



FACT SHEET

UNITED STATES AIR FORCE

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Carl Ben Eielson

Aviation pioneer

Pioneer, explorer, hero -- all terms that describe the life of Alaskan aviator and namesake of Eielson Air Force Base, Carl Ben Eielson.

Eielson was born in Hatton, N.D., in 1897, and despite an interest in aviation going back to his childhood, the 18-year-old Midwesterner pursued a law degree, at the University of North Dakota, and later, the University of Wisconsin.

Following America's entry into World War I, Eielson found his chance to become an aviator. In January 1918 he enlisted in the newly-formed aviation section of the U.S. Army Signal Corps. World War I ended while Eielson was in flight training, ending America's immediate need for pilots. He was commissioned a second lieutenant and discharged on the same day in March 1919.

Eielson alternated between college and aerial barnstorming in the Midwest for the next three years. Unable to decide between law and flying, he accepted an offer to teach at a Fairbanks, Alaska, high school in 1922. He taught general science, English and physical education.

Intrigued by the vastness of Alaska and the potential for aviation in the area, Eielson was soon drawn from the classroom.

He convinced several Fairbanks businessmen that commercial aviation was a feasible business venture in the Alaskan interior. Eielson soon became the sole pilot for the Farthest North Aviation Company, formed in 1922.

After obtaining a surplus Army aircraft in the Lower 48, Eielson was soon making the first regular commercial flights from Fairbanks to interior mining camps and communities. He delivered supplies, mail and passengers in mere hours -- over distances that took days by train, or weeks by dog sled.

Successful and popular among its growing number of customers, the commercial operations of the company led Eielson and the firm to strive for regular airmail deliveries to Interior Alaska. With the help of the territorial Congressional representative, Eielson was awarded a postal contract in 1924. The agreement set up a 300-mile route between Fairbanks and McGrath, Alaska, which Eielson was tasked to fly.

The Post Office Department unexpectedly withdrew the contract in May, after six months of operations, but Eielson remained in Alaska until September as a bush pilot. He

then enlisted in the Army Air Service, and after one year at Langley Field, Va., he returned to North Dakota, where he found employment as a bond salesman.

Closing in on fame

His aviation background in Alaska, however, brought him an offer in late 1925 that promised to fulfill his dream of crisscrossing the vast Alaskan territory by air.

Australian explorer Sir Hubert Wilkins, already known for exploits in the Arctic, enlisted Eielson for an exploratory expedition to the North Pole and a possible trans-polar flight from the northern coast of Alaska to Greenland.

The expedition, which started in 1926, was unsuccessful, although Eielson became the first aviator to cross the Arctic Ocean and land a plane on the Arctic slope.

Eielson joined Wilkins again in 1927 on another unsuccessful Arctic-North Pole expedition. Eielson attained his greatest recognition on their third effort, which succeeded in 1928.

In April, Eielson flew Wilkins the 2,200-mile route over the polar ice cap from the North Slope of Alaska, to Spitzbergen Island, Greenland. This was the first flight from North America over the North Pole to Europe.

Eielson accompanied Wilkins on an Antarctic expedition later in 1928; they became the first men to fly over both polar regions of the world in the same year.

The flight over the North Pole brought Eielson lasting fame. He was decorated with the Distinguished Flying Cross and won the 1928 Harmon Trophy for the greatest American aviation feat of the year. He returned to Alaska in the summer of 1929 as a local, national and international hero.

Eielson used his renown to good advantage, securing financial backing in the Lower 48 for the establishment of a large commercial aviation company in Alaska.

Tragic flight

Eielson was an active participant in the company's flying operations. He joined company pilots in the winter of 1929 on a flight to rescue stranded passengers and recover a million dollars worth of furs aboard a freight ship caught in the ice off the Siberian coast.

It was during this rescue attempt that Eielson and Earl Borland, his mechanic, lost their lives.

On a November night, the two departed from a small airstrip on the northeastern coast of Alaska in a furious blizzard. Eielson's aircraft never reached the freighter "Nanuk." Seventy-nine days later, a multi-national air and ground effort discovered the wreckage of Eielson's airplane on a small island off the Siberian coast. Both bodies were recovered in February 1930 and returned to the United States for burial.

Alaska later memorialized the aviator by naming a mountain peak near Mount McKinley after him. In 1948, the Air Force renamed its Mile 26 airfield, located 26 miles southeast of Fairbanks, after him. And in July 1985, Eielson was inducted into the National Aviation Hall of Fame for bringing aviation to the sparsely populated regions of the world to better serve the needs of his fellow man.

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