Clarion Review

Biography

The Heart of a Pilot: Exploits as a Boy, an Alaskan Bush Pilot, and an Airline Pilot
Thomas Lee Bangart
Xlibris
978-1-4500-6163-6
Three Stars (out of Five)

It's not quite fair to compare The Heart of a Pilot to Ernest K. Gann's superb Fate is the Hunter, but readers who enjoy aviation books will close Pilot with an appreciation for their similarities. Everyone who enjoys reading about airplanes and pilots wants the thrill of adventure, and Thomas Lee Bangart delivers—especially in recounting his escapades as an Alaskan bush pilot in the decade after World War II.

Bush flying in Alaska during that era wasn't for the faint of heart. It was all seat-of-the-pants navigation; small, underpowered aircraft hanging on fabric covered wings; and landing on snow and ice when water, gravel, or mud were unavailable. Bangart writes, "There's no way I could fly up through the clouds that were above me, because at that time I had neither instrument flight training nor proper instruments in my airplane."

But the near-misses didn't end there. Bangart eventually earned a commercial pilot license and took a job first with Cordova Airline in Alaska and later with Eastern Airlines in the continental United States. He flew the venerable DC-3 in Alaska and more modern Convair and Marten aircraft at Eastern as a co-pilot and flight engineer. "My closest encounter with a fatal accident happened while working as a flight engineer," he writes. "…a military B-52 descended down on top of us from behind. Their left wingtip missed the right pilot's window by less than two feet…The co-pilot was so startled that he let out a yell and would have jumped out of his seat, if it had not been for his snug seat belt.

Don't expect introspective and self-analytical prose here. Bangart's writing is straightforward, marred occasionally by misplaced punctuation and other minor errors. He is, nevertheless, a skillful storyteller, a man who readers might like to share a cup of coffee with in order to ask a probing question or two. Some readers may be disappointed that this memoir generally covers only Bangart's exploits as a pilot and does not expand on other parts of his life.

Born shortly before the great 1929 economic collapse, Bangart lost his father early, was raised by his widowed mother, married young, and set off to find his fortune in the Alaskan territory.

In Alaska he worked construction, but there's no description of his money management and business skill that allowed him to buy an airplane and start his bush pilot career. Later, when he begins flying for Eastern Airlines, Bangart mentions the low pay of that era, but readers soon learn that he earned enough to accumulate a herd of registered cattle and buy a ranch in his home state of Montana. No doubt he was schooled by his Depression-era upbringing: Work hard, take care of your own, and don't brag.

The Heart of a Pilot is a worthy effort, one that aviation buffs will certainly enjoy.

Gary Presley