

New York to Nome In 53½ Hours—Wow!

By Stanton H. Patty

Fifty years ago eight daring young men flew four modified World War I Army bombers from New York to Nome, Alaska, and back to New York.

It was a flight that had profound results — the real curtain-raiser for Northland aviation. Few even remember that it happened.

Yet, the leader of those air pioneers still is living to tell about it. Another, who died last May, has a lasting place in Seattle's aviation history, too.

The Alaskan Flying Expedition it was called. It was the first flight from the United States to the obscure territory that had been purchased from Russia just 53 years earlier.

The late Brig. Gen. Billy Mitchell, then assistant chief of the Army Air Service, conceived the project.

Years before, as a junior Signal Corps officer, the visionary Mitchell had been in Alaska to help string the first telegraph wires. He regarded Alaska as "the most strategic place in the world" and wanted to prove that airplanes could fly to the top of the continent.

No more dangerous mission could have been planned.

The 4,500-mile route to Nome for the open-cockpit De Havilland 4-Bs lay across a stormy no-man's land of savage terrain that never before had been penetrated by aircraft. There were no emergency landing fields. Maps were inadequate. Instruments were primitive. The single-engine biplanes would depend on 400-horsepower Liberty motors propelling them at a top speed of 115 miles an hour over the mountains and glaciers.

Amazingly, all returned without a major mishap.

"A spirit of romance and adventure dominated the individual pilots who participated with me in that flight," Capt. St. Clair Streett, the flight commander, wrote later.

Streett, 76, who retired as a major general in 1952, resides now in Calvert County, Md.

Among those on that memorable adventure with Streett was Lt. Erik H. Nelson, later a vice president and director of The Boeing Co. Nelson retired in 1946 as a brigadier general and resided in Hawaii until his death in May at the age of 81.

While with Boeing from 1929 to 1936, Nelson was largely responsible for forming the Boeing Air Transport Co., later to become United Air Lines. He also helped design the Boeing 247 transport and other aircraft.

Four years after the Alaskan feat, the Sweden-born Nelson was a pilot for the Army expedition that made the first flight around the world. That flight left Seattle's Lake Washington on April 6, 1924. Two of

the four planes completed the trip. One was Nelson's.

That plane, a Douglas World Cruiser named the "New Orleans," is on display today at the Air Force Museum at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, Ohio. So was Streett's flagship of the 1920 Alaskan Flying Expedition until it was destroyed inadvertently during the Second World War.

Alaska's trailblazers were nicknamed the "Black Wolf Squadron" because of the wolf's-head insignia on Streett's plane. The little De Havillands had wing spans of 42 feet 7 inches and were less than 30 feet long. At best, they were able to climb to 15,800 feet.

This was the roster:

Plane No. 1—Streett, pilot and flight commander; Sgt. Edmund Henriques, observer and mechanic. Plane No. 2—1st Lt. Clifford C. Nutt, pilot and second in command, and 2nd Lt. Erik Nelson, engineering officer-pilot; Plane No. 3—2nd Lt. Clarence E. Crumrine, pilot-photographic officer, and Sgt. James D. Long, observer; Plane No. 4—2nd Lt. Ross C. Kirkpatrick, pilot, and Master Sgt. Joseph E. English, mechanic-observer.

There was another, too, Capt. Howard T. Douglas, an unsung hero of the story. Three months before the expedition began, Douglas went over the route by train and

ship to have hastily made landing fields prepared. There were many places along the way where none of the residents had even seen an airplane before.

It was 12:33 p. m. on July 15, 1920, when the squadron lifted off from Mitchel Field on New York's Long Island. The planes reached Nome the afternoon of August 24.

With time out for sour weather and repairs, the actual flying time to Nome was 53 hours and 30 minutes.

On October 20 the same planes and crews touched down at Mitchel Field after covering a total of 9,000 miles. They had averaged 80 miles an hour.

The historic flight began with high spirits. But soon after takeoff from Long Island Streett found himself in "a black wall of fog and rain." Near Elmhurst, Pa., he decided to land in a hayfield. The landing-gear axle snapped when the plane rolled into a hidden ditch.

It was the first of several accidents that would tax the ingenuity and tempers of the fliers.

Crumrine's plane mired down in the soft airstrip at Erie, Pa., and had to be dragged out with a team of horses.

Onward, across Michigan, Minnesota and North Dakota. But at Portal, N. D., Crumrine sliced the tires of his plane on glass strewn on the runway. The town had used the field for a garbage dump in times past.

Into Canada's Saskatchewan, navigating by following a railroad through the bewildering checkerboard of farmland. Hospitable Canadians packed around the flight crews so densely at Saskatoon that the police chief had to clear the field.

At Edmonton, they landed on the wrong field, took off again and then found the right spot. Thousands were waiting. Nutt broke a wing skid on the second landing. Streett had a fuel-tank leak.

Ahead now was unmappped wilderness. The crews asked old-timers for landmarks and sought weather reports from train dispatchers. They took off from Edmonton the morning of July 31, but soon had to turn back because of fog that hid the rocky terrain where they might have had to make a forced landing.

Then off from Edmonton, successfully this time, to Jasper in Alberta.

"The magnificence of the scenery about us was beyond description . . . our motors hummed sturdily over this terrible landscape," Streett recalled. "The people of this remote country had never before seen an airplane."

On the way to Prince-George, B. C., smoke poured from Streett's motor. He turned over the controls to Sergeant Henriques and crawled forward with a fire extinguisher. Just as they were plunging down for a forced landing on a river, the smoke stopped.

"I prayed for the intervention of Provi-



AFTER THE FLIGHT, Captain Streett was congratulated by Gen. Pershing.



BEFORE TAKING OFF from New York City, some of the crew members were given encouragement by Brig. Gen. Billy Mitchell. Shown above, from left, are: General Mitchell, 1st Lt. Ross C.

Kirkpatrick, Sgt. Edmund HERRIQUES, 2nd Lt. Erik H. Nelson, Capt. St. Clair Streett, Sgt. Joseph E. English, 1st Lt. Clifford C. Nutt and 2nd Lt. Clarence E. Crumrine.

dence," Streett said. "Providence replied in the nick of time to save us from a ducking."

Then across the Canadian Rockies and through the Fraser River Valley to Prince George.

It was growing dark. Rain and hail pelted Streett's plane, which was behind the three others because of the close call. Lightning darted from the clouds. Finally, Streett saw a flare and landed at Prince George in blinding rain.

The left wing of Streett's plane was smashed in the landing. Crumrine had blown a tire and nicked his propeller. Sergeant Long, Crumrine's mechanic, was riding on the tail of the machine to help it stop rolling after landing. The plane nosed up and tossed Long headlong. But he was unhurt.

They found a cabinetmaker and a tailor to make the necessary repairs. But more bad news: The preselected field ahead at Hazelton, B. C., was reported to be unsafe.

Streett traveled to Hazelton by train and persuaded a cooperative farmer to cut a runway in an oat field. It was anything but ideal, but it worked.

From Hazelton, they flew (with little help from inaccurate maps) across perilous mountains toward Wrangell, Alaska. Finally, Alaska was in sight.

After being feted at Wrangell, they continued on past Juneau and through White Pass of gold-rush fame into Canada again to their next stop, Whitehorse, Yukon Territory.

On to Dawson, the Klondike gold town.

Streett watched as Crumrine landed grandly at Dawson on one good wheel and another improvised from rope. Crumrine had blown the tire twice while trying to take off from Whitehorse. He simply looped rope around the wheel rim and placed the tire casing over that.

At Dawson, the Army fliers went aboard a gold dredge and were made honorary members of the Yukon Order of Pioneers. Fairbanks, in the heart of Alaska, was next.

The reception at Fairbanks was exuberant as the four planes landed on the field at the ball park. Spectators jamming the bleachers cheered. Others swarmed around the olive-green planes. Some scribbled their names on the fabric.

"OUR AIR EXCURSION BIGGEST THING WORLD KNOWS TODAY," was the proud banner in the Fairbanks Daily News-Miner.

(It would be three more years before Carl Ben Eielson, Alaska's pioneer birdman, helped begin the bush-pilot era from Fairbanks.)

From Fairbanks, the squadron followed the Tanana River and then overtook a sternwheeler on the Yukon River. They landed at Ruby, the old mining town, where Indians had been gathering for days to see the planes.

The last hop, 300 miles to Nome, was routine. The fliers landed on the parade ground of old Fort Davis near the town and delivered the mail they had brought from New York.

Streett and his men were jubilant. But they wanted more.

Hopefully Streett telegraphed the Army

for permission to continue across the Bering Sea from Nome to Siberia. "Return home," the Army replied tersely.

So, reluctantly—both for the air crews and Alaskans—the Black Wolf Squadron headed back for Mitchel Field in New York. They were met there by Gen. John J. Pershing, the famed World War I commander, and Billy Mitchell, the aviation prophet.

What did the flight prove? Consider these accomplishments:

1. Establishment of an effective aerial route to the northwestern corner of the continent—and on to Asia.
2. Charting and photographing of inaccessible areas of Alaska that never before had been mapped.
3. Demonstration of the airplane as a means of long-haul transport for passengers, freight and mail.
4. Pointing out the necessity for landing fields and airplane service stations throughout the United States and its territories.
5. Proving that flying is safe over terrain where railroads and highways cannot travel.
6. Showing the comparative ease and speed with which troops can be transported long distances by air.
7. The beginning of aviation cooperation between United States and Canadian military establishments.

Streett thought it all over back in 1920 after the flight and said:

"Someday this trip may be made overnight—who knows?"

The old general has lived to see the jet age make that prediction come true.