

New York to Nome via Wrangell First plane in Alaska landed on Sergief Island

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August 1920 brought excitement to Wrangellites as they participated in the history-making effort of four planes and eight aviators who flew from New York to Nome.

The planes didn't actually stop in Wrangell. Instead, lunches were packed and residents boarded vessels to Sergief Island, where the transcontinental flight stopped for refueling.

The purpose of the 4,500-mile flight was to prove commercial airlines could function practically in Alaska. Originators of the idea hoped the flight would result in establishment of mail routes by air in Alaska.

Men in the U.S. Army Air Service were selected for their sense of adventure and flying ability. DeHaviland 4-B's--similar to those used in World War I--were equipped with 400-horsepower Liberty motors.

Mechanics flew along with the pilots on the New York to Nome flight. Organizers said they understood the success of the flight would depend on the men being able to make repairs enroute.

Rain, fog, mechanical repairs, broken axles, damaged props and minor accidents confronted the four planes as the pilots maneuvered them toward Nome.

In Wrangell, residents were expecting the planes on July 18. But the July 1st Wrangell Sentinel reported the arrival had been postponed.

While Capt. St. Clair Streett, in charge of the flight, guessed the flight would take less time, he found the hazards confronted forced a longer schedule.

"Great Transcontinental Airplane Flight From New York to Nome Started Noon Today," the Sentinel reported in a headline.

Sgt. W.W. McLaughlin of the U.S. Signal Corps in Wrangell was in charge of seeing the landing field was created on Sergief Island. Under his supervision, a boardwalk was built from the beach to the field.

Supplies and 35 drums of gasoline were delivered to the island and final touches were made by McLaughlin and his crew.

A white cross made of cheesecloth was used to mark the field.

Capt. Sid Barrington announced that he would have the Hazel B. No. 3, Hazel B. No. 4 and a scow available to transport passengers to Sergief Island--for a nominal fee. The Sentinel also informed the public that the mill whistle would be blown and town bells rung to let everyone know the event was at hand.

"It is time to put out the cat, grab the baby and lunch basket and hurry to Grant's float where the boats will be in readiness," the newspaper reported.

The newspaper noted that a lunch basket was advised because "there are no restaurants on Sergief Island."

While the town waited to spot the planes coming over the mountaintop, the planes were encountering nothing but trouble. The Sentinel reported July 22, 1920, that the planes had flown only 630 miles from their starting point. "At this rate, the squadron should reach Wrangell early in September, but let us hope that conditions will be more favorable for flying during the remainder of the flight, and that the birdmen will soon be in the North."

The Sentinel said each plane carried 117 gallons of gas and 12 gallons of oil. Flyers were equipped to kill and cook wild game in case they were forced to land in the wilderness.

By the time August 5, 1920 rolled around, the Sentinel said the squadron was last sighted in Prince George, British Columbia. Problems continued with damage to planes on landing, the newspaper said.

Finally, word was received that the four planes would be touching down in Wrangell on August 14. Flags were hoisted, the mill whistle began blowing late that morning and bells began ringing.

Wrangellites deserted town that afternoon. Barrington Transportation Co.'s vessels were filled and departure was at noon. Other residents in private boats also headed for Sergief Island.

While the people waited, it appeared the squadron had been delayed once again. By 4pm. Everyone began getting restless and thinking about going home. Suddenly, planes were sighted and McLaughlin lit a smudge pot to direct the planes.

"The planes circled around over the island several times making an observation of the land field," the newspaper reported. "Lt. Ross Kirkpatrick of plane No. 4 gave the spectators a real thrill when he made a pass by the crowd only a short distance in the air going 60 miles an hour. He then made a wide circle slowing down as he went, and upon again reaching the field, he first touched ground only a few feet in front of the crowd.

"The machine stopped very shortly after first touching ground. The other three planes made their landings in quick succession and in seven minutes from the time plane No. 4 touched the ground all four planes were safe on terra firma."

Wet, boggy fields had become quite familiar to the four pilots. And landing on Sergief Island was no exception.

According to Streett's account in the National Geographic Magazine in May 1922, the landing strip looked excellent from the air. As they watched Kirkpatrick land his plane, Streett said they observed what looked like sand flying up around the wheels. As they each landed their planes, however, they realized they were setting down "in a bed of salt marsh grass immersed in over a foot of water in places."

"The field was inundated at high tide," he said. "Our hosts had neglected to mention these circumstances, which is just as well, because this field was the only available site in that section, and landing in that amount of water is more disconcerting than dangerous."

Streett said he later found out that Wrangell was experiencing one of its highest tides of the summer--19 feet.

Local residents on hand to record the event included Richard Suratt, taking moving pictures for the Fox News Agency; the Rev. H.P. Corser and J.E. Worden taking still photos for "outside metropolitan newspapers."

Once the planes were ready for the next days flight, the eight men were transported to Wrangell for a dinner and dance. On the way to town, however, the Hazel B. No. 3 became stuck on a sand bar for almost two hours.

The men retired early that night to prepare for the next day. However, the weather wasn't fit for flying on the morrow so takeoff was postponed another day.

On takeoff, two of the planes skidded off into a slough. For the first, damage was slight. For the second, a propeller was broken and needed repairs.

The Sentinel of August 19, 1920, reported that Mayor Grant and some other residents pitched in and assisted Streett in rolling the plane back to solid ground. Repairs were accomplished with replacement parts shipped to Wrangell before the flight began in New York.

The repairs meant another night in Wrangell. The squadron finally was in the air and off to Juneau, then on to Skagway. The pilots finally reached Nome on August 24, 1920, for a celebration with residents there.

They then made their return flight to New York, but didn't stop in Wrangell, because of rainy weather in Southeast Alaska at the time. Instead, the pilots made their stop in Glenora, B.C., on the southbound run. Despite the plans, one of the planes piloted by Kirkpatrick ended up in Wrangell anyway! Kirkpatrick encountered fog near Taku Glacier, and then continued a course for Wrangell.

Flying his plane low over the town, he created much excitement in the community. McLaughlin hired a boat and met Kirkpatrick at Sergief Island to hear the story about why the plane was in Wrangell rather than Glenora.

Meanwhile, one of the planes had broken an axle on its landing gear while landing in Glenora--and that brought Streett to Wrangell on the Hazel B. No. 4 to obtain replacement parts.

The Sentinel reported that residents were so excited to see Kirkpatrick's plane again that they decided to give him some souvenirs. A Chilkat blanket was purchased for Kirkpatrick, while a rare totem pole carved of jet black slate was given to his sergeant, the newspaper said.

Finally, on October 20, 1920, the planes returned to New York, their 9,000-mile adventure completed. Flying time was 112 hours--completed with the same planes, the same engines and same spark plugs.

"It is freely predicted that the time will yet come, and it will not be very long on the way either, when it will be possible to go from Nome to New York in 45 hours, actual elapsed time," the Sentinel reported.

Streett, meanwhile, said he hoped "some day this trip may be made overnight--who knows?"

Assistance with the research from Al Mongin, former architect historian for State of Alaska, the Irene Ingle Public Library and Robert Stevens, a retired airline pilot who first mentioned the fat that old photos on file in Wrangell were records of the 1920 flight. The propeller from one of the aircraft now hangs in the Wrangell Museum.