane winged its way back across San Francisco Bay.

The *Bulletin* reported: “Just as the plane reached an altitude of 5,000 feet, the hen cackled and laid an egg.” The article continued, “A second afterwards [Chef] Victor [Hirtzler] had the newly laid egg cooking on an electric stove attached to the ignition system of the airplane. Swooping out of the clouds and cleaving the fog, the chef handed the fried egg to San Francisco Mayor ‘Sunny Jim’ Rolph.” The mayor laughed, telling the crowd assembled at the airfield, “I’ll show you fellows what a good two-handed eater I am.” He devoured “the delectable aerial dish” in seconds. “It was,” reported the *Petaluma Daily Courier*, “the first fried egg *a la* airplane.”

One newspaper reported that the hen got nervous and flew out of the cockpit

over San Quentin, where it safely landed.

All of that was the official story dished up to the reading public. The historian DeWitt S. Copp gives us a completely different version. According to Copp, Hirtzler indeed took with him an electric frying pan to prepare the egg. Hirtzler, who was known for his thick French accent, goatee, curled handlebar mustache, showy costumes and always-present red *fez*, freaked out when he saw the open cockpit of the primitive de Havilland DH-4. Wrote Copp, “It took all of Hap Arnold’s power of persuasion” to induce the chef to climb aboard. The hen, as dismayed as Hirtzler, did indeed “flap its way out of the cockpit” on the trip back to San Francisco and, “when last seen, was spiraling down into the Bay.” The plane was traveling at a speed of 130 miles per hour. The prize hen never landed safely at San Quentin as reported — farmyard chickens have their wings clipped to prevent them from flying. The poor bird plummeted 5,000 feet to its watery grave. During its brief stay aboard the plane, the hen never did lay an egg and even if it had, to Hirtzler and Spaatz’s dismay, there actually was no receptacle in the DH-4 into which the electric frying pan could be plugged. The normally exuberant chef, upon landing, was reported to have been “both crushed and shaken.” Quickly regaining his composure, though, he had a substitute egg surreptitiously cooked in his St. Francis Hotel kitchen. Even Mayor Rolph was a last minute substitute. The original recipient was supposed to be Admiral Hugh Rodman, the Pacific Fleet Commander. The fleet, which was in route to San Francisco for Fleet Week, was delayed by adverse weather conditions.

Despite the hilarious skein of blunders, the story was a first-rate public relations success for Arnold and Spaatz, who both went on to long and distinguished military careers. Arnold would become the Commanding General of the Army Air Force during World War II, while General Carl “Tooe” Spaatz would become the first Chief of Staff of the United States Air Force. History would be kind to Victor Hirtzler, too, remembering him as the inventor of the Crab Louie.