

This is the story of the Smith - Bronte flight. It was the second trans-Pacific flight from Oakland, California, to the Hawaiian Islands, July 14 and 15, 1927, shortly after the first successful flight of Lieutenants Maitland and Hegenberger, of the United States Air Corps, and a month prior to the ill-fated Dole flight. *It was the first civilian flight. + this was written by Emory Brannen Bronte. the navigator, June 9, 1936.*

TO PARADISE BY AIR

It is significant that the aerial route from California to Hawaii has been successfully negotiated on only 5 occasions, whereas both the north and south Atlantic Oceans have been flown often during the past few years.

The great circle distance from San Francisco to Honolulu is 2,408 statute miles across the open Pacific, not particularly far in this day of unfailing motors and non-stop flights in the neighborhood of 6,000 miles. However, in addition to the danger of flying over water there is a navigational hazard which causes the most audacious pilots and aerial navigators much thoughtful hesitation when contemplating this flight.

True, the lure of the enchanting Paradise of the Pacific, with its warm sun and gentle breezes, its color, beauty, and friendly hospitable inhabitants is hard to resist; but even the promise of its joys does not justify the risk of missing so minute an objective due to some small error in navigation. On the map of the world, the Hawaiian Islands are represented by a number of dots. Actually, they consist of a group of eight islands extending east and west for a distance of approximately 300 miles. The slightest divergence in the course of a plane flying from the mainland is sufficient to carry it unknowingly past this relatively small mark in mid-Pacific. The fear of such a possibility has clutched at the hearts of all who have undertaken this venturesome feat, and well I know whereof I speak.

After a false start aborted when the plane ground looped on the dirt runway, the Travelair Monoplane, "City of Oakland," rose laboriously from the Oakland Municipal Airport at 10:25 o'clock on the morning of July 14, 1927, bound for Honolulu, Territory of Hawaii. That sterling gentlemen and peerless pilot, Captain Ernest L. Smith, Air Corps Reserve, sat at the flying controls in an open cockpit behind the engine and I plotted the course in the Navigator's Compartment, aft of the gasoline tanks in the rear of the plane. We communicated by means of a small clothesline to which we clipped notes with clothespins. It was a primitive but adequate system. Large metal funnels attached to short lengths of hose which extended through the floor in each cockpit were our toilets.

The plane was powered with a Wright Whirlwind Engine and its tanks filled with 370 gallons of gasoline, sufficient, we figured for possibly 30 hours flying, if necessary. At an average speed of 90 miles per hour, we were hopeful of reaching our objective in less than 27 hours.

Appreciating to the fullest extent the need for accurate navigation, we had on board a short wave radio transmitter and receiver, principally that we might avail ourselves of the Army Radio Beacon connecting the stations at the Presidio of San Francisco and Paia, a village on the island of Maui. We were further equipped with the necessary charts, parallel rulers, dividers, three liquid magnetic compasses, a sextant, chronometer, and the usual books of navigation tables. We also carried 2 pairs of homing pigeons sent to us by the Sperry Flour Company.

Stowed between two of the large gasoline fuel tanks was our pneumatic rubber life boat, deflated and folded, with its paddles. Our food supply consisting of a box of sandwiches, two bottles of milk and a thermos bottle of coffee, had been conveniently placed close at hand on top of one of the tanks.

A blanket of fog 2,000 feet thick obscured the western portion of San Francisco Bay and leaving Oakland Airport astern, we decided to fly above it in order to enjoy the advantage of the perfect visibility to be had by so doing.

Ernie had now set the plane on our course, and I had unreeled the radio antenna. This was held beneath the plane for a distance of 150 feet by a leaden weight attached to its end. The Radio Beacon was then tuned in, its signal letter T, a long dash, sounding very strong and indicating that we were exactly on the correct course. The peace of mind thus created was short lived, however; for two hours later without warning our reception suddenly ceased due to the complete collapse of the coils of extremely light wire in the diaphragms of both ear-phones. At this point two of the pigeons were released carrying our position report.

Our navigation problem had now become extremely serious, for without the priceless guidance of the radio beacon, everything depended upon the accuracy with which we could steer our course, and my ability to correctly check our position from time to time by sextant observations of the heavenly bodies. However, it was still possible to transmit messages and at hourly intervals we would send out our latitude and longitude, with some additional cheering word regarding our progress.

Ernie was flying as never before, steering a course that seldom varied over 2 degrees, and then for only an occasional instant when his attention was occupied with nursing the engine in order to develop the most economical cruising speed.

As the afternoon wore on, the fog became a source of considerable concern. Upon closer scrutiny of our weather report, we noticed that it was expected to extend for only 500 miles off the coast; but we were now far beyond that point, and still nothing but fog could be seen as far as eye could reach in every direction. Altho flying over the greatest ocean in the world, we had not as yet glimpsed it.

The sun slowly disappeared behind the western horizon. We had eaten nothing since early morning, and in fact, during the entire day, thoughts of food had not entered our minds. Now that we were well on our way and had settled down to a somewhat steady routine, the angry cries of our ravenous appetites could no longer be ignored, and we devoured two sandwiches apiece, washing them down with part of our milk supply.

The last rays of daylight faded quickly, and after two hours of darkness, the beautiful full moon, which we were depending upon to help brighten our route, rose gloriously in the east, lighting the sky overhead, the fog beneath us, and even the interior of our plane, almost as though it were broad daylight. It is impossible to describe the utter beauty of this part of the flight, or the awe with which it inspired us. We realized, possibly for the first time, the insignificance of man in the scheme of the universe.

I kept an eye constantly on our master compass, changing the course a few degrees to the south every three or four hundred miles, in order that it might conform as closely as possible to the great circle route between San Francisco and Honolulu. Observations of Polaris and other stars to determine compass error, latitude and longitude, also kept me busily engaged.

We were now roaring smoothly along without lights in the plane, the brightness of the moon making them unnecessary. Ernie even had extinguished the lights on his instrument board and was steering the course by a bright star ahead. He would frequently switch on his compass light for a moment to make sure that the star coincided with the course which we desired to steer, and the accuracy with which he managed was remarkable.

Midnight came, and with it an overpowering drowsiness, which we fought off with mental pictures of the hidden angry sea thousands of feet below us under the fog, and with the help of a bottle of aromatic spirits of ammonia. At about 4 o'clock in the morning, we received a shock, however, which completely ended our lethargic inclinations and set our nerves atingle with fear. The motor, without warning suddenly sputtered and stopped!

Galvanized into lightning-like action, Ernie switched the gasoline control from the tank upon which the engine had been feeding, to the gravity tank, and commenced pumping desperately with the hand pressure pump. There was nothing I could do but hope and pray that his efforts would be successful, and in a moment the engine returned to life with a mighty roar. This was our first intimation that we were running short of fuel. I scribbled a hasty note asking Ernie how much gasoline remained and he replied that we could continue for about 4 hours.

We were flying at an average speed of approximately 100 miles per hour, and with the quantity of fuel remaining, could probably continue for 400 miles. Upon anxious reference to the chart, I realized that the situation had become extremely precarious, as we were then 500 miles from the nearest land in the Hawaiian Group, the Island of Maui. It was with tremendous reluctance that I informed Ernie of our plight, but he merely smiled, shrugged his shoulders and continued steering a perfect course.

Opening our radio transmitter, I sent a message to all ship and shore stations, advising of our predicament and stating that we expected to be forced down in the sea approximately 100 miles from the coast of Maui. The message also requested that ships near that vicinity be on the look-out for us. Position reports were attached to the two remaining pigeons and they were released. When last seen they were heading for California 2000 miles to the east.

Our pneumatic life boat was the source of but little comfort at this time, for neither of us had much faith in its ability to weather the huge Pacific swells. True, it had been thoroughly tested for seaworthiness in the placid waters of Lake Merritt, Oakland, prior to the takeoff, but its life saving capabilities there could hardly be likened to the conditions which would be encountered on the turbulent surface of the shark-infested sea.

About an hour later, the moon commenced setting in the west, as a faint gray light on the eastern horizon indicated the approach of dawn. We noticed with great relief that the fog had disappeared and that we now were flying above broken cumulus clouds. For the first time, we gazed upon the waters of the Pacific, 6000 feet below.

After what seemed an interminable period, the sun rose in all its warmth and splendor, and we then dove down through the clouds to an altitude close above the surface of the sea, in the hope of sighting a ship. This search was unavailing. Nothing but blue water was to be seen as we flew on, now at an altitude of only 100 feet. My eyes glued to our powerful binoculars, swept the horizon anxiously again and again.

In the meantime, our radio antenna, trailing below the plane, had been completely forgotten; and when an attempt was again made to send our latest position, I discovered that the leaden weight on the end of the antenna had apparently struck a wave, causing the wire to snap off just below the fuselage. Now our dismay was heightened by the fact that the radio was entirely useless.

We were on the verge of despair, expecting at any moment to hear the starved choking of the motor sound our doom. Every resource seemed exhausted and we could only await as calmly as possible what seemed to be the inevitable conclusion to our flight.

Our calculations now placed us less than 100 miles from the Island of Maui, and the decision was made to fly above the cloud layer once more, in the hope of sighting one of the several tall island mountain peaks. We climbed slowly, conserving our fuel, to an altitude of 8000 feet. Through the binoculars, I studied the horizon above the clouds, as Ernie grimly continued flying an unwavering course.

No land was in sight. My eyes were weary from the strain of seeking it in a world consisting of apparently only sea, clouds and sky. Soon, several dark clouds appeared in the distance ahead, and upon anxious investigation one was selected which appeared to have a more permanent outline than the others. After watching it for several minutes, my doubting senses were joyfully convinced that it was actually a mountain peak piercing the clouds. We altered our course slightly to the south, and headed towards it.

Soon we sighted another smaller peak to the north of the first one. A study of the chart told us that the large mountain was Mauna Kea, rising to a height of nearly 14,000 feet above the Island of Hawaii; the smaller, Haleakala, 10,000 feet high, on the Island of Maui. Quickly changing the course again, we sped towards Haleakala, the motor roaring sweetly even though, according to our reckoning, the gasoline supply should long since have been consumed; and ere long we were within gliding distance of Maui's shores.

The soft beauty of the island, spread out beneath us, with its cane fields, waving palms, and thatched huts, brought to us, as we sought a suitable field upon which to land, a sensation of intense relief and joy. The beach was too steep and narrow, and although a landing could have been effected in one of the fields of sugar cane with probable safety to ourselves, the plane undoubtedly would have been badly damaged.

Wheeler Field, the Army Airdrome near Honolulu on the Island of Oahu, and our ultimate goal, lay 90 miles away in an air line. Less than 15 gallons of fuel would carry us over the remaining distance; and though we know that our gasoline supply must now be nearly exhausted, the engine was still functioning perfectly, and the decision to continue was quickly made.

Pailolo Channel, separating Maui and Molokai, was rapidly crossed and as we skirted the southern coast of the latter island, Oahu became visible in the distance. Flying at an altitude of 500 feet, in safe gliding distance of the shore $\frac{1}{3}$ the length of Molokai had been left astern.

Then, for the second time, the motor sputtered! Ernie's hand flashed to the pressure pump. The motor roared again, but for a second only, sputtered once—stopped! The last drop of gasoline was gone.

Looking below, the sight of jagged coral reefs warned Ernie that a landing upon the surface of the water would be disastrous. His eyes darted shoreward. No soft sandy beach was visible, as the tide was high; but the shore was lined with a luxuriant growth of heavy bushes and small trees.

Without a moment of indecision, he banked the plane sharply to the right, pulling its nose slowly up as we settled into the trees with a terrific tearing and crackling noise. We had landed, the impact throwing Ernie forward against his instrument board. I lay in a heap, wedged up against a gasoline tank.

Fortunately we were both unhurt, but as we climbed from the plane one glance told us that it was badly wrecked. The left wing was torn off, the other damaged beyond repair and the fuselage was broken in half just back of my cock-pit. Glancing at my watch, I noticed that it was 11:27 a.m. Pacific time. We had been in the air for 25 hours and 2 minutes.

Of all the islands in the Hawaiian group, we had landed on the one we considered the least desirable, erroneously believing, at the time, that the entire island was a leper settlement. While investigating the extent of the damage to the plane, we were startled by the sound of low voices close at hand. Looking up, we saw, in a road nearby, half a dozen natives curiously watching us. They had been drawn to the spot by the sound of the crash.

Having in mind the possibility of their being victims of the dread leprosy, we approached them warily. Then Ernie, throwing all caution aside, asked for a cigarette. I begged him to be careful, warning that they were probably lepers, but he said he would have to risk it, being unable to wait any longer for a smoke. The native nearest me then smilingly assured us that the leper colony was located miles away on the north coast of the island, and that we had nothing to fear.

We then asked the location of the nearest radio station, being impatient to send word to Honolulu of our safe arrival. It was in Kaunakakai, several miles distant.

One of the natives disappeared, returning shortly driving a terribly dilapidated and very ancient Ford truck. Climbing into the driver's seat beside him, we bounced toward Kaunakakai over one of the roughest roads in the world, but we agreed that no automobile ride had ever been so thoroughly enjoyable.

At the radio station, an excited Chinese operator greeted us, and soon the news of our safety was being flashed to a world that had almost ceased to hope. Later, a message was received from the Commanding General at Honolulu, advising that a squadron of army DeHaviland observation planes was enroute to Molokai, and that we should return to Wheeler Field with them.

Escorted by a friendly crowd in a varied assortment of automobiles, we departed for the landing field, a large pasture close by, where the Army planes were already waiting. Soon we were in the air again, waving Aloha to our Molokai friends as the squadron circled the field.

The crossing to Oahu was quickly made, Diamond Head and Honolulu flashed by beneath, and shortly the Squadron landed at Wheeler Field.

Now, after the passage of 5 years, the warmth of the welcome accorded us in Hawaii can still be felt, and we dream of the day when we shall return.

Peering into the future, we see huge flying boats engaged in safe, swift commerce over the air trail that we blazed in the tiny "City of Oakland" to the Paradise of the Pacific.

NOTE: Commander Emory B. Bronte, USNR (Ret.) has resided in Hawaii since 1946. His home at the present time is at Alaeloa, Maui, 8 miles north of Lahaina and directly across Pailolo Channel from the site of the landing described herein.

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Mr. and Mrs. Bronte moved to the Colony Surf Hotel in Honolulu in 1970, on the beach, opposite to Kapiolani Park. Mrs. Bronte continues to make that her home. -7-