The aerial circumnavigation of the globe was accomplished by pilots of the United States Army Air Service in specially-built Douglas World Cruisers (DWC) between 6 April and 28 September 1924, the magnitude of that flight in terms of preliminary study and engineering, world-wide logistic support, crew training, inter-service cooperation, diplomatic clearances, and personal skill and determination is almost directly comparable to the first moon landing that took place decades later.

One of the major incentives for this epoch-making flight was the spur of inter-service competition. Right after World War I and into the early 1920s, the Air Service and the air arm of the US Navy were intense rivals. Each sought to outdo the other in technical and operational achievement on the publicity see-saw they both shared.

Aside from the service rivalry, there was the national prestige angle. Other nations were preparing to send airplanes around the world and an international world-flight race was shaping up, but the competition between Army Gray and Navy Blue was the prime catalyst.

At home, the Navy had scored the first big coup with the transatlantic flight of their Curtiss NC-4 in May 1919. The Army then came through with a round-trip transcontinental air race later in the year that was billed as a “Reliability Test” and then won the international Pulitzer Air Race in 1920. Both services withdrew from the 1921 Pulitzer at the last minute, but the Navy loaned its new Curtiss racer to the Curtis company and, although flown as a private entry, the winning “Navy Racer” still garnered plenty of publicity for its owners.

The Army won the Pulitzer in 1922 and then set some new absolute speed records. Both services scored in 1923, the Navy winning the Pulitzer as well as the prestigious Schneider Trophy while the Army successfully completed the first non-stop coast-to-coast flight and made a mass flight from New York to Nome, Alaska, and return.

By any standard, 1924 was the Army’s big year. Not only did it win the Pulitzer again, it also accomplished the first dawn-to-dusk transcontinental flight and then came up with the topper — the first flight around the world.

PLANNING AND COOPERATION

Despite their simmering rivalry, no single service could have accomplished such a flight on its own. While the Army conceived the mission and worked out the major details, it still took prodigious help from the Navy, other departments of the government, and civilian firms to pull it off. Once the top levels of government approved the plan and the State Department got into the act to obtain all the necessary clearances from 28 territories along the

Seattle II transiting from Renton to Boeing Field to take part in the 100th anniversary of Boeing. During the original flight, Boeing provided a great deal of support for the aircraft and crews since the start-off was at Seattle.