

Flier's wife is voice of the U.S. mail

She's radio link, food buyer and friend for clients

CASCADE, Idaho — Between taking radio calls and helping load the planes, Carol Arnold explained the hectic business of flying mail and freight into some of the most rugged country in the nation.

"All the landing strips — and there are dozens and dozens of them scattered through the forest — are dirt strips. Three of them run uphill, one is located on the side of a hill and still another is not only a side-hill strip but also an uphill one.

"Almost all of them have humps or dips in them because of the nature of the ground and because nearly all of them are handmade."

Of the three U.S. mail contracts left in the West, Carol Arnold and her husband, Ray, have two. The third is flown out of McCall, 30 miles north of Cascade.

"Of course, there's still a lot of mail-plane routes up in Alaska," she said.

To be served by a mail plane, people must convince the government that their isolated cabins or ranches cannot receive mail any other way.

"We've been low bidders on the airmail contract since 1975," Carol Arnold said.

"You don't make any money just delivering mail — there's not that much. But the mail pays for the expenses and enables us to charge lower rates for passengers and freight, which is where we make a profit. We charge 10 cents a pound for freight and roughly \$30 per passenger."

While Ray Arnold and his pilots fly, she manages the office, answers the radio and shops for the supplies that are delivered by the planes.

The cost of running telephone lines in to the isolated ranches and homesteads is prohibitive, so most residents along the mail route use radios to send their urgent messages.

The Arnolds' airport-office radio can contact both the planes in flight and their customers' radios. It also has an attachment for a telephone so that radio callers, when Carol Arnold dials the number, can talk by phone to a third party.

"But everyone who has a radio out there can listen in on the conversation," Arnold noted. "There are very few secrets up in this part of the country."

Grocery lists are radioed in to her and just before the delivery date, she goes grocery shopping at nearby stores.

"At this time of year, they order mostly produce — fresh vegetables and fruit. Some order meat, but usually they're pretty self-sufficient in that. They may butcher a steer before snowfall and then home-can the meat. Or some have game meat, a deer or elk, hanging in the shed.

"Liquor is a big thing in the winter for some of the people," she said. "About half want beer and half want hard liquor. And they want cigarettes and chewing tobacco, too."

Arnold also has to shop for hardware, building materials and engine parts.

"Motor stuff gives me the most trouble shopping, because I don't understand engines or what they're talking about when they try to describe a part over the radio."

The long winter also gives the

snowbound women plenty of time to sew, and they radio in requests for dress patterns and sewing supplies. If they want ready-made clothing, they give Carol Arnold the measurements over the radio.

"I'm getting pretty good at figuring things out. A woman will describe to me what kind of wallpaper she wants, or what color paint she'd like for the bedroom. Sometimes, when someone is sick, we'll talk over the symptoms and figure out what kind of medicine to get from the drugstore."

Sometimes, though, those in the wilderness must come out.

"Ray has flown out people who have cut themselves with axes, broken arms or legs, had rafting accidents, got hurt when they've been kicked or bucked off horses," Carol Arnold said. "We even had a tubular pregnancy case once. And then there

was a woman so far gone in labor she couldn't be flown out. We had to fly a nurse in to deliver the baby."

Isolation affects people in different ways, she said. Some want to be flown out to a city now and then, usually about once a month.

"But some don't ever want to come out. As long as they've got their supplies, they're perfectly content to stay in the mountains."

It's funny, she said, to see how people react to city life after an extended period of isolation.

"Some want to see movies, some want to eat junk food, some just want an ice-cream cone. And some head straight for the bars.

"The old-timers, the ones who have been in the backcountry the longest, just want to talk to someone. They talk, talk, talk all the time. You can't shut them up," she said, laughing.

A Mailman in Idaho Needs 'Right Stuff' For Every Envelope

Neither Mountains nor Trees Keep Aviator Ray Arnold From Appointed Round

By SCOTT D. SCHUB
Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

CASCADE, Idaho—Ray Arnold drops nose of his single-engine Cessna into a cove and buzzes straight toward the face of a mountain.

Seconds from impact, he looks over his shoulder, banks hard to the left and pulls the throttle. The stall-warning buzz screams. The landing gear nearly scrapes some treetops. But he puts the plane down safely and makes a gut-jostling taxi over a pitted airstrip to seven people patiently waiting in two Jeeps and a Pontiac.

The U.S. mail has arrived at Big C Ranch.

Since 1975, Mr. Arnold has been making his appointed rounds on homemade runways located between mountains, alongside creeks and amid pine trees and livestock. Most of the two dozen stops on his weekly route require the kind of diving, circular landings that a pilot might have to use to land in the Rose Bowl. No amount of training can teach someone to do it; Mr. Arnold, in fact, has spent barely 60 hours in flight school.

River of No Return

"It takes a special kind of half-wit to fly this route," says 71-year-old Frances Z. Miller-Wisner, who in the past had to fly 17 miles to pick up her mail. The route covers 2.2 million acres of wilderness surrounding the Salmon River. But among the 100 or so backwoodsmen, ranchers and loggers that he serves, it is called the River of No Return.

For his trouble, Mr. Arnold receives \$20,000 annually from the U.S. Postal Service, which barely covers his expenses. Of course, at 20 cents a letter, the Postal Service doesn't make out too well on the route (either.) So Mr. Arnold runs an air-courier business on the side, delivering food, clothing, lumber, hunters, game carcasses, prisoners and the ill and injured, often between his postal stops.

Mr. Arnold is an aw-shucks kind of man. A 47-year-old former schoolteacher with hair and beard streaked with gray, he says that he flies for the love of it and he doesn't particularly see much glory in what he does. But he admits that he enjoys the feeling of being needed. "In any job you want to be wanted," he says. Of his customers, he adds, "they're loyal. They stay with you."

But like thousands of other American mailmen, Mr. Arnold's customers don't have much choice in the way they receive the mail. The Postal Service employs about 12,000 contractors to make deliveries in out-of-the-way places, and they use a variety of unconventional means. Donald Hingle, for example, maneuvers a diesel boat through the swamps and bayous of the Mississippi River delta. James Delaney hires a mule train for making deliveries to an Indian village on the floor of the Grand Canyon.

Mr. Arnold, one of just 34 postal-airmail pilots in the lower 48 states, has made 100,000 of his kamikaze-style landings, successfully all but twice. Once, a gust of wind blew him beyond a way into a tree. He totaled the plane, walked away unhurt. The next time, carbon monoxide leaked into his cabin from a broken exhaust pipe. He passed out, crashed, spending eight days in the hospital with a cracked vertebra.

"It makes you wonder while you're sitting in the hospital if it's worth it," he says. "But I was back up in the air within a month."

In addition to skirting the treetops, Mr. Arnold sometimes has to go to the edge of air-safety regulations to get the job done. His serious crash drew him 13 citations from the Federal Aviation Administration, including one for flying too low, an avoidable violation, he points out, in the course of a crash landing. (He was fined only \$400.)

On another occasion, Mr. Arnold had to be flown from the FAA after delivering an injured snowmobiler to the hospital in the snow. "Something that the FAA frowns upon," he says, "is that pilots, like Mr. Arnold, don't have landing lights and don't fly by instruments. (Mr. Arnold wasn't cited after directing the FAA queries to the man whose life he saved.) Mr. Arnold ordinarily confines his flying to the best conditions, navigating by his knowledge of the terrain."



Ray Arnold

Mailman flies customers and their letters

— Continued from page D1

United States, this was the final flight in a daylong series of hops to isolated landing strips in the vast, timber-covered mountains of the River of No Return Wilderness Area in central Idaho.

On Wednesdays, every two weeks, Arnold flies a delivery route out of the Cascade airport, picking up and delivering mail.

Equally important, he carries groceries and supplies as well as passengers returning to their isolated homes or "coming out" for a bit of civilized rest and recreation.

The two passengers, Holly and Jim Akenson, were flying back to their mountain cabin on the Big Creek. They run the University of Idaho's Taylor Ranch field station, studying deer, elk, mountain lions and other wildlife coexisting in the huge wilderness area.

The Akensons had been "outside" for a short vacation and now were returning to their cabin and their wildly excited dog with a load of groceries and other supplies.

"We've been here three years now," Holly Akenson said. "Almost year-round, except for vacations and for trips to seminars to give papers on our work. I'm working on my doctorate, too, and sometimes I have to fly out to do needed research in the university."

Taking their place in the plane for a flight back to Cascade were Jim Johnston and Nancy Kmonk, both of McCall, Idaho. They had fed the horses and dog while the Akenson's were gone and kept up on wildlife observations, among other work.

Johnston and Kmonk also had a lot of gear to stow in the airplane, including two sets of skies. For takeoff purposes, the aircraft wasn't much lighter than it was when it landed.

Starting the engine, Arnold rocked

this case, a confined, narrow canyon. As the end of the strip approached, Arnold pulled back on the stick and the plane jumped into the air. The stall warning squawked again as he fought to get the plane up to flying speed.

Speed and height were critical now; Arnold had a tight flight maneuver to perform. He flew back up the box canyon as far as possible to gain speed. Then, tilting the right wing up barely 25 feet from the rocky side of the canyon, he turned the plane in a tight circle, the stall squawk complaining all the while, until the opposite canyon wall flashed by a few feet away.

Still banking almost vertically, Arnold dropped the aircraft's nose slightly to gain speed, leveled out and relaxed as the plane settled into a labored but routine climb up and over the snow-covered peaks.

"We fly in anybody and anything in this part of the country," Arnold said of his charter service. "In the summer there's a lot more business: U.S. Forest Service men and equipment if there's a fire, backpackers and fishermen, ranchers, river floaters, customers staying at remote dude ranches, miners, elk hunters. You name them, and I've probably flown them."

"Flying is the only way into these mountains. There's almost no roads, but there's all kinds of old homesteads, patented mining claims, ranches and outfitter camps in there that have airstrips. And each one is different if you're landing or taking off."

As the plane flew a few hundred feet over the peaks, windblown snow could be seen clinging to one side of the pine trees, giving the forest a frosted look.

"This next landing is a hunting

one or two of them in and out. This time I'm flying in booze for them," he said.

Wine or Cognac?

"Naw. They wanted a case of Wild Turkey bourbon and case of Coors."

Arnold made a pass over the landing strip where the hunters were camped. One end of the runway was cut off by the ice-covered stream bed of the Middle Fork Salmon River, the fabled River of No Return.

Then, unexpectedly, he gunned the ship into a climb and turned toward the mountainside instead of away.

He pointed down. Yelling over the noise of the engine, he said, "Elk, a herd of elk."

Clearing a ridge, he made a half-circle and began his approach.

"Wanted to show that herd," he said by way of explanation for the sudden maneuver. "Not all of them

migrate out of here in the winter."

Arnold had more room on this strip and sailed down, hitting the icy ground with authority. Again he had to fight the wheel to stay on course.

After delivering the liquor to the appreciative hunters, Arnold roared down the runway, and, as the stall warning gave its tortured squawk, jerked his plane into the air just as the strip ended at the bank of the stream.

"I'd like to have more speed on a takeoff, but you have to get it into the air when you run out of runway," he said.

Then, rising into scattered clouds tinged pink by the setting sun, Arnold said:

"It'll be dark before we get back to the airport. There's a full moon tonight. Maybe I can show you what the snow on the mountains looks like under a full moon."