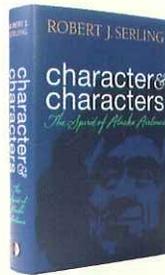


SEATTLE, WA

AN AIRLINE WITH CHARACTER(S)

Since the bush-pilot days of territorial Alaska, when Linius McGee launched an airline with a single three-seat Stinson airplane, Alaska Airlines has prevailed. In fact, for the last 75 years the airline has thrived through adversity, outlasting dozens of airlines, large and small, that were unable to compete amid fare wars, mergers, soaring oil prices and deregulation.

Credit for Alaska's success goes to



the grit and determination of the employees who have long fostered a culture of caring and independence, and a sense of humor, according to Robert J. Serling,

author of *Character @ Characters: The Spirit of Alaska Airlines*.

His new book profiling the airline is a rich history revealed in the stories of people who had a talent and passion for making machines work, for creative promotions, for selling an idea, for running the numbers and for following a dream.

"Alaska is an airline built from humble beginnings, by a cast of always dedicated, sometimes quirky and often brilliant characters," Serling says. "For more than 75 years it has been an airline that has defied all odds. It has proved to be as rugged, as rich in tradition and as resourceful as its namesake state."

In commissioning Serling to write the book, Alaska executives sought a realistic, unvarnished account not only of the airline's past, but also of its developing legacy. *Character @ Characters* is more than a corporate history; it is an honest, human tale of a proud and often colorful group of people, motivated by what they call "Alaska Spirit."

Character @ Characters is published by Documentary Media of Seattle and is available in bookstores. —Paul Frichtl

saga of Alaskan airline development belong to a distinguished company.”

McGee established a close relationship with one pilot in particular, an ex-barnstormer with a reputation for some screwball antics, such as taking off from a dry gravel road in a plane equipped with snow skis. He was Harvey Barnhill, nicknamed “Barney,” and while a bit flaky, he was also a brilliant pilot, the kind who could have flown an iron bathtub if it had wings and an engine. By 1931, McGee had saved enough to start his own fur-trading business and decided he needed an airplane. Trappers and trading posts were scattered all over Alaska. Quite naturally, he turned to Barnhill for advice, and this mismatched pair formed a partnership.

McGee was a workaholic, serious, and scrupulously honest. Barnhill was unpredictable, a marginal alcoholic with a devious streak. McGee once wryly observed, “Barney’s pretty fast on his feet.” It was a comment made after their first joint business transaction.

They purchased an airplane from Walter Varney, an aviation pioneer himself who in 1926 had started an airline bearing his own name, one that eventually became Continental Airlines, a carrier, incidentally, that decades later was to provide Alaska Airlines with some of its finest talent. The negotiations were held in San Francisco, and the airplane Varney wanted to sell was a three-seat Stinson monoplane, a smaller version of the popular Stinson Detroit. The aircraft was only two years old and reasonably priced at \$5,000, but according to McGee’s later account, Barnhill almost blew the deal.

It seems that what Barnhill tried to give Varney for his \$2,500 share of the airplane were bonds from the city of Kelso, Washington. Varney checked with his broker and was told the bonds weren’t worth anywhere near \$2,500, so Barnhill had to rush to Seattle to raise the amount in cash. Where and how he got it is unknown.

The partners flew the airplane from San Francisco to Seattle, then had it crated up and sent to the Alaskan port of Valdez by boat. For a brief time, the lettering on the fuselage read “McGee-Barnhill Airways,” and the airplane initially was used solely to support McGee’s fur business. But with the dawn of 1932, McGee apparently was bitten by the aviation bug and decided to offer charter service between Anchorage and Bristol Bay.

McGee even took the drastic step of learning to fly, just to relieve Barnhill, who was flying the Stinson to every remote trading post and village within range. Then McGee got a break when some businessmen in Seward talked him into providing charter flights to new prospectors and other fresh arrivals who wanted fast transportation from Seward to various

Alaskan locations.

With the aid of a bank loan, the partners bought a second Stinson, painted black and silver like the first. The plane was delivered to them by none other than McGee's half-brother, Estes Call, a pilot himself who decided to stay in Alaska and work with Mac. Now McGee and Barnhill had a real airline, in a land where even just two airplanes constituted a fleet. But this turned out to be their last joint venture.

Late in the spring of 1932, the McGee-Barnhill partnership was dissolved. McGee never explained exactly why they ended not only their business relationship but apparently their friendship as well. Barnhill had somehow wound up owning the second Stinson, probably as a payback for his share of the deteriorating partnership, tried in vain to sell it in the lower 48 states, and finally sold it back to McGee at a nice profit.

At that point, Barnhill seems to have faded from McGee's life. Years later he was a passenger in a fatal automobile accident, thus defying the predictions that he was destined to die in an airplane crash while drunk. Mac hired two experienced employees — Oscar Winchell, a veteran bush pilot, and a full-time mechanic named Earl Woods — and it was now McGee Airways. So Alaska's bush carriers had a new boy on the block.

Curiously, Linious McGee's name isn't even mentioned in most of the books written about Alaska's bush-flying era, probably because although he became a fairly good pilot, absorbing flying knowledge from airmen such as Barnhill and Winchell, his real talent was in management. In that area, he displayed not only instinctive executive ability but also surprising farsightedness for an airline neophyte. By the time his company merged with Star Air Service in 1935, McGee's fleet included seven Stinson Model S Junior aircraft.

The only author to thoroughly research McGee's life was Archie Satterfield, a freelance journalist who wrote *The Alaska Airlines Story*, a history published in 1981 to mark the airline's 50th anniversary. Satterfield described McGee as "a compulsive worker."

"He never walked," Satterfield wrote. "He ran or jogged everywhere. He did not know how to play . . . even on vacation. He worked every day of the week under the assumption, one friend said, 'that since there are seven days a week, you might as well work them all.' He expected his employees to work equally hard."

Yet McGee seems to have been a fair boss, and he may have invented the first version of a profit-sharing plan. Instead of a salary, Oscar Winchell,

his pilot after Barnhill left, received a share of the revenues, and McGee made an arrangement with other pilots.

McGee is also credited with convincing officials to adopt the postwar aircraft so that parts were available for one or five different types of aircraft.

As McGee expanded his fleet of identical Stinsons. He had a well-equipped hangar, and the planes were shipped to the Lycoming engine after every 750 hours of operation.

Not all the bush pilots were as experienced. It was more common to have a pilot with nothing about it. McGee's philosophy to his pilots as well as to the passengers either deliberately or a result of accidents had been originated by Freeland's experiences in South America. The pilots communicated by radio or telephone. Grant, Jean Arthur, and others.

A U.S. airline, Western Air Lines, was sure into operation as well. The carrier hired special pilots and made reports to the flights a day.

It's unlikely that the "Model Airway." Nor was the weather-observing station. The weather information was provided by other motives was economic. The same charter service (McGee Airways).

The shortest air route was through a mountain gap on each side of the pass. McGee invented something that few if any other pilots had. The radios were