

IN REMINISCENCE

by Ed Kiessig

(December 1989)

RUSS COTTLE ASKED ME TO COME up with a few recollections of my single-engine experiences as a pilot with Pacific Air Transport. Some of you will recall that prior to the Air Mail Contract cancellations, United Air Lines was comprised of four subsidiaries: Boeing Air Transport (BAT), National Air Transport (NAT), Pacific Air Transport (PAT) and Varney Air Lines (Varney). Each subsidiary operated independently. There was no seniority system for flight personnel when I was employed by PAT as a copilot on December 1, 1931.

The PAT route extended from Seattle to San Diego and was divided into three flight segments—Seattle-Medford, Medford-Oakland and Oakland-San Diego. There were four scheduled daily flights: Ford trimotors departed San Diego and Seattle in the morning about 0900 and Boeing 40-B-4 single-engine biplanes which departed Seattle southbound about 2015 and San Diego northbound at 2215. Portland and Medford were scheduled stops and crew change points on all trips operating between Seattle and Oakland. San Francisco Bay Airdrome and Burbank were scheduled stops on the Ford schedules between San Diego and Oakland. The 40-B night schedules, both northbound and southbound between San Diego and Oakland, had scheduled stops at Burbank, Bakersfield and Fresno.

At the time I joined PAT, there were three pilot domiciles: San Diego, Seattle and Medford. The pilots then holding runs were:

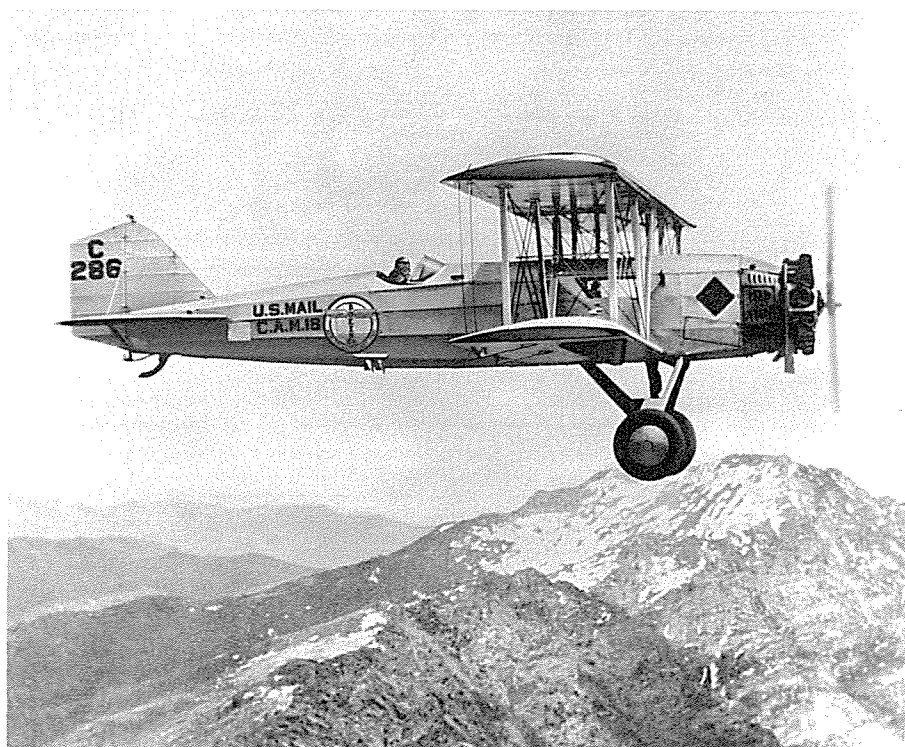
MEDFORD	SAN DIEGO	SEATTLE
Al Gilhousen	George Allen	Harold Adams
Herschel Laughlin	Dick Bowman	Frank Anderline
Grover Tyler	Harry Crandall	Al Davis
Ralph Virden	Johnny Johnston	Heber Miller
	Eldred Remelin	Charlie Stead
	Charlie Sullivan	Joe Smith (R)

Harold Adams, Harry Crandall, Johnny Johnston and Al Davis were killed in crashes occurring in 1932. Eddie Brooks and Mike Gugliemetti filled the vacancies created by the deaths of Crandall and Johnston. Joe Smith filled the Adams vacancy at Seattle with Lloyd Leak and Bud Gurney covering the Davis vacancy. It is a very sad and sorrowful commentary to note that with the death of my close friend, Joe Smith, on November 8, 1989, there is not a single survivor of this group.

As a result of the many pilot losses early in 1932, I was promoted to reserve pilot about April 15, 1932. Other than what I learned as a copilot on Fords, I received no schooling, training or checkouts in any of the airplanes I would fly. Neither was there such a thing as route Familiarization Flights. My first assigned flying was a seven-day-a-week night mail run between San Jose and Oakland—32 miles with departure

from San Jose around 2100. Actual departure time was anytime I got the mail to the airport. It was my duty to pick up the mail at the main San Jose Post Office. The return departure from Oakland depended on when the BAT westbound mail (one little sack) arrived, usually about 0600. I flew a Douglas O-2 most of this assignment and occasionally a Boeing 40-B-4 when the O-2 was out of service. (Most likely it was a Douglas M-2, civil version of the O-2 military biplane, built for carrying the mail.) I almost met my maker when I took off in zero-zero fog at San Jose one night. But that is a long story! I could pick up the mail at the San Jose post office and drive it to Oakland faster than I could get to San Jose airport, warm up the engine and fly that long 32-mile route!

My first 40-B trip southbound on the main PAT route was an adventure. I had never seen Fresno Chandler airport. It was a black night and Fresno visibility



M-2 mail plane, civil version of the O-2 observation plane minus the machine guns, and the front cockpit replaced with a covered mail tub.

(McDonnell Douglas via R.E. Williams)

Boeing 95 of Western Air Express at their Alhambra, California base. (Western Air Lines Photo)

was poor due to local forest fire smoke. No Jepp charts [existed] in those days and not enough illumination in a 40-B cockpit to read them if they had been available. With data I had gathered from maps, the Fresno low-frequency range and help from the man upstairs, I found the airport. There were no runway lights, only a few flare pots. Determining the proper runway heading and getting lined up for approach, I cranked the landing lights out. Imagine my surprise when the smoke-refracted light disclosed several tall eucalyptus trees in the approach path. It was a happy and relaxed feeling when I taxied to the hangar at San Diego and cut the switch to terminate the trip.

In that era, instrument approaches utilizing the LF ranges were unheard of. Quite a few LF ranges were installed and operating along the PAT route but no one knew how to use them. Most en route flying was contact or "on top" dead-reckoning. With the frequent and persistent stratus overcast at San Diego, Burbank and Oakland, we had to rely on dead-reckoning, two-way company radio and a lot of luck. Flying on top, we would dead-reckon to where we believed the airport was. The person handling the ground remote radio would tell us when he heard our engine. (In those days there was no Air Traffic Control and very little itinerant traffic.) The remote operator, on picking up the sound of our engine, would ask us to "jazz" the engine two or three times. If he then positively identified us he would begin giving us our direction from the field and proximity by stating that our engine noise was faint, near or over the field. When we got the last advice we would then start our spiral down through the overcast on instruments. Radio contact ended when we reported: "Field in sight." On one of these approaches at San Diego, the late



Seely Hall was handling the remote mike. He finally got me in position over Lindbergh Field. I then began my descent. Just as I broke out of the overcast a red and silver Boeing 95 shot across my path close in front of me. I estimated our separation was about 500 feet. I was really startled and "shook up." I landed and the Western 95 landed right behind me. By the time I got out of the cockpit I could see that Seely Hall was about ready to take the 95 pilot, Kelly II, apart. When asked why he had spiraled down through the overcast so close to me without any radio contact, Kelly II replied: "When I saw Kiessig go into the overcast I knew that he was over the airport so I followed him. By doing so I saved Western some money because it costs us \$1.00 for every radio contact with PAT."

For any who knew Seely Hall, let me record that I never saw his upper lip quiver so violently—a sure sign of his intense anger. He really castigated

Kelly II and it would be wonderful if his words could have been recorded. Today, as I write this, I shudder to think of the many approaches I made at Burbank in this manner. I now wonder just how close to the Verdugo mountains and disaster many of us were in using this imprecise and perilous type of approach.

The 40-B-4s were retired from PAT service in 1933 and their schedules covered by Ford trimotors. It was an emotional and sad farewell to a wonderful airplane for all of us who had the good fortune to fly it. It was always exhilarating to sit in the 40-B's open cockpit, look forward at what was then a powerful Pratt & Whitney *Hornet* engine. One had the world by the tail. Many more interesting and sometimes hair-raising incidents were experienced. They will have to remain in my memory unless I can muster enough initiative and energy to write them for my many grandchildren. □

Boeing 40-B biplane of Boeing Air Transport.
(United Air Lines Photo)