

BOB ELLIS

(interviewed on radio in Fairbanks, March 28, 1974)

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Ellis was born in 1903 in Vermont. He left home at 16 and headed west.

He formed Ellis Airlines and is presently on the board of directors of Alaska Airlines.

He ended up in Seattle and took aviation training from the Navy...said he learned to fly in the Naval reserve in 1927. He got his first flying job in 1929. In 1930 pilots were grossing \$500 per month plus \$5 per hour for every hour they flew. Flew only in the summer time in the beginning. In 1936 he started flying year around.

His first job was out of Winmar Airport. His first trip to Juneau was with Ancel Fdkman - April 15, 1929 they landed in Juneau. It was the firts non stop flight to Juneau from Seattle. They took seven hours and 35 minutes to make the flight. Ellis was the navigator. Also on that flight was a mechanic Jack Holoran. They were heros in Juneau. They took that day's Seattle paper to Juneau - quite a novelty to have the same day's Seattle paper. They also had an extra quart of milk left over...Seattle milk usually spoiled before it could reach Juneau by water.

Ellis now lives out of Ketchikan on an island. Used to live in a boat.

He talks about Alaska-Washington Airlines. Made lots of money in Alaska and the company spent it in the Northwest and eventually went broke. Talks about the early planes they flew - Lockheed Vegas.

Alaskan Airways, a subsidiary of American Airlines, operated in Southeastern Alaska. Some of the pilots for Alaskan Airways were Joe Crosson, Ed Young, Robbins, Harold Gillam. Matt Neinaman (sp?) was in Anchorage.

The first year Ellis was in Juneau he was the only pilot. Juneau had about 5,000 people then. Gene Myring (sp?) was flying out of Ketchikan then. In 1930 (the time we are talking about) Ellis said there were few pilots any place.

Nick Bearsley (sp?), a fish processor, bought Alaska-Washington Airlines and named it Alaska Southern Airways.

Ellis tells story about his flying to Nome to meet Jimmy Mattern who was U.S. pilot attempting to fly around the world. He was a few days ahead of Wiley Post but developed oil trouble in Siberia. He rigged up an extra oil tank but it was too cold and the oil congealed. He put the plane down on the tundra. A search was undertaken for Mattern. A New York brewery sponsored the Mattern relief expedition and engaged Ellis to go to Nome and to Siberia to help look for Mattern. The brewery's plane tried to land at

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Prince Rupert (looked like a big town on the map), but there was no field so the plane flew back to a farmer's field near Terrace. This was in 1934.

Ellis left Juneau and arrived in Nome at 5 p.m. that day. Gassed in Fairbanks and Ruby (followed the Tanana Valley and Yukon River as nav aides). Eventually the Russians brought Mattern to Nome. Ellis flew him on to Juneau and then on to Terrace, but he declined to land in the farmer's field. Landed at Hazelton and headed quickly back to Juneau before he had to fly any more harrowing trips with Mattern. Mattern took off (with great difficulty) with five men and headed back east.

In the fall of 1934 Nick sold Alaska Southern to Pacific Alaska Airways. In 1937 PAA started flying the Juneau to Seattle Sykowski twin engine amphibian planes. In 1938 PAA went to the four enginer planes.

Ellis - in 1936 - went into business for himself. He borrowed \$4,000 and bought a Waco for \$6,800. The Waco was a bi plane with a Jacobs engine. It held the pilot and three passengers. Operated out of Ketchikan since there was no air service out of that town. No strip at Ketchikan yet. Annette Island airport started in 1940. Ellis flew people and little freight. His business was good. Flew fish buyers, tourists, people going from town to town, etc. Bought another Waco and then a Bellanca. Then he bought another Bellanca. At the beginning of the war he had six planes - a Stinson, three Bellancas and two Wacos. After the war Gruuman Goose aircraft became available and he started buying them as soon as he could get a little money ahead.

At the time of his merger with Coastal Airlines, Ellis had eight Gruuman Gooses (geese) and one PBY. Coastal had seven Gruuman Gooses and two PBYs and a couple single engine planes.

Recalls Ancel Ekman back in 1929 in Seattle. Eckman was a World War I pilot. In the 1920's he used to fly the Boeing B1E flying boat to Victoria on Vancouver Island and meet the ships coming in from the Orient. Flew mail to Seattle and thus cut off one day on delivery tiem. Ellis said Ekman was a very poor navigator. He used the old adage pilots coined : "Fly low, slow and be careful." That was the very way he flew Puget Sound and lived through it in the days with no or few nav aids. Edman died in bed about 10 years ago. He eventually bought a resort on Orcas Island. He was a wonderful piano player, Ellis recalls.

Outstanding pilots Ellis recalls: Joe Crosson. Tells about winter of 1935 when Crosson blew snow from the airport in Juneau before he took off. Gillam was the first of the good instrument pilots. Gillam was forced to land in a snow storm in Southeastern Alaska and according to Ellis, Gillam starved to death before he was found.

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Sherrill Simmons was another very skilled pilot he recalls.

Ellis' most harrowing experience as a pilot? Flying a decrepit aircraft from Sitka to Kodiak during the war. He went to Anchorage and then headed to Kodiak. Snowing. Went up above and then back down near Seldovia. Back up again and came down through a hole in the clouds near the Barren Islands. Snowing very, very hard and the air scoop filled with snow. Power was down to almost zero when he finally remembered instructions about an emergency air intake in case snow clogged the regular intake. He found that and pulled open. Engines shot ahead at about 90% of power and the throttle stuck. He landed the plane at Kodiak with 90% power, cutting engines in the process. Made it okay, but nervous.

During World War II Ellis was recalled to duty by the Navy. Active duty in 1941 in Sitka. Then he joined a scouting squadron at Sitka. He became its executive officer and eventually is commanding officer. He was moved to Kodiak and transferred to the Kodiak Air Station as executive officer which he performed for more than one year. Then he was assigned to Attu as executive officer and eventually as commanding officer. The Attu duty was near the end of the war, Ellis said, when shooting at Attu had ceased.

He recalls when President Roosevelt came through Kodiak during the war. He knew only two days prior that the president was coming though the commanding officer knew in advance. He described Roosevelt as obviously very sick. "Most of the time he was droopy and in a funk," Ellis said. That was in 1944. Ellis said Roosevelt sparked up when public appearances were called for...or when he reviewed the troops. But it was a put on job to conceal his deteriorated condition.

Ellis completes this one hour tape with recollection of harrowing landing on the Taku River. He was taking some firefighters to a fire up in British Columbia. He was instructed to land at a spot below the fire. The river was very swift and he was not able to hold the plane with the line. The plane floated down stream. The mechanic was still on the craft and managed to get the engine started and taxied it up to the landing again. All was okay and he securely tied the tie line, but someone forgot to tie it securely to the plane. Down stream again. After a couple more attempts they got the plane tied up securely enough to unload passengers. Ellis took off without passengers and sent a boat for them few days later.