

AFEHRI File 19-10

Research Materials/Source Documents
ENLISTED FIRSTS

FILE TITLE: Enlisted Crew Members of 1st Cross-Continental Bomber Flight - SSgt
A.B. Jewell and SSgt K.T. Wiedekamp

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It was a rugged test, that first cross-country bomber flight.

Flying Feat Without Fanfare

by TSgt. Lorenzo D. Harris

Back in 1923 a lone Army Air Service plane on a first-time mission flew with only passing fanfare straight into the pages of history, its crew never hearing the ever-swelling rounds of hurrahs usually associated with singular feats of daring.

But the significance of the first cross-continental bomber flight from Langley Field, Va., to San Diego and then back to Langley, was not lost on those of vision who saw the undertaking as an example of military and commercial aviation coming of age.

Four men, including the commander, then-1st Lt. John Whiteley, were aboard the Martin NBS-1 bomber on the multilegged 8,257-mile trip that began Sept. 13, 1923, and ended Dec. 14.

At the time the flight pushed aviation technology to the limits. And, yes, it was a ride to remember, the old-time bomber skimming over mountains at 70 miles an hour and sometimes missing treetops by a mere whisper.

"At one point we were as close as fifty feet above the sloping ground—so close we could almost count the daisies," remembered Col. Whiteley, now 86, who retired from the Air Force in 1953. Recapturing the flavor of the mission, he noted that "the bomber was similar to a powered glider. It kind of followed the air currents between the peaks and down into the valleys, often just barely lifting us over the mountains. Our main concern was the lack of power to safely clear the mountains. Some of the peaks were as high as 12,000 feet and the max-

imum official ceiling of our airplane, which was considered at that time to be a heavy bomber, was 10,000 feet."

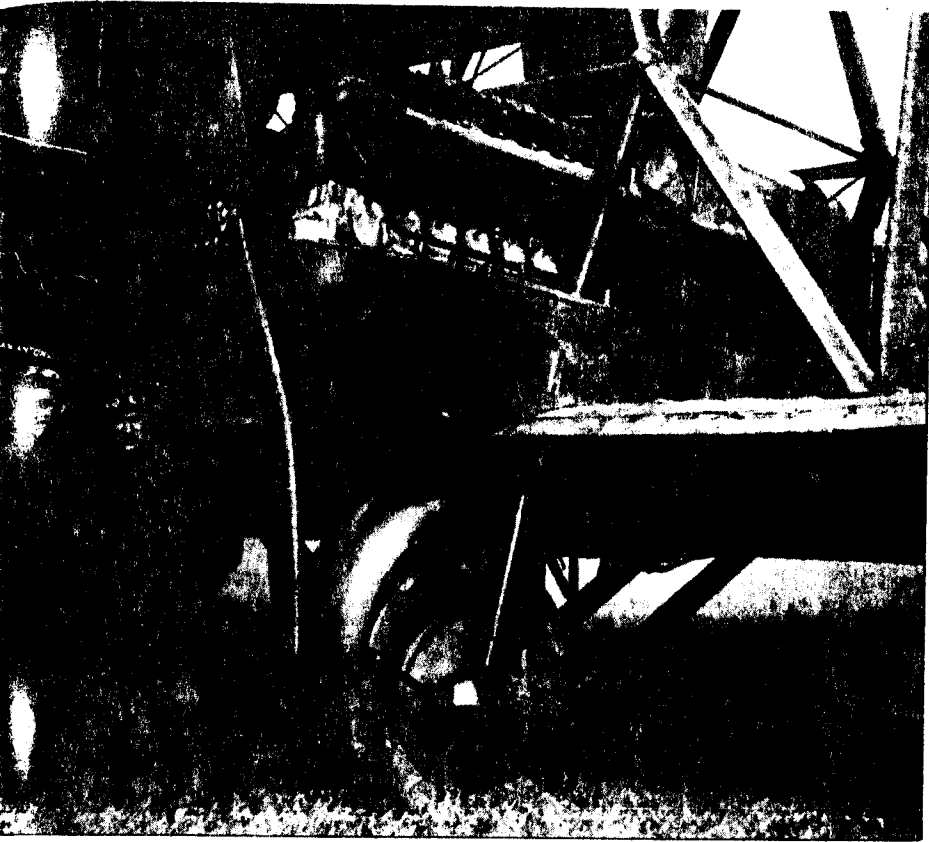
It had been the colonel's idea to make the long-distance trip.

"I was in a good position to propose such a journey, having had some experience with the newly inventoried bomber," he said. "I was one of the pilots who flew the Martin bomber to prove General Billy Mitchell's point that warships could be sunk by superior air power using 1,000- and 2,000-pound bombs, the heaviest available at the time. In the summer of '23 I took part in the bombing of the obsolete battleships *Virginia* and *New Jersey*. We sank them off the Cape Hatteras coast.

"By the time we finished the bombing tests and proved that General Mitchell was right, we had quite a bit of experience with the plane," said Col. Whiteley. "Yet none of the planes had been flown as far as the West Coast. In fact, they hadn't been flown very far inland from the East Coast. It seemed to me like a good idea to see what the airplane was capable of doing."

His plan intrigued his superiors. After all, they agreed, in case of some unforeseen emergency, it could become necessary to move the Langley bombardment group to the West Coast. First Lt. Whiteley's request was approved by the chief of the Air Service. Another pilot, 1st Lt. Harold Smith,





Aboard the Martin NBS-1 bomber that flew coast to coast were (left to right): 1st Lt. John F. Whiteley, 1st Lt. Harold D. Smith, and SSgts. K.T. Wiedekamp and A.B. Jewell.

and two highly skilled mechanics, SSgts. K.T. Wiedekamp and A.B. Jewell, were chosen by the Army to accompany him.

"The main thrust of the mission, of course, was to determine whether what was then considered a heavy bomber could be deployed that far," the colonel explained. "But regardless of whether the mission could be successfully accomplished, the Air Service would learn more about the support capacities of the various landing fields scattered between the coastlines."

Mainly, service officials wondered whether the runways, which had mostly supported lighter weight DH4s used by the Mail Service, could sustain the extra weight of the heavier Martin bomber. And were they long enough for the landings and takeoffs of a larger dual-engine biplane capable of carrying up to 2,000 pounds of cargo? No one knew. However, no one was more eager to find out than young 1st Lt. Whiteley, whose intense enthusiasm for flying had led him to attempt to join the military as a pilot before World War I.

"They turned me down because I was too young and had no flying experience," recalled the colonel with a smile. "But when the war came along, I enlisted in the cavalry. It was in 1917. I spent a year in the 11th Cavalry before going to the 3rd Training Camp and getting a commission in the field artillery. In 1918 I was trained as an

artillery observer at Fort Sill, Oklahoma. It appeared that some buddies and myself were going to get orders to go overseas when the armistice was signed. We were still expecting to go to Europe when, instead, we got orders to Panama in early 1919.

"As a field artillery officer attached to the Air Service, I started to fly in Panama," he continued. "The flying schools were closed for about a year after the war ended, so I had no opportunity to get professional military flight training. I had a good friend who taught me for a short while. Then I simply flew on my own—sort of indoctrinated myself you might say."

After two years in Panama, the young do-it-yourself pilot was transferred to the 20th Squadron at Langley Field. Once there, he and his fellow squadron members participated in the Gen. Mitchell-directed bombings.

Then came the cross-country flight.

"Flying was truly by the seat of the pants in those days," the colonel said. "There were few radios or visual aids to assist us in navigating across the country. Use of airborne radio was rare, although some Air Service members were working with available equipment, trying to make it effective.

"Most flying was done beneath the clouds and away from bad weather, never through or above the clouds or weather," he said. "That was an open invitation to bewilderment. Pilots were prepared to turn back or land in the

face of bad weather. Often you never knew what waited ahead for you because the weather reports were sketchy—not as thorough as they are today."

Sketchy or not, 1st Lt. Whiteley and crew cranked up their bomber and headed west, making stops at Dayton, Indianapolis, Kansas City, Salt Lake City, Sacramento, San Francisco, and Los Angeles, before arriving in San Diego and completing the first half of their mission. There were also other stops for gas, repairs, and rest.

"The plane had been flown quite a bit before and during our flight to the West Coast," the colonel continued, "so the original motors were replaced with two at the Air Service depot in San Diego. Major 'Hap' Arnold, who later became commanding general of the Army Air Forces, was in command of the depot at the time.

"In addition to other modifications, removable floorboards were placed at the bottom of the bomb bay, which gave us some extra space. There, we loaded parachutes, a spare tire, an extra gas pump, and other parts and supplies. We didn't think it would be necessary to bring extra engine parts because they would be available at the Air Service and air mail fields we planned to use."

The colonel remembers the three-hour-and-50-minute leg from Rock Springs, Wyo., to Salt Lake City as the toughest part of the mission.

"Our worries began when we read a description of the airfield and discovered that it was 2,000 feet long—about half the distance we would need to take off after landing there," he said.

Col. Whiteley was somewhat relieved when an airmail pilot told him that it would be easy to take off again because the field was actually longer than was indicated by the information the colonel had. Additionally, he was told that he could tack on another 2,000 feet to the runway on takeoff simply by crossing a road—an option that would certainly be frowned upon today.

Compounding the problem of a shorter-than-expected takeoff distance, the Rock Springs runway was located in a rather treacherous position—on a valley floor in a boxlike canyon. West of the runway, high bluffs of a mesa

formed an almost perpendicular wall at least 400 feet high above the airstrip, which it was advisable not to approach without good altitude.

"The runway was at an altitude of about 6,400 feet with surrounding ridges about 1,000 feet above that," recalled Col. Whiteley. "The runway extended toward the bluffs. It was about a mile from the end of the runway to the foot of the bluffs. However, the view was deceptive and they appeared much closer than they really were.

"We were warned by the Mail Service to stay away from the bluffs because prevailing westward winds dropped quickly from the ridge into the valley and caused dangerous air currents," he continued. "The currents were so strong that an Air Service pilot had recently been pushed into the bluffs shortly after takeoff. He crashed, but fortunately escaped injury. We heeded the advice and moved one of our mechanics from the rear to the front cockpit, allowing us to get the tail of the plane up faster so we could gain altitude before we got dangerously close to the bluffs."

Once airborne, the crew took a route to Salt Lake City, west of the Green River. The terrain below was not exactly a bed of roses, according to the colonel.

"The route was so tricky that the mail pilots flying it got seven cents a mile, whereas pilots flying other routes got but five cents a mile," he noted. "We didn't have any trouble until we reached the Uinta and Wasatch mountain ranges, which seemed to form an impenetrable barrier about 12,000 feet high. The snow line was about 9,000 feet and the mountain ridges were snow-covered several thousand feet above that. Looking down on the vast expanse of white, it was impossible to see anything except fingerlike valleys radiating from the snow-covered ridges. We ran the engines wide open and still it seemed impossible to keep an altitude of much more than 200 feet above the valleys between those peaks most of the time."

Oncoming 35 mile-an-hour winds nearly stymied the bomber, cutting its ground speed from 70 mph back to 40 and sometimes to 35. The turbulent air currents caused the biplane to stall and buck, much like an unbroken bronco.

"The rough country with numerous peaks caused frequent up and down air currents," recalled Col. Whiteley. "Often, when we were flying over ridges, we were caught in down currents that forced us as close as fifty feet to the ground. Sometimes it looked as though we weren't going to make it over those mountains. But once we reached the windward side, we got into an updraft and regained our original altitude.

"We later passed through a light flurry of snow and then, suddenly, broke out about 8,000 feet above Salt Lake Valley. The mountains dropped down almost perpendicularly beneath us. It was a wonderful sight to behold! When we landed at the Air Service field near Salt Lake City, we were greeted by a crowd of spectators and some newspaper reporters who had evidently gotten word of our journey from back East and reported it to the local citizens."

The colonel and his fellow crew members didn't know it at the time but Salt Lake City wouldn't be the only town in which they'd receive publicity. From there on to California and during the return portion of the trip, public interest continued to mount.

"During our stay at Los Angeles, we often had crowds of four- or five-hundred people interested in the ship and the flight we had made," said Col. Whiteley. "In San Antonio and Dallas,

on the return trip, the people were very much interested in our trip. The press gave considerable comment on the flight. The Dallas Times Herald had a headline that read, 'Giant Bomber Encounters Difficulty in Crossing High Mountain Ranges in the West.' Then the paper went on to note that the bomber's successful flight could lead to the establishment of a transcontinental air route through Dallas with passenger and freight planes operating on a daily schedule."

Of course, both civil and military aviation authorities benefited from the

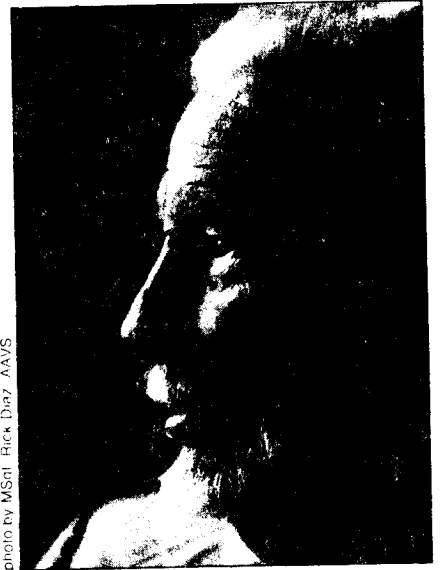


PHOTO BY MSGT RICK DAZ AAWS

Col. John F. Whiteley, now 86, retired from the Air Force in 1953.

crew's experiences. One of Col. Whiteley's primary recommendations was that heavy airplanes be fitted with more powerful engines that would allow the aircraft to more easily gain additional altitude on cross-country flights.

Strangely enough, much of the enthusiasm about the journey died with the roar of the old bomber's engines when 1st Lt. Whiteley shut them down after he and the crew returned to Langley Field in mid-December. Perhaps the reason was that Col. Whiteley never sought publicity. The only thing that ever surpassed this kind of humility was his spirit of adventure. With space beckoning that spirit lives with the Air Force of today.

Thanks, Col. John Whiteley. ☺