UNUSUAL PLACE - UNUSUAL STORY - HEROIC CREW

W8SU 2010

A regular society article dated 27 May 1932 out of the Atamont New York Enterprise; It read partially; "I saw Mr. And Mrs. Jack Schmidt along Main Street Monday while vacationing at their summer home." Seated in a low slung DeSoto sport roadster, with its chrome gleaming, Jack presents an attractive figure. Bronzed by the wind and sun, dark hair brushed back, full chest and powerful shoulders, the casual bystander would never guess that he is unable to walk without crutches since practically birth. Despite this tremendous handicap he has found himself bound into national prominence through sheer will power and a brilliant mind. Truly this man has the heart of a champion. "Down In Bermuda." Do you recall the hit tune "Bermuda" in the 50's by the Bell Sisters? It haunts me in this story, stay tuned.

The period of the twenties and thirties and beyond were of great competition of records to be broken in every venue. One record that had been pursued but failed with cost of lives was the first Great American Journey, a dream of flight to Bermuda from the North American mainland. It was long before the capabilities of sending a radio beacon beam to an aircraft to utilize safe navigation. The Bermuda Trade Development Board earlier offered a 25 thousand dollar prize for the first flight to Bermuda. No airport existed in Bermuda, thus a float plane would be necessary. Aeronautical experts considered the flight too hazardous and the prize offer was withdrawn. Just who were our terrific threesome in this adventure and what became of them in life? For sure not many will ever know, but here we try.

John W. Schmidt 2PI - 2XBQ - W4PC - W8QMR - LU4A ***1901-1946*** Jack or pen name (Zeh Bouck) a Consultant, publisher, writer, aviation radioman - top electronic expert. Jack Schmidt (pseudonym Zeh Bouck) a NYC product born on West 143rd to John A. (German immigrant, merchant) and Alice White Schmidt.

Jack educated in NYC public school system and N.Y. City College. Schmidt earned amateur radio license 2PI prior to 1928. Our subject born handicapped and used crutches all his life. John is enshrined in "Who's Who" North American authors Volume Five 1931-32 - He found time to marry, Charlotte Bosse in 1920. Jack's physical limitations didn't stop him in 1924 from becoming a sought after VIP in the radio electronics world and an early delegate for the Hoover Commission 3rd annual Washington DC radio conference in the ever growing field of radio practice and regulations governing wireless.

Jack (AKA Zeh Bouck) held other important positions early on in his life and among those were advisor with Pilot Electric Mfg. Co., Brooklyn, NY. The plot thickens; Late 1920s Schmidt was part of a gifted team of engineers and product managers formed by Isidor Goldberg, owner/founder of Pilot Electric. The Pilot Company's daring support adventure slated for 1930 was being planned in their Brooklyn offices. This group portrait picture taken in 1929 was an amazing keep sake for the historic realm, next page L to right - Pilot great Bob Hertzberg W2DJJ shown left, John Geloso the brilliant Italian engineer - owner and founder Mr. Goldberg, then Al Gihiardi and our subject is fifth from the left Jack Schmidt 2PI- lastly far right Robert Kruse of National Radio SW5 fame.

This gifted group gathered at Pilot were discussing plans and preparation for the first Pilot sponsored daring flight to Bermuda. "Bermuda Triangle watch out, you just might get beaten." The Pilot Radio Company had at its disposal a Stinson Detroiter sea plane, issued radio call 2XBQ I.D NR-4876. The design team gloried short term in the "Pilot Super Wasp" success an affordable well designed kit radio for radio experimenters and other radio related items. Their ace in the hole was primitive TV development. Two big challenges faced them business wise, first the depression and then sponsorship of first flight to Bermuda from the mainland. Much acclaim awaited the flight team including the trap of the infamous Bermuda triangle, not yet coined. Continued on page three.

President of Pilot MFG Isidor Goldberg center and Zeh Bouck (Schmidt) 5th from left. Looks like Schmidt was making a important point to the group planning the dangerous Bermuda flight, as by 1930 no plane had yet flown to Bermuda from the mainland. Historic picture provided by W2DJJ's son Paul Hertzberg K2DUX.

Finally D-Day was here, 1 April 1930. The flight derring-do was scheduled to depart the banks of Flushing Bay, near College Point L.I. A small crowd was to witness their take off. The crew consisted of Co-Pilot Lt. Wm. Alexander with military experience; First Pilot and Navigator Lewis Yancey, an expert also with noted military and commercial experience; Finally Zea Bouck, radio expert who would have constant communications with New York Times Radio (U2UO) on a exclusive basis. Operations were not proving to be adequate at the start, Radioman Bouck was late, he had to finish charging communications batteries, which would prove a God send later on.

The take off weather was good but hazy - sea calm and wind light. Actually some wind would have gotten them into flight probably first try. They had far too much cargo as it was a calculated risk carrying 5,200 lb. It took 5 attempts to depart L.I. Sound. Continued on page four.

The overloaded Detroiter's Wright 300-hp engine finally made the grade at 10 A.M., much later than planned. A plane from EDO Company taxied to make ripples that allowed Pilot Radio to break the surface. One writer said "If they failed and with their limited fuel capacity, there was no allowance for mistakes, they would surely perish."

Bermuda Islands were so admired by Aubrey Fessenden, radio patriarch and pioneer, another VIP we have written about. Fessenden had made the breath taking coral blue waters of Bermuda home. Bermuda by the Bell Sister's haunts me especially the part of the lyrics, "As I grow Old!" How true.

With Alexander at the controls, the Detroiter float plane christened "Pilot Radio" lumbered along southeast ward with a cruising range of 550 miles and a top speed of 118 MPH.

With great hope to make the record breaking non-stop hop to Bermuda, yet there were no guiding beams in flight and would not be introduced until 6 years passed, in Bermuda airways. Still with Bouck in constant communications with the NY Times station, it would be a small comfort to have the capability of human contact. Could they hit the 12 square mile dot once called "Isle of Devils" in the oceans expanse? Bermuda was plotted as 760 Miles from NY, Long Island or 660 miles southeast of Cape Hatteras, N.C. Were they beyond their fuel capacity?

Clad in their heavy flying suits and goggles they throttled the frail aircraft leaving the NY region on the Atlantic. Leveling off at 2000 feet, Bouck made regular shortwave radio reports to "The New York Times" and talked with several ships en route, while Lew Yancey took frequent drift readings. The weather remained good to fair but they encountered strong head winds by mid ocean point of the journey. They prayed their fate would resolve into victory!

As the sun was dipping in the west, Bouck reported that they expected to arrive off Bermuda at 6 p.m. - At 5:20 p.m. he radioed a somewhat less optimistic update to the Times; "If we don't see the islands pretty soon, we will set her down for the night. If we have to set her down, don't let anyone worry about us. The sea is like a lake."

At 5:34 p.m. Bouck reported; No news yet. We are making a run for the islands, but don't know what the chances are. We may make it or we may not. At 5:50 p.m. Bouck stated; Setting her down right now. Position 60 miles north of Bermuda. Tell everyone not to worry. Will continue to Bermuda in the morning.

Alexander opted to land on the open sea because it would have been hazardous to attempt a night landing among the unseen coral reefs that form a barrier around Bermuda's north shore. It would also have been dangerous for the three airmen to try to land in the unlighted, unfamiliar harbor at Hamilton, Bermuda's capital.

Meanwhile, Bermuda residents had long been scanning the northern sky. But when eight hours passed from the plane's expected arrival time in mid-afternoon. Bermudans were afraid there had been a disaster. Ships in the harbor at Hamilton were asked to turn on their searchlights. Requests were sent out to wireless stations and ships to try to establish radio contact with the aircraft. SS Bermuda, one of the ships that plied the route between NY and the islands, was contacted, as was Lady Somers, a Canadian cruise ship that had left port Bermuda for Halifax that afternoon. Bermuda was unable to establish any radio communication with Bouck and continued on her way. Lady Somers circled for some time, looking for flares. Continued on page five.

The flying trio, meanwhile did not feel they were in danger, but the aircraft had consumed more fuel than anticipated by the prop blade biting into the winds and salt spray in the Atlantic's air-currents. Bouck's radio log from the following morning tells what they had done the night before; 5:50 a.m. April 2nd 1930 NYC time, Please telephone my wife and tell her everything O.K.

Here is the dope; Set her down 6 p.m. April 1st 1930 for the night. Let out a sea anchor and turned in for the evening, keeping three watches. At 3 a.m. a ship was sighted and we shot five flares. They hove to and we asked them to report that all was O.K. with us. They wanted to take us off but we decided to stick to the aircraft. Just got off now in a bad ground swell; it was a tough job. Also the landing last night was tough, due to ground swell. A highlight, we lost our flashlight overboard last night when looking over the pontoons and had to rig up an emergency light to signal the boat with. I tapped a piece of wire on the battery cable for a key. We didn't get the name of the boat, but I can't understand why they didn't report us. They seemed somewhat surprised that we refused to be taken off. Bill Alexander was a little seasick, Yancey and I got thru the night O.K.

It was 6:00 a.m. 2 April after the night on the open sea, Alexander took off in heavy swells, he accomplished an aviation first of which he was then unaware. He had become the first pilot in history to land an aircraft in the open sea, remain overnight and take off successfully during a record flight attempt. His flying skill, however, could not overcome the simple fact that the aircraft could go only as far as the fuel allowed. The plane's overloaded condition and head winds resulted in high fuel consumption as mentioned. The plane's fuel gauge was faulty, so the men did not have an accurate reading of how much fuel remained for the final leg.

Bouck sent a final message at 6:17 a.m. stating they had sighted Bermuda dead ahead. Shortly after the trio saw Hamilton's white buildings glistening in the bright sunlight, the fuel factor caught up with them as Pilot Radio's engine suddenly sputtered and died. Alexander had to make a forced landing only 10 miles from the north shore. The plane was sighted by a watcher at the marine pilot station on St. David's Island, who immediately dispatched two members of the station in a motorboat to greet the embarrassed Americans.

When members of the pilots station learned they needed fuel they returned with several cans. A second boat arrived with J.P. Hand, chairman of the Bermuda Trade Development Board and a member of the Bermuda parliament. Pulling alongside, he extended an official welcome to the three fliers. - Alexander made a final takeoff after adding the gas and landed a few minutes later in Hamilton Harbor before a small cheering crowd. Before the crewmen could greet anyone, they were towed to a wharf on the other side of the harbor, where they were met by the chief of police and a physician who gave them a quick medical examination. Then the plane was pulled up on a ramp and the men were driven to the Inverurie Hotel to wash up and greet the public.

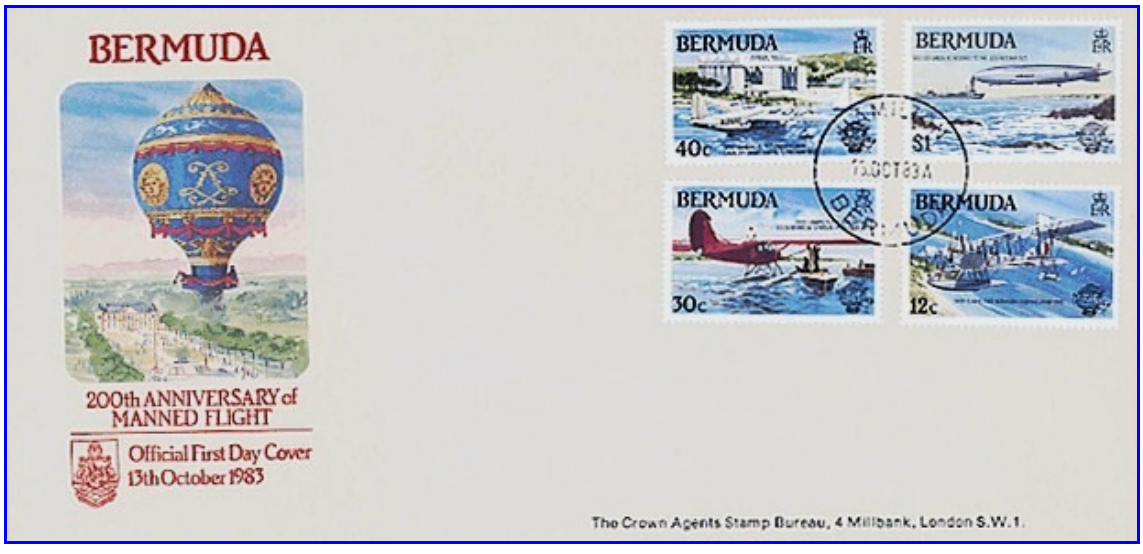
The Bermudans warmly welcomed the fliers and feted them to a series of celebrations over the next several days. The development board members who had withdrawn the 25 thousand prize money the year before voted to give one thousand to each of the three aviators in recognition of their accomplishment. Alexander radioed the New York Times that they would make the return flight to NY when the weather was favorable.

As they were preparing for the return flight, they discovered that one of the plane's wing struts had been wrenched during the two sea landings making it too risky for the Stinson to make the return flight. Pilot Radio was hoisted aboard a steamer and the fliers returned with it by sea to N.Y. Continued final page.

After Pilot Radio crew left Bermuda J.P. Hand announced he would introduce legislation to prohibit any further such flights until a weather station and a radio beacon could be installed on the island. He added a prediction that the flight was the forerunner of great things to come for the commercial air service to the island.

The backers of the flight were jubilant even though it had been accomplished in only one direction. Richfield Oil praised the pilot for conserving his fuel by making a safe sea landing instead of blundering on in the dark. The Stinson Company complimented Alexander for his skill to get off the water with the Detroiter's heavy load at the start and from the treacherous Atlantic swells the next day. Isidore Goldberg proudly announced the Pilot Radio would be sent on a tour of South America and would demonstrate two way radio via aircraft. Charles Colvin president of Pioneer Instrument Company, maker of the instruments on the plane, commented "The landing on the sea in the dusk made the flight even more valuable because it served to dispel popular belief that sea landings were always disastrous etc."

The Royal Air Force established a station at Bermuda in 1933 and operated Osprey and Seafox float planes from the harbor in conjunction with the British fleet. In September 1936, Lufthansa began a series of experimental transatlantic flights via seaplane from Berlin to NY, with the flying boats heading from Lisbon to the Azores and then to the seaplane tender Schwabenland. It was proposed that passengers could then fly direct to New York or via Bermuda.

In the years since those relatively primitive days of ocean flying, before reliable radio aids were available for navigation, Bermuda has become an easily accessible year around resort for those who want to sample the pleasures of a mild semitropical climate.

Pilot Bill Alexander died later on in a traffic accident. Capt Lewis Yancey first pilot and navigator died unexpedley in 1940 at age 44 of a stroke in Yonkers, N.Y. He had served in both the U.S. Navy and U.S. Coast Guard and is buried in Arlington National Cemetery. Jack Bouck died early in 1946. We found an article in the NY Times dated 19 April 1930 where our radio officer Jack Bouck tells experiences on the Bermuda flight, in a talk Jack gave, he praised Capt Lew Yancey who navigated the ship and to Bill Alexander for safe landings on the water and to the New York Times for keeping in constant touch with the Pilot! Scripting credit History dot net; C.V.Glines - Bermuda-online dot org. QSL cards K8CX historic files. K2DUX foto. W8SU 2010