FROM THE EDITOR

This issue features some of the more unusual and unique ideas that came about in aviation during the Golden Age. Some ideas and efforts were brilliant; others...maybe not so much.

It is interesting to revisit some of these ideas and designs with fresh eyes now that 80 years or so have passed since they were first presented. New technology applied to old ideas that were not possible back then due to manufacturing processes, material requirements, and the limits of the technology of the time could be viewed with a new perspective in today’s day and age. Some of the ideas and experiments were perfectly acceptable as they were, but sometimes an unusual design that does not conform what society accepts as the norm has a hard time gaining traction on the road to success.

We have also had quite a bit of material on Travel Air Mystery Ships come to our attention recently and feature it all in this issue. Special thanks to Charles Peter Colomello who provided us with his never-before-published images of the type.

In future issue we plan to feature coverage Autogiros, Wacos, New Standard, early Taylor aircraft and early Piper Cubs. If you have information, an article, photos or news that you’d like to share with us, we would appreciate it!

Earlier this month I joined WW1 Aeroplanes, Inc. Board President, Sean Tavares (right) and fellow aviation enthusiast and pilot Sheldon Tieder at the National Air & Space Museum in Washington, D.C. We had the pleasure of spending an hour or so with NASM’s Associate Director for Collections and Curatorial Affairs, Dr. Peter L. Jakab (center). Sean, Peter and I originally met at the WW1 R/C Model Jamboree at The Old Rhinebeck Aerodrome back in the 1970s/1980s. Photo: Sheldon Tieder

Let us know your thoughts...write us at skysways.journal@gmail.com

As always, thank you for reading!
Tom Polapink
Pancho Barnes’ Travel Air “Mystery Ship”

Nick Spark

www.legendofpanchobarnes.com

Nick Spark is the producer and writer of The Legend of Pancho Barnes, an Emmy-award winning documentary film that traces the career of legendary aviatrix Florence “Pancho” Barnes. This entry from his production journal recounts the story of Barnes’ iconic airplane - Travel Air Mystery Ship #R613K. Read more about the film and see a trailer at: www.LegendofPanchoBarnes.com

Pancho Barnes’ Travel Air "Mystery Ship" symbolized her bold, fast, wild life of adventure. It's a key part of her story and our documentary, and true to form an actual "mystery." The entire time we were making the film, I wondered where Pancho’s plane had ended up. The last confirmed sighting of it was decades ago, when it was sold to an unnamed buyer. Combing through magazine articles and internet postings, and asking everyone we came into contact with, yielded few answers. A couple people seemed to know where it was, but said they "couldn't say" when pressed. Vows of secrecy, non-disclosure agreements, or just people having fun with us? One thing seemed clear: whoever owned it, really wanted to keep the plane's whereabouts a mystery.

Our Mystery Ship's MIA status was certainly true to form. The plane itself was one of only five ever built and got its nickname because head designer Walter Beech and his underlings Herb Rawdon and Walter Burnham kept the "Model R"'s design a secret right up until the moment it was unveiled at the National Air Races in 1929. The plane, with its clean lines and hefty radial engine, caught the crowd's attention. Soon it stunned the field, as pilot Doug Davis flew #R614K at an astonishing 194.9 miles per hour to win the Thompson Trophy. Davis was the first civilian pilot to win the coveted award, besting several Air Corps entries in handy fashion. Pancho probably witnessed that race, as she herself was in Cleveland that day.

After crashing in the Powder Puff Derby, Pancho was eager to prove herself and the meteor-like Mystery Ship proved irresistible. She probably saw the one that she purchased, tail #R613K, on display at Cleveland.

Known as the "Chevolair" Mystery Ship because it was equipped with a six-cylinder inline engine, it debuted there alongside its more powerful twin and eventually (at the time Pancho bought it) was reconfigured with a radial. This was the plane that Pancho flew to fame, coasting from Oakland to Los Angeles in record time, and besting Amelia Earhart's air speed record at an average speed of 185 mph in 1930. That proved to be the most triumphant moment of Barnes' aviation career. Just a few years later she fell on hard times and couldn't afford hangar rent for the plane, much less avgas. The zippy aircraft ended up in the hands of fellow stunt pilot Paul Mantz. In Mantz' hands #R613K became a Hollywood star, appearing in a number of aviation films.
and serials including "Dive Bomber" and "Tailspin Tommy". The plane's exotic fuselage allowed it to impersonate experimental fighter aircraft, a Schneider racer, and others before it fell into disuse and disrepair — probably during WWII when all West Coast-based civilian planes were grounded.

Paul Mantz, along with fellow stunt flyer Frank Tallman, proved to be an avid collector of planes. The two eventually opened the "Movieland of the Air" museum in Santa Ana, and the derelict Mystery Ship was on display there. After Mantz was killed during the shooting of *The Flight of the Phoenix*, a large part of the collection was sold at auction including #R613K. The aircraft was a prize part of the 1968 auction and expected to bring a premium price, but that's not what happened. Given her unmistakable looks and larger-than-life presence, it was hard for auction attendees not to notice Pancho, and when people realized that she hoped to win her plane back, they refused to bid against her. In the end Pancho, her son Billy and his wife Shouling won the plane at a price that must have left auctioneers Parke-Bernet feeling like they'd been robbed. It was clearly an amazing moment for Pancho, who posed with the plane and once again basked in the warm glow that belongs to winners.

Although Pancho and Bill declared that the aircraft would fly again, people who visited Barnes Aviation (Billy's FBO at Fox Field near Lancaster, Ca.) couldn't help but notice that progress on it was excruciatingly slow. Apparently Billy's efforts were sporadic because he feared that Pancho, who was in ill health and hadn't had an active pilot's license in decades, swore that she was going to take her trusty old steed up in the air as soon as it was flyable. She also swore a blue streak to anyone who doubted her, and especially Billy. But while her desire was strong, Pancho's heart was frail and she died in 1975. In the wake of her death Billy made more progress on the old plane, and it looked like it might be ready for a rebirth. But the Model R still was far from airworthy when he unexpectedly died after his favorite plane, a P-51 Mustang that Bill flew in air shows, caught fire during takeoff and plowed in.

Following Bill's death, his widow Shouling struggled mightily to keep Barnes Aviation afloat, but she refused to sell the Travelair at any cost. Eventually however she must have realized that restoring the airplane was a big project that required a lot of commitment and deep pockets. An historic aircraft collector from England contacted her about purchasing the plane, but initially Shouling didn't reply. After eight months of silence, she finally sent word that she was willing to talk about it. The collector flew out to Lancaster and, after a bit of protracted discussions, bought the plane. It then did a vanishing act worth of Houdini.

At a certain point during pre-production of the film, the plane's fate seemed extremely important to Amanda and I. At that time we hadn't been able to locate any film footage of Pancho or the Mystery Ship, and so we were thinking that we'd have to shoot some re-enactments to bring these portions of the film to life. For that we'd need a Model R, and while a nice replica was offered to us, the real deal seemed alluring. But where was the aircraft? Shouling Barnes wasn't talking, and no one else seemed to know much except that it was "in the U.K." Rumors abounded. One person told us it was in pieces, in a garage. Another told us it was part of a disputed estate. A third swore she'd been to the UK and seen it undergoing restoration. And so on...

In the end we dismissed the idea of using a plane, original or replica, in the ending of the movie --- the ending turned out to be more about Pancho's connection to Edwards AFB than anything else. But as the film made its way into the world, Amanda and I fielded a persistent question at every screening, "Where is Pancho's plane today?" The fact that we couldn't answer surprised everyone, and made us look a little foolish.
"The location of Pancho's plane," we would laugh, "is similar to the location of Earhart's. We just don't know."

Eventually the publicity surrounding the film broke the logjam. One day I opened an untitled email and learned that I'd been contacted by the Mystery Ship's owner. He sent along a couple photos of the plane, which now looked to be in magnificent condition albeit without an engine. The owner confessed that he'd known about our film for some time, but said he hadn't contacted us out of respect for our own sanity. The reason being, he recognized that if we had access to the plane, we'd most likely want to film it in flight. Yet the restoration effort had been an extremely tough and glacially slow process, and after years of work the plane still wasn't flying and no date for a first flight had been set. Rather than ground loop our production with a first-class distraction, he chose to ignore us. That's a fact I'm now grateful for, because I am certain that if we had been aware of the plane's location, we wouldn't have been able to resist trying to incorporate it into the film.

A few weeks ago I got to meet the owners of Pancho's plane, who were passing through Los Angeles on their way back to England. For now, these charming people prefer to remain anonymous. I can tell you however that the Mystery Ship is in very good hands. The restoration was absolutely world class, completely immaculate, with special attention paid to returning the aircraft to the condition it was in during its heyday. The photos that you see here represent the very first time the owners have granted permission to show off the airplane — so you are among the first people to get to see it. The photos speak volumes so I won't bother to waste adjectives or your time on that. What is intriguing are some of the things you don't see in these images, the story of the restoration itself and what was uncovered during it. For example, underneath the tattered layers of paint added by Paul Mantz to camouflage the plane for Hollywood, was found the original red and yellow paint scheme, as well as a blue scheme Pancho used while flying for Union Oil. Also, evidence of frame damage emerged during the work, possibly from an incident Pancho frequently mentioned in which Howard Hughes dinged the plane and then refused to pay the repair bill! These and other details are bound to surprise and delight, once the aircraft takes flight and makes its formal debut on the pages of plane restoration magazines around the world. Exactly when that will happen we don't know, but stay tuned.

One thing is for certain: if Pancho were around today, she'd be grateful that her plane has been so lovingly restored. In my mind the plane with its stubby wings, distinctive wheel pants and strong streamlined shape, seems to embody so many things about Pancho. One thing above all else stands out — like its former owner, it is a survivor. In the coming years, it will add a new chapter to its story, and burnish the legacy of the Golden Age of Air Racing and Pancho Barnes.

Bravo!

Please note: Photos from Skyfire Corporation and Heather Alexander, Pancho Barnes Trust Estate and "University of Southern California are subject to copyright and may not be reposted without express permission."
The documentary is narrated by Tom Skerritt, and includes Kathy Bates as the voice of Pancho Barnes. This multi-award-winning film has screened throughout the United States on public television (PBS), in Australia, and in nearly a dozen film festivals. Celebrated within the aviation community, it was specially screened at the EAA’s AirVenture in 2010 and 2011, at AOPA’s annual convention, at Sun ‘N Fun, the Arlington Fly In, NASA Dryden, and at scores of air museums nationwide.

The deluxe DVD now available features both the broadcast version (as seen on public television) and the special uncensored film festival version of the documentary, along with nearly 18 minutes of additional video including deleted scenes. It also features commentary from writer/producer Nick Spark and director Amanda Pope, a study guide for secondary school students, and more.

Winner of an Emmy and multiple film festival awards including Best Documentary Film and Audience Awards in 2010, The Legend of Pancho Barnes and the Happy Bottom Riding Club is a fun-filled documentary romp through the life of one of the most colorful and accomplished female pilots of the early 20th Century. Florence "Pancho" Barnes was the first woman stunt pilot in Hollywood in 1929 and shattered Amelia Earhart's air speed record in 1930. In the 1940's and 50's, Pancho entertained the greatest test pilots in the world, the men with the right stuff at the infamous "Happy Bottom Riding Club" guest ranch near Edwards Air Force Base. When Chuck Yeager broke the sound barrier in the Bell X-1 in 1947, he partied with Pancho. A friend of the fast and the famous, Pancho Barnes was a swaggering, forceful, ill-behaved woman whose exploits and accomplishments are truly the stuff of legend.
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