

CARL "BEN" EIELSON
The Father of Alaskan Aviation
1897-1929



Anchorage Museum of History & Art. Library & Archives.

Collection Name:



Identifier:



Title:



Description:

[AMHA. General Photograph File](#)

[AMHA-b75-134-207](#)

[Carl Benjamin Eielson.](#)

[Portrait of Carl Ben Eielson, Alaska aviator.](#) From [verso](#): "[Carl Ben Eilson \[sic\]. Property of Cook Inlet Historical Society.](#)" [n.d.](#)

[Original photograph size: 7 3/4" x 5 5/8".](#)

*Don't be a show-off. Never be too proud to turn back. There are old pilots
and bold pilots, but no old, bold pilots.*

— E. Hamilton Lee, 1949

More about Ben Eielson:

The history of pioneer aviation in Alaska may be wrapped in the gauze of romance today, but in the early 20th century, the skies were the domain of the daring, the ambitious, the adrenaline addicts, or perhaps those who were simply reckless.

Exploring the polar skies, as dangerous as it was, also brought out the best in some men, as it did with Carl Ben Eielson, who became world-famous before his final flight at age thirty-two.

Originally from Hatton, North Dakota, Eielson was the son of Norwegian immigrants, born July 20, 1897, and already reaching for the skies simply by advancing his education. He was one of eight children and fourteen years old when his mother died in 1911. While his father, Ole, did not remarry, Ben's eldest sister took over running the household and made sacrifices so that her younger siblings could go to college.

Eielson attended University of North Dakota then the University of Wisconsin. He intended to go into law, but soon he would discover that aviation was his one true passion. It began in 1917, when Eielson quit school to enlist in the Army Air Service. He began pilot training just fourteen years after the Wright brothers' first flight.

In 1921, after military service and a stint working in his father's store, Eielson bought a Jenny and took up barnstorming, then experienced his first crash landing. Whether by his own choice or his father's, shortly afterward Eielson went back to college then entered law school at Georgetown University. During his first year, however, he met an Alaskan who helped arrange a teaching job at the Fairbanks high school. He would start in the fall of 1922.

As with law, however, teaching wasn't Eielson's long-term career choice. Once he saw the potential for aviation in the vast territory, he conceived of a flying venture and with the support of Fairbanks businessmen, such as W. F. Thompson, he persuaded investors to buy him a Jenny for his one-plane fleet. In the spring of 1923, he was the sole pilot of the Farthest North Airplane Company. Within months, he had his first brush with fame as he performed an aerial exhibition for President Warren G. Harding, who was touring the territory that summer.

The new airplane company transported passengers, freight, and doctors into rural areas. Before long, Eielson also received the mail contract for delivery between Fairbanks and McGrath, a job that traditionally belonged to dogsled carriers. Eielson offered to do it for half the cost, and the federal government contracted with him for \$2 per pound of mail on the three-hundred-mile route. The first flight on February 21, 1924, was successful in an open cockpit DeHavilland, but postal officials were ever concerned about

safety issues, and after mere months, they withdrew the contract with when he crash-landed that May.

“Of over two hundred pilots hired between 1918 and 1926, thirty-five died flying the mail,” says the National Postal Museum website. “The service gained an ominous nickname among the nation’s aviators as a ‘suicide club’ for flyers.”

Still, the mail delivery route landed Eielson in Alaska’s record books as the first to fly an Alaskan airmail route. Many other firsts would follow, including first to land on an ice floe, and first to fly airmail from Atlanta to Jacksonville, Florida. One of the most astounding firsts, still ahead, was Eielson’s flight over the North Pole, a feat that earned him international recognition.

In June 1924, Eielson took a job with the Bennett-Rodebaugh Airplane Transportation Company and his reputation continued to grow. When famed explorer George Hubert Wilkins was enquiring about candidates to join his upcoming expedition, his friend Vilhjalmur Stefansson advanced Eielson’s name.

In April 1927, Eielson and Wilkins made an exploratory flight over the Arctic Ocean, an adventure that ended prematurely when they were forced to make several emergency landings and finally abandon the Stinson on Beechey Point. The pair had been given up for dead when they staggered into a village two weeks later, having traveled 125 miles on foot. Eielson lost a frostbitten finger to amputation after the ordeal.

A year later in April 1928, with financial backing from the *Detroit News*, the pair took off in a Lockheed Vega and flew nonstop over the Arctic Ocean from Barrow, Alaska, to Spitzbergen, Norway, a 2,200-mile route. And in late 1928 and early 1929, on the Wilkins-Hearst Antarctic Expedition, Eielson was the first to fly over both the Arctic and the Antarctic regions, piloting the same Lockheed Vega that had taken him to Norway.

While still a young man, Eielson was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for his North Pole crossing, and in 1929, President Herbert Hoover presented him with an international award, the Harmon Trophy. Also in 1929, he received a colonel’s commission in the National Guard at Grand Forks, North Dakota.

Eielson had gained international fame and had shaken hands with leaders of countries all over Europe. He and Wilkins had been feted in New York, and newspapers

across the country boasted of their heroic explorations. But in 1929, while at his peak, Eielson would die in Siberia during a rescue mission. He was thirty-two.

That fall, the ship *Nanuk* was caught in the ice at Cape North, Siberia, with fifteen passengers and six tons of furs; Eielson and his mechanic Earl Borland were hired to ferry the people and cargo back to Teller on the Seward Peninsula. On November 9, 1929, having completed one trip successfully, Eielson's plane went down due to weather conditions and perhaps a faulty altimeter, killing both men. The crash site was in Siberia about 250 miles northwest of Teller.

Following a massive search effort, the site was located seventy-seven days later. After another twenty-four days, on February 18, 1930, the bodies of Eielson and Borland were recovered, shrouded in American flags, and returned to the United States. Hundreds of mourners attended his March 27 funeral in Hatton, and he was buried in the local cemetery, which was renamed the Carl Ben Eielson Memorial Cemetery. According to the Hatton-Eielson Museum, other family members who were buried elsewhere were later relocated to the Eielson plot.

According to one North Dakota historian, "Norwegian-Americans particularly lionized Eielson. A commemorative booklet published in Hatton in 1930 said he was 'endowed with a certain spirit of romance and adventure, so typical of a true son of a Viking.' Likewise, North Dakotans counted Eielson a hero and a sort of Nordic martyr."

Fairbanksans likewise honored their hometown hero. Members of the American Legion and Fairbanks Commercial Club first met in June 1930 to decide on an appropriate memorial and to begin fundraising. Ideas included a clock tower, a swimming pool, a student loan fund or a chair of aeronautical engineering chair at the college, or a public school. Ultimately, the Eielson Memorial Building was constructed in his honor on the campus of the Alaska Agricultural College and School of Mines. In later years, a local junior-senior high school also was named for Eielson, a memory of the teaching career that was never pursued: And outside of Fairbanks, Eielson Air Force Base was dedicated on March 20, 1956. Back in Hatton, North Dakota, Eielson's boyhood home has been a museum since 1976, and another school was named for Eielson in Fargo, North Dakota.

Nearly fifty years after his death, in 1985, Carl Ben Eielson was enshrined in the National Aviation Hall of Fame. Remnants of Eielson's ill-fated plane, a Hamilton

Metalplane, remained in Russia until return in the early 1990s, and are today in the collections of museums in Alaska and North Dakota.

Today the Alaska Aviation Heritage Museum at 4721 Aircraft Drive, near Anchorage's Lake Hood, holds important articles in its Eielson collection, including movie footage of the aviator and his Hamilton in Siberia, his fur parka and inscribed gold watch, salvaged pieces of the Hamilton including its twisted propeller, and the flag that shrouded Eielson's body when it was recovered and returned to the U.S., another American hero who died too young.

LINKS:

Ben Eielson bio by Thomas H. Smith, first published in *Grand Forks Herald*:

www.northstar.k12.ak.us/schools/beh/namesake/namesake.html



Hatton-Eielson Museum, North Dakota:

www.eielson.org



University of Alaska Stories, Carl Ben Eielson:

www.alaska.edu/opa/eInfo/index.xml?StoryID=276

Alaska Aviation Heritage Museum, Anchorage:

<http://home.gci.net/~aahm/>

National Aviation Hall of Fame:

http://nationalaviation.blade6.donet.com/components/content_manager_v02/view_nahf/htdocs/menu_ps.asp?NodeID=1005983888&group_ID=1134656385&Parent_ID=-1

Visit the library for more information:

Alaska's libraries include audio, visual, and written material about Carl Ben Eielson and the early history of Alaska aviation. Visit your local library or go online to see what's available in holdings all over the state. Take these simple steps:

1. Access **SLED** (State Library Electronic Doorway) at <http://sled.alaska.edu/library.html>.
2. Click on the listing for **ALNCat** (the Alaska Library Network Catalog) to view the Basic Search window.

Go to the Keyword field, and type in **CARL BEN EIELSON**.

More Reading:

Gleason, Robert J. *Icebound in the Siberian Arctic: The Story of the Last Cruise of the Fur Schooner Nanuk and the International Search for Famous Arctic Pilot Carl Ben Eielson*. Anchorage: Alaska Northwest Publishing Co., 1977.

Mondor, Colleen Catherine. *Just One More Dead Pilot: An Exploration of the Causes of Pilot Error Accidents among Alaskan Air Taxi Operators*. Thesis/dissertation, 1999

Page, Dorothy G. *Polar Pilot: The Carl Ben Eielson Story*. Danville, Ill.: Intersstate Publishers, 1992.

For juvenile readers:





Chandler, Edna Walker and Barrett Willoughby. *Alaska Skies: The Story of Ben Eielson*. Boston: Ginn, 1959.

Herron, Edward A. *Wings over Alaska: The Story of Carl Ben Eielson*. New York: J. Messner, 1959.

More photos:



Archives, University of Alaska, Fairbanks

	Collection Name:	Edward Lewis Bartlett Papers, 1938-1970
	Identifier:	UAF-1969-95-464
	Title:	First experimental mail flight
	Description:	Title taken from verso . Photograph of the open cockpit biplane , mounted on skis . Verso : first experimental mail flights Fairbanks to McGrath made by Col. Carl Ben Eielson . Ship is 400 h.p. 12 cylinder water cooled Liberty engine DeHaviland airplane . Ben Eielson standing by cockpit of plane .



Archives, University of Alaska, Fairbanks

Collection Name:

[Historical Photograph Collection](#)
[Vertical File Photograph Collections-People](#)
[UAF-1967-44-3](#)

 **Identifier:**

 **Title:**

 **Description:**

[Eielson leaning](#) against an [airplanes wheel](#)
[Photograph](#) of [Carl Eielson leaning](#) against the [wheel](#) of an
[airplane](#).



Fairbanks Airport Cabin Plane
ready to take off with party
consisting of Gov. Parks,
Major Elliott, and Mr. Sommers

Alaska State Library - Historical Collections

Collection Name:

[George A. Parks. Photographs, 1911-1933. ASL-PCA-240](#)



Identifier:

[ASL-P240-016](#)



Title:

The [1928 Alaska Tour \(06\)](#) by [Governor George A. Parks](#), [Major Malcolm Elliott](#), [Mr. R.J. Sommers](#), [Territorial Hwy Engineer](#).



Description:

[Album caption: Fairbanks Airport Cabin Plane ready to take off with party consisting of Gov. Parks, Major Elliott, and Mr. Sommers. June 7, 1928.](#)



Creator:

[Sign in image: Bennett-Rodebaugh Co., Airplane Transportation. Parks, George A., 1883-1984](#)



Anchorage Museum of History & Art. Library & Archives.

Collection Name:



Identifier:



Title:



Description:

[AMHA. General Photograph File](#)

[AMHA-b01-27-31](#)

[Bodies](#) of [Eilson](#) [[sic](#)] and [Borland lost](#) in the [Arctic](#).

[Title taken](#) from [front](#). [Sleds carrying bodies](#) of [pilot Carl Ben Eielson](#) and [mechanic Earl Borland](#), [covered](#) with [American flags](#) and [surrounded](#) by [searchers](#). 1930. [Original photograph size: 2 3/4" x 4 1/2"](#).