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Sanderson, Texas

Museum News

MISSING AVIATOR RIDES INTO SANDERSON: WAS GIVEN UP FOR LOST



Photo: Public Domain

Lieutenant Alexander Pearson, Jr. - missing in Las Vegas de los Ladrones.

It must be a fearsome thing while flying in an open cockpit, DH-4 "doublewinger" aircraft to hear strange noises coming from your engine. Alexander Pearson was a seasoned expert flyer, but even that scenario must have given him pause as he cruised thousands of feet over some of the most desolate terrain in the United

States, the Big Bend of Texas.

Pearson, at just 25 years of age was already one of the Army's most esteemed test pilots. Born in Sterling, KS in 1895, young Pearson was fascinated with flying. He enlisted in the Army in 1917, eventually entering the air service and winning a commission as a first lieutenant by 1918,



Photo: Public Domain

De Havilland DH-4 airplane, similar to the one Lt. Pearson crashed in Las Vegas de los Ladrones, in the wilds of Mexico.

but not in time to go to France to fight in the Great War.

At various postings, Pearson ended up at Scott Field in O'Fallon, IL in 1919. It was here that he entered the Transcontinental Reliability and Endurance Test, billed by the *New York Times* as the "greatest air race ever attempted."

His participation was rewarded with a trophy for best flight time in the coast-to-coast race, but at several points, as in all of his flight career, his life was in mortal danger. At one point he barely pulled out of a deadly tail-spin at the last moment, as always, seeming to pull victory from the jaws of defeat.

In 1920 he was posted to Douglas, AZ to conduct the 12th Aero Squadron's Mexican Border Patrol. He greatly impressed his commanding officer, who gave him a glowing recommendation when it came time to transfer from the Reserves to the active Army.

In February of 1921 he was ordered to make a flight from San Diego, CA to Pablo Beach, FL in his venerable de Havilland DH-4 aircraft. He was scheduled to make only two stops along the way. The DH-4 had been battle tested and was a dependable aircraft.

Outside of El Paso his crankshaft bearings seized up and he had to make an emergency landing. After repairs were made he continued his journey.

Barely three hours out from El Paso, as he passed over the wild and desolate terrain of the Big Bend of Texas, a fast-moving norther forced him far off course to the southeast, and the extreme cold caused his crankshaft to seize up once again. Pearson did not realize that he had drifted over the Rio Grande and was now cruising over the Mexican badlands, near Las Vegas de los Ladrones, literally "the lowlands of the thieves."

With no power it was a harrowing ride to the ground, but he managed to set his plane down safely in a small, rugged canyon. Unfortunately, the engine was damaged and he would have to hike out if he wanted to get home.

As far as the world knew, Pearson was lost forever, and the efforts of 65 search craft could turn up no trace of him.

With only minimal provisions, Pearson drained water from his cooled radiator, not knowing if there was water to be had in the arid desert landscape.

After three days of tramping through the wilderness, he came to the Rio

Grande. He was far too tired to swim and it was too deep to wade across, so he stopped for the night to rest.

The next morning he plunged into the chilly February waters and tried to swim across, but the current was too swift and he was on the verge of exhaustion and starvation. He caught hold of a log floating down the river and drifted with the current.

Eventually, he came to a spot in the river where two men were working. They were local cowboys, Mexicans working for the Rutledge Ranch and Mr. J. E. Murrah, foreman. They helped him out of the water and took him back to their ranch where Mr. Murrah received him with typical West Texas hospitality. After food, water and a brief rest, he mounted a burro and Mr. Murrah guided him back to Sanderson, some 90 miles to the northeast.

Upon arriving at Sanderson, Pearson went to the telegraph office and wired his family and commanding officers that he



Photo: Public Domain

Actual photo of Pearson testing an early parachute.

was okay and would be returning to San Antonio as soon as possible.

He would not return for his craft, but the young Lieutenant Jimmy Doolittle of World War II fame was sent to retrieve the plane. After a two week repair, Doolittle's crew hacked a rude runway from the rocky canyon floor and he took off, flying the valuable craft back to San Antonio for refurbishing. In effect, this demonstration of Doolittle's prowess as a pilot, mechanic and engineer encouraged him to pursue his career in the Army Air Corp, where he became an unflinching supporter of air power and led the first air raid on Tokyo in World War II. The Pearson venture proved to Doolittle that he had "the right stuff."

As for Alex Pearson, his career extended beyond flying to include parachuting. In a time when pilots thought wearing a parachute was "sissy," he helped develop the devices with research and personal testing at Camp McCook, Lincoln NE. When Lt. Harold Harris, Flight Test Division Chief was saved by a parachute (which he put on as an afterthought that day)

pilots began to see the wisdom of taking one along. By 1924 the Army was re-



Photo: Public Domain

quiring pilots to wear them.

In 1922, Pearson was the first man to fly within the walls of Grand Canyon. It was thought that the updrafts and treacherous air currents in the canyon made it unnavigable, but Pearson once again proved the experts wrong. He scouted landing fields around the canyon for the Department of the Interior and was actually the first man to land on the canyon floor, perhaps reminiscent of his days in



Photo: Public Domain

Lt. Alex Pearson stands proudly before the Curtiss R-8 speed racer that took his life.

Las Vegas de los Ladrones. And all of this was done on his honeymoon, as reported by one newspaper.

In June of 1924 a horrific tornado decimated the city of Lorain, OH. In the first aerial assessment of tornado damage ever attempted, Alex Pearson was selected as the pilot most fit for the job. Taking along Dr. Sam Burka, who had developed special aerial reconnaissance cameras, Pearson and his partner took extensive photos of the damage which were used later to evaluate the storm and help in the rebuilding of the city.

Later that summer an opportunity came for Pearson to participate in the Pulitzer Trophy Air Race, an international competition to which only the top aviators and the best planes in the country were invited. Without doubt the Pulitzer was the top aviation award in the world. Particularly a speed race, he planned to break the current record of 243.673 mph.

On September 2, 1924, as he practiced in his Curtiss R-8 for the upcoming

Pulitzer race, he banked the craft in a tight turn and the wings simply folded up on the airplane. It plunged to earth at 260 miles per hour and buried itself some ten feet into Ohio farmland. Pearson's body landed some feet away, killing him instantly. His young wife was in attendance and observed her husband's tragic death.

Ironically, as a leading proponent of parachutes, he had decided that because of weight limitations he would not wear his parachute that day.

As an active Army airman killed in the line of duty, Pearson was buried with all military honor and ceremony at Arlington National Cemetery, Arlington, VA.

In 1925 the Vancouver Air Field, oldest operating airfield in the United States, was renamed Pearson Field in honor of the valiant airman. The occasion was celebrated with a huge air show with 20,000 spectators in attendance. Alex Pearson would have liked that...he was just that kind of guy.

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