

Oral History Project
History 640

Emitt Soldin
Government Pilot

Hello, I'm Jeff Roberts interviewing long time Alaskan aviator Emitt Soldin. Emitt has had chapter dedicated to his life in recently written, "Heroes of the Horizon" by Gerry Bruder.

1. When and where were you born?

I was born in Skagway, Alaska on October 14, 1924 just 70 years ago.

2. What brought your family to Alaska?

It was the building of the White Pass and Yukon Railroad from Skagway to White Horse. My grandfather brought a team a workers from Seattle in 1888 or 1889 to work on the railroad, I guess the railroad asked them to do that. Actually I don't know how they contracted him because he was from the east and just like all the gold seekers (just looking for work). He wasn't looking for gold he was just a plain ol' contractor and he moved there and started a family, the first born on 1900, an uncle who just died last year. Then there was six total in the family, three girls and three boys and my mom was the second oldest. She was born in 1901 and I was born in '24 my kid in '55, grandkids were '70's, four generations anyway of them.

3. Did your family have any encounters with Skagway's outlaw Soapy Smith?

No not actually my mom wasn't born until after he was supposedly shot by the marshall. No, that was before the family arrived. I guess grandma and grandpa were there but never really talked to Gram about it.

4. What was life like in Skagway growing up and how did the Depression affect that part of Alaska?

Actually the Depression didn't really hit Alaska like nowadays. It hit America and Alaska survives then later Alaska gets it and the states survive. It is typical of the times we had electricity and water, a lot of people thought we didn't have those sorts of things. Cold homes in the winter times because they weren't designed or built for cold. Often wind, Skagway is known for its wind, blows from the south in the summer and the north in the winter. In the Depression actually we were living in Tacoma for a year '28 and '29. I wasn't very old but I do remember coming back to Alaska after the crash in October- we came back to Skagway in December. Dad couldn't find work in Seattle or Tacoma so he came back to Skagway and went to work for the railroad where he worked before. He remained with the railroad until he retired. He was section foreman and later B and B foreman and he retired as a B and B foreman-built all the bridges and houses and everything on the railroad. The railroad was a real steep grade, 4% is a number I remember in one section, they had to get up there quick. The first twenty miles it goes up nearly 2,000 feet-and up and down canyons to get there-a real feat in engineering. So the Depression really didn't affect Alaska like it did other parts of the country?

No we didn't have the problem with food that we did in Tacoma. Mom would go pickin' berries, we get to keep half of them. We didn't have much meat on the table- we were pretty hungry and we got back up to Alaska and it was easier to survive. I mean, really we had lots of food especially when mom worked for the railroad, they always had good food because we lived on the railroad in the summer. Nothing fresh, like vegetables, but the basics, and money to buy it. And that was a big thing, during the Depression the food was there but nobody could buy it.

5. Now your family worked closely with the railroad so how did you get involved with aviation rather than the railroad?

Well that was because I watched those two pieces of iron going over the hill and I said, "Hey I want to do something else", and I saw an airplane and I said, "That is for me".

6. How old were you when you remember any contact with airplanes?

Probably about eight years old. It was a Savoy Macci owned by Tony Schwam and it stayed on the beach north of Juneau and then he left it on the beach rotting away. It really wasn't much of an airplane anyway as far as being commercially useful- it didn't carry much of a load. It had quite a history, the airplane was flown from Italy in an armada of them back in the 1930's to a convention of them in New York. And they sold them all in America-I don't know how they got them across the ocean but they did! But they did scatter them around America and one ended up in Juneau. That is my first airplane experience. After that I read magazines and built models and the airplane finally came to town probably about 1935. Slim Menathy flew tourists hops and up into Whitehorse. Of course I hung around as close as I could but an 8 or 10 old kid they don't allow them to close to airplanes!

So this sparked a curiosity or fascination with flying?

Yes, it's like railroads were with the west in the 1800's. Kids look for the most exciting thing in their lives and airplanes became my life.

7. When you were 15 years old Hitler began overtaking neighboring European countries. What was your reaction to this aggression and did you believe at that time that the U.S. would ever become involved?

Yes, I've got memories of a couple of Germans, young fellas that came up on the railroad in the late '30's. And I knew, 'cause we had a heck of a good school and the teacher was really strong in history-Mrs Lotty Gaffy who taught fifth and sixth grade. And we were kept abreast of all the activity over there. Ya, we were aware of the German invasions and oppressions. These two young fellas years later I got thinking about it-were they sent up there to spy or what were they doin' there? Were they escaping Germany-they were definitely German young fellas. My natural dad was in World War I which was a war to shut down the Germans but it didn't work. They came back! My natural dad died when I was two so I never had an opportunity to hear his side of the war side of it. He was gassed in the trenches, pneumonia caused his lungs

gave out on him. I think it was about 1926, but I don't really know. My mom married my stepdad which was really my dad-I grew up with him. A Swede from the old country.

Did you ever believe the U.S. would get involved over seas? That is hard to say. I was pretty young and there was so much newspaper boloney about we are going to stay out of this war, we don't belong in this war. And there was so many Germans in this country that we didn't want to have too much of an opinion in the paper and in the government. It took the Japanese to get us really involved we were mentally involved before that but we couldn't get physically involved because in America we had people for the British and people against the British. And there was so many feelings it was just hard to get as into it. We entered because we built all kinds of stuff for the British but it was the same old story of them speaking out of two sides of their mouth. But when the Japanese attacked it was very simple. Germany declared war on us, which a lot of people don't realize. We didn't declare war on them. We declared war on Japan then Germany declared war on us. That's the thing that turned the tide and it made good sense and everything went the right way. It was a popular war, we were real hard to convince that we've got to go one way-with the Germans or the British. And when the Japanese attacked and the Germans declared war it was no problem.

8. Where were you at and what were you doing when you first heard about the Japanese invading Pearl Harbor?

Oh ya, I sure do. It was Sunday and we heard it got bombed and we had a meeting at school and the whole town was there because it was the biggest place we had then. I was in high school then-senior high. The military had sent a message for a guard by the communications building, it was only one little shack about 30 foot square. It had radios, an antennae and it was the only communication out there. So they asked the town to set up a home guard around 24 hours a day. Until they could get the military up there to take over the guard duty. I wound up 4:00 to 8:00 in the morning with a guy named Lee Gualt. They put one kid and one adult and put them together. And we stood guard-colder than all hell. It was very interesting, people don't realize what little we

knew about the Japanese. Now they they got their feelings so they are whitewashing the Japs and blackballing the Americans and where were all these people, they weren't there at the time. We didn't know whether the Japanese were coming up the canal because Skagway was a key point in Alaska and heck they knew more about Alaska than we did, we found out later. They had pictures but we didn't know, we guarded that radio shack and I remember watching over that hill where if there would have been airplanes they would have come from. And of course we watched the water-it was right down on the waterfront. If there would have been anything unusual all we would have done is to get that radio man to send a message out. One week later the military sent a contingency up from Haines that did all the guarding from then on. And of course they came in later with a group of waterfront guards because there was a lot of shipping going on even before the Japs bombed we had a lot of shipping going through Skagway. It was the only way to get stuff to the interior.

9. After high school did you go into the military?

No, I was 17 and mom wouldn't sign the papers for me so I couldn't get in until they drafted me at 18 and I didn't get in until '44. And I went into the air force because I had a little knowledge of aviation but by then they had more pilots than they could handle. So there was no way of getting pilot training in the airforce so I became a mechanic. Which was good, I had some real good training. Couldn't have afforded it in the outside world and I always wanted to go to school but the schools were so expensive and I really didn't have an agreement or anything.

So you got a free education in the service?

Yes I sure did!

10. At what age did you get married, who was your wife, and did you have any children?

I got married September 1, 1948 to Margaret. That only lasted 10 years. I married Charolette December 1959 and then was divorced on April 5, 1970. My son was born in 1955.

Where you working in Alaska at the time?

No at the time I had just gotten out of the service and I was

getting my mechanic's license in San Francisco and working in Chico for an old buddy. Just trying to make a living, it was kind of exciting after the war. in aviation down there taking surplus airplanes that you couldn't dream of getting a chance to fly and buy them for nothin'. Guys were buying BT-13 and buying them for \$600 to \$800. That's all the money they had and didn't have money to put gas in them, beautiful airplanes. My brother bought a P-51 in 1955 for \$800. A real nice one, I got licenced and flew it around a little bit in '55.

In Gerry Bruder's book it mentions you flying bees from California to Canada, is this during this time?

This was quite a bit later. I was flying copilot in a P-46 and we had a few passengers perhaps a million or so. The plane was totally stocked with bees, boxes of honeybees. There was an aisle down the center and there was honeybees all over, we had about as many on the outside as we did on the inside.

11. "Heroes of the Horizon" by Gerry Bruder mentions an incident of a forced landing of a Seabee in 1949 due to a cut oil line could you expound on this?

It was just by accident that I noticed. You don't realize how much you watch for things. I had just taken off from Juneau and was heading somewhere down towards Petersburg and just got out over rough water and the gauge started flickering and I immediately turned around for a place to land and landed behind Marmot Island. And what it was is that the mechanic the night before for some reason got playing with the prop took it off and there was some oil rings that where delicate. When it was put back on there was a hunk taken out of it so the oil pressure went right on by. The prop was out back so I didn't know it. By then it was all covered with oil. When I called in and told them it was the prop the mechanic guy knew what had happened brought out a new seal. It took about ten miles to totally lose all oil pressure. Actually this is quite common with Seabee. In fact later they put a mirror on the strut so you can see the oil. The prop was a problem and the diaphragm on the fuel pump would leak and suck engine oil overboard.

12. At what point did you begin working for Fish and Wildlife and what did your job entitle?

February 1953 and I always wanted to work for them. I was a mechanic the first six months and worked into a pilot. In those days all pilots were pilots/mechanics with the Fish and Wildlife. The first years of being checked out in a Widgeon, I was looking in my log book and was checked out in a Goose in March in '55. I was more like a taxi driver, a bus driver, doing survey work, taking guys with me-I always had guys with me. A surveyor or game wardens, interesting trips taking people down checking restaurants for selling wild game illegally. We would catch goats in Homer put them on PMA and keep them in cages and fly them down to Prince Wales Island or Baranof Island rather. And I guess there is quite a population of them now but it was pretty sad, we would lose about two-thirds of them. They would just die. One died right in my arms. I picked him up from the airplane and packed him up in the woods. He gave a couple of baas and he was dead. It was just the trauma of people dealing with them. They were tranquilized and that might have been a problem too. I worked on a sea otter transplant too and it was with the state in '65. And we would take ten sea otters on a trap, and each one was in a pen. The first trip we took was down to Pelican, we lost about 3/4 of them. We would tranquilize them, put them in a box, and about two hours later we would drop them off. It was a lot of loss, it was pretty sad. I didn't take long to figure out what we were doing wrong-we weren't putting water on them. What they were saying at that time is that they were afraid to get their fur wet because you might mat it. It's not true and we developed the first successful transplant of sea otter. You get really involved with some of these projects. Catching fisherman on Bristol Bay is kind of an interesting one. Some real bandits, we would play a cat and mouse game with them. Those guys knew, they had been at it longer than I had by far. One fourth of July I caught forty of them out there. The fog started lifting and they were all above the line, in illegal water. We flew low enough and caught forty of them. We got convictions on all but two of them and a year later they went to court with their fee lawyer and we had a typical dimwitted district attorneys who just came out of law school who didn't know their fronts from their backs and we lost that one. We won most of them. It wasn't a case of trying to persecute anybody, they were in

the wrong, it was illegal and that's it! But the damned attorneys can make it look like you don't know what you're talking about. How do you know your compass was right? I don't need a god damned compass. Well you're suppose to have a compass-oh boy! Then he'd ask the fisherman, "how does your compass work?" "Well it hasn't worked for five years-I don't know"? You can't prove he was in that area. I know he was, I can see the gol darn markers!

They weaseled their way out of these.

They sure did.

13. When were you employed by the Bureau of Land Management and what was your job description?

Two years. I flew fire fighters, and pile in four or five of these guys and all their gear, man, they fill up the goose. Then we take them out over the fire and they always had a jumpmaster to tell me where he wanted me to be, what minimum speed and altitude and I'd do it and out they would go. Usually about 1500 feet any lower than that then there could be trouble. It was hilly country it wasn't like dropping them in the flat. In Fairbanks we used to practice on the flat and it was a piece of cake. But when you get out in the real life it's mountainous and they'll want to get on a certain ridge. The jumpmaster he is a pretty smart guy and you just do what he tells you. It is not as dangerous as down in America because up here its just brush-no timber. I don't remember us ever losing any smokejumpers on the ground or in the air. There was another thing I got involved with Cadastral Engineers- we called them catastrophic engineers. They do surveys of all the country up there. I would fly these guys around to all the lakes, and rivers and all over. Again it was sort of like a glorified cab driver-with a hell of a nice airplane and all the gas I could put in.

14. Were you an advocate of Alaska statehood and what was your attitude towards Alaska's treatment by the Federal government while it was a territory?

In my opinion Alaska has always been well treated by the Federal Government. I voted against statehood in 1959 while I was in

Bettles searching for my boss Clarence Rhodes who was found 21 years later. My dad voted for statehood-so we cancelled each other's vote! I don't know, I didn't think we were ready for it but who knows really looking back it was stupid for me to ever vote against it because it's here and going to happen. The federal government has always babysat Alaska in my opinion. We've got welfare, native support and so many federally sponsored programs to keep everyone alive in Alaska. I always kind of thought B.L.M.'s job was just to give Alaska money. We fought fires that were so stupid. We fought one northeast of Fort Yukon for about three weeks then they decided to pull off it. Well we didn't have any other fires so what the hell let's go back on that fire and put it out. Well we went back on that fire for about a month and pitted with it and I flew the last crews out of there and there were still fires perking up, but there was nothing to burn, nothing but muskeg. Northeast seventy-five we called it. Fires were always identified by their location from a known point. Like Fairbanks northwest 10 be out there in the foothills or Fairbanks south 20 and that fire cost a bundle of money. to supply it, and take guys in, and feed them and we needed a warehouse and they wasted so much money on that stupid fire then a warehouse would have cost.

But they kept you employed and gave you a nice aircraft. Right, yep! You look at it right and it was a total waste but I had a nice job, nice equipment, but F.A.A was a little different. There was really something there to do, maintain the airway facility, make sure that they're working properly. Nowadays you don't even need to worry about it they have equipment that is so much superior to what we had. What the ground people did in those days now we do flight check as a formality. On those days we had to keep on top of it.

15. Where were you residing and what were you doing when the 1964 earthquake struck?

Oh, right in the middle of it we was in Turnagain, I was in Marstin Drive, one of the areas that we all got 100% destroyed. I got a lot of tax money back from that. In previous years I paid pretty good in taxes so I lived for about a year in tax returns. I was at Merrill Field working and my family was in the house when it started shaking but I had a friend Ray Luse who was visiting and he was

going out hunting but thank God he was there because as soon as it started shaking, he was in the living room with the kids and said, "Come on kids let's get the hell out of here!" and they went out the back door. Luckily the front end went down but the back end stayed up. It opened up like a plowed field and the whole house fell into it. Which is the best thing that could have happened to one of Wally Hickel's motions. Here's one of Wally Hickel's million dollar deals-a piece of junk for a house.

16. Heroes of the Horizon mentions a scouring search for Clarence Rhodes. Could you please tell your personal involvement?

I was down in King Salmon when it started. It was Saturday he and a guy named Stan Swanson, Dan Fredrickson, and his son went up to set out some caches because he was going to take the Department of the Interior chief for a tour of the country up there. And they just dropped off the map one day. He left Peter's Lake, spent the night there and never showed up again. So by Monday morning they called everywhere, Sunday they were searching or sort of casually up there. By Monday they called an official search and boy that was a big one. We had the military PC-4's flying the whole North Slope, checking weather and telling everyone what it was like, and it was good weather-really it was nice weather. I didn't get in until Wednesday or Thursday came in from King Salmon they called me in with the Goose. And I search but I never did search where he was ultimately found.

Bruder's book said you were flying in the vicinity.

One day we were just south of it, we were flying out of Hewes, no Fort Yukon. We were probably 30 or 40 miles away from it, we flew in sectors that we were assigned. I don't know who had the sector north of us but from the pictures I saw nobody would have seen it anyway. Cause it was burned completely, they might have made scorched ground but it was out in the open tundra and there was nothing there to see-nothing sticking up. The picture I saw the biggest thing you could see was the wheels of the airplane. It was 1958 and the plane wasn't found until 21 years later.

17. Gerry Bruder's book also tells of an exciting night that you spent in Kachemak Bay. Could you expound on this story?

Yes, I was stuck in the mud and there was a rock stuck in my brake was the biggest part. The wheel wouldn't turn so it just kept burying in the mud. So I waited until the tide came back in then I pulled the gear up and at midnight I called the flight service and said, "I'm gonna land in the lake down there 'cause I don't dare land on the runway or this rock that is locking my brake up might put me on my back. So the flight service guys said that they would get some cars down there and light it up for you. So several people went down there and lighted up the road across the end of the lake. That's what I needed to know is where when I crossed over there to make sure I didn't run onto land. Landing in the water is no problem but I don't want to land on the hard ground. So I landed there and pulled up in the muskeg and them and said, "Call you in a few hours, I'm sleeping-I'm going to sleep for awhile!" So the next morning when it got daylight, I got the rock out of there fired it up and got back on the runway. Just one of those deals, one more little problem would have been something.

You were a little bit tired after that whole ordeal?

Ya, it was 4:00 in the morning when I finally got it off. The wind was blowing and I had to keep nuzzled into the beach and there wasn't anything I could do so I finally took off in the dark right at an island but there was a good strong wind and I knew soon after I took off I could roll it over to the left and get the hell out of there. It was one of those incidences where if one more little thing had gone wrong it could have been a tragic situation. But no one was with me but that was part of the problem. I was all alone and if I would have had one more person with me they could have gotten out of the airplane I could put it up on the beach but I had to keep the power on to hold it there. And I tired once to get out of there and I punched a hole in the float and that was another thing that didn't help it any. The left float was full of water, as soon as I could get it out of the water it would all leak out, but I still had too much in it. It weighted the left wing down and made it uncomfortable. It was interesting, nothing ever happened to it and nothing ever became of it but potentially it could have. I think back-how lucky I was.

18. When were you hired by the F.A.A. and what types of aircraft were you flying?

December 5, 1965 I was flying for the Fish and Game-Gooses and Cubs and whatever they had. In September someone asked if I wanted to go with the FAA and I said, "Ya"! I had my name in there since 1960, I'm ready! I had a governmental rating with Fish and Wildlife and BLM. G.S. I was no problem getting me in the system I was already in it. Finding an opening was the big problem. Quit the Fish and Game and had to read up on the DC-3. I flew DC-3 and C-123 and other little ones for charters -Cessna's, 402, Aerocommander and Moony's. The Moony was flown to see if the radar could pick it up because it was a small aircraft and it was a metal one not a wooden one.

Now the C-123 was a military aircraft right?

Yes, it was given to the FAA in 1956 because they needed something they could haul equipment into the bush with and DC-3's couldn't do it-didn't have room. Somehow between the fact that we had Jack Jefford in Alaska and one of his best buddies back in Washington they put the deal together, to buy the 123 or just have it signed to the FAA. We wore it out, well didn't wear it out-it's still going. I put about 5,000 hours on it

19. Now you worked pretty close with Jack Jefford who was a long time pilot and employee with the FAA and wrote the book "Winging It"?

Ya, sure did. He was my big brother, I used to go visit him every weekend. The weekend he died he just got back from fishing down in Yakutat. When he got home he put his gear away and when he got to the top of the stairs he fell over he was having an aneurism and died

20. When did you retire from the FAA and how old were you at the time?

August, 1979. I retired on medical, not on age. I didn't have my thirty years, in fact I was only 54 at the time. But with the arthritis they decided that we got to let him go, so away I went.

21. In what aircraft have you logged the most hours and under whom were you employed when you were flying this aircraft?

DC-3, cause you sit in the darn things for eight hours a day. You go to Barrow and you got a lot of in route. Did flight checking in route too. We checked airways, checked the radio, signal strength and communications and a lot of different things we could do on that in route flying. It wasn't just flying four of us up to Barrow. That was a long ways to go and Prudhoe was another long one.

22. Of all the agencies and employers you've worked for which was perhaps the most enjoyable or exciting?

Probably the Fish and Wildlife because it was the most enjoyable. BLM was alright but McCormick and I didn't get along, well we did at first but later we didn't get along. Clarence and I were always good friends and working with him was really a pleasure and it was less restrictive. The FAA was a wonderful job but I think it was more fun. At first in the FAA with all the electronics, I played with electronics anyway, and it was really kind of nice. But then the position kind of became old hat. Basically I'd say my time with Fish and Wildlife. '53 to May of '60 I quit. Statehood came along and they wanted to dump all the aviation departments-Fish and Wildlife. Later it became OES which was a combination of BLM and Park Service and Fish and Wildlife. But they went down to zelch wanting to lay us off and I said, "Hell with that I'm gonna go out and earn some fame and fortune trying to fly different airplanes.

23. What be your favorite type of aircraft that you've flown and why?

The Goose, it was so versatile and it was just kind of like my R.V. at times. Fish and Wildlife, Federal Fish and Wildlife, not Fish and Game, we were pretty loose and free. If you want to get together for a hunting or fish trip get a gang together and go. He liked the fact that the airplane was up in the hunting areas not that we were doing anything but the airplane was there just like the cops taking their cars home. Nobody knows that the cop is not sitting in his car

watching you. Just like the neighborhood they know they got the cops. And we go hunting and fishing in the old Fish and Wildlife Goose. Now you do that-you go to jail.

24. What was probably your most frightening experience flying?
Golly, I don't know, I would say there was one particular. I don't know, I can't pin one down.

Heroes of the Horizon mentions a story about you landing in a lake with some stumps and logs scattered on the lake. Ya, there's nothing scary about that-I knew they were there. That's out on Middleton Island on the east side there is a lake there its full of dead logs and they are sunk at on end and they stick up. Ya it wasn't scary it was just something you wouldn't want to do to often. I did bump one when I was taxing in but they were soft and underwater and it touched gently. I don't know, I was always chicken I didn't go so far as to scare the hell out of me! I'd go home and think it over!

25. How are you still involved in aviation?

Oh, just a little bit now. I do paperwork for mechanical work I did. Write up 337's and peddle with ultralights is the biggest thing now days. Ultralights are taking over! Right now I'm peddling with some strobes, and blinker lights for airplanes, and landing lights that alternately blink. Built up a system that doesn't eat up the battery. They've got some that are awful hard on the battery but this one I've developed is real easy on the battery and it blinks your landing lights. And I make little parts now and then but not very much anymore.

Are you more of a consultant now?

B.S.er, right! When people call me I'll tell them about something I've done or seen done. Actually I've done several things in the Gooses. I've develop landing gear, electric landing gear, that's in most of them now. Clarence came out to the hanger one day and said, "I want electric gear in that airplane, I'm tried of cranking it!" He said, "Yep, you do it!" So I peddled around and found out some outfit back east that piddled around with it and I got some of their information and I developed what 90% of the Gooses now have got. It is just an electric motor from a tail wheeler truck from a B-

17-we've got tons of them, boxes of them, cans of them. So it was an easy thing to start with and then we found a gear I could buy that goes on the shaft and run the chain, from the gear to the motor. Then I rigged up all the electric stops and everything for it. And another is that I put the first nose door on a goose that flops forward. The nose doors open sideways originally. It was a pilot in Juneau in the fifties that said, "I'd sure like to have the door open forward instead of sideways because you take the freight out from the side and it bangs on the door and bends it. The boss said, "Emitt see what you can do!" So I just got lookin' at it and rivetted two halves together, put a hinge on the front, took some screws that I had and got started. I also developed a real good fuel gauge for a PA-12. Which I made about ten of them and I got it all lined up with a place that makes the glass for me and another place that does the engraving and nobody buys them anymore. I sold about ten of them-it's a real good gauge, better than a PA and Supercub gauge.

I appreciate this wonderful opportunity to learn about your adventurous life. Thank you for your time in sharing your unique and exciting experiences.