

Clyde Edward Pangborn, 1896-1958



Clyde Pangborn was one of America's greatest pilots. From fearless barnstormer to test pilot to record-setting endurance flyer to wartime ocean-crossing bomber ferry commander to aircraft designer, he knew airplanes backward and forward. He logged more than 24,000 flying hours during his lifetime and never injured a passenger.

Pangborn was born October 28, 1896 near Bridgeport, Washington, some 75 miles north of East Wenatchee on the Columbia River. He spent his boyhood in Idaho, graduating from St. Maries High School in 1914 and then taking civil engineering classes from the University of Idaho. When the United States entered World War I, "Pang" enlisted in the Aviation Section of the Signal Corps and learned to fly. He served as a flight instructor until, after an honorable discharge, he returned to the Pacific Northwest where he performed exhibition flying and became a stunt flyer/barnstormer.

In 1921 Pangborn joined Ivan R. Gates as partner in the Gates Flying Circus. For the next nine years he "barnstormed" across the U.S. doing daredevil tricks such as wing walking, plane-to-plane and auto-to-plane transfers, tail spins, corkscrew rolls, and flying upside down. He became so good at slow-rolling the plane to its back and gliding in that position for long periods, that he earned the nickname "Upside-Down Pangborn."



In 1929 Pangborn became chief test pilot for the new Standard Aircraft Corporation. While on a 30-city demonstration tour of a New Standard plane, he met fellow pilot Hugh Herndon, Jr. Herndon was a wealthy playboy whose mother offered to stake \$10,000 in a Hugh-Clyde partnership to lure her son away from the New York City bars. The two pilots formed the "Flying Fleet," carrying passengers and barnstorming for a little over a year until new national aviation safety laws shut down their operation. Pangborn then decided to challenge the around-the-world flight record of 20 days held by the German dirigible *Graf Zeppelin* and invited Herndon to be copilot. Herndon's family again put up the money.



In their bright red-orange Bellanca CH-400 called *Miss Veedol* (after an oil company product), the two pilots left New York on July 28, 1931 on the first leg of their flight. Unfortunate mishaps befell them (including terrible weather, wandering off course into Mongolia, and sliding off the runway into mud in Khabarovsk), so they abandoned their original round-the-world goal. They decided, instead, to compete for the \$25,000 prize offered for the first nonstop flight from Japan to the United States. Sabishiro Beach, near Misawa, had a very long runway and would be their takeoff point.

Pangborn knew they would need to increase *Miss Veedol's* fuel capacity so he added a "chin" tank. He also designed and constructed a mechanism that would allow the flyers to drop the plane's

landing gear once it was airborne, to reduce weight and drag and add approximately 600 miles to their range. The people of Misawa were friendly and helpful as the Americans prepared for their historic flight.



Clyde and Hugh took off on the morning of October 4, their Bellanca laden with 930 gallons of fuel and weighing more than 9,000 pounds (far beyond the manufacturer's recommendation). A few hours into the flight Pangborn pulled the cable to release the landing gear. The wheels fell into the ocean, but the drag struts got hung up – a potentially risky situation when it came time to land. Pangborn turned over the controls to Herndon and, at 14,000 feet above the icy waters, crawled out onto the wing supports and freed the struts. His wing-walking days as a barnstormer paid off!

Following a "Great Circle" course that took them over Alaska and British Columbia, they swapped naptimes and spelled each other at the controls for 40 hours. As they neared Seattle, however, Pangborn saw that the cloud cover was too thick for a safe landing – so they headed east for Boise (which would also set a new long-distance record). But Boise was also under clouds. He decided to try for Wenatchee, an airfield he knew well where there might be no fog. He was right.



At around 7 a.m. on October 5, the *Miss Veedol* belly-landed at Fancher Field. The propeller was bent but the pilots were safe! A small crowd of onlookers was there to greet the tired airmen – including Clyde's mother, brother and sister-in-law. A local newspaper reporter telegraphed the good news to the Associated Press in San Francisco, and the world learned of the amazing record-setting flight. The men received the \$25,000 prize; however, most of it went to Herndon's family to repay its investment in the flight.

Throughout the 1930s Pangborn test-flew, demonstrated and delivered various aircraft in the U.S. and Great Britain. In 1940 he co-created the Royal Air Force Ferry Command and recruited pilots from Canada and the U.S. to fly American planes across the Atlantic to war-torn Europe. He made 170 crossings himself and earned the rank of R.A.F. Senior Captain. After the war he picked up where he had left off: testing and delivering aircraft, surveying possible airline routes in Latin America, and designing improvements for such planes as the Learstar. He died in New York City at age 62 on March 29, 1958 and was buried at Arlington National Cemetery with full military honors.

Photos courtesy of Wenatchee Valley Museum & Cultural Center