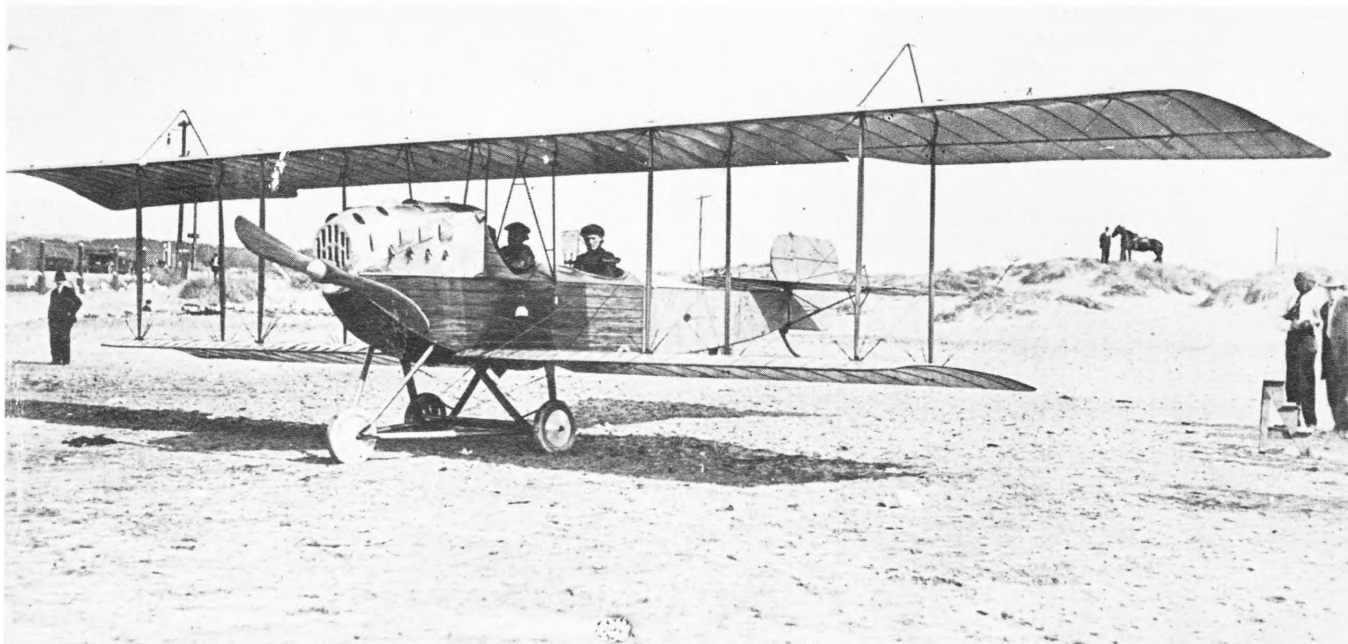




Silas Christofferson, pilot, and Claude French, mechanic, seated in the Christofferson Tractor Biplane.

First Over Mt. Whitney

By ERNEST L. TRUE

June 20, 1914 saw many exciting events unfold in Bishop, Inyo County, California. It was the beginning of Aviation Week in the Trans-Sierra counties of Inyo, Mono and Alpine. Within the oval of the race track at Bishop, the Christofferson Tractor Biplane glistened in the morning sun while mechanic Claude L. French made sure all was in readiness for pilot Silas Christofferson. Satisfied that the 100 horsepower Hall-Scott motor was tuned for this altitude, 4,147 feet above sea level, the airplane was ready for the opening ceremonies. Silas Christofferson planned to climax the week by flying over Mount Whitney and he was using these preceding days to test the airplane and himself in the thin and drafty mountain air.

People from near and far crowded around the race track, mountaineers from the Sierra Nevada and miners from Death Valley, many of whom had never seen an airplane before, were excitedly waiting for the take off of the first test flight. Silas climbed into the cockpit, the motor was started and the airplane took off to soar and bank around the race track. The large crowd cheered and waved lustily as Silas continued his graceful flying. The first test flight had been a success from everyone's viewpoint.

June 21 was spent in testing the airplane at altitudes up to 10,000 feet and although the air became thinner and much colder, the craft performed flawlessly and the experience and confidence needed for the flight over Mount Whitney mounted steadily. On June 22 the motor was dismantled, inspected and reassembled and the airplane received a thorough going over from its maker.

E. Carl Wallen, a San Francisco Examiner photographer, joined Silas Christofferson on June 23 for a flight to Lone Pine, 70 miles south of Bishop. Lone Pine was to be the operations base for the assault on Mount Whitney. Flying at 10,000 feet gave Wallen the opportunity

to take many feet of magnificent Sierra Nevada scenery with his movie camera. During this flight the airplane became "unruly and plunged 1,800 feet from its original altitude of 10,000 feet before Christofferson could regain control of it". (T) A landing was made at Independence to be sure there was no damage, and when none was found, the flight was continued to Lone Pine.

Like Bishop, Lone Pine was crowded with mountaineers and miners excitedly waiting to see an airplane. The Mount Whitney flight had been scheduled for June 24, but during the night unfavorable weather conditions had developed on and around Mount Whitney, forcing a cancellation of the flight. Mountaineers, miners, pilot and mechanic alike waited for a break in the strong, gusty winds and the clouds that hid the summit of their goal, but the hours went by with no change. Disappointment rose from the spectators as many of them had to return to logging or mining operations the next day and they had wanted to see an airplane fly. Silas was aware of this and when the wind abated along about sundown, he quickly took off and flew around the airfield. For this simple flying gesture he received the everlasting thanks of these people, many of whom were heard to say, "I saw it with my own eyes, now I am satisfied".

The 25th day of June 1914 dawned bright and clear and an already expectant crowd was gathered at the airfield. Mount Whitney, the monarch of all American mountain peaks, looked even more regal in the golden light of the morning sun. Mechanic French busily put the final, skilled touches on the motor while pilot Christofferson tested the controls. Satisfied that all was in readiness, Silas walked over to shake the hands of friends and give his wife a fond farewell embrace. Back in the airplane, he gave French the signal to start the motor and as flying temperature was reached, he signaled to those holding struts to release their

grip. The airplane rolled rapidly forward and became airborne at 0509.

Observing from the ground, E. Carl Wallen said, "The highly varnished finish of the airplane allowed it to reflect the rays of the sun in a brilliant mirror-like fashion, thus making it an easy matter to keep the craft in view at all times." [2]

As Silas was making what appeared to be a last circle before approaching the summit, he suddenly turned aside and came straight back to the airfield, landing at 0603. Getting out of the airplane, he stated, "I did not make it." He had circled in too close and the tricky mountain air currents had carried him downwards, missing the summit by 1,000 feet. He would have to "tack" more to compensate for the strong southwest wind at that height; he would need the other propeller to give the airplane the needed lift in the rarefied air and there had to be an adjustment made to the carburetor.

An interesting note on this unsuccessful attempt is that in the 54 minute flight he had reached an altitude of 13,428 feet, thereby breaking the existing American record of 11,286 feet, held since 1911 by Lincoln Beachey. (And he did this before breakfast.)

Breakfast, tuning and propeller changing completed, Silas left the ground for the second time at 0821. This time he circled more broadly, bearing as far as sixteen miles north until he appeared well above the crest of the mountains, then he turned south and flew straight for the summit of Mount Whitney. He was well above the top-most peak as he flew over America's highest mountain. With wide, sweeping turns, he flew back to the airfield flashing overhead at 90 miles an hour and landed at 0917. He had attained an altitude of 15,728 feet, or 1,226 feet above the summit. On this second flight he had flown 60 miles and had been in the air 56 minutes. This achievement was somewhat saddened for Silas because during the flight he had lost his mascot, the cap he had worn on every flight he'd ever made was blown off in the strong wind at the top of Mount Whitney.

Silas Christofferson had flown higher than any other American at this time, but unfortunately he was never to receive official recognition for this feat. It is with this in mind, that this small document has been prepared as a tribute to this man's courage and so that his flight shall be preserved in the annals of California and American aviation history.

Official Statement of the Board of Observation Concerning the Airplane Flight of Silas Christofferson Over Mount Whitney...

"We, the undersigned, a duly constituted Board of Observation, authorized by the Inyo Good Road Club to report upon the motor-plane flight of Silas Christofferson over Mount Whitney on June 25th, 1914, do hereby certify as follows:

"We were in attendance upon the aviation field at Lone Pine, California on the morning of June 25th, 1914 from the time of departure from the ground of Silas Christofferson when starting on his airplane flight over Mount Whitney, to the time of his return, fifty-six minutes later.

"The aviator was never out of range of vision during this flight, although diminutive when farthest away, and at the zenith of his altitude above Mount Whitney.

"According to the best of our knowledge, based upon actual and careful personal observation by eye, and by field glass and telescope, and all attending circumstances that enter into the formation of an opinion, together with the barometric reading shown and testified to by the aviator himself, it is our belief that the official announcement of height attained, to wit: 15,728 feet above sea level, declared by the executive secretary of this club, is true and correct.

"We were close and attentive observers throughout, having access to field glasses and telescopes to supplement the naked eye when desired.

"Several hundred people were present, many of whom were provided with similar accessories, and we have not heard a single opinion or intimation dissenting from what we have hereby expressed."

G. P. DOYLE - M.D.
President Inyo Good Road Club

M. Q. WATTERSON
Treasurer Inyo Good Road Club
Cashier Inyo County Bank

W. G. SCOTT
Executive Secretary Inyo Good Road Club
Manager Inyo Mines Syndicate

T. C. KNOLES - A.M.
Pastor Methodist Episcopal Church

F. A. CAMPBELL

Bishop, California, June 30, 1914.
Subscribed and sworn to before me this first day of July, 1914.....

A. D. SHIVELEY
Notary Public in and for the
County of Inyo, State of
California.....

NOTES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY:

[1]San Francisco Examiner, June 24, 1914.

[1][2] San Francisco Examiner, June 26, 1914.
The Official Report of the Board of Observers was taken from "The Ace", August 1925.

"Flying" carried a brief account in the August 1914 issue.

The San Francisco Examiner, which had a very close relationship with this flight, carried a front page story for the entire week, June 20-26, 1914. Several pictures of Silas Christofferson, E. Carl Wallen, the Christofferson Biplane and Mount Whitney, accompany the stories.

The Sacramento Bee, June 25, 1914, with a story bylined from Independence, California, credits the flight as having been over 16,000 feet and as assuredly establishing a new American altitude record.

ADDENDA:

In the National Geographic, July 1924, Lieutenants A. W. Stevens and J. A. Macready had this to say after their photographic expedition of 1924:

"Mount Whitney differs from all other mountains that we have seen, in that it is one of a series of prominences located on a broad, extremely high base. This base is part of the main body of the Sierra Nevada Range, extending far to the north and south; it comes up rather gradually from the west and is several miles wide on top, dropping off quite sharply to the east. A tail wind was carrying us along at 14,000 feet and the ground was passing uncomfortably close at the rate of 140 miles per hour, or better than two miles a minute. Owing to some peculiar down currents, the plane was unable to rise above the top and it was necessary to skim very close to the surface of the mountain, adjacent to the highest peak."

AUTHOR'S NOTE: The author wishes to give a special notice of appreciation to Mr. Willis Nye of Hayward, California for the photograph of the Christofferson Tractor Biplane and to say that without his knowledge and enthusiasm this article might never have been written.