



Alaska's First Bush Pilots, 1923-30: And The Winter In Siberia For Eielson and Borland

Jim Rearden

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This book follows the careers of Alaska's pioneering pilots, who, with cranky open-cockpit biplanes, started the great change in Alaska's way of travel. Aviation first arrived at Fairbanks, the trade center of mainland Alaska, from which dog sled trails spider-web to mines, villages, and trap-lines. During winters, goods and people traveled mostly by dog sled.

During the summer of 1923 Ben Eielson was the first to fly commercially from Fairbanks, ferrying passengers and light freight with an open cockpit Jenny (JN4) biplane. It was the beginning of the leap from ground travel to the air.

Noel Wien was the next. In the summers of 1924-26 he flew open cockpit biplanes from Fairbanks. Starting in 1927, he flew a cabin biplane year-around on scheduled flights in the 579 miles between Fairbanks and Nome.

In March, 1929, Wien flew from Alaska to the Elisif, an ice-locked trading schooner in Siberia, to return with a load of valuable furs. In the following November, Ben Eielson repeated this flight to the Nanuk, another ice-bound trading schooner in Siberia. And when he and his mechanic, Earl Borland returned for a second load of Siberian fur, their Hamilton airplane disappeared in a winter snowstorm. This brought on one of the most famous, and difficult aerial searches ever made from and in Alaska.

By the 1930s, Alaska's growing aviation industry had revolutionized transportation in the Territory. This volume is a fond look back at the triumphs and tragedies of the pioneering Ben Eielson, Noel Wien, Harold Gillam, Joe Crosson, Ed Young, and others, the great pilots who were the first bush pilots of Alaska.

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