

The 500 signatures, embroidered in silk,
are practically a Who's Who of Aviation.

Mama Joe's Tablecloth

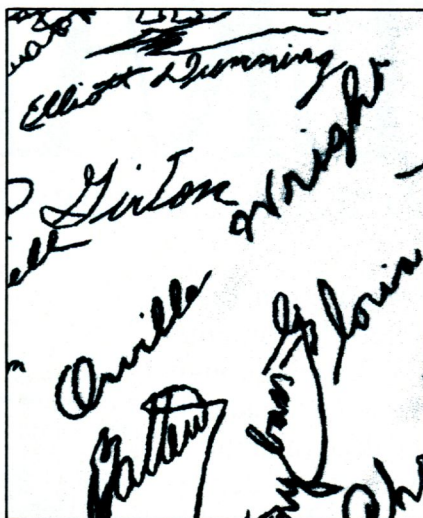
BY C. V. GLINES

AMONG the aviation memorabilia on display at the National Air and Space Museum in Washington, D. C., is a large, white tablecloth. Although it might seem out of place among the multitude of aerospace artifacts, it is in fact a priceless acquisition.

What makes this tablecloth unique and well worth preserving in the world's top aerospace museum is that it bears the signatures of more than 500 key aviation personalities. All these signatures were embroidered for posterity by Mrs. James H. Doolittle, the recently deceased wife of the legendary aviator.

The tablecloth preserves the original handwriting of Orville Wright, Eddie Rickenbacker, and many of the other "name" pioneers of aviation. At least as important, however, is the way that it helps preserve something of the spirit of the remarkable woman who created it.

Called "Joe" by all who knew her, Mrs. Doolittle was born Josephine Daniels. She was given her lifelong nickname of "Joe" by her father, who spelled it with an "e" because he had wanted a boy. In future years, she came to be known as



Like other aviators and well-known figures who dined with the Doolittles, Orville Wright signed Mrs. Doolittle's tablecloth in pencil so she could preserve his signature in embroidery.

"Mama Joe" to her adopted family, Doolittle's Tokyo Raiders.

The Doolittles were always noted for their gracious hospitality. Wherever they lived, their home was a favorite place for pilots to remain overnight, relax, and sample Joe's excellent cooking. As her husband's fame grew with his ever-growing list of accomplishments, so did the number of visitors who would drop in to take potluck. Never surprised at whom Jimmy would bring home, Joe would put an additional leaf in the dining room table, set another place, and stretch whatever she had on her menu.

Joe became an expert in the use of leftovers, coming up with enough recipes to fill a cookbook. "Leftovers got to be such a problem," she once explained. "I thought something intelligent ought to be done about them." While she never had time to put the recipes into book form, she felt that all of hers should be shared as widely as possible.

Cooking might have been her specialty, but one of her hobbies during the 1930s was embroidering her tablecloth. After a meal at the Doolittle home, each guest who had not

previously done so would be asked to sign his or her name on the tablecloth in pencil. Then, whether on one of her many trips with Jimmy or while waiting for his return, Joe would carefully stitch the signatures in black thread.

A Who's Who of Aviation

Over the years, the tablecloth came to represent a Who's Who of aviation. In addition to Wright and Rickenbacker, those who signed their names included Alexander P. deSeversky, Elmer Sperry, E. M. "Matty" Laird, Henry H. "Hap" Arnold, Ruth Nichols, Laura Ingalls, Albert F. Hegenberger, John A. Macready, Walter H. Beech, St. Clair Streett, Benjamin S. Kelsey, and Frank Hawks.

Other guests were the famous German pilots Ernst Udet and Ellie Beinhorn. Three of the 1924 round-the-world flyers—Leigh Wade, Lowell Smith, and Leslie Arnold—also signed. Several Chinese names are embroidered on the tablecloth, as are those of long-time family friends such as "Hungry" Gates, "Thirsty" Gaines, "Gabby" Henshaw, and "Bromo" Selser.

The world of the Doolittles was not limited to aviation. Other signatures stitched in silk for posterity include those of writer-adventurer Lowell Thomas, comedians Olsen and Johnson, and singer Lawrence Tibbett, a man both Doolittles had known since high school days.

For all its historical interest, the tablecloth is even more reflective of the nature of the Doolittles themselves. The number of embroidered signatures provides a dramatic reminder of the open and gracious way of life that the couple pursued through seven decades of happy marriage. Warm, friendly, and hospitable, the man with the famous grin and his gracious white-haired lady touched the lives of thousands.

As Jimmy continued to reach out and widen the couple's circle of friends and acquaintances, Joe kept up correspondence at a prodigious pace. She never failed to send notes to "my shut-ins" whenever she learned of friends who were ill, had suffered bad luck, or had experienced personal tragedy. Even more remarkable, she wrote to the unfortunates every day until they were functioning again. During one

lengthy trip around the world with Jimmy, she mailed 500 cards to friends and relatives in a single day. Her messages of friendship, sympathy, and courage brightened the lives of all on whom she focused her special brand of love and encouragement. Her letters continue to be prized by all who received them.

A Revered Figure

Joe died last December 24, the Doolittles' seventy-first anniversary, and was buried in Arlington National Cemetery. Having met in high school, she and Jimmy remained sweethearts ever after.

that is kind. She always had a smile for everyone, a kind word. She was never in so much of a hurry that she couldn't stop and say 'Hello' or 'Thank you.' She always made you feel she was glad to see you.

"She [was] . . . that special person who cooked unforgettable meals . . . and who always took the time to have those treats she knew you loved.

"She [was] . . . someone I could talk to and who could talk to me. Someone I had fun with. Someone I just enjoyed being with. We played cards, went to the theater, went to lunch, talked until dawn. . . .

"Mama Joe" examines the record of her dinner guests. The more than 500 signatures and sketches attest to the Doolittles' wide circle of friends and seven decades of hospitality. Not only aviators, but entertainers, writers, and just plain friends shared Mama Joe's table.



Mama Joe bore two sons and was a revered figure to her six grandchildren and fourteen great-grandchildren.

In a graveside eulogy, granddaughter Jonna Doolittle Hoppes paid Joe a tribute that reflected the sentiments of all those whose lives she inspired.

"Granny was the embodiment of goodness," she began. "She was everything that is good, everything

"She lived a glamorous life filled with adventure and surrounded by all kinds of people. But it wasn't without its sorrows, and through those sorrows she showed her strength, her wisdom. . . . I came to depend upon her wisdom, to value her honesty, and to respect the remarkable woman she was."

Mama Joe's tablecloth is not only a lasting tribute to her friends, but her final gift to everyone. ■

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