

PDF - World's First Nonstop Trans-Pacific Flight, 1931

Pilot Clyde Pangborn's logged 11,000 hours of flying by February 1931 was the world's record. He decided to attempt another international feat: to set a new record for flying around the world. He asked fellow pilot Hugh Herndon, Jr. to join him on this venture – partly because Herndon's wealthy family was willing to finance the flight. The around-the-world record at that time was 20 days, set by the German dirigible *Graf Zeppelin* in 1929. But in the last week of June 1931 – just a month before Pangborn and Herndon were to take off – Wiley Post and Harold Gatty circled the globe in eight and a half days in *Winnie Mae*, a speedy Lockheed Vega. This was the record Pangborn and Herndon would now have to beat.



They left New York in *Miss Veedol* (named after the official sponsor's line of motor oils) on July 28, 1931, headed for London. Over the Atlantic Ocean, while Pangborn was napping in the back of the plane, Herndon took the controls and unfortunately got the plane off course by 10 degrees. Then, after more than 30 hours, they landed in a farmer's field in Wales. They spent the night, and then got directions to the Croydon Aerodrome near London. It was Pangborn's intention to land, quickly refuel and depart for Berlin. But Herndon's mother had arranged for London relatives to meet Hugh; they whisked him away for some six hours while Pangborn fumed. He calculated they were 10 hours behind the Post-Gatty record.

After quick stops at Berlin and Novosibirsk, the pilots headed for Siberia. But while Pangborn was sleeping, Herndon again wandered off course and landed them in Mongolia! Following this delay and back on course, *Miss Veedol* blasted through a night of terrible weather and landed for refueling at Khabarovsk. The runway was awash in a sea of mud and the plane got badly stuck. It took many local volunteers a long time to free the Bellanca from the mud and drag it to a hangar for cleaning. By now, 27 hours behind Post and Gatty, Pangborn and Herndon abandoned the speed attempt. But they learned of a new prize: \$25,000 from a Tokyo newspaper for the first nonstop flight from Japan to the continental U.S.

They departed Khabarovsk in a hurry, taking advantage of a break in the weather, but neglected to obtain the necessary permits to enter Japan. The flight to Tokyo took them over the Taugaru Strait, then over Honshu Island to Tokyo Bay where they landed at a huge military airport under construction. Workers directed them to Tokyo's public Tachikawa Airport – where they were placed under arrest! The Japanese suspected them of spying on military fortifications and taking illegal photographs, as well as lacking permits.



The U.S. State Department intervened and Pangborn and Herndon were released, after paying fines of \$1,050 each.



The publicity surrounding the aircraft's arrival generated sympathy from local aviation enthusiasts who offered hangar space, tools, food and support. Pangborn had modification plans for *Miss Veedol*. After routine maintenance to prepare the plane for a 40+ hour flight, he rigged its landing gear so it could be released from inside the cockpit (once the plane was high above the ocean) to reduce weight and drag. He also placed skid strips on the center fuselage, for a safer belly landing, and added a "chin" fuel tank of some 50 gallons.

The Tokyo runway was too short for a heavyweight takeoff, so the pilots moved the plane north to the village of Misawa and its Sabishiro Beach; this beach had been the departure point for three prior attempts, all unsuccessful. The people of Misawa painstakingly packed the sand "runway" with their feet, stamping out some 8,000 feet along the beach. Misawans welcomed Pangborn and Herndon into their homes, generously shared meals and helped with final airplane preparations.

On October 3 a crowd gathered to watch *Miss Veedol* take off. With its added belly and chin tanks, the plane weighed over 9,000 pounds – nearly three times the normal empty weight of a Bellanca CH-400! Pangborn fired up the engine and the plane slowly started down the wooden ramp and onto the packed sand. At 80 mph Pang tried the float pilot's trick of rocking from wheel to wheel in an effort to unstick the wheels from the sand. Finally, at 90 mph, with less than 500 feet of runway remaining, the Bellanca staggered into the air and headed for Seattle.



Some three hours out, the pilots determined that the plane was performing as planned and they wouldn't need to return to Japan. It was time to drop the landing gear. They pulled on the wires attached to the wheels and struts and felt the gear drop away. *Miss Veedol* was instantly 300 pounds lighter, and the climb rate improved immediately. But the two drag struts that braced the gear to the fuselage did not drop away!

At 14,000 feet, Pangborn turned the controls over to Herndon and performed one last barn-stormer trick. In his stocking feet (the pilots had left their boots in Japan to reduce weight) he climbed out the window, braced himself on the wing strut sponson, and carefully detached the troublesome drag strut. Back in the cockpit he warmed up, then performed the same trick on the other side. Now the plane was ready for its eventual belly landing.

Flying over a "Great Circle" route, the shortest distance between two points on a sphere, they took turns piloting, navigating and napping in the back of the plane. They followed a compass course of 072 degrees true, checking their progress with land features over the Aleutian Islands

and Polaris (the North Star) when over water. As they passed over the Aleutians they rose to 17,000 feet. This must have been hard on Herndon, a chain smoker. Twice he forgot to pump the body and belly tank fuel to the wings, starving the engine of fuel. When the engine stopped, they had to dive the plane steeply to windmill the propeller to restart it. One of these diving restarts took them dangerously close to the freezing Alaskan Gulf waters: just 1,500 feet above the surface.

The hours droned by. Finally they spotted the northernmost tip of the Queen Charlotte Islands; they were right on course. Pangborn turned the stick over to Herndon and told him, "Hold this course and altitude. When you see the glow of city lights through the clouds, that'll be Vancouver, B.C. Wake me up." Sometime later Herndon awakened the sleeping Pangborn. It was 2 a.m., nearly 40 hours since takeoff. Pangborn looked down and spotted 14,400' Mount Rainier emerging through the clouds below them. They had flown past both Vancouver and Seattle!

With Seattle under clouds, Clyde took over the controls and turned *Miss Veedol* east toward Boise. He wanted to set the plane down where it would not be damaged by a belly landing and could be easily repaired (with new landing gear installed). But Boise, too, was under a cloud cover, as was Spokane. Frustrated, Pangborn turned back west toward Wenatchee. There was a small airstrip there that he knew well, as his mother and brother were Wenatchee residents.

When the plane was flying over Alaska, a ham radio operator had broadcast their presence to the West Coast and news reporters were alert for the landing. Further news went out from Seattle of an airplane overhead in the wee hours of the morning. Some guessed that *Miss Veedol* might land in Wenatchee. Carl Cleveland, of *The Wenatchee Daily World*, was waiting at the Wenatchee airfield on the eastern bluffs above the Columbia River. (East Wenatchee had not yet incorporated into a separate city.) Clyde's mother, brother and sister-in-law were there, too, along with several dozen other interested spectators.

Shortly after 7 a.m. on October 5, 1931 the Bellanca roared in over the basalt cliffs, east of the airstrip. Pangborn told Herndon to dump the remaining fuel in the tanks, reducing the risk of fire upon landing, and then to climb in the very rear of the aircraft to balance its weight. Pangborn then shut off fuel to the engine and landed the plane on the dirt-sand runway. *Miss Veedol* skidded on its belly, tipped up almost vertical, then skewed left onto a wingtip and fell back on its tail – undamaged except its propeller. The pilots were safe!

Cleveland alerted the Associated Press of the successful flight. A representative of the Tokyo newspaper presented Pangborn and Herndon with a check for \$25,000, and the fliers were given a hero's welcome in Wenatchee for days. The two pilots were international household names for weeks. The Bon Marche department store in Seattle arranged to have *Miss Veedol* trucked in and recreated the landing tableau on the second floor, drawing huge crowds. Pangborn was given the Harmon Trophy for 1931, aviation's most coveted award. The aircraft was sold and renamed the *American Nurse*. On a 1932 flight from New York to Rome, it disappeared into the ocean without a trace.

