

“The Pioneer of Parachutes”

San Diego takes another important step forward in the interest of national defense as the city's newest factory begins to manufacture parachutes . . . by the end of this month production on orders for the U.S. Navy are expected to be under way.

-San Diego Union, December 8, 1940.

The Standard Parachute Corporation of San Diego was a major manufacturer of parachutes between 1940 and 1945. “Stanpar” products brought millions to San Diego’s economy and were a major contributor to the nation’s military in World War II. For the company’s founder--a quiet, unsung engineer named James M. Russell--Stanpar would be the last chapter in a remarkable career in aviation.

The son of mining engineer, Russell was born and raised in Mexico. At age nineteen, as World War I was drawing to a close, he joined a team of civilian experts at an army site for aviation experimentation--McCook Flying Field in Dayton, Ohio. Russell’s teammates at McCook included a retired race car driver, a former car salesman, and an army balloonist. With almost no experience in aviation design but reams of enthusiasm, the team managed to create the first modern parachute, which would be adopted by the Army Air Corps.

Following the war, Russell came to San Diego—a town rapidly achieving a reputation as the “Air Capital of the West.” Early parachutes were dangerous devices but young Russell leaped from airplanes to test his own experimental designs. In 1927, he introduced the “Lobe,” a parachute that eliminated the oscillation that plagued early designs, and opened with only a third of the “shock” of other parachutes.



James M. Russell with patented parachute pack.

“The Lobe” was a sensation and led to the founding of the Russell Parachute Company, headquartered at 1202 Kettner Avenue. With the world between wars and military budgets small, the company aimed its marketing efforts at commercial aviation. Remarkably, the company targeted air travelers--not pilots—by suggesting that all aircraft passengers be provided with their \$350 “aerial life preservers.” An editorial in *San Diego Magazine* recommended that “since the parachute is safe, simple, and necessary . . . the government should require its universal use by all.”

In England, where a Russell-owned London factory sold the parachutes to the Royal Air Force, the idea of the parachute as a personal safety device was championed by the Prince of Wales, the future King Edward VIII. “The Prince dons a Russell parachute on all his airplane flights,” claimed a company spokesman.

The idea of a parachute as personal “safety insurance” was carried even further in 1930 when Russell announced a new product that would be sold to commercial airlines. “The last word in safe aids to air navigation,” would be a parachute mounted above the passenger’s head in the plane’s cabin. The parachute pack could be pulled down and easily attached to a light, fabric vest that all passengers would be wearing. “Ten seconds after passengers on air transports are warned to leave the ship, in case of emergency in midair, they will be able to float safely earthward,” promised the company.

Russell also experimented with grander schemes. On September 2, 1930, at Grosse Ile Airport, south of Detroit, he demonstrated a parachute for an entire airplane. At 6,500 feet the pilot of a small biplane shut off his engines and released a parachute from the plane’s tail. “The plane performed various gyrations as it descended,” reported the *New York Times*, but landed safely with a cracked wing and minor damage to the landing gear.

The company claimed interest in the Russell plane parachute from “more than 150 aircraft companies, insurance agencies and others interested in increasing the safety of flying.” The product never sold, but interestingly, Russell’s invention anticipated by 50 years a similar system marketed today by Ballistic Recovery Systems, Inc.



James Russell’s engineering prowess was apparently more successful than his business judgment. Or, perhaps the disastrous economic conditions spawned by the Great Depression were simply too much for his company, which closed shop in the early 1930s.

Russell re-emerged in 1940, with the creation of the Standard Parachute Company. Partnering with two World War I fliers, Col. C. E. Fauntleroy and John Speaks, Russell started the new firm in a loft at 800 14th Street, specializing this time in military contracts. When World War II erupted, the company quickly expanded to a dozen locations in San Diego and employed up to 500 workers.

A parachutist descends using a Russell “Lobe” chute.

An important subcontractor to Stanpar was the Pacific Parachute Company at 627 Eight Avenue. Pacific Parachute was managed by Howard “Skippy” Smith, a former stunt skydiver. Smith, an African-American, employed a large, mixed-race workforce until 1944.

Sadly, Russell would not live to see the success of his last venture. On September 13, 1941, the engineer suffered a heart attack and died suddenly in Las Vegas, Nevada, at age 43. His Standard Parachute Company would go on to manufacture an estimated 150,000 parachutes for the war effort—equipping battalions for Normandy, Arnhem, and other major battles of World War II. The company continued through the war years, finally closing business in September 1945.

Photographs courtesy San Diego Aerospace Museum.

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