

Museum News: Lost in Las Vegas de los Ladrones

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In October of 1911, the first airplane Sanderson folks ever saw sailed over our horizon and landed in front of the courthouse. Two days later it left from the Terrell County Museum and Sanderson was suddenly launched into the air age.

Just nine years later anyone in town who wanted to see an airplane did not have to wait long or go far. Airplanes were taking off multiple times per day from the 90th Aero Squadron Aerodrome, Sanderson's own Army airfield. The pilots and crews were either patrolling the border or practicing their bombing skills. Some were simply enjoying the ride, or were truly defying death by flying under the Pecos River High Bridge or smuggling booze from non-Prohibition Mexico.

Along with the thrill of seeing airmen cavorting in the sky, there came the increased possibility that some of those daring young men were going to lose their lives, and indeed there were a number of fatal air crashes, some even making national news.

In 1921, ace pilot Lt. Alex Pearson, one of the Army's top pilots was attempting a transcontinental flight with just two stops. He certainly was qualified, having won the big air race of 1919 and taking home a fanciful silver trophy festooned with tiny airplanes held aloft by the tips of guardian angels' wings. He had only soloed the year before, but he was taking bigger chances to achieve better speeds.

He would fly a venerable de Havilland DH-4 bomber, the same type stationed at the Sanderson air field, the American version of a British plane that was the workhorse of the First World War. It had ample capacity to make the flight in only two stops...air-to-air refueling was not yet perfected. He would start at San Diego and take the southern route to Fort Pablo, Florida in February when the weather on the southern route would be balmy.

Of course this is where I have to tell you what my father advised folks who prognosticated the weather, "Only fools and newcomers predict the weather in West Texas," he would say, and with a sly smile he would add, "And I know you are not a newcomer!"

Pearson had no problems with the California and Arizona weather but as he neared El Paso his engine coughed and sputtered and then stalled with seized crankshaft bearings. It was fairly flat country and those old "double-wingers" could glide magnificently (they were, after all, just a pile of spruce sticks, wire and lightweight cloth, a motorized box kite.) He had no problem setting the craft down. The upshot of it was that he would have to double his efforts if he wanted to achieve a speed record.

After a rebuild of the engine he flew into El Paso, but not too far off schedule. He refueled and launched into the air once more, but now he flew into dark territory, the tortured landscape of the Big Bend, with canyons and updrafts and rough air galore.

As he neared Sanderson he ran into a "blue norther"...high winds, chilling temperatures and low visibility. His craft was steadily pushed to the southeast by the side winds and soon he was over what he thought was Reagan Canyon, southwest of Sanderson above Black Gap. In reality, he had crossed the river and was flying into Las Vegas de los Ladrones, literally, "the lowlands of the thieves."

And that would have been okay, just a slight correction would have brought him back on the path, but then that pesky engine began to cough and sputter in that all-too-familiar way. He probably swallowed hard when he realized he was lost and his craft was going down.

Using all his skills the young man brought the craft down into a narrow canyon for a rough landing. When he assessed the damage he realized that the engine was "done for"...he would not be flying out. Taking what few provisions he had and draining water from his radiator, he set out to walk back through the desert to civilization.

The first day came and went and he trudged on with no luck. Fortunately it was February and the norther had blown through...he wasn't suffering...yet.

Heading to the west, the second day turned into a third, with no luck. At the end of the third day and out of food and water, he made a fortuitous discovery...the Rio Grande! But, the river was deep at this point and the water too swift to swim, especially in his condition, so he decided to rest and try to cross the next day. As he lay there fighting pangs of hunger, he thought he could hear the sounds of an airplane. Sixty-five aircraft were searching the rugged terrain for him, but they wouldn't find him.

That night was frigid, with no fire and only his flying leathers to keep him warm. The next morning he was exhausted, starving and losing hope. He plunged into the chilly water and took an easy pace across the swiftly moving current, but the water was too fast and he was too weak. Fortune smiled and he spied a tree branch floating down the river. Barely enough to keep him afloat, he grabbed it and let the current take him downstream. He was fighting to remain conscious.

In the afternoon of the fourth day he could hear the whack of axes on wood...someone was nearby. As he floated around a bend he saw two men chopping firewood, but they were in Mexican garb with big floppy hats and guns strapped to their hips. The Revolution was in full swing and an idle fear crept into his brain that they might be insurrectos at best or cutthroats at worst. At this point he didn't care...he just wanted to be saved, even if it meant leaving the river in fetters, bound for the interior. Surely God isn't that cruel, he thought to himself.

And He wasn't. The men waded out and helped him ashore. He needed help...he was so tired he could barely move. They were local cowboys working on the Rutledge Ranch for Foreman J. E. Murrah. They took him to headquarters and after food, water and a brief rest he mounted a little burro and Murrah guided him some 90 miles to the northeast to Sanderson. Barring saddle sores, his ordeal was over.

When he arrived at Sanderson he contacted authorities to let them know he was safe. He would not go back to get his plane.

Instead, the young Jimmy Dolittle, leader of the first bombing mission over Tokyo in an effort to take WWII to the Japanese homeland, was assigned to retrieve the de Havilland. A pilot, mechanic and engineer all in one, Dolittle trekked into the Mexican wilderness with men, pack animals, tools and carrier pigeons for communication. Parts were parachuted in and the de Havilland repaired. Hacking a runway from the rocky canyon floor, he took to the air and returned the aircraft to San Antonio for a rebuild. He later wrote that this was a pivotal moment in his life, when he knew for sure he had "the right stuff."

Young Pearson lost his chance to win another trophy, but he went on to set new records and win other accolades until one day in 1924 the wings on his Curtiss R-8 speed racer folded up on a steep bank at 265 miles per hour and he buried his craft ten feet deep into Ohio farmland. He would not walk away from this one.



Lieutenant Alexander Pearson, Jr. - missing aviator. The fetching dimple in his cheek is actually a scar received in one of many crackups.

Photo: Public Domain



Pearson, shown with the Curtiss R-8 that would take his life, only a few days later.

Photo: Public Domain