

The Sky's the Limit

With persistence and great vision, William E. Boeing set the course for innovation in air travel

BY MARIA BLACKBURN



William E. Boeing's first flight was neither smooth nor luxurious, but it was a trip he would never forget.

On July 4, 1914, Boeing and a friend, U.S. Navy Lt. G. Conrad Westervelt, climbed aboard a rickety hydroplane in Seattle manned by Terah Maroney. The plane was only big enough for two, because it had no seats. Boeing and Westervelt took turns sitting beside the pilot on the front edge of the muslin-covered wing. Boeing was captivated by the sight of the landscape tilting up beside him at takeoff and the two men spent the afternoon taking turns soaring through the sky above Lake Washington.

By day's end, they knew this was no flight of fancy. Aviation was the future of transportation. "I think we can build a better plane," Boeing reportedly said that afternoon. Within a year their new plane was a reality. Called the Bluebill, B&W Model I (the initials stand for Boeing and Westervelt), the 27 ½-foot seaplane/biplane reached a top speed of



just 75 miles per hour on its first flight on June 15, 1916. The B&W was William Boeing's first plane but it wouldn't be his last. During the next century, the company he founded in 1916 as Pacific Aero Products would go on to become Boeing, the largest aerospace company in the world and the originator of the iconic Boeing 747—and his name would come to be synonymous with aviation innovation.

Even as early as 1929, just 26 years

after Wilbur and Orville Wright's first manned flight, Boeing recognized the seemingly limitless possibilities of air travel. "Now I would say that people want to ride in airplanes more and more each day—and I shall go so far as to say they will someday regard airplane travel to be as commonplace and incidental as train travel," he said. "We are trustees of a veritable revolution that is taking place once more in the economic, social and political

fabric with the advent of this new speed medium."

Boeing was born on Oct. 1, 1881, in Detroit, to Wilhelm and Marie Boeing. His father was a successful mining engineer and timber merchant and Boeing attended the finest schools. In 1903 at the age of 22 he left his engineering studies at Yale University and headed for Grays Harbor, Wash., to learn the logging business. His timber ventures were successful and by the time Boeing moved to Seattle in 1908 he had added to his already considerable fortune.

Boeing was a private man, an avid reader and a perfectionist, according to his son, William Boeing Jr. Once, during a visit to his airplane building shop on the Duwamish River, he caught sight of a frayed cable and stated, "I, for one, will close up shop rather than send out work of this kind."

The advent of World War I gave Boeing Airplane Co. a much-needed boost and the company began manufacturing pontoons for the U.S. Navy. However, Boeing knew the contracts wouldn't last. "It now behooves us to devote our energies toward the development of machines that will be used in peacetimes," he wrote to his cousin Edward C. Gott, who was in charge of the airplane company's factory in 1918 when the war ended. "In this connection the first logical opening will be the development of a commercial flying boat."

The loss of government contracts caused the company to struggle in the years after the war and Boeing branched out to make furniture and phonograph cases to stay in business. Still, the company continued to make advances in aviation technology and eventually built a successful airmail business. By 1928, after only a dozen years in business, Boeing employed 1,000 people and had the largest plant in the country devoted solely to aircraft production.

In 1934, the same year he was awarded the Guggenheim Medal for being an aviation pioneer, Boeing was accused of operating a monopoly by the U.S. government and was forced to

divide his company to separate his manufacturing interests from his commercial airlines. He retired that year at the age of 53 and devoted his time to horse breeding, property development and yachting.

Boeing died of a heart attack in 1956 at the age of 74 but his pioneering spirit lives on. Because of his vision, the company he founded would go on to become the biggest maker of commercial aircraft and the largest aerospace company in the world, with more than 160,000

employees around the world.

"I've tried to make the men around me feel, as I do, that we are embarked as pioneers upon a new science and industry in which our problems are so new and unusual that it behooves no one to dismiss any novel idea with the statement that it 'can't be done,'" Boeing said in 1929. "Our job is to keep everlastingly at research and experiment, to adapt our laboratories to production as soon as practicable, to let no new improvement in flying and flying equipment pass us by." —

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