

EXCERPT

The success of the first United States air meet at Dominguez in 1910 inspired many. Aviation fever was rampant, hitting young and old alike. There were various strains of the fever; one struck those who wanted to design, build and fly their own innovative flying machines; another hit those who just wanted to take to the air.

In May 1910 aviation fever hit a young Pasadena aircraft designer by the name of Bernard Birnie. Surrounded by well meaning friends and curious onlookers, the twenty-three year-old, who had built and operated a glider when he was only eight years old, decided to escape to Long Beach to build his aircraft in peace. The 90-pound biplane, 30 feet wide, and 45 feet long, made with pressed steel ribs (which were his own idea), and cloth woven in Philadelphia on his father's looms, was built at a cost of \$3,000. The *Daily Telegram* of May 10, 1910, noted this was "the first big airship built in or near Long Beach."

Soon the first Long Beach built aircraft, equipped with a 50-horse-power five-cylinder Macomber rotary engine, left the ground, briefly. On May 30, 1910, the biplane rose smoothly from a Long Beach field, zipping along about five feet off the ground. After gliding about thirty feet it struck a post, breaking the framework. Bernard was not one to give up. He entered his steel framed aircraft in the second Dominguez air competition in December 1910, but was unable to secure a motor powerful enough to get it to fly.

The Birnie family — Ida and John, their sons Bernard, Charles and Edwin — moved to Long Beach permanently in 1915. In a 1921 questionnaire Bernard filled out for a book entitled *Long Beach in the World War*, Bernard said he spent so much time in Long Beach he felt he had lived there since 1905. He listed his occupation as aviator and aeronautical engineer. He described his experiences in detail:

"In civilian life I have been in the aviation game as flyer builder and designer since 1909 being Long Beach's pioneer in the aviation game, making my first flight at Long Beach Flats (Anaheim and Pier streets) on May 30, 1910, afterward moving to Dominguez where I practically flew, built, experimented and designed different types of aeroplanes until 1914. From 1914 to 1917 the game was kind of slow, so I had to take up automobile work and transportation, but since war time activity has advanced aviation will probably stay in the game. When the U.S. declared war on Germany I tried to enlist in any of the branches of aviation but was refused, which hurt my pride considerably. I tried several times afterwards, but without success, until I landed at Camp Kearney and then had to fight to get action in getting overseas. I asked General Young of 65 Brigade Headquarters for a transfer to aviation where I rightfully belonged, having been in the aviation game since 1909, but without results until after I got to France, where I took the matter of transfer up directly with General Harbinger at Tours, France, and was transferred at once to the Main Instruction center and later transferred to 31 Aero Squadron. Colonel Hiram Bingham commander of the port, and Major Victor W. Page, engineer of port, both promised me a commission but nothing became of it. So much for the luck of war; a

man was placed where he least fitted. Two days before starting home from France I had an accident. I accidentally got caught in rope on an airplane hanger and was thrown to the ground on my left side which resulted in a gash on the head, sprained shoulder, bad sprain and dislocation of spine, also partial fracture and sprain on my knee all on the left side, which has left me partially paralyzed at times on account of nerve damage on spine. I am still in hospital here in Palo Alto but am gradually getting better.”

In 1916, before the United States entered the war, Bernard and three other Long Beach residents opened an airplane manufacturing plant in nearby Wilmington. With \$10,000 in capital Bernard Birnie, Dr. Samuel L. Good, Burdett D. Fuller and Elzie H. Duffy formed the Western Aviation Company of Long Beach. They planned to manufacture airplanes, operate a passenger-carrying service and conduct an aviation school. When Bernard's brother Edwin wasn't working at his full time job with Otis Elevator, he put in as many hours as he could helping with the manufacturing end of Western Aviation. Even though Edwin had the same aviation fever as his brother, starting a new business was chancy and Edwin couldn't afford to give up a steady income.

Edwin was the first of the Birnie brothers to sign up for active duty in World War I. He tried to enter the aviation branch of the Army but was turned down because of a weak heart. Instead he served as a private in the Army infantry, 91st division, 362nd regiment, company K in the Argonne drive in France, where he was exposed to mustard gas, resulting in severe lung damage that required a long and painful recovery. Ironically Edwin recovered, only to die in a disastrous airplane crash a short time later.

Edwin couldn't pilot a plane himself, because of his bad heart and injuries suffered during the war, but he did convince 24-year-old Donald Gwartney, also of Long Beach, to take him along in a rebuilt Western Aviation aircraft for a test flight. On September 21, 1919, pilot Donald Gwartney and passenger Edwin Birnie, climbed into the aircraft, which recently had been in a smashup and rebuilt for passenger service, and ascended to an altitude of 500 feet. Gwartney made several turns over the airfield, and was making a sharp turn when his plane slipped downwards. At a height of about 150 feet above ground the aircraft, which had gone into a tail spin, crashed head down into a Wilmington field. Both men died instantly. It was believed the aircraft had fallen into an air pocket which caused Gwartney to lose control of the plane.

Gwartney, who had started at Western Aviation only a few days earlier, left behind a widow, and one-year-old son. Edwin's death devastated Western Aviation as well as his family. The 29-year-old veteran, Edwin Birnie, is buried at Long Beach Sunnyside cemetery.