

# THE CANYONVILLE MAIL PLANE CRASH

By Ron Bartley

As Grant Donaldson, pilot, approached from the south, he saw low clouds hanging over the mountains north of Canyon Creek Pass. It was Tuesday morning, October 2, 1928. As an airmail pilot for the Pacific Air Transport Company, flying the route between Portland and Oakland-San Francisco, this was a familiar weather pattern. He knew he ahead a difficult decision to make.

If he descended into Canyon Creek Canyon below the clouds, he could probably continue down the canyon and into the South Umpqua River Valley, which is usually clear. If he continued northward over the cloud covered mountains, he might eventually be forced to descend through the clouds, low on fuel, and would not know if clear sky were present below.

The dilemma facing Grant Donaldson was further complicated by the presence of a passenger seated in the enclosed cabin along with the mail sacks of the Boeing-40-C mail plane. There could be no thought of parachuting to safety if trapped on top of the cloud layer.

The decision was made. He entered Canyon Creek Canyon at the Pass, flying the big biplane in the narrow space between the treetops below, and the low clouds and fog above. As he flew down the canyon, he looked downward from his open cockpit to keep Pacific Highway in sight. As he approached the Pioneer Bridge, two and a half miles from the Pass, it happened.

Excerpts from the *Roseburg News-Release* told the following:

## MAIL PLANE CRASHES AT CANYONVILLE

*A Pacific Air Transport company plane flying from Medford to Portland, crashed this morning on the summit of Canyon Mountain, 9 miles south of Canyonville, seriously injuring H.G. Donaldson, the pilot. A passenger, said to be B.P. Donovan of Los Angeles, was reported to be missing. Donaldson was brought to Roseburg in a semiconscious condition, suffering from bruises, concussion and burns, and was taken to Mercy Hospital.*

*The accident occurred about 10 o'clock this morning when the plane, flying at a small elevation because of low hanging clouds, was caught in shifting fog in the canyon south of Canyonville and crashed.....*

*Despite his serious injuries the pilot made his way to the highway, about a hundred yards away where he was picked up in a semiconscious condition. He gasped about incoherent details of the wreck before lapsing into an unconscious state. Men were immediately sent out to the scene to seek for the passenger who was supposed to have been in the ship at the time of the wreck.*

*Rev. H.C. Messerli, Lutheran minister at Albany, who with is wife and two children on the way home from a trip to Michigan, was nearing Pioneer Bridge from the south at the time of the wreck and heard the crash as the machine struck the hillside. He thought that a car ahead of him had hit the bridge railing, but as he came down to the bridge he heard someone calling and saw Donaldson running out of the brush.*

*"The flier was a mass of blood," Rev. Messerli said. "He did not seem to be so badly cut, but the flesh of his face, hands and feet was terribly burned and swollen. He did not talk coherently, but kept muttering about the fog forcing him down. We took him to Canyonville and stopped at the drug store, and a Dr. Patterson was called to treat him. They said they would get an ambulance from Roseburg and so I came on."*

*Donaldson was unable to talk after reaching Canyonville except to mutter incoherently of the wreck. A report was immediately sent into the Pacific Air Transport company and an answer received at once requested news of the passenger, D>P. Donovan of Los Angeles. This was the first information that the pilot was not alone in the ship. Men immediately hastened for the scene but spent considerable time vainly seeking the wrecked ship.*

*While men were searching for the wreck of the plane and passenger, people in Canyonville devoted their attention to caring for the injured pilot.*

*Information received from Portland was to the effect that L.G. Hubble, division superintendent of the Pacific Air Transport company, left Vancouver, Washington, for Roseburg immediately after being notified of the accident. He plans to see Donaldson at the hospital and take charge for the search for the passenger.*

*The place where the accident occurred is one of the worst portions of the coast airway. The mountains are high, and when there is much fog the canyons are filled with low hanging clouds that completely*

*obscure vision. Searchers for the wrecked plane reported to Canyonville that the fog was so dense at 1 o'clock that they had not been able to find the wreckage, and had secured no trace of the passenger, who, it was reported, might have been killed in the crash.*

*ROSEBURG NEWS-REVIEW, October 3, 1928*

*The body of D.P. Donovan, of Los Angeles, passenger in the ill-fated P.A.T. mail plane wrecked yesterday south of Canyonville, was found late yesterday afternoon in the cabin of the burned plane. The body was charred beyond all recognition, the extremities being burned completely away. Searchers were greatly handicapped by brush and fog, and did not find the plane until several hours after the accident. Pilot Grant Donaldson who was terribly burned about the face and hands was taken to Portland yesterday evening in a plane piloted by Lt. J.R. Cunningham.*

*Donovan apparently was killed by the impact when the plane struck the mountainside. At least it is quite certain that he was knocked unconscious before being burned.*

*The plane was finally discovered by the fact that it had mowed the tops from several large trees before it crashed on the hillside. Noticing the broken tree tops searchers made their way to the spot where they found the wrecked plane and the body of the passenger.*

Pacific Air Transport inaugurated airmail service between Seattle and Los Angeles in September, 1926. At the time of the Canyonville crash, the company had experienced at least three other mail plane accidents. It was being operated as a division of Boeing Air Transport, Inc., and eventually became part of United Airlines in 1934.

Grant Donaldson recovered from his injuries, but didn't resume his career as a pilot.<sup>1</sup> The severe facial burns he sustained while trying to get his passenger out of the burning plane after the crash, were with him the rest of his life. By 1931, he was the Pacific Air Transport station manager in Bakersfield, California. He retired ca. 1969 as a dispatcher for United Air Lines, spending most of his career in the San Francisco area. He was very well liked, and highly respected by his fellow employees. An unspoken agreement existed between Grant Donaldson and close associates not to discuss the crash; consequently, relatively few details are known today.

Most of the wreckage at the crash site has long since vanished. It remains an interesting, but little known event in the early history of the U.S. Airmail Service, and the Umpqua region.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Information regarding Grant Donaldson was obtained from current and retired United Airline Personnel.

<sup>2</sup> Any Additional information would be welcomed by the writer, especially regarding the dispersal of the wreckage after the crash. Please contact: Ron Bartley, P.O. Box 3069, Ashland, OR 97520, (503) 482-8930.