

Aviation and Fine Watches: A Perfect Partnership

December 17, 1903: Orville Wright lies prone upon the wing of the Wright Flyer, preparing for takeoff. The homemade engine of the little airplane pops and snarls as it spins the two 8-foot, hand-carved propellers into opaque disks. The cold, blustery wind sweeping in from the sea chills the pilot and rocks the wings of the pioneer plane. The primitive airplane built of wood and cotton fabric is about to carry Orville Wright and all of mankind into the air age.

Only three instruments were available to Orville on that very first powered, heavier-than-air flight: a tachometer, an anemometer and a watch. And as the watch faithfully measured, this momentous first flight lasted exactly 12 seconds.

From the very beginning, aviators' lives depended upon the ability to track time accurately in flight. Pioneering aviators blazing new trails across oceans and continents relied upon a primitive form of navigation that balanced estimated speed and direction of flight, against the accurate measurement of time. At the end of a long flight, those early aviators emerged from their open cockpits wind-tousled, oil-spattered, and wearing rumpled, grease-stained flying togs. But they often sported the most expensive of fine timepieces on their wrists or in their pockets, valuing the precision accuracy and reliability that these luxury timepieces afforded them.

John Alcock, who along with his partner, Arthur Whitten Brown was the first to fly the Atlantic nonstop in 1919, died in a crash just months after his famous flight. He was found in the wreckage of his plane wearing a diamond-studded wristwatch. When Amelia Earhart made her record setting flight as the first female pilot to fly the Atlantic in 1932, she was wearing a two-register chronograph wristwatch. That very same watch was carried to the International Space Station in 2010, and is now on display at the Ninety-Nines Museum of Women Pilots.

Jimmy Doolittle is considered by many aviation historians to have been the greatest of the aviation pioneers. History buffs know of Doolittle as the leader of Doolittle's Raiders, the bomber squadron that launched off the deck of an aircraft carrier in the first American strike against the Japanese mainland in 1942, as dramatized in the Hollywood movie *Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo*.

But one of Doolittle's greatest achievements occurred years earlier, in 1929, when he made the first flight in history to be flown solely by reference to instruments. Doolittle took-off, navigated a course, and landed without ever seeing the ground, completely reliant upon his precision flight instruments and, of course, an accurate timepiece. One of Doolittle's wristwatches, a gold-plated watch that incorporated 3 miniature compasses in the face, is now part of a collection at the National Air and Space Museum in Washington D.C.

Even as the air age advanced into the space age, “the clock is running” post-launch report to mission control by the astronaut in command confirmed the functioning of that all-important instrument, the timepiece.

Golden Age Aviators Depended Upon Alpina Watches

The 1920’s and 1930’s were considered the Golden Age of aviation. Pilots like Alcock and Brown, Earhart, and Doolittle achieved worldwide fame for their aeronautical achievements, setting records for speed, distance and altitude on a regular basis. Nomadic pilots known as barnstormers carried the excitement of aviation to small towns across the land, hopping thrill-seeking passengers from cow pastures and farm fields.

Many pilots of the time relied upon Alpina watches. Several Alpina models in the 1920’s and 1930’s were highly popular among pilots. And Alpina watches were held in particular high regard by military aviators, with Alpina designated as the supplier of watches for the air forces of several nations during this time.

Pioneering Partners

Alpina, founded 20 years before the Wright Brother’s first flight, was coming into its own as a world-class watchmaker when another famous company was getting its start. Cessna Aircraft Company, founded in 1927 by Clyde Cessna and Victor Roos, grew to become the largest aircraft producer on the planet. Since its inception, Cessna has produced more than 190,000 aircraft, more than any other manufacturer in history. One Cessna model alone, the 172 Skyhawk, has been produced in greater numbers than any other aircraft model.

Just like Alpina, Cessna continues to be a cutting-edge company, a leader in its field. Cessna’s Citation line of business jets has been in production for more than 40 years, and remains the world’s best-selling line of business jets. And Cessna’s new Skycatcher light sport plane is a state-of-the-art leader in the field of recreational aviation.

It’s fitting, then, that Alpina and Cessna have teamed up as marketing partners, each delivering superior, elegant, cutting-edge designs to the aviation community.

A Tradition Continues...

With its new Startimer collection, Alpina continues the tradition of supplying fine watches to the world’s aviators. The Startimer line offers pilots the accuracy and dependability they require in the cockpit, along with the sophistication and elegance that are so valued outside of the cockpit. Models such as the automatic chronograph AL-860 combine the clean, classic beauty of Golden Age watch designs with modern, precision engineering and manufacturing.

The world of aviation has changed considerably since the days of the early pioneer pilots. Daredevil pilots and their grease-stained flying togs have been replaced with today’s

affluent and sophisticated pilots, flying aircraft that offer levels of safety, comfort and performance of which the early aviators could only have dreamt. But aviators still rely upon accurate and dependable timepieces. That hasn't changed, and never will.

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