

Mailsacks and Rainstorms



What happened when an adventuress of yesteryear scorned an airliner for her first flight and chose a mailplane instead?

BY DIANE D. GREER

"Hot dog! I think I'll buy a plane."

The lady who wrote that was no shrinking violet. Rather she was something of an adventuress who wrote of her love of flying and her desire to buy a plane while en route from Hadley Field, N.J., to Cleveland, Ohio. The petite redhead was my grandmother, Reba Dingwall, who had enjoyed a brief career on the stage before settling down to raise twin sons in Crestwood, N.Y. The tiny notebook in which she record-

ed her impressions of her first flight was waterlogged by the time she arrived in Cleveland. No wonder—she had flown 450 miles in the open cockpit of a Douglas M-2 mailplane as the passenger of William C. "Wild Bill" Hopson.

Although this bit of derring-do was worthy of newspaper coverage in the Cleveland News, it was not at all newsworthy by my grandmother's standards. She was a lady who was constantly in search of an adventure. Marriage to my

grandfather succeeded in settling her into a comfortable home where they raised their family, but it never rid her of her zest for adventure. When she decided that she wanted to fly, there was no alternative but to get her on a plane—any plane.

The year was 1925. Amelia Earhart had taken to the skies, but it would be two years before Charles Lindbergh would make his transatlantic crossing. There was limited passenger service at

Douglas M-2 pilot William C. "Wild Bill" Hopson waits as Reba Dingwall gets settled in the front cockpit for a flight over the Alleghenies.

the time and "airplane travel" was all the rage—if you dared. For the little lady from Crestwood, it was never a matter of daring. She didn't want to be bored and flying a passenger plane would be boring. Her choice was to go by mailplane. Her fare—one dollar per pound. Grandmother never weighed more than a hundred pounds.

The details of how her husband, Archibald, was able to arrange the flight remain a mystery. But arrange it he did, much to the dismay of the then-famous "Wild Bill" or "Hoppie"

Bill Hopson, "Wild Bill" or "Hoppie" to his friends, was a veteran of World War I. One of the feats for which he gained fame was awakening the villagers of Warrensville Heights, a Cleveland suburb, while making a night run, to prevent them from a serious loss by fire. In 1925, Hopson was a pilot for the National Air Transport Co., a predecessor of United Air Lines, flying their New York to Chicago mail run. It was on his July 5 flight from Hadley Field to Cleveland that my grandmother accompanied him.

After flight togs were donned, Wild Bill grudgingly posed for photographs before takeoff. They may have been the last photographs that were ever taken of the pilot.

Grandmother was put in the front cockpit, perched among sacks of mail. The zest with which she described the flight is typical of her reactions to most things. Her detailed account was scrawled into a tiny address book, which did not allow for lengthy writing, but it accurately depicted what it was like to fly in an open cockpit during a storm. Her last entry in the notebook summed up the trip very well. "I'm so delighted that it was my good luck to fly in such a storm, as otherwise the trip would have been very uneventful." Other entries indicate the severity of the storm.

"15 minutes out of Hadley Field—I feel no uneasiness in being so far off the ground. Passing over golf links and the sand pits look like oyster shells. The entire surface of the earth looks beautiful from the air. All rough places are softened by distance and speed and all one sees is the perfect symmetry of woods and fields. Visibility is poor. There seem to be heavy storm clouds and perhaps rain ahead. I feel absolutely no nervousness and rather enjoy the air pockets. Wish the pilot would write me a line and say where we are, but he looks as cross as two sticks. Probably didn't want to bring me.

"My feet can't touch the floor so I'm using a pile of mail bags as a foot rest. No sun whatever. We have passed over one fairly sizeable place—all roofs! It is

Mailsacks



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curious to see the chickens scuttle for cover as we fly over their kingdoms—they all look white, but I probably can't see the colored ones.

"We seem to have met the storm. It is very dark and I feel rain—*stinging* rain. If it gets too bad I'll crawl in with the mail sacks. Can see almost nothing now especially on my left, which must be south. We must be what they call flying blind. It is a very heavy downpour and violent wind, but no lightning.

"Clearing a bit. Can see on the left now, but not on the right. Fog comes in rapid waves and bigger air pockets. Probably a high gale. Occasionally I can see light on a distant spot. We are higher now and rocking a bit. IT'S GREAT! My goodness. Bright sunlight and I am pretty well soaked. We bank first one side and then the other and then we drop and then ascend. I am neither sick nor nervous. All mountains around. I can see the storm raging behind us. Below, rivers wind over the landscape like threads. Occasionally we pass through a dense cloud and for a minute cannot see much. The wind isn't bad with this curved windshield in front of me.

"Now we must be in mining districts—large areas of black below. The air isn't cold. I'm almost too warm. I started to sing 'It's A Long Way To Tipperary,' but couldn't hear a word I sung so I stopped. The noise, however, doesn't hurt my ears. It is rather like the rushing sound in a subway under the river—only not so bad. I'm glad we flew through a storm—it was wonderful.

"Big city below. It looks deserted. We are too high to see humans. Lots of small mining villages and a lake that looks grass green. High mountains and a bit of fog—not dense—only patchy. Why didn't I bring my camera and my watch? I'm sitting on the parachute and it's no cushion! Looks like more rain ahead. Such gorgeous mountains and their color—beautiful valley beyond. Some fields green and some yellow, some dark red or purple. I'm so glad I didn't wait for a passenger plane. I have been told that flying is monotonous, but how could it be when your perspective changes continuously and different views unfold before you like magic? It gives me a feeling of unreality and insignificance. I think I'll buy a plane.

"We are way above the clouds now. There is no instrument board in my compartment. I'd like to know what it registers. It is so wonderful to look down on clouds. We must be miles high. I can't see land at all. Now we are passing over a huge city on a very wide river. I feel it may be Pittsburgh. Sever-

al bridges and islands. All white around, above and below us—clouds. The rivers all look red. Not a thing in sight but clouds.

"I wish I'd eaten my lunch. Nothing now but clouds and some bad air pockets. Very dark and a bit of rain. I've a notion to go to sleep—nothing to see. The pilot just turned the ship almost completely around, and it stood at an awful angle. I had to hang on! It must have flown off course. Hot dog—can see a bit now—very high. I certainly don't call this a good flying day. He turned around again, and a view of the land came up beside me. We banked so we are much nearer the ground. Turned around again between mountains. I just saw three kiddies looking up. I feel the pilot must be lost as I can see him peering all around. Probably came down out of clouds to see where we are. Ascending again to cross more mountains. Miles of dense forest below and mountains.

"He has gone around a huge storm cloud. Rain and plane not nearly so steady—bad going—nothing but storm. We made a half turn and again bad pockets. I feel like hanging on. Sheets of stinging rain—we turned completely around again. Terrific air pockets. I'm getting soaked. Twice a loud whistle has blown on our plane. Hard storm. Water runs off the wings like Niagara Falls. Solid, sheets of water. Country looks flooded. Roads, trees and fields in deep water. Turned around again, and again! And for the third time, the whistle.

"Each time we turn we rise higher. I'll be glad when we're over the mountains. Just spiralled over an enormous mountain. I'm glad to see a few fields ahead now. I believe it's clearing. Banking and nearing ground. Motor quieting down. Perhaps we are out of gas. No, I see an airport—Bellefonte!

"We have filled up the gas tank and received weather reports from Cleveland. Poor all the way, so the pilot thinks we'll have to wait here as there are still some bad mountains to pass over. A very low ceiling, but the rain has stopped. It is 3:15 and it took us 2 hours and 10 minutes to get here. Usually it takes 1 hour and 20 minutes. He said it was a mighty bad storm. The horn I heard was wind on the wires.

"Off again at 3:30. It looks a bit brighter now, and fog is lifting. Pale sunshine. Much pleasanter going now than east of Bellefonte. Can see a little. But now more rain. Now over soft rolling country. Very lovely. Arrived Cleveland airport 6:40. Circling the city. We circled the field twice, banked elaborately and made the landing with considerable flourish. It all seems im-

possible and untrue. The pilot tells me that for almost an hour he was not at all sure of getting out of that tight place in the Allegheny's."

In addition to bringing smelling salts, my aunt Nina met her sister with a reporter from the *Cleveland News*. Her flight had been noteworthy and most certainly unusual. The following morning an article bearing the heading, "Visitor Arrives By Air," was on the newstands. The article stated that my grandmother would "return to Crestwood by plane—that is, if she enjoyed her initial trip in the air."

Although my grandmother lived long enough to take to the skies many more times in less newsworthy ways, her fondest recollection was of the flight with Hopson. Once, while reminiscing with my father about that first flight, she told him that Hopson had confided in her that he was convinced he would be killed in a plane crash on that very route—"the worst," as he described it. Was Hopson psychic? Who knows? But he did disappear a couple years later on the night of Oct. 18, 1928, on the flight from Hadley Field to Cleveland. His plane went down in a storm over the Allegheny Mountains near the town of Clarion, Pa. Hopson's close friend and fellow flying enthusiast, Will Rogers, wrote the following letter to the editor of the *New York Times* after learning of the crash:

Will Rogers Pays Tribute To a Lost Air Mail Flier

To the Editor of The New York Times:

It was a dark rainy, cloudy day on the New York end of the air mail. No planes through in two days. I wanted to get home to my family in California. I insisted on going. It wasn't bravery—it was dumb ignorance and an unlimited confidence in all air mail pilots.

"We will try to get through if you insist." And we got through, clear to Cleveland. Yesterday he didn't get through.

I kinder feel like his skill saved my life; so "Hopple," old boy, here's hoping you are piloting the best cloud the Boss has got in His hanger up there, and you don't have to worry about low ceiling, engine missing, head winds, or even whether the old rip-cord will pull in case—

Yours,

WILL ROGERS.

New York, Oct. 19.

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