

Land, Sea, Air / Aviation

The Black Wolf Squadron: Dawn of Airplanes over Alaska

By Tricia Brown

The U.S. Army Service's famed "Black Wolf Squadron" left its mark on northern history in 1920, when four biplanes passed through the Yukon and Alaska in an attempt to demonstrate the feasibility of long-distance air travel. The New York-to-Nome Alaskan Flying Expedition, as it was known, involved a squad of four airmen with crewmembers flying wheeled DH-4 de Havilland biplanes. Powered by 400-horsepower, liquid-cooled Liberty engines, the planes journeyed across the continent, from Fort Mitchell in New York to Fort Davis in Nome, and back again. The pilots left New York on July 15 and returned in triumph on October 20, completing the 9,000-mile trip in 112 air-hours, albeit spread over three grueling months.

Author Budd Davisson wrote about the difficulty of the historic flight in the June 1998 issue of *Flight Journal*. In his article, titled "Footprints in the Wilderness," Davisson wrote, "... it took the U.S. Army's Black Wolf Squadron nearly six brutal weeks to fly four de Havilland DH-4s under the command of Capt. St. Clair Streett to the mostly log-cabin community of Fairbanks, Alaska."

The de Havilland DH-4 had seen action during World War I in daytime bombing raids, and during the postwar period, beginning in 1918, it was pressed into service for flying mail. One of those DH-4s is on display at the Smithsonian Institution's Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C. According to the museum, the DH-4 was a rugged plane, "ideally suited for the task of delivering mail throughout the United States."

"Altogether, more than 200 of these DH-4Bs were used in a pioneering role by the U.S. Post office over a period of eight years," reports the Smithsonian on its Air

and Space Museum website. “After 1927, a number of air mail DH-4s were modified or rebuilt as forest fire patrol aircraft to fly long-range patrols over the expansive western wilderness. A few were transferred to the new airlines that took over the mail services in 1926-1930.”

In fact, part of the Black Wolf Squadron mission was to deliver the first airmail in Alaska. The pilot of Plane No. 4, Lt. Ross C. Kirkpatrick, air-dropped a copy of the *New York Times* in Juneau, the first mail to arrive in Alaska via air. The newspaper had to be collected from the roof of the Brunswick Hotel. Later Governor Thomas J. Riggs, Jr., sent a letter of thanks, which is included among Kirkpatrick’s collection of archival papers and photographs at the Alaska State Library.

On every leg of the journey, the airmen made history, it seemed, as the first to fly to Alaska from New York, the first to fly up Gastineau Channel, the first warplanes ever seen by many Alaskans. The sight of the World War I bombers overhead thrilled the residents of Wrangell, Juneau, Skagway, Whitehorse, Dawson, Fairbanks, Ruby, and Nome.

Considering the pioneering nature of their journey, the airmen amazingly suffered no losses and very few mishaps. At Whitehorse, pilot Lt. C. E. Crumrine blew a tire, and was forced to make temporary repairs—good enough to get him to Dawson—by wrapping rope around the wheel.

The transcontinental flight was conceived by Brig. Gen. William “Billy” Mitchell, who championed air travel in the Far North, calling Alaska the “Air Crossroads of the World,” and even predicting that Japan would one day bomb Alaska.

Mitchell knew Alaska firsthand through his service with the U.S. Army Signal Corps in 1901 and 1903. Mitchell had been sent to scope out a portion of the route for the Washington-Alaska Military Cable and Telegraph System, or WAMCATS.

By 1920, Mitchell had been promoted to Assistant Chief of the U.S. Army Air Service, later the U.S. Army Air Corps, and he was bullish on the capabilities of airplanes. His point was to prove that Alaska truly was accessible by air—by friends and enemies alike. This first military flight to Alaska marked the starting place for further aviation development, and within a few short years, pioneer aviators such as Carl Ben Eielson and Noel Wien, among others, had taken to the skies above Alaska.

In 1929, the men of the Black Wolf Squadron were awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for their historic flight.

THE CREW:

Captain St. Clair Streett

Sgt. E. Henriques

Lt. C. E. Crumrine

Lt. C. C. Nutt

Lt. E. H. Nelson

Lt. R. C. Kirkpatrick

Sgt. J. E. Long

Sgt. J. E. English

THE ROUTE:

New York City, New York

Erie, Pennsylvania

Grand Rapids, Michigan

Winona, Minnesota

Fargo, North Dakota

Portal, North Dakota

Saskatoon, Saskatchewan

Edmonton, Alberta

Jasper, Alberta

Prince George, B.C.

Wrangell, Alaska
Whitehorse, Yukon
Dawson, Yukon
Fairbanks, Alaska
Ruby, Alaska
Nome, Alaska

LINKS:

De Havilland DH-4 info, National Air and Space Museum:

http://www.nasm.si.edu/research/aero/aircraft/dehavill_dh4.htm

Elmendorf Air Force Base history:

<http://www.elmendorf.af.mil/3Wing/Units/History/Webdocs/11%20AF%20early%20history.htm>

Yukon Transportation Museum:

http://www.virtualmuseum.ca/pm.php?id=record_detail&fl=0&lg=English&ex=00000323&rd=179717&hs=0

VISIT THE LIBRARY FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Alaska's libraries hold audio, visual, and written material about the history of the Black Wolf Squadron and other early aviation in Alaska. 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 **ALASKA HISTORY AVIATION** or **BLACK WOLF SQUADRON**.

MORE READING:

McAllister, Bruce. *Wings above the Arctic: A Photographic History of Arctic Aviation*. Boulder, Colo.: Roundup Press, 2002.

Mills, Stephen E. *Arctic War Planes, Alaska Aviation of WWII: A Pictorial History of Bush Flying with the Military in the Defense of Alaska and North America*. New York: Bonanza Books, 1978.

Potter, Jean Clark. *The Flying North*. Toronto, London: Bantam, 1983, 1947.

Ruotsala, Jim. *Alaskan Wings: Aviation in Southeast Alaska. Vol. 2, The Golden Years, 1935-1946*. Juneau, Alaska: Seadrome Press, 2002.

Ruotsala, Jim. *Pilots of the Panhandle: Aviation in Southeast Alaska*. Juneau, Alaska: Seadrome Press, 1997.

Stirling, Dale A. *A Bibliography of Alaska Aviation*. Alaska: Heritage North Press, 1985.

Stirling, Dale A. *An Overview of Aviation History in Alaska: With an Emphasis on Float and Ski Plane Use*. Anchorage, AK: State of Alaska, Department of Natural Resources, 1982.

ARCHIVAL MATERIALS:

Ross C. Kirkpatrick Photograph Collection, 1920. Alaska State Library. Includes 121 black-and-white photographs and papers. Kirkpatrick was the pilot of plane No. 4 in the Black Wolf Squadron that made the historic 1920 flight. The collection includes photographs of the U.S. Army New York to Nome Flying Expedition from New York to Nome, 1920. Photographs were taken in Alaska and other locations such as Jasper Park, Canada, and Hazelton, British Columbia. Includes the flying squad, the Black Wolf Squadron and other airplanes. This collection also includes clippings from the flight and some personal certificates received by Lieutenant Kirkpatrick.

The Army in Alaska since 1867, 1867-1975. Alaska State Library. Includes 40 black-and-white and color slides, plus narrative. The collection consists of a slide show presented during the Army's 200th birthday, commemorating the 172d Infantry Brigade's 108 years of military service in Alaska. The 40 color slides include images of maps, historical illustrations and photographs accompanied by a narrative history.

Bill Frame Photograph Collection, 1912-1940. Alaska State Library. The collection of 300 black-and-white photographs contains views of tourists, automobiles, and transportation companies in Alaska in the early 20th century. Hotels, roadhouses and transportation companies, mostly in the region of the Richardson Highway (or Fairbanks-

Valdez Trail) are shown. Locations include Chitina, Paxson, Gulkana, Copper Creek, Salchaket, Sourdough, Kenny Lake, McCarty, Meiers and others. Also included are a few images of the Black Wolf Squadron. Individuals and community businesses are identified.

Wrangell Historical Society and Museum Photograph Collection, 1868-1970. Alaska State Library. Includes 830 contact prints and 181 black-and-white slides. The images in this collection from the Wrangell Historical Society include Alaska road projects, Wrangell residents and businesses, petroglyphs of Wrangell, and totem restoration. Reproductions are available from the Wrangell Historical Society.