Sierra Air Mail pilots: heroes of the sky

By Gordon Richards
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Editor’s note: This is the first of a three-part series on the history of air mail pilots and their efforts in the Sierra.

The stories of people who struggled to conquer and cross the Sierra in winter are filled with many heroic exploits. The wagon trains, the Central Pacific Railroad, and other modes of transportation often put men in the face of death. Most survived, some perished. The early pilots who flew the Sierra Nevada were another set of those heroes of history that few today can match.

One of the first attempts to fly over the Sierra was a much publicized flight by Robert Fowler in 1911. But the weather and the lightly powered planes of the times couldn’t conquer the Sierra. Aviation received a huge boost during World War I with advancements in aircraft design and manufacturing.

The first publicized flights over the Sierra occurred in 1919 when three U.S. Army planes with 90 horsepower engines easily climbed over the mountains from Sacramento.

By then, the East Coast was already experimenting with regular daily air mail service, and a few small contract routes existed in California.

The mail was the leading form of business and personal communication in the United States. Faster transcontinental service was demanded by the public, so the U.S. Post Office established the Air Mail division.

First flights over the Sierra
On Sept. 8, 1920 Stanhope Boggs flew out of Reno with the first westbound air mail over the Sierra. The next day Ray Little flew the first eastbound mail pouches over the mountains. Little was so unprepared for the flight, he got lost for a time while crossing the mountains and had to search an hour for Reno.

On the 11th, Edison “Monte” Mouton flew over the Sierra with the first mail sacks sent from New York, completing the Red Line mail service across the country.

For the next seven years pilots working for the government flew 4,200-pound De Haviland model Four biplanes on regular flights over the Sierra.

The De Haviland planes
The reliability of the open cockpit, wooden framed, cloth-sheathed, wire-bound biplanes was good, but the Sierra pushed them to their limits. These planes were designed in England, being built during the latter part of World War I, and helped win the war in Europe. Some of the planes flying the Sierra had actually seen service over Germany.

At first the planes could not be flown at night, and they were grounded in the worst winter storms. Connections were scheduled in Reno so that the mail could be transported by train at night to keep it moving. When winter storms stopped the flights, the mail went on the trains, as it had before air mail.

Mechanics — known as “Motor Macs” — at the Reno Field shops had to bore out and rebuild the standard motors and increase the power to 300 horsepower, so that the planes could soar up to 12,000 feet to get over the Sierra safely. These machines needed constant attention, and mechanics made many
improvements and additions to the planes.

An emergency landing field was built north of Truckee along the Lincoln Highway. Located next to current Prosser Dam Road, the dirt strip was known as Black Rock for the painted black boulder that stood out in winter snow pack. It was used many times as motors cut out or fuel ran out during the battle against the Sierra.

Wooden skis were added to planes in the winter so forced landings would be more successful. The planes were stocked with food rations, winter clothing, signal guns, and webbed snowshoes.

In 1926, the Douglas M-2 started replacing the De Haviland on Sierra flights, making flights a little easier, though these were still open cockpit biplanes. Radio technology soon improved so that pilots could maintain contact and receive weather reports as they traveled over the Sierra and Nevada.

**Hand-picked pilots**

Many of the post office air mail pilots were veterans of the U.S. Army, and some saw battle up close. The battles against Sierra natural forces, fought with new technology, were as deadly as any dogfight over France in The Great War. Men such as Monte Mouton, Ray Little, Claire Vance, Eugene Johnson, Burr Winslow, William Blanchfield, Rex Levisee, Jack Sharpnack, and Harry Huking flew the mails over the Sierra, leading a life of adventure and skirting danger most of the time. Air Mail pilots flew the Donner Pass route. They followed the Southern Pacific Railroad and Lincoln Highway so they could navigate in bad weather, and so they could be rescued quickly if their planes went down.

Air Mail pilots also navigated by compass, sight, and dead reckoning. It was truly flying by the seat of their pants. The men had to know how to fly, how to put it down and stay alive, and repair the plane miles from anywhere. They also had to know Sierra weather.

Pilots had to dress in fur-lined leather jackets and pants, Eskimo boots, a lined leather flying helmet, and goggles to survive flying in good weather or bad, dry or wet. All with no heater.

The pilots were not braggarts and mostly avoided publicity, but the press kept track of their exploits and to the public they were heroes. Anywhere from 300 to 500 pounds of mail were stashed in the front compartment, while the pilot sat in the back, behind the wing, adding to his visibility and horizontal stability.

**The hazards of the route**

Planes went down frequently in the early 20s, with some experiencing easy landings that allowed the pilots to fix the problem and take back off again. Others required hauling the plane by tractors, trucks or sled dog teams back to the nearest airstrip, where they were repaired and put back into service. The remains of those too damaged to fly again had their parts stripped and were burned.

Flying up the slopes of the Sierra, pilots encountered dense fog, heavy rain and turbulent winds. At the higher elevations fog, snow, ice and subzero temperatures often blinded the pilots.

Updrafts would push them up to 15,000 feet, while downdrafts would drop the planes back down thousands of feet on both sides of the mountains. Tailwinds could speed the plane over the “hump,” while headwinds would stop all forward progress, and sometimes push the little planes backward.

During storms, pilots might fly north or south a hundred miles to try to find a break in the clouds, and sometimes set the plane down on an empty pasture to wait the storm out. The planes only did 90 miles an hour, so it was somewhat pointless to buck strong wind.

**Eye-opening experiences**

On a flight to Reno in March 1927, Burr Winslow had an oil line break on him as he was crossing Donner Summit. Blinded by leaking oil, he managed to cut his motor off, and glide into the Truckee emergency field. The rough, hard crusted snow on the strip caused the nose of the plane to dig into the snow, flipping over the biplane on its back. Winslow was unhurt, but the plane was badly damaged. The mail and pilot were hauled to Truckee by sleigh, and put on the train to continue the trip eastward.

Pilots Ray Little and Jack Parshall, among others, used the life saving Truckee field when mechanical problems or weather conditions forced them out of the sky. Wrecks of planes that crashed or landed and
remained in the Sierra included those of pilots Vance, Little, Degarmo, Johnson, and Winslow.

Nationwide, 35 Air Mail pilots died. Those who were well known in the Reno operation who sacrificed their lives to keep the nation’s primary communication link going included pilots Claire Vance, Jack Sharpnack, William Blanchfield, Norman Potter and Cap Lewis.

Claire Vance and Burr Winslow flew the most trips over the Sierra. Each logged more than 1,900 flights over the “hump” of the Sierra.

Others flew without major crashes and had long, happy careers flying commercial passengers. Harry “The Hawk” Huking flew for United Airlines until 1971; Winslow flew commercially for decades as well.

**From mail to passengers**

In July 1927, Boeing Air Transport took over the contract for flying mail over the Sierra. This was done to encourage the establishment of commercial air passenger traffic across the country. Most of the experienced Sierra pilots continued to challenge the Sierra.

Chicago newspaper reporter Jane Eads (later Bancroft) was the first paying commercial passenger to fly over the Sierra, as she completed her cross country adventure to scoop the nation. Her Sierra pilot, Eugene Johnson, thrilled her with stories of his adventures over the mountains.

Boeing upgraded its plane to more powerful, closed cabin planes, that could carry 1,600 pounds of mail, express freight or passengers. The comfort, safety and communication improvements ended the pioneer period of the early aviation history over the Sierra.

Future columns will detail of some the exploits of the Wonder Men of the Sierra.

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