

Albert Pete Wilson

AL WILSON

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Born in Kentucky, Wilson's family moved to Southern California when he was a young boy. When he was only 18 years old, he and a friend built an airplane using a four-cylinder motor. It wasn't the most professional creation and would only rise about 50 feet off the ground, but it did fly. When the many hard landings finally took their toll on the contraption, Wilson sold it to a motion picture company for a prop.

His contact with the motion picture industry continued as he performed small tasks and even did some minor acting work. He is also credited with constructing the first wind machines used by the movies from airplane propellers and automobile engines.

During this time he took a job in maintenance at the Schiller Aviation School which also gave him the opportunity to begin learning how to be a pilot. He later moved to a flying school at Riverside where he completed his training. Wilson returned to Venice, which was now named the Crawford-Saunders Field, and the American Aircraft Company hired him as their chief instructor. He developed his stunt flying skills by performing acrobatic maneuvers that would "stimulate students." Wilson's brother, Herbert, built a two-seat monoplane at this time, which, with Al as the co-pilot, was rented to movie companies. "This was the beginning of Al Wilson's motion picture stunt flying career," Wynne said.

One of Wilson's students while at Venice was Cecil B. DeMille who had hopes of becoming a pilot during the war, but, although he became an accomplished pilot, the war ended before his dream was realized. However, this led to another opportunity for Wilson. When DeMille formed the Mercury Aviation Company, Wilson was named vice-president and general manager. The company offered flight instruction, sight-seeing tours, charter flights and more. Most importantly, motion picture studios came to Mercury when they needed airplanes and pilots.

Wilson didn't stay in this position long apparently missing the thrill of performing stunts and resigned to return to exhibition flying. At one point he formed a partnership with stuntman Frank Clarke and piloted one of two airplanes as Clarke performed a wing-to-wing transfer. The availability of the Wilson-Clarke team was advertised in the Oct. 10, 1919, issue of *Billboard* magazine. Wilson was also known to perform his wing-walking acrobatics while stunt pilot Wally Timms (whom Wilson had trained back at Mercury Aviation) piloted the airplane.

One of his more spectacular stunts, which brought him quite a bit of publicity, was a double airplane transfer in February, 1920, which called for him to grab the landing gear of the airplane above and pull himself up. Then the first plane changed to the overhead position, and Wilson once again pulled himself up by the landing gear to the original airplane. While this was being done, there was the additional risk of being dangerously close to the whirring propeller.

Wilson continued working exhibition tours and doing movie work in the off-season. Around 1922, he signed a contract with Universal, but it is difficult to determine exactly how many or which films he may have contributed to as a stunt man.

In 1923, however, we see him featured as an actor for the first time in the Fred Thomson 15-chapter serial "The Eagle's Talons." Of course, he wasn't just hired to act. He also performed his stunts, one being a plane-to-train transfer. This was followed the same year with a role in the 15-chapter serial "The Ghost City" starring Pete Morrison. One stunt in this film came close to disaster when Wilson was transferring from a car traveling at 70 miles per hour to a rope ladder dangling from an airplane overhead. However, when Wilson put his weight on the ladder, the plane settled hitting Wilson on the ground. Although the initial inclination was to turn loose since he was already at ground level, he would have been injured even worse at that speed if he had let go. Instead, he held on, and the pilot pulled up leaving Wilson only with some bumps and bruises.

After this, Wilson formed his own production company and began a series of thrillers for which he wrote the scripts, performed the stunts and was the star. In 1924, he made "The Air Hawk," followed by "The Cloud Rider" and "Flyin' Thru" in 1925 and "The Flying Mail" in 1926.

Each film was similar in make-up, Wilson as a Secret Service agent, with the Air Mail Service or in some other "do-gooder" capacity saving the girl and everyone else from the bad guys. Of course, a variety of aerial stunts were performed to accomplish this including fights on the wing of a plane, changing the wheel of an airplane above him while standing on the wing of a plane below, making a plane-to-automobile transfer to capture the escaping bad guy, transferring from a speeding motorcycle to a rope ladder dangling from an airplane above and more.



Charles Lindbergh's solo crossing of the Atlantic in May, 1927, which created a national obsession with aviation, coupled with the spectacular success of William Wellman's epic "Wings," which was released in August, was enough for filmmakers to realize what would sell at the box office. For some reason, Wilson got out of the producing business and was back with Universal in 1927. Could it be the studio, also wanting to cash in on the aviation craze, enticed Wilson back to the fold? Whatever the reason, he was busy starring in a new series of films -- "Three Miles Up" (which was released less than two months after "Wings") and "Sky High Saunders" in 1927 followed by "The Air Patrol" in 1928. *Variety* said the air stunts were the "only feature" of "Three Miles Up." Two months later the publication criticized "Sky

High Saunders" saying, "The airplane stuff is okay and held attention. Otherwise, blotto." In January, *Variety* called "The Air Patrol" "fourth rate stuff." Obviously, Universal wasn't lavishing time and big bucks on these films (three films were released within four months), but in all fairness to the studio, Wilson wasn't hired because of his acting abilities, either.

One can only assume that, regardless of the reviews, the films were making money for Universal because Wilson starred in three more in 1928 -- "The Cloud Dodger," "The Phantom Flyer" and "Won in the Clouds" -- and then "The Sky Skidder" in 1929. Although he doesn't mention which film, Wynne notes in his book "The Motion Picture Stunt Pilots" that Wilson almost lost his life when his plane caught fire when a fuel line broke and barely made it to the ground before the plane was consumed by the fire.

Wilson was one of several pilots who worked on Howard Hughes' "Hell's Angels" beginning in 1929. It was a tragic accident in this film that had the most profound impact on Wilson up to this point in his career.

The scene called for a plane to be flown while "lamp black" was released which resembled smoke coming from a damaged aircraft. Although several other pilots had refused to fly the plane because of its condition, Wilson volunteered but insisted that he fly alone and release the lamp black by a control in the cockpit. A mechanic named Phil Jones, who wanted to earn some extra money, convinced the director that he should accompany Wilson in the plane and release the lamp black.

Although the scene appeared to be progressing as planned, the plane began going into a spin and falling apart. Wilson told the mechanic to bail out and then bailed out himself. For some unknown reason, the mechanic stayed in the plane and was killed. Wilson said he yelled twice at Jones to bail, but no one knows if Jones heard him, was knocked out from being thrown around in the spinning plane or was pinned in by the centrifugal force. At the site of the crash, Jones was still in his place in the plane, parachute unopened.

There was an investigation for homicidal neglect, but no evidence was found to support the charge. Wilson did lose his license for a period of time, but it was restored. The criticism Wilson received for not "saving" the mechanic, especially from some of his peers, affected him deeply. Although three planes were filming the scene, and all three pilots said Wilson should not be blamed, the fearless aviator gave up motion picture stunt flying to work as an airline pilot for Maddux Air Lines.

Like so many of his contemporaries, Wilson's luck ran out in 1932. He was appearing at the National Air Races in Cleveland, and his plane was drawn into the vortex of an autogyro's blades. Both machines fell to the ground. The two occupants of the autogyro escaped without serious injury. Wilson was taken to the hospital

**with lacerations, a crushed rib cage and a fractured skull. He died a few days later on Sept. 5, 1932.**