

PART I - THE PIONEERS

Dauntless Spirit

SEPTEMBER 16, 1929

Aviation in Alaska provided the means to open vast expanses of remote territory. Pioneer aviators led the way with fragile, open-cockpit biplanes, flying into uncharted areas with only the thrill of adventure to guide them. They blazed overland routes through rugged mountain ranges and across wide stretches of open tundra. Each flight was a risk. There were no radios for communication, no navigation aids to guide the pilots through inclement weather or at night, and no weather facilities to forecast changing conditions. Navigation was by dead reckoning alone, in every extreme of weather, through even the coldest months of winter. It was the exploits of these pilots that opened the frontier to the outside world, bringing people, mail, and much needed supplies in a matter of hours and days instead of weeks and months. Alaska was changed forever.

Russel Merrill was one of the first pioneer bush pilots in Alaska and the first to open the South-central region to aviation. After his discharge from the Navy as a Lieutenant Junior Grade in 1918, he nurtured aspirations of a civilian flying career. Over the next few years he continued flying and honing his pilot skills with the Naval Reserve Flying Corps while employed as an engineer in San Diego. As the Alaskan territory was being introduced to aviation in the early and mid-1920s, the eventual expansion allowed him an irresistible new opportunity for adventure.

Along with his business partner, Roy Davis, Merrill started a flying business in Seward in August 1925 with a Curtiss Model F Seagull flying boat. They flew into Anchorage for the first time on August 20, when they touched down on Cook Inlet and taxied to the

city dock. The following week they also made the first civilian flight across the Gulf of Alaska and into the town of Kodiak. Unfortunately, the airplane was destroyed by a storm a few days later while anchored off a small island north of Kodiak, all but ending their first flying business.

After a return to the United States for another aircraft, Merrill and Davis flew back to Alaska in 1926 with an Aeromarine 40 flying boat, still determined to establish a flying service in the region. On the flight north that airplane was severely damaged in Ketchikan, ending another business opportunity. Salvage and repair costs were not financially feasible, and both men ended the brief partnership on good terms.

It seemed to Merrill as if his goal of remaining in Alaska as an aviator would be delayed indefinitely. He was in the process of leaving the territory again when another opportunity suddenly materialized. A new flying service being established in Anchorage desperately needed another pilot and inquired if he was available. Merrill gladly joined Anchorage Air Transport, and in June 1927 he joined fellow pilot Ed Young in flying the company's two Travel Air biplanes. One was a model 7000 with an open-cockpit for the pilot and an enclosed cabin for four passengers. The other smaller airplane, a model 4000, had an open-cockpit for both the pilot and two passengers. Both had detachable pontoons, wheels and skis.

While working for the company, Merrill quickly established a reputation as a skilled and reliable aviator. He was the first to fly in many areas of Alaska and helped open the Kuskokwim region of the Interior to routine flying service. It was Merrill who also discovered an important air route through the Alaska Range on the western side of Cook Inlet that still bears his name today.

Most of the struggling aviation companies in Alaska were incorporated under one name in August 1929. Alaska Airways became the predominate flying service in the territory after purchasing Wien Alaska Airways in Nome, Rodebaugh Company in Fairbanks and Anchorage Air Transport. Famous Alaskan aviator Carl Ben Eielson headed the company, and the list of pilots soon included other famous pioneer aviators such as Joe Crosson, Ed Young, Frank Dorbandt, S.E. Robbins, Matt Nieminem and, of course, Russel Merrill. Other lesser-known pilots of that time, like

Harold Gillam, would later earn praise and fame from their own daring exploits.

Merrill remained in Anchorage as the only pilot, still flying the same airplanes on the same routes, but under the different management of Alaska Airways. His days were just as hectic as before, flying as often as the daylight and weather permitted. He flew because he loved it. Everyday risks and occasional survival situations were all part of the bold adventure. Often he would overnight at some remote trapper's cabin or native village while en route to a distant destination, or while waiting for weather conditions to improve. Occasionally he even spent the night alone on some remote lake or river with only the stars for company, but that was all part of the routine. Like every pilot in Alaska he had become accustomed to surviving on his own when required, and always carried extra provisions for exactly that possibility. If by chance he was stranded because of engine or mechanical problems, Merrill knew other bush pilots would not hesitate in searching for him or in providing assistance.

It was still dark when he awoke at 0300 on September 16, 1929. Merrill ate a hearty breakfast with his wife before leaving for the airplane, assuring her he would be back in a couple of days as long as the weather cooperated. He had two scheduled flights in the morning, then a long cross-country flight to a mining camp near Bethel in western Alaska in the afternoon. It would require spending the night somewhere en route, probably along the Kuskokwim River, but he did not mind. There were plenty of hospitable trappers and natives along the route who would welcome him into their homes, eagerly inquiring of any news he brought from the Outside.

After pre-flighting the float-equipped Travel Air 7000, Merrill loaded his mechanic and a local hunting guide for the short flight south. They departed at 0530 as the sun began breaking over the horizon. A light breeze was blowing inland off the water as they climbed over Turnagain Arm toward the Kenai Peninsula. Broken clouds dotted the sky above them and the distant shoreline was already visible in a flat line above the inlet. The higher snowcapped Kenai Mountains stretched the length of the peninsula southeast of their flight path, in a solid line that intercepted Tustumena Lake, their destination.

Numerous small lakes were scattered across the flat terrain

around the many rivers that flowed away from the mountains. Tustumena Lake was easily the largest lake in the area, encompassing over sixty square miles in the southern half of the peninsula. It lay in a prime hunting area that was becoming well known for brown and black bears, abundant fishing and record-size moose. The hunting guide whom Merrill was flying had a camp already established there and was going back to prepare for the arrival of some well-paying clients. His camp was in the perfect location, isolated in pristine territory, yet still only seventy miles south of Anchorage, allowing for a short trip when the need arose.

It did not take long for them to reach the lake, land and unload before departing again. There was not enough time for much small talk at the lake with more missions still to fly, and Merrill took off as quickly as he could, still carrying his mechanic. They touched down in Anchorage at 0900, stopping the engine only long enough to load more supplies and another hunting guide for the next destination near Rainy Pass, located northwest of Anchorage in the Alaska Range. The mechanic went along again on the flight, and Merrill was grateful for the company and help with the cargo. After another quick turnaround at the second hunting camp, they arrived back in Anchorage around mid afternoon, ready for a well-deserved break and a hot meal.

The last flight of the day would be the longest and Merrill wanted a brief rest before he left. He intended to land about three hours into the flight somewhere along the route, then continue to the Nyac mining camp on Bear Creek, near Bethel the next morning. Remaining in Anchorage and delaying the flight until the 17th was a possibility, but it would still mean spending a night away from home because of the distance involved. The mine had already ceased operations until a new compressor could be delivered, and delaying the flight another day would only aggravate their situation. There was also a cargo of live foxes waiting in Bethel for transport to a fur farm on the Kuskokwim River on Merrill's return trip. In addition, he carried fifty pounds of mail that needed to be delivered along the way to Bethel. Keeping everyone waiting while he was perfectly capable of flying just did not seem right to him.

With the aircraft freshly serviced and loaded with the heavy compressor, Merrill lifted off the water alone at 1610, flying west over Cook Inlet toward the high peaks of the Alaska Range. As he

crossed over the open stretch of water, the tide was almost near its highest level, but he only glanced briefly at the surface. His eyes were already focused on the cloud formations that surrounded the distant peaks, studying them for any indication of dangerous winds. He intended to fly up the Chakachatna River, then through the mountain pass he had discovered years before which led into the Kuskokwim region on the other side of the mountains. The weather in the area was always a concern, but he knew that if necessary, he could always land beside one of the trapper cabins on the large lake below the pass and wait until conditions improved.

Russel Merrill and the Travel Air 7000 he flew disappeared that evening, never to be found. No one suspected he was missing until the 18th, and even then most of his friends assumed he had only experienced a mechanical problem that forced him down somewhere in the Interior. His family was worried, of course, but they understood that those particular situations were not uncommon. Everyone was confident he would be located as soon as a search was initiated.

Since Russel Merrill was the only pilot flying out of Anchorage at the time of his disappearance, Alaska Airways had to send some of their other pilots from the northern cities to look for him. As the head of the company, Eielson himself decided to fly down from Fairbanks, arriving in Anchorage on the 19th to begin the search. On the 20th he flew along Merrill's assumed western route to the village of Sleetmute on the Kuskokwim River, a little over half the distance to Bethel. Eielson took along a mechanic as an extra set of eyes, but they saw no sign of Merrill or the airplane, and the village had no news of him.

Other pilots arrived in Anchorage on the 21st. Joe Crosson decided to participate in the search for Merrill instead of continuing on to his Alaska Airways job in Fairbanks. The only airplane available in Anchorage was the smaller Travel Air 4000, primarily used for landing on short fields and sandbars, and so he had the wheels quickly replaced with pontoons. Harvey Barnhill also arrived the same day, flying a New Standard biplane that had just recently been assembled at the Alaska Airways hangar in Fairbanks. They branched off on different routes, enabling them to cover more of the territory that Merrill might have flown over. By that time he had only been missing for five days, and they were all still confident he

was safe and waiting to be found. It was common knowledge that Russel carried enough food aboard his airplane for two weeks, and as long as he was not injured there was little to worry about.

Over the next few days the search pilots and their observers covered every conceivable route Merrill might have taken on his flight, including any diversions he might have made because of bad weather. Every attempt came up empty, with not a single clue to indicate his whereabouts. The primary route between Anchorage and the Kuskokwim River, through Merrill Pass, was covered four times, and the area around Cook Inlet several times as well. When those flights proved unsuccessful, they expanded the search north into the Susitna Valley, over Skwentna and Rainy Pass. They even began dropping notes to hunting parties and remote cabins to ask if anyone had seen or heard Merrill's airplane on the 16th. No one had.

By the 26th the search crews were becoming concerned and began extending their flights farther away from Anchorage. They hoped Merrill had somehow made it farther toward Bethel without being seen or heard in the villages and scattered cabins of the region. Crosson flew all the way to the mining camp at Nyac, only sixty-five miles from Bethel, but with no luck. He then tried an area farther east of the Kuskokwim area where Merrill kept several caches of gasoline. There was no sign of him.

The search along the western shore of Cook Inlet became more intensive as the Interior flights came up empty. Spirits were temporarily lifted when villagers at Tyonek, only forty miles west of Anchorage on the opposite shore of the inlet, signaled a positive reply to a search aircraft that had dropped a note asking about Merrill. They spread a brief message on the ground that was interpreted by the pilot to mean they had seen an aircraft drifting in the inlet with the tide. However, a boat sent to investigate returned with the news that the villagers had probably not seen an aircraft at all, but only natural debris that was floating with the current.

That news might not have been so easily dismissed if a report had not arrived from Seward at about the same time, claiming a ship captain had seen signal rockets off Cape Resurrection, on the other side of the Kenai Peninsula. Speculation arose from some that Merrill had diverted his flight south along the inlet, where he was probably forced down onto the water. The wind and tides could then

have carried the airplane around the peninsula, from where he would have attempted a signal.

Several search ships soon combed the area around Cape Resurrection and a general alert was issued to all vessels to be on the lookout for any signs of the missing pilot or airplane. At the insistence of a local newspaper in Anchorage, the Territorial Governor dispatched a Coast Guard cutter on October 7 to assist in the search around Seward. No evidence was ever found of Merrill, his airplane or anyone else in distress in the vicinity of Cape Resurrection.

While attention shifted toward Seward for a few days, the Alaska Airways pilots in Anchorage continued the search for their lost comrade. Other people began coming forward, claiming wreckage resembling a small airplane had been seen drifting in Cook Inlet on the day of Merrill's disappearance. The pilots intensified their flights over the inlet, expanding the area even further south along the Alaska Peninsula and again along the previously searched routes leading into the Interior. Most of the aerial coverage concentrated on the western side of Cook Inlet, since the outgoing tides usually moved in that direction and the shoreline followed part of Merrill's proposed flight route.

There was also a possibility that Merrill might have attempted to walk out if he was forced down east of Chakachamna Lake, on the inlet side of Merrill Pass. A well-used trail existed between the lake and Trading Bay, and he could possibly have covered the distance on foot if he was not injured. However, subsequent searches along the trail and coastline found no sign of him.

Finally, on October 20, there was some confirmation of Merrill's fate. A local trapper near the village of Tyonek had found a piece of fabric from the missing airplane on October 3, after it washed up on the beach. He was unaware of the significance at the time and continued with his hunting. He returned to the village on the 20th and mentioned the discovery to others. A mechanic who had stitched and painted the fabric only a week before the airplane vanished positively identified it as belonging to the aircraft. It appeared to have been cut from the tail section of the aircraft and speculation arose that Merrill might have used it as a makeshift sail to try and reach shore.

The next day, Harvey Barnhill landed in front of the village to

inquire further about the sightings on the 17th. Upon seeing Barnhill's airplane on the beach as a comparison, the natives became convinced that the object they had previously seen in the inlet was indeed an airplane. It was concluded by the search pilots that Russel Merrill must have landed on Cook Inlet after experiencing some sort of difficulty, but was unable to reach shore. A storm that swept through the area that night probably destroyed the airplane, taking whatever wreckage remained to the bottom or out to sea.

The search for some sign of Merrill's body continued for another week, but there was no longer any hope that he had survived. At the end of October the search was finally halted. Over 10,000 air miles of Alaska had been covered during the six week search, with many of the routes being overflown numerous times. The search area had stretched from Bethel to Anchorage, from the Susitna Valley to the Alaska Peninsula, and from Cook Inlet to Seward. His friends and family reluctantly admitted it was finally over.

Russel Merrill left a legacy of dedication and personal service to the people of Alaska. The Anchorage Municipal Airport was renamed Merrill Field in his honor in 1930. A plaque bearing his name is still mounted at the base of the control tower today.

*To that dauntless
Pioneer of the air
Russel Hyde Merrill
Whose life aim was
The development of
Aviation in Alaska*

—SEPTEMBER 16 1929