

## Air and Space this Week

### Item of the Week

# The Roughneck Barnstormer

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[KEY WORDS: "Roughneck" "Barnstormer" "Lariat" "██████████" "██████████" "██████████"]

I had to move the Key Words list to here to maintain the suspense!

***How does a hardscrabble roughneck, a guy proficient at lariat tricks, and the improbably-named place called Utqiaġvik have anything to do with one of the most important events in aviation history? Well sit back, and let's explore that question together.***

He was the son of a cotton farmer, barely grubbing out a living on the Oklahoma prairie over a hundred years ago. He had a son, born on November 22, 1898. Like many young men of that era, his son's first exposure to aviation was a barnstorming airshow in 1913. The young man managed to finish the sixth grade in school and, in 1914, went to work at a construction company near home. When WWI came, he wanted to become an Army Air Service pilot, and joined the USAAS training facility at the University of Oklahoma. He learned a lot about the rapidly-developing field of radio communication (see previous Item on Marconi and Fessenden), but WWI ended before he could see active service.

Times were tough in Oklahoma between the Wars. Our young man couldn't make ends meet in the Oklahoma oil fields, so he tried armed robbery, but he was caught, convicted, and served over a year in the Oklahoma State Reformatory before being released in 1922.

He finally managed to get into the air in 1924, but not as a pilot. He joined the [Burrell Tibbs and His Texas Topnotch Fliers](#) outfit as a parachutist. This helped pay the bills, but he still needed work in the oilfields, and on October 1, 1926, he lost his left eye in a drilling rig accident (injuries were common back in the cable drill days). He received a small financial settlement, and used it to purchase his first airplane. It proved to be an astute investment. He had learned to fly along the way, and would make money as a free-lance pilot providing air service. One such gig involved getting a performer to a nearby rodeo. Our reformed thief and the lariat trickster, a fellow Oklahoma, became fast friends, in spite of a ~20 years age difference between them.

But it wasn't all on the up and up. Prohibition was in place, and was particularly unpopular with the Oklahoma oilfield roughnecks and roustabouts. Oklahoma is landlocked, making transport by boat rather difficult, but it had a lot of sparsely-inhabited areas, tailor-made for aerial hooch delivery. Our hero would make a moonshine runs under the moonshine, arranging ahead of

time for his customers to block off a back road with their oilfield equipment to prevent inquisitive interference. Paid more than barnstorming ever did!

By 1930, our pilot used his oilfield and flying connections to become the personal pilot for a couple of wealthy oil men, F.C Hall and Powell Briscoe. Hall bought a Lockheed Vega in 1930, named it for his daughter, and let our hero use it in airshows. He used it to win the 1930 National Air Race Derby, setting a record time from LA to Chicago (9 hours and 9 minutes, winning the race by a whopping 62 seconds).

His rodeo friend was also doing well in his career. Born to a Cherokee veteran of the U.S. Civil War (on the Confederate side), he parlayed his rope-handling ability to gigs in vaudeville and eventually the Ziegfield Follies. But lariat tricks can only get one so far, but the rodeo guy also had a way with words and a working man's insight into the topics of the day. The Follies led to a lot of radio appearances and a syndicated newspaper column that would make him very famous.

Setting the record pleased and thrilled our hero, and he began to plan an even more ambitious endeavor with his boss' plane, a trip around the world. The record time for a circumnavigation flight was held by the *Graf Zeppelin* (21 days), and our hero wanted to beat it. So he and a navigator hopped into the Electra on June 23, 1931, and took off from Long Island's [Roosevelt Field](#) (the same field from which Charles Lindbergh departed on his solo flight across the Atlantic, named for [Quentin](#), Teddy Roosevelt's son, lost in WWI air combat, the only presidential child to be KIA). Our hero succeeded, returning to Roosevelt Field on July 1. The response to this flight was similar to that for Lindbergh: lunch at the White House, a major tickertape parade in New York, and a Distinguished Flying Cross.

I'm guessing that, by now, many of you have recognized our hero and his rope-twirling buddy. His name was Wiley Hardeman Post, his plane was the "Winnie Mae," and his Oklahoma pal was the famed humorist, Will Rogers.

Post and his navigator, Harold Gatty, published a book about their flight, and he now had the funds to purchase the *Winnie Mae* from oilman Post. But where should he go from there? He wanted to open his own pilot training facility, but even with the success of his circumnavigation, Depression-era banks were leery of loaning a lot of money to one with only a sixth-grade education and some shady episodes in his past. So Post decided to repeat his round-the-world feat, but this time, he'd do it alone. He would rely on the newly-developed autopilot and radio direction finder to make up for lacking a navigator. He succeeded, and broke the circumnavigation record, taking only 7 day, 18 hours, and 49 minutes to complete the series of flights needed. More than 50,000 people met him at the landing site, Floyd Bennett Field, on July 23, 1933. Post enjoyed his second NYC tickertape parade.

Long-distance flying was only one way for Post to push the boundaries of what was possible. In the middle 1930s, Post garnered financial and other support from the Phillips Petroleum

Company and B.F. Goodrich to conduct practical research on flying at very high altitude. Lockheed Electras were unpressurized, and could reach only ~17,000 feet before both pilot and engine ran out of air (today, pilots flying above 12,000 must have either a pressurized cabin or be on oxygen). Post modified the *Winnie Mae's* engine with a supercharger, solving the engine problem, and developed the first practical pressure suit to protect pilots. He made his first flight thus equipped on September 5, 1934, and made it to just over 40,000 feet. He did even better on subsequent flights, ultimately attaining an altitude of over 50,000 feet. He was the first pilot to encounter the Jet Stream, and showed that planes flying at stratosphere altitudes could make very fast times, at least when flying west to east.

Post's next endeavor was to scout possible mail/passenger routes from the West Coast to Russia. He'd need a plane larger than the *Winnie Mae* this time around. He was chronically short of funds for his aerial endeavors, and had to cobble together an aircraft from parts of two others, a [Lockheed Orion](#) (fuselage) and a [Lockheed Explorer](#) (wings). The Explorer had a non-retractable landing gear, undesirable for most long-distance applications, but good for Post's plan since they could be fitted with pontoons for landing on water. (Actually, the Explorer was a dog; Lockheed only built four of them, all notoriously nose-heavy, and all four of them crashed.) Lockheed refused to make the conversion, thinking that the Orion and Explorer designs were dangerously incompatible, so Post made the conversion himself (cue ominous music).

Post and Rogers had maintained their friendship all this time, and when Will found out about Wiley's plan, he asked to go along. Post's flight plan would take them through Alaska, and Rogers wanted first-hand info about this vast territory for his newspaper column (remember, Alaska statehood wasn't until 1959).

Post and Rogers left the Seattle area in late July and headed north. They made Fairbanks with no problem, but on their next leg, to Barrow at the northmost Alaskan coast, they became lost. Post landed in a coastal lagoon to seek directions and got straightened out as to which way to go. Alas, a few moments after takeoff, the engine failed, and the nose-heavy plane did a quick nose-dive into the lagoon from ~50 feet altitude, killing both men instantly.

The national shock was immense. Both men were famous, even beloved. They were "everymen," and offered a bright spot in an otherwise-dismal time. Oklahoma City's main airport was named for Will Rogers, and its secondary airport was named for Post. A [memorial to both](#) was set up near the crash site. Point Barrow is the extreme northern tip of Alaska, and the town of Barrow was the nearest town that had an airstrip. Barrow has recently been renamed "[Utqiagvik](#)" (No, it was not named "Aquavit," as my spell check suggests, nor did a travelling Klingon retire there.) A few years later, a random guy, one Jesse Stubbs, showed up and built a second monument; both monuments are still there.

The Smithsonian Institution purchased the *Winne Mae* from Post's widow in 1936. It has been displayed in the Udvar-Hazy Center and then the National Mall Building's Time and Navigation gallery (the NMB is presently under re-construction after over four decades of use – more people have visited that building than live in the USA!).

#### REFERENCES

Wikipedia (Wiley Post): [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wiley\\_Post](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wiley_Post)

Wikipedia (Will Rogers): [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Will\\_Rogers](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Will_Rogers)

NASM (Post): <https://airandspace.si.edu/stories/editorial/wiley-post>

NASM (Winnie Mae): [https://airandspace.si.edu/collection-objects/lockheed-vega-winnie-mae/nasm\\_A19360030000](https://airandspace.si.edu/collection-objects/lockheed-vega-winnie-mae/nasm_A19360030000)

Rogers – Post crash site: <https://www.nps.gov/articles/rogers-post-site.htm>

I gave a plug to balladeer Al Stewart recently, and I'm doing it again. His song, *The Immelman Turn* (a half-loop upward followed by a half-roll to go upright), has a great beat and talks about being a barnstormer, but why Al thinks the Immelman Turn is particularly dangerous, I don't know. Neither did the Chair of NASM's Aeronautics Division, even though he's an Al fan, too!! See: <https://alstewart.com/the-immelman-turn>.

Last Edited on 19 July 2020