

Archie meets Noel Wien; learns to fly

Archie's first trip in an airplane was with another legendary Bush pilot, Noel Wien, one of the founders of the company that was to buy Archie out: Wien Alaska Airways. Noel came to Kotzebue in 1927, barnstorming his way across the Arctic. Interested in this new form of transportation, Archie screwed up his courage and paid his money for that memorable first flight asking Noel to "pour it on and give me my money's worth." [15]

Noel did exactly that. Once aloft he proceeded to scare the living daylights out of Archie by performing a series of barrel rolls and loops watching in amusement as a terror-stricken Archie gripped the sidewalls of the plane so hard his "fingers left dents." [16]

For years, Archie relished telling of that first flight. "Wien looped me 'n I purty near fell out," he would recall with self-deprecating laughter. "Gosh, I was so scared I couldn't get my hands loose from the sides of the airplane!" [17]

But far from convincing Archie he should stay on solid ground, the flight only sharpened his desire to fly. Perhaps a more persuasive reason Archie wanted to learn to fly was that Hans Mirow, the Nome pilot who was doing most of the air cargo and passenger hauling in those days, was not proving dependable. Archie had a let's-do-it-right-now personality. When Mirow or his pilots couldn't keep to Archie's rigid schedule, Archie decided to take matters in his own hands and became a pilot. [18]

But learning to fly was not that easy. First, Archie had to locate a plane in the "Lower 48", have it disassembled and transported to Kotzebue where Archie was spending quite a bit of his time. Next, somebody had to teach him how to fly the contraption. Then, of course, were the associated problems of a consistent supply of fuel and spare parts. And mechanics would be needed to maintain and repair the aircraft.

These minor issues aside, the aviation venture had to make money. Bush flying was not a profitable business and profit margins were then at best. To show a profit, Archie would have to compete head-to-head with seasoned veterans of the sky like Frank Whaley, John Cross, Frank Pollack, Hans Mirow, and Jack Jefford, just to name a few.

None of this deterred Archie in the slightest. He was going to fly. He made the final decision in Selawik in 1930, Jim Hutchison remembered. Hutchison, who was working as a reindeer herder then, remembered that Archie had fallen into conversation with Jim Robbins of Pacific Alaska Air-

ways — a subsidiary of Pan American — who had taught flying in San Diego before coming to Alaska.

After the two talked about aviation all night long, Archie made up his mind to fly, not that he needed much of a push. Robbins suggested Archie learn in a Great Lakes Trainer, an open cockpit biplane that Archie considered ideal for his purposes.

The next year, 1931, Archie scraped together \$4,000 and bought a Great Lakes Trainer. He spent another thousand to have it taken apart and shipped to Kotzebue. When it got to Kotzebue, he and Jim Hutchison had to replace the fabric because that which was not rotten was badly ripped.

Now that he had a plane that was serviceable, Archie needed a sky-teacher. Leafing through a flying magazine, Archie came upon an advertisement for a "flight-trainer." Chet Brown of Colorado. He hired Brown by telegram and Brown came North to what he probably thought was the edge of the earth.

For all his enthusiasm, Archie was hardly a star pupil, even in a class of one. It could not be said that he was an average student of aviation either. In fact, in all honesty it could only be said that Archie was one of the worst students imaginable. For all his drive and energy, he had a terrible time mastering even the most elementary aviation skills. After 60 hours

of training, seven times longer than an ordinary student would require, Brown was unwilling to let Archie fly solo. Archie thought differently. He was ready to fly solo. He wanted to fly solo and by God! he was going to fly solo.

Finally, after much whining and arm-twisting — not to mention a lot of practical jokes along the way — Brown relented and released Archie into the sky to fly solo. But, taking a page from Archie's own book of practical jokes, Brown slipped an alarm clock under the pilot's seat. It was set to go off 10 minutes after Archie left the ground.

"Go right up over town," advised Brown suppressing a smile. "Climb to a thousand and circle around. And be sure to take your time."

All went well as Archie flew steadily for nine minutes and 59 seconds. Then, when the alarm went off, the plane began wallowing about the sky, as if a wild man was in the cockpit — which one was. A shaken Archie brought the plane down quickly, managing to land safely on the gravel bar in Kotzebue Sound rather than on the landing strip.

"Gosh I was scairt," Ferguson liked to tell later. "I thought [the alarm] was some kind of a signal!"

Brown quite the same day. Since Archie still needed more training, he hired another pilot by telegram, Maurice King, out of Davenport, Iowa. Maurice, pro-

nounced "Morris," also came north at Archie's expense. But even under the tutelage of this second expert instructor, Archie was still unable to master even the most basic of commercial aviation skills.

Then along came Burleigh Putnam who was working for the CAA (Civil Aeronautics Association), the aviation watchdog. Burleigh gave Archie a few pointers to enable him to pass his commercial license and "make him as legal as possible." Burleigh remembered going aloft in Archie's Fairchild 24 to teach him spins, and Archie "pretty near went through the roof of the airplane when it stalled," Putnam recalled. "He'd never had anything like that happen to him before."

Little wonder that it took Archie five years to get his license. Even then it was widely rumored and quite possible true that Archie bribed a CAA inspector to pass him. [19] (That inspector, incidentally, was not Burleigh Putnam. Putnam steadfastly maintained a reputation for being squeaky clean.)

With his hands, at long last, on his pilot's license, Archie quickly earned a reputation as one of the worst pilots — if not the

worst — in the Arctic. He quickly became known and acclaimed as the most erratic flyer in Alaska, if not the United States. Every landing he made, it was said of Archie, was merely a "controlled crash." [20] He didn't so much land as arrive. Other more earthy descriptions of his lack of flying skills were accurate as well. "More bulls—r than pilot," said Ray Peterson, a co-founder of Northern Consolidated and later part owner of Wien Consolidated Airlines. "Maybe he's a pilot," a lot of other Bush pilots used to say of him, "but he shouldn't be."

15] The date is in dispute, some say 1926, others 1927.

16] Harkey, *PIONEER*, page 178-9.

17] *Ibid.*, pages 157-8.

18] This tidbit came from Don Ferguson.

19] Conversation with Ransom "Tony" Schultz, August 20, 1991 and Shafsky.

20] *Ibid.*, page 77

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