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**James E. Granger**  
*Aviation's enterprising salesman.*

by Barbara Hunter Schultz

*Honest, credible, and humorous, he sold safety in the sky. His untimely death only served to perpetuate his philosophy.*

Sunlight glimmered on the Pacific as Jim Granger prepared Keith Rider's new R-3 racer for a late afternoon test flight. As he began his take-off roll down the runway, anticipation grew among the small throng of spectators at Santa Monica's Clover Field. There was no reason to expect anything other than success.

Alarm quickly spread through the crowd, however, as Granger appeared to lose control of the racer. In a matter of seconds, the R-3 lay on its back. The following day, October 3, 1934, the well-respected aviator died from massive head injuries. The tragedy stunned the flying community.

Jim Granger migrated to Pasadena, California from Massachusetts in 1910. Armed with a practical knowledge of electrical circuitry, he easily found work with the Edison Electrical Company. Two years later, longing for independence and adventure, Granger opened a Brush automobile agency in Long Beach. It proved quite profitable until the manufacturer went out of business.

Granger established his next enterprise - a garage, gas station, and Ford dealership - in a renovated bootlegger's barn in Spadra, a now defunct town on the well-traveled route

between Pomona and Whittier. Business boomed for the natural promoter and salesman. His gregarious personality earned him the nickname "Sunny" and a position as first President of the local Citrus Belt Auto Dealers Association.

Despite his success, contentment eluded the earthbound Granger. This changed in 1926. In the spring of that year Granger took his first airplane ride. The flight not only inspired him to take up the sport but convinced him that flying was destined to play a major role in transportation's future. Eager to be part of the exciting probability, he sold his automobile dealership and embarked on a career in aviation. A Union Oil Service Station on Clover Field, the West Coast's most popular airport, remained his sole connection to the automobile trade.

Ken Montee, operator of an aircraft company at Clover, taught Granger to fly. Aircraft designer Waldo Waterman sold the fledgling pilot his first airplane, an OX-5 Jenny. Granger used the biplane for his first aviation job - movie flying!. Granger eventually accumulated over 100 hours performing in such films as *The Winged Horseman*, *Night Flight*, and *The Yellow Ribbon*.

After ten hours of performing before the cameras, Granger sought a more stable career in aviation. His master plan included instructing, charter service, and airplane distributorships. Clover Field and his newly acquired Pacific School of Flying became his base of operation.

Clover proved to be ideal location for Granger. Adjacent to an 18 hole golf course and within minutes of the MGM studios and the Pacific Ocean, the airport hummed with activity. MGM, along with other movie companies, used the airport as the backdrop for their very popular aviation dramas. Aircraft needed for the productions were rented from the

fixed base operators on the field. Granger provided new and used planes for the studios, a result of the three distributorships he held. He became the West Coast distributor for the Swallow Aircraft Company in 1928. During the First National Air Races and Aeronautical Exposition at Los Angeles Municipal Airport that year, he promoted the Whirlwind-powered biplane. They sold well. He acquired distributorships for Butler Black Hawks and Laird aircraft in 1929 and 1932 respectively.

Other aircraft available to Granger for occasional film work belonged to the movie crowd and were hangared at Pacific. Ruth Elder's J-5 Swallow, Hoot Gibson's Blackhawk, Douglas Shearer's Avro Avian, W.W.I French Ace Charles Nungesser's Hanriot, and Edgar Rice Burroughs' Kinner Shortster were among those used.

At the end of 1928, Granger further profited from the movie industry's presence at Clover. He persuaded Fox to rent one of their abandoned hangars to him. The structure served as a prop during the filming of *Air Circus*, a production that patterned its flying school theme after Pacific. Much larger, the new hangar allowed Granger to increase his office space and house more planes.

The Pacific School of Flying, renamed the Pacific School of Aviation by Granger, was one of eight flying schools at Clover. They all competed for student pilots, but Granger's became the most popular. His school graduated more proficient flyers than any other. There was a simple reason.

In an era when the sensationalism of aerial circuses, wingwalkers, and reckless stunt pilots characterized aviation, Granger emphasized common sense, not daring bravado. He espoused the need for "flying savvy". No one, not even the pro, took to the skies in a faulty aircraft or with Mother Nature brewing a wicked storm. No chances allowed at his school!

People from all backgrounds came to Pacific to learn to fly or seek advanced training. Many were movie stars from nearby MGM studios. Hoot Gibson, Ruth Elder, Bebe Daniels, Ben Lyon, Buster Keaton, Norma Shearer, author Edgar Rice Burroughs of Tarzan fame, and race car driver Harry Hartz earned their wings there. Spencer Tracy frequently flew with Granger but never pursued a pilot's license.

Granger knew no gender boundaries when it came to flying. He believed women could fly just as safe and competitively as men. Many women became superb pilots through his encouragement. The majority of them were able to pay for their lessons. Others less affluent traded flying time for jobs around Pacific. Granger's reputation for fairness attracted women who already held a license. Bobbi Trout and Vera Walker received advanced training from him.

All students who soloed at the Pacific School of Aviation were safe and conscientious flyers. The only accident involving Granger or his planes was one that nearly took the life of actor Hoot Gibson.

In 1933, Gibson challenged western star Ken Maynard to a race. They both felt that the publicity accompanying the event would most certainly help their fading box-office appeal. At Granger's suggestion, the two actors arranged for the competition to take place during the National Air Races held in Los Angeles that September. Twenty thousand spectators watched as Hoot, in Granger's J-5 Swallow, and Maynard, in a J6-7 Stearman, headed for the first pylon. Hoot stormed around the first two pylons, taking a commanding lead in the second straightway. At the third pylon, he pulled the Swallow into a steep turn, stalled, and dove the plane into the ground. Fortunately, he lived to fly another day. The Swallow was demolished.

Granger's first student was his wife Clema. She learned quickly and became as enthusiastic about aviation as her husband. Most local exhibitions and races included Clema. She enjoyed demonstrating the ease of piloting, particularly landing without the aid of an engine. These dead-stick landings during competitions reinforced the safety of the plane for the public. Clema's expertise always assured her of a first place finish.

Clema encouraged her husband to teach their three sons to fly when they turned sixteen. As the boys reached adolescence, the family truly became a "flying family". Granger's youngest son Norm put it this way: "We all had a part in local air racing and shows. We loved every minute of it. I was usually on the flight line with my brothers (Jim Jr. and Harry) and some of our school's students, swinging props, getting planes out and putting them away, gassing them up, checking oil and water, warming up engines, etc. Along with our huge new hangar, we had a chain fence down the flight line that disappeared into the ground when not needed. We would pull up the posts and string out the chain to control the audiences. There were always dignitaries flying in or visiting so Dad built steps up to the roof where chairs were provided for them next to the speakers stand.

"Another job we all did was changing Dad's Swallow from a passenger carrier to a race plane in about fifteen minutes. We would remove the front seat cushions, secure the seat belts, and install the cockpit cover. As soon as the race was over, we were to reverse the procedure and make the plane ready to carry passengers again. All this time we had to watch the stuff closely. Audiences were not only welcome guests they were also souvenir collectors!"

Granger sponsored both male and female pilots in exhibitions and races. Although he was a competent and versatile pilot himself, he derived more enjoyment watching his former

students and friends take the prizes. Three of Granger's Swallows participated in Los Angeles' 1928 National Air Races held at Mines Field. He and his wife took turns participating in cross-country races to Cleveland between 1928 and 1932. They did not always finish in the top slots but completed the races safely. Granger finished 17th in the 1932 Cord Cup Transcontinental Handicap Race. In a 200 horsepower class, free-for-all in 1934, he placed first.

The Pacific School of Aviation hosted the opening ceremonies for national and local air races. One event that attracted more attention than most was the First Transcontinental Air Race for Women in 1929. Dubbed the Powder Puff Derby, its 20 participants registered for the race, volleyed interviews, and posed for front page photos in Pacific's hangar.

All of these activities - flying, selling, sponsoring, and teaching - gave Granger a great deal of satisfaction but he wanted to accomplish much more. He wanted to change the general public's skeptical attitude toward aviation. Through the many articles he wrote, he attempted to promote flying as a safe and reliable mode of transportation.

In one entitled *Bringing Aviation down to Earth*, Granger stated: "Aviation will never become a universal means of transportation as long as the average man thinks of a licensed pilot as a cross between a bird and a man endowed with superhuman powers. Fliers have fostered this feeling, surrounding themselves with glamour and taking the attitude towards the layman of, well, you can try and fly if you want to, but you've got to be good, buddy, you've got to be good. It's tough and it takes something the average man hasn't got." Granger's approach to instructing and flying was certainly a positive factor in changing this widely held and imaginative view of flying.

In other articles, Granger proposed changes to facilitate cross-country flying. He felt that a better system of navigational aids, such as painted poles, and emergency landing strips between airports would help a pilot keep on course and provide safe, alternative landing areas.

Granger wanted to eliminate much of the technical information required for a pilot's license. He thought mandatory regulations discouraged too many individuals from pursuing flying. This included competency in meteorology. "With an average amount of common sense, plus average eyesight, the man who drives a car without thought of fear, should be able to fly an airplane with the same amount of confidence and ease. How many automobile dealers would there be if a man had to drive up to an intersection, shoot the sun with a sextant, use a compass and then plot his course. There are signboards everywhere - even in the air."

As the aviation industry began to feel the effects of the Great Depression, Granger's ingenuity kept him in business. Some enterprises proved more successful than others. He attempted a mail route between Santa Monica and the Imperial Valley but competition with the post office soon ended this venture. To maintain his flying school, Granger sold shares to investors. Ruth Elder and Edith Boyston Clark were among the stockholders that kept the school operating.

Granger helped organize the Los Angeles Aircraft Distributors Association of Southern California in 1931. The dealers united to bolster their industry through air shows and exhibitions. Granger became their first secretary and served as their "Master of Ceremonies". His hangar provided the setting for several of their meetings. It was also the scene of many celebrations as Norm Granger recalled:

“Our hangar was huge. It held about twenty planes plus shops, offices, etc. Dad painted the floor like a giant orange and black checker board. He would occasionally hold Saturday night dances in the hangar. Halloween dances were particularly popular. We would move the planes out at night and decorate the place with lights and streamers on the ceiling tie bars. An orchestra and caterers were hired for food and song. Dad would invite everyone he knew and he knew a lot of people!”

Granger formed a partnership with J.C. Gregory in January 1932. The two opened an aerial survey and photographic company in Granger's hangar and equipped his Black Hawk with camera mounts. The majority of their business came from mapping the Los Angeles basin. A trip to Cy Eddinger's wood mill in nearby Sawtelle resulted in Granger's next venture.

Aircraft designer Keith Rider's entry for the impending MacRobertson race from London to Melbourne was under construction in Eddinger's mill. The potential of the aircraft left Granger quite impressed. After consulting with his good friend Donald Douglas, who supported his optimism for the racer, Granger sought the desperately needed backing for Rider's project from one of his stockholders, Edith Clark. The Rider-Clark Aircraft Corporation resulted. Granger became test pilot for the streamlined prototype.

Final assembly of the racer took place in Granger's hangar. Mid-August 1934, Rider's crew rolled the plane out for its initial engine run-ups. After several successful high speed taxi runs, Granger flew the R-3 to Mines Field with his wife Clema, Edith Clark, and Keith Rider following in Clema's Stinson. The flight went very well. Granger loved using flaps on landing and looked forward to retracting the gear on his second flight.

Repairs delayed the R-3's next take-off. They also eliminated any possibility of the plane entering the Bendix Race on August 31. The pilot's seat needed repositioning to allow more leg room in the cockpit and the wing fabric needed replacing. The material separated from the wing surfaces during the maiden flight because of poor glue adhesion. Additional adjustments took the plane out of the MacRobertson competition.

Granger made nearly a dozen flights in the R-3 before a fateful October 2. Witnesses to the tragic accident speculated that either engine problems or hard braking caused the crash. The R-3's next test pilot Vance Breese disagreed. He stated that "pitch control was inadequate at low speed relative to the landing gear position. The tail had to be held low for a take-off run." In other words, Granger allowed the tail with its small elevator surface, to rise too high and lost pitch control. This, in turn, pushed the prop into the ground, flipping the R-3 over. The impact collapsed the vertical stabilizer. With this support eliminated, Granger no longer had adequate clearance between the fuselage and the ground and suffered massive head injuries.

Granger's death was not a result of the R-3's lack of aerodynamic control, however. Poor planning killed him. A stronger pylon support behind the pilot's seat or a reinforced vertical stabilizer would have allowed sufficient space between the ground and the pilot. Future aircraft designs incorporated stronger structural components to avoid a repeat of this type of accident.

Sixty years later, it seems little forethought is given to the R-3 lesson. Two similar accidents - one involving a Travelair Model R; the other, a Hawker Sea Fury - appear to duplicate the avoidable mishap that killed Granger. The experienced pilots of these airplanes

appear to have lost their lives when their craft inverted on landing and the vertical stabilizer collapsed.

Jim Granger left aviation a legacy of responsibility to itself and the general public. If one entity is to support the other, common sense, accountability, and simplicity must prevail. The message adapted well as aviation advanced during the twenties and thirties. Considering past and recent accidents, it should be reemphasized today.