

# Max Conrad

## Record-setting pilot is gone but not forgotten

BY WILLIAM SCHEREN

*"Aviation is proof that given the will, we have the capacity to achieve the impossible."*

*-Capt. Edward "Eddie" Rickenbacker*

On the morning of June 2, 1959, Max Conrad's fuel-laden Piper Comanche 250 barely made it into the air. As the morning sun began to rise over Casablanca, his small airplane turned west and soon became a dot over the expansive Atlantic Ocean. Conrad's goal was to break the Class IV (between 3,858 and 6,614 pounds) Federation Aeronautique Internationale record, and he had a secret. After months of studying U.S. Navy charts for the Atlantic and the Caribbean, he knew that the westerly surface trade winds should help him to break the record. As he began his flight over the ocean, he kept his altitude at 300 feet during the day and 500 feet at night. Yes, flying at higher altitudes burned less fuel, but Conrad knew that it took power to reach those altitudes - fuel that he didn't want to waste. To him, the engine was most efficient at low altitudes, and long-distance records were broken because of efficiency.

*Max Conrad completed his first Atlantic crossing in September 1950 from New York to Palermo, Sicily. He flew record-setting flights around the world until his last flight in 1969*

The day slowly turned into night, and Conrad kept going. After a sleepless first night, the sun broke the horizon, showing him continued favourable weather. Conrad continued on throughout the second day, still without sleep. As the sun began to set, he found himself over the Greater Antilles. His coffee was gone, and his sweet tea had turned bad. His mouth was dry, and he became obsessed with thirst. That night he spent six hours dodging thunderstorms. Trying to collect water outside his small window opening proved unsuccessful,

and his thirst intensified. On the third day, he was crossing over the shoreline of Corpus Christi, Texas, when his main cabin tanks finally went dry. All he had to do was to make it to El Paso, and the record would be his.

Finally, after 55 hours of flight, Conrad arrived at El Paso, having broken the world record. Exhausted and thirsty, he looked at his fuel gauges - 80 gallons remaining. He wearily told the tower operator, "I might as well go to Los Angeles." Four hours later, Conrad arrived at Los Angeles International Airport. He had been flying an unbelievable 58 hours and 38 minutes, and still had 30 gallons of fuel left. Max Conrad, 56, had just set a new, world, long-distance record.

### The Man

Max Conrad was considered one of the greatest pilots who ever lived. He specialised in general aviation airplanes and setting long distance records. The flight from Casablanca to Los Angeles was just one of his amazing world records.

Inspired by Charles Lindbergh and his flight to Paris in 1927, Conrad quit college and began taking flying lessons that same year. In 1928 he bought his first airplane, a Laird Swallow, and began a flying career as a barnstormer and instructor. In 1929, a horrible accident occurred that would forever mould Conrad's life. After giving a ride in his airplane to two teenage girls, one of them proceeded to climb off the wing forward, toward the engine and spinning propeller. Conrad yelled out to her as she began to step off the wing. He quickly closed the throttle, jumped out onto the wing, and grabbed for her. Seconds later, the powerful propeller struck both of them, killing her instantly, while cutting deep into Conrad's brain.

After months in a hospital, Conrad recovered, but his speech and motor skills had been greatly diminished. He was unable to speak for

a long time. Later, when he found out that the girl had died in the accident, he was devastated. It took great courage and months of rehabilitation for him to climb back into a cockpit and learn to fly all over again.

### **The Records Begin**

Conrad's quest for challenging aviation records began by accident when, in 1950, he had a dire need to get to Europe to see his wife and children. Because a trip by ocean liner cost more than Conrad made in a year as a pilot, he got an innovative idea one day as he was flying over Piper Aircraft Company in Lock Haven, Pennsylvania. Piper had just introduced the Piper Pacer, and Conrad knew that sales were slow. Days later, he set up a meeting with William Piper and convinced the Piper president to allow him to fly one of the Pacers to Europe where Conrad had moved his family to reduce living expenses. Piper would get the publicity, and Conrad would be able to see his wife and children. Conrad took off from New York in late August of that year in the fabric-covered Pacer that weighed only 1,000 pounds and was powered by a 135-horsepower engine. By adding internal tanks in the cabin, Conrad figured that he had enough fuel to stay aloft for 30 hours or more. From New York, he flew to Goose Bay, and then planned to fly direct to Ireland. Nine hundred miles out over the cold Atlantic, the U. S. Air Force forced him to land in Greenland, thinking that he might be a Communist spy. But, how many enemy spies fly the Atlantic in a Piper Pacer? Twenty-four hours later, the Air Force allowed him to depart. Conrad flew nonstop to Ireland, then Scotland, and finally to his final destination in Geneva. Two weeks later, Conrad returned to the United States in the same airplane, flying the same route. When he arrived home, the Piper people were ecstatic, and Pacer sales soared. Max Conrad had become a hero and made a name for himself in the aviation community.

### **The Challenges Continue**

The quest for long-distance flying was now in his blood, and the public encouraged him to find a new challenge. Fortunately, Piper was eager

for more sales, so a partnership developed. Piper asked Conrad to fly one of its new twin-engine Apaches over the Atlantic. Conrad jumped at the chance but added that flying nonstop from New York to Paris might be better for publicity. In October 1954, Conrad took off from New York with 369 gallons of fuel on board. The airplane was 1,500 pounds over gross, but because it was a Max Conrad flight, the authorities believed that the long-distance champ knew what he was doing. The flight was uneventful until, halfway over the frigid Atlantic, the Apache developed carburettor ice in both engines. As Conrad pulled out the carburettor heat, both engines suddenly stopped. The closest land was 500 miles away. Fortunately, turning off the carb heat caused both engines to restart. He was able to solve the heat, throttle, and mixture problem and continue on, but an hour later his directional gyro and artificial horizon failed just as he found himself in snow and IFR conditions. Conrad pressed on with just his magnetic compass and turn-and-bank indicator.

*Conrad set the aviation world on fire when he flew a Comanche nonstop from Chicago to Rome.*

Twenty-two hours later, a weary but happy Max Conrad landed at Toussus-Le-Noble Field in Paris. He had become only the second person in the world to fly nonstop from New York to Paris in a lightplane. The first one was Lindbergh.

### **The Challenges Grow**

By 1958, Conrad had flown solo across the Atlantic 39 times. That year, he delivered Piper's first Comanche 250 to Europe. In true Max Conrad style, he flew the airplane nonstop from Idlewild, New York, to Palermo, Sicily. When word got out about the flight, sales of the new Comanche skyrocketed. If that wasn't enough publicity for Piper, the next year Conrad set the aviation world on fire when he flew a Comanche nonstop from Chicago to Rome-an incredible distance of 4,830 statute miles that took only 34 hours. Piper sales were soaring, and so was Max's reputation.

In 1964, Piper brought out a new plane called the Twin Comanche. Conrad quickly loaded one with 800 gallons of fuel and flew it nonstop from Capetown, South Africa, to St. Petersburg, Florida.

**Conrad set a coast-to-coast lightplane speed record on May 14, 1951, when he landed at New York's La Guardia Airport after a 23 hour four minute flight from Los Angeles in a Piper Pacer**

### Trying to Top Records

In July 1960, he set a closed-course record between Minneapolis, Chicago, and Des Moines. In a Comanche 180, he flew seven laps around the course. It took him 60 hours, covering 6,921 miles, and it was an astonishing achievement for both the airplane and the pilot, but the public barely took notice.

In 1961, Conrad flew around the world at the equator in a Piper Aztec. It took him eight and one-half days. Unfortunately, Conrad's records were becoming predictable.

### Excitement Over Greenland

By 1964, Conrad had traversed the Atlantic solo 150 times and the Pacific 43 times. That

*At the age of 65, Conrad set out on an around-the-world trip by way of the North and South poles.*

same year, he suffered one of his closest brushes with death.

Conrad was asked to fly a small Italian airplane from Italy to California. The Proacer Picchio was a small four-place, low-wing monoplane powered by a 180-hp Lycoming engine. In the middle of his trip, after a short weather delay in Iceland, oil began spraying onto the windshield while over the icy Atlantic Ocean. Luckily, Greenland was a distant blur off his right wing, and Conrad immediately turned the airplane. Moments after he issued a distress call, his windshield went black with oil, and everything went quiet. The engine had frozen. Max was able to glide the small airplane to the tip of a fjord and land safely near the edge of

a glacier. Twenty minutes later, a Douglas DC-4 that had heard his distress call flew overhead and dropped survival gear. Conrad hiked two and one-half miles through blowing snow and over dangerous crevasses to the edge of the glacier, where an iceberg patrol boat picked him up.

In 1965, Conrad was awarded the Harmon Trophy for his aviation accomplishments. He was the first general aviation pilot ever to receive this prestigious award.

### His Greatest Challenge

At the age of 65, Conrad set out on what he thought would be his greatest challenge - an around-the-world trip by way of the North and South poles that would capture three world records. In November 1968, he took off from St. Louis in his Piper Aztec and headed north.

*Conrad was welcomed by a crowd of several thousand at Bocca di Falco Airport in Palermo, Sicily, after his 4,440-mile flight from New York in a Piper Comanche.*

He flew from Calgary to Alaska, over the North Pole to Norway, and on to Paris, Casablanca, Rio de Janeiro, Buenos Aires, and Punta Arenas, Chile. After two tries he finally made it to Adelaide, his first stop in Antarctica. There the weather became unbearable. Conrad lived underground with U.S. Navy scientists for three weeks but, seeing no letup in the weather across the ice-covered continent, he reluctantly took off and headed back to South America - a disappointed man. He had come so close. He arrived in St. Louis on January 21, on his sixty-sixth birthday. Fellow pilots and his fans understood his decision to turn back, but Conrad considered himself a failure, and a deep depression took hold.

### Never Say Die

Depression tormented Conrad until he couldn't take it any longer; he decided to attempt the record again. This time he would approach Antarctica from the opposite direction where he could fly with the weather as it moved across the continent. Unfortunately, the U.S.

Navy was not as excited about his second record attempt. It felt that, at age 67 Conrad was just too old-and because of the Antarctic weather, the odds were too much against him. When most pilots would have given up, Conrad pulled an ace out of his sleeve and called his friend U.S. Sen. Barry Goldwater, an aviation enthusiast. Forty-five minutes later, "the Flying Grandfather, as people called Conrad, receive another call from the Navy. They would love to have him come to Antarctica.

**Unfortunately, the Navy was not excited about Conrad's second record attempt; at age 67, they thought him too old for the flight.**

On November 30, 1969, Conrad took off from Winona, Minnesota. Immediately things started going wrong. On the leg to San Francisco, one of his alternators malfunctioned. While it was being repaired, someone broke into the airplane and stole his passport. On the leg to Hawaii, the power supply to his radio burned out. Six hundred miles out of Hawaii, concerned when the airplane's second alternator failed, Conrad declared an emergency and landed at the military base on Johnson Atoll. Then on the way to Brisbane, Australia, one of the Aztec's engines failed, and Conrad had to fly on one engine to a small island in Fiji. After landing, Conrad was able to find a fuel-pump diaphragm in a boat junkyard, repair his left Lycoming, and continue on. Finally arriving at Christchurch, New Zealand, Conrad refuelled his airplane and took off for Antarctica. Eight hours out of Invercargill, the Aztec's wings began to ice up; Conrad had no deicing equipment on board. Moments later, he lost oil pressure in his left engine. Disappointed, he headed back to New Zealand on one engine. Conrad decided to have the left engine overhauled and continue pursuing his dream. Seven days later, he left New Zealand and flew to McMurdo Sound in Antarctica, the final stop before reaching the South Pole. When he landed at Amundsen-Scott Station, he was ecstatic. He had finally reached the South Pole. Although the field elevation was 9,400

feet and the temperature 35 degrees below zero, what concerned him the most was that the area was surrounded by high mountains. It was there that his dream began to face reality. With the field's density altitude and the amount of fuel Conrad's Aztec needed to reach his next destination, the odds started to look slim. Even worse, the rugged mountains surrounding the area stood like towering pieces of granite, ready to reach out and catch a small airplane passing by.

For the next few days, Conrad had to wait around until the Navy OK'd the weather for his departure. He used the time to calculate how much fuel he would need to reach his next destination. He finally figured that 6,600 pounds would be the most he could lift from the ice-covered runway. In addition to fuel, he had to carry snow skis for the Aztec. The next day, the weather began to clear, and the Navy gave him permission for a quick takeoff. During the preflight, the weather turned again, surrounding Conrad in IFR conditions with little lateral visibility. With the engines running, Conrad spotted a patch of blue sky and rammed the throttles. As the heavily laden airplane struggled to lift into the air, the bit of blue sky disappeared and there was no distinction between the white snow on the ground and the snow in the air. Moments later, one propeller struck a snowbank at an altitude of 10,000 feet msl, and oil from the prop was slung onto the Aztec's windshield. Conrad turned and began searching for the runway, but the airplane hit the snow covered ground and came to an abrupt stop. When the Navy arrived in their vehicles, they found an unhurt but very dejected man. They flew him back to Winona, leaving his airplane in the snow as a tribute-or possibly a caution - to fellow pilots around the world. Max Conrad's dream had come to an end, and with it, the end of an era.

### **A True Hero**

In 1969 Conrad was the guest of honour at the Explorer's Club in New York. With more than 50,000 flying hours, he was described as "the foremost pilot of lightplanes in the world." Many of Conrad's FAI records still stand, and

there aren't too many people willing to step up to the plate to challenge them. Max Conrad had more than just a sporting interest in setting aviation records. It's almost as if he were possessed. Maybe he felt that it was his duty to sacrifice his life on a quest because of the guilt he continued to feel after the young girl died from his propeller. Although he passed away in 1979, the name Max Conrad will live on forever in the record books.

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