

McHugh's "soul was born to fly."

James Beaty McHugh was a home town boy whose "soul was born to fly," wrote his boyhood friend, Ben Robertson. "He was the fastest thing on wheels at Clemson. Beaty came as near making a Ford fly as any person in creation." Robertson and McHugh grew up together on the still-young campus of Clemson College, where each boy's father was a member of the faculty. Both entered Clemson as members of the Class of 1923—and both are now memorialized on Clemson University's Scroll of Honor.

Perhaps as a counter to his infatuation with speed, Beaty also loved music. He was an accomplished pianist and played the saxophone as well. As a Clemson cadet, he helped organize the college orchestra, sang with the glee club and marched in the band, which he served as captain his senior year. After completing his degree in chemical engineering, McHugh took a position with the Virginia-Carolina Chemical Company, but soon felt the urge for a more exciting profession and joined the Marine Corps.



He soon married Celena Smith of Pendleton and in 1926 transferred to the Marine Corps' air branch. He completed his flight training and earned his wings at Pensacola, FL in 1927, just in time to be selected as one of the pilots to escort "The Lone Eagle," Charles Lindbergh on his flight up the Potomac to Washington following his historic solo flight across the Atlantic.

McHugh developed a reputation as a superb pilot, regaling airshow crowds with his aerodynamic feats and winning air races. He was regarded as one of the best stunt pilots in the Corps, earning equal praise for his ability and his daring.

In the early decades of the 20th Century, the United States maintained a consistent presence in Latin America, including in Nicaragua. The Nicaraguan government had been angered by American backing of a canal in Panama and had offered concessions to both Japan and Germany if they would build a new canal across Nicaragua. As the political situation deteriorated, US Marines were sent to the country in 1912 to protect American citizens and interests. Factional violence flared again in 1926. Former Secretary of War Henry Stimson was dispatched to help broker a peace agreement between rival militias.

In 1928, McHugh, now assigned to the Second Marine Brigade in Managua, was cited for bravery in combat. On March 18, while flying an air patrol, McHugh discovered hostile rebels of the revolutionary leader Santiago in the vicinity of Murra. The following day, the patrols returned to the area and successfully enveloped a force of

150 rebels. With great skill and courage, McHugh attacked the rebels in the face of heavy rifle and machine gun fire. The attacks resulted in twelve hits to his airplane, but he pressed on throughout the day until “successful” results were achieved.

McHugh was subsequently ordered to assist with an aerial survey for a potential Nicaraguan canal. Such a canal would cut the trip between the east and west coasts of North America by 500 miles, saving time and money.

McHugh and two non-commissioned officers, Byron Piner of Roanoke, VA and Otto Miller of Pittsburgh, PA, took off on a photographic mapping flight on April 13, 1929. Flying in an OL-8 amphibian, their mission was to construct a photo-mosaic map across Nicaragua from its Caribbean coast to its Pacific coast. All three were killed when their aircraft crashed due to undetermined causes at Lake Nicaragua.



The United States pulled its military forces out of Nicaragua in 1933 when the Great Depression made it economically infeasible to maintain the garrison there. The Nicaraguan canal was never built.

James Beaty McHugh was survived by his wife and their young daughter, Joy. The Nicaraguan campaign, part of the so-called “Banana Wars,” is little remembered today. Yet, McHugh’s experiences and sacrifice there, like those of his comrades, helped build the body of knowledge of American military aviation, knowledge that would become indispensable in the world conflagration not too distant on the horizon.