

Idaho

Senior Independent

Volume 1 Number 5

December 2005/January 2006

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Snowshoers at Craters of the Moon National Monument photo by Natalie Bartley



Carol & Ray Arnold Provide Remote Air Express Service

By Holly Endersby

Step into the office of Arnold Aviation just south of Cascade, and you're likely to hear Carol Arnold on the radio phone, talking to a back country forest service ranger or to a wife at a remote ranch along the Salmon River. Or if it's hunting season, she may be talking by satellite phone to a successful elk hunter, arranging a pick up at Chamberlain Guard Station airstrip. But if it's Tuesday night, she and partner Ray Arnold are usually busy getting the mail bags ready for

Wednesday's delivery. For thirty years, Ray and Carol Arnold have had the mail contract for the big, wild country in and around the western edge of the Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness.

"When the mail contract came up in 1975 we bid on it," relates Ray. "We've had the job ever since. We cover a huge area, from the Shepp Ranch on the main Salmon to Allison Creek and Chamberlain Basin on Wednesdays. Thursday we fly the Middle Fork of the Salmon River. We deliver mail directly to about twenty remote addresses and that number has stayed constant over the years."

Ray says to his knowl-

edge, theirs is the only direct flying mail service left in the lower 48 states.

But Arnold Aviation brings more than mail. Because most of the remote ranches and government facilities have no way to shop for food, they either call in their weekly orders to Carol by radio phone or satellite phone or put their list in with the outgoing mail bag. Groceries are delivered along with the mail the following week. In the early days Carol did most of the shopping but now, wholesalers deliver right to Arnold Aviation. But Carol still has to sort and weigh all the deliveries to ensure an efficient and safe flight.

"The business just grew like Topsy," recalls Carol. "Neither of us had any business training, but we're still here, thirty years later."

How it All Began - Ray says he got interested in flying in the early 1970s. At the time, the government gave tax credits for investments so Ray obtained his air taxi flying certificate and bought his first plane, a Piper PA Super Cruiser while he was still teaching math, chemistry, and physics at Cascade High School, the same school in which Carol taught Home Economics. He tried to juggle teaching and flying for a short while, but flying won (Continued on page 14)

There has been a lot of air beneath Carol and Ray Arnold's wings in the nearly three decades since they left their high school classrooms and started flying to provide air service to people in Idaho's remote areas. [Photo by Holly Endersby]

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just because there were no other jobs available. He was a smooth talker. He paid his taxes. Many people didn't believe the accident was his fault. After all, an employer can't always be held responsible for the behavior and decisions of his employees.

Time passed as the investigation crawled along for two long years. Bob were spending most of their time on this one case and traveling in five states to collect evidence. The region had a budget to balance and Dixon McClary, special agent in charge, had some decisions to make.

"[He] knew firsthand that EPA investigations were a lot like fishing. It was never the small

ones that got away; it was always the big ones. McClary was undoubtedly envisioning Elias getting away and having nothing to show for a costly investigation but an unbaited hook."

Although McClary ultimately agreed to continue the case, he remained less than confident that Elias would ever pay a substantial fine or serve any actual jail time. The process dragged on for another two years.

Even after a jury brought back a guilty verdict whether or not Elias would be sentenced remained up in the air. Weeks before the sentencing date, prosecutor, David Uhlmann, dis-

covered that, "a case that would stand for the proposition that environmental crimes were real crimes and those convicted would face real jail time... had suddenly become the case that could topple the Environmental Crimes Section of the Department of Justice."

The Cyanide Canary more than a well-written book, it is a lesson in how the justice system works—and how it doesn't work. It is well worth reading for all of us in the west where so much of our industry depends on how we use or abuse the environment and how we view the people who own and work in these industries.

Arnold Aviation - Continued from front cover

out. After thirteen years of teaching, he turned to flying full time. Shortly thereafter, Carol joined him as office manager, flight coordinator, and the radio link with folks in the backcountry.

Arnold Aviation Today - Now, Ray with Carol's son Mike are co-owners of the business. Mike, who also has his pilot's license, takes care of ground details and mechanical chores. Their daughter, Ronda, is an electrical engineer in Boise and does not take an active part in the business. Another pilot, 28 year old Walt Smith, shares the flying duties with Ray. Walt's wife, Rachel, makes the mail and grocery deliveries twice a week to remote areas like Yellow Pine and Big Creek that are now accessible by rough,

secondary roads. The company's three planes and delivery trucks also keep another mechanic, Chris Benford, busy all year. Ray estimates he flies an average of 800 hours a year, with about 2,800 landings. And, he claims, at age 68 he's mellowed some.

"I am more laid back than I used to be," Ray says. "I won't take the risks now that I took in the past."

The backcountry airstrips Ray frequents require the ability to land and take off on short runways, often with heavy loads. And forget about traffic control towers. It's the pilot's job to look for other aircraft as well as wildlife that might be crossing the airfield. And despite his claim of increased caution, it's only fair to note that Arnold Aviation has missed its mail run just one time in thirty years even with the notoriously tricky weather this mountainous area can dish out.

"We missed one mail run in 1988 when all the roads were washed out from the torrential rain. We were landlocked and the postal service couldn't get the mail to us," Ray remembers.

Arnold Aviation is known for its backcountry service and many elk hunters call on them for flights in and out of the nearby wilderness. When

they return with elk, it's often Carol's responsibility to run it to a local processor and ship it to out-of-state clients when the meat is ready.

"I used to have to drive it to Boise for shipment," Carol says, "but now we can send it UPS overnight from McCall."

Strange Requests, Close Calls, and Fire Duty - Over the years, Ray and Carol have served as a direct link between backcountry families and outside help.

"We've had to fly a veterinarian in a few times to work on sick animals and we've flown family pets out so they could be taken to the veterinarian as well," recalls Ray.

The strangest flight, Ray says, was the time he had to take a convicted murderer from Idaho to Arizona. The man had killed people in each state but would begin serving his first of two life sentences in Arizona.

"The prisoner was in chains, we had two armed deputies along and I had the gun I keep in the side pocket

of the plane as well," he recalls. "The guy looks around and finally says, 'I think I am out numbered.'"

Even though Arnold Aviation is a private business Ray says they are often hired for government service during fire season.

"We do what's called air attack monitoring of the fire," he explains. "We fly above the helicopters and air tankers with the person in charge of planning and executing the attack so he can see exactly what's going on and what needs to be done. We just keep flying big, right-hand circles."

Ray says that his most apprehensive take offs and landings have always been on skis.

"You just can't predict how the snow will affect the skis," he explains. "All of a sudden you have a couple hundred extra pounds of soft, sticky snow or ice on your skis that affect your drag immensely."

Ray recalls two trips into Cold Meadow deep in the Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness in his PA Super Cub as examples.

"We were landing at just over 7,000 feet and the snow turned out to be dry powder. We sunk into it as far as the belly of the plane. You couldn't tell we had any skis on it. A month later the plane only sank in 1/4 of an inch because ice had crusted the snow."

The other common hazard to the remote airstrip flying Arnold Aviation does have is deer on the runway. "We had a \$12,000 deer once at Yellow Pine bar," remembers Ray. "It ran out in front of the plane just as I was landing. It destroyed the propeller and the crankshaft."

In the thirty year history of the company, Ray says there have only been two fatalities, both pilots without passengers along.

"One was a catastrophic engine failure and the other was because the pilot got disoriented, flew up a box canyon and ran out of room."

Although both accidents happened over twenty years ago, it is clear Ray is still bothered by them. "It's very rare that mechanical failures are responsible for accidents," he explains. "Most are the result of bad weather and just a few are due to pilot error."

The Ups and Downs of Flight Service - Both Ray and Carol agree that the friendships they have developed over the years with repeat clients are a big part of why they continue to offer their air charter service, despite the heavy work load and the difficulty in getting any time off.

"It's tough to find someone to take over for us," admits Carol. But, she adds, there is a sense of offering an important community service. "For many years the only way folks in the backcountry could communicate with the outside world was by radio phone," she recalls. "And they expected me to be there for them when they needed something."

Ray says he simply enjoys flying as well as working with the people he meets doing so.

"And besides," he says with a grin, "there's nothing to keep you busy if you retire!"

And with a newly signed mail contract for four more years, neither Ray nor Carol will be retiring anytime soon.

"I guess we'll just work until we drop in our tracks," laughs Carol.



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