Interview Long had a long and distinguished career as a pilot in WW II, including the Flying Tigers, and in civilian aviation, principally in the Arctic region. He is best known for the pioneering and famous flight in late 1971, the “Crossroads Flight,” that was the first solo flight, some 36,000 miles, around the world and from Pole to Pole. Remarkably, in the early months of WW II, he enlisted in the United States Navy on his 15th birthday, and after completing boot camp, he attended both Aviation Radio School and Radar School in San Diego. He was soon promoted to Second Class Petty Officer, and saw combat in the South Pacific before his 16th birthday. Later he served aboard VP-102, a Coronado four-engine seaplane, and learned the basics of celestial navigation. His assignments included stops at the Marshall and Marianas Islands. At age 17 he was promoted to First Class Petty Officer, and on his second overseas tour he visited Okinawa, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, and China. The war ended on September 2, 1945, and having just turned 18 he was discharged on January 6, 1946. He married Marie on May 12, 1946. Long enrolled at UCLA to study electrical engineering, but left after three semesters to serve as a radio operator, and later as the senior navigator, with the Flying Tiger airline. Later he served with Alaska Airlines and made numerous flights across the North Pacific, and to various destinations in Alaska. Many of his flights landed on the smooth ice of northern Alaskan rivers and lakes. In those days the airline lacked dispatchers, and flights would land often with no advance notice to the airport. In 1949 Long returned to the Flying Tiger line, and spent most of his remaining career with them. He was hired as a pilot in 1952, and was nurtured by his fellow pilots who did everything they could to instruct him properly. He flew mostly C-46s for the next five years chiefly in Alaska, the Aleutians, and Canada. Once the DEW (Distant Early Warning) line was established, Long flew out of the Central Sector in Canada from Peary Point to Shepherd’s Bay. Within Canada the airline was known as the Queen Charlotte Airlines, and the pilots, including Long, all of whom were Americans, had to obtain Canadian pilot’s licenses. Various sites were established for DEW line operations. All had to be accessible to water, and they were supplied in part by a CAT and by sleds which went tents, fuel, food, and other necessary supplies overland. The original plan was to establish Early Warning Detection sites about 100 miles apart. If necessary, auxiliary sites were established in between the main sites to detect any low flying intruders. In constructing the sites the CAT drivers scraped out crude runways of 3500 to 4000 feet, and marked their location with fuel drums placed every 100 yards. The drivers had no radios since radio beacons had yet to be established. Visibility was difficult in an all-white environment and white-outs were not
In the early days, after wandering about once or twice for some time looking for a new runway, Long and Robert Sharp made the first landing ever at Shepherd’s Bay. Another pilot, Bill Patterson, once “landed out in the middle of nowhere” and had to dump his load so that he could take off empty. In time further supplies, including radios, would be sent in to the new DEW sites. Pilots flew without compasses since they would not work so close to the Magnetic North Pole. Nor was there any weather forecasting so the pilots had little idea what they were flying into. When the temperature dropped to 35 below zero all flights were grounded. Often the oil pressure indicators would not work in such extreme weather conditions. At such times, it was especially important to know how to take care of your airplane, and know how to dress properly. Navigating was always the single biggest problem the airmen faced. Out on the ice there were no landmarks. Everything was white. Since Long was a trained navigator as well as a pilot his services were always much in demand. Many flights had no electronic aids to guide them. Long relates that pilots were flying illegally all the time. “We were over-grossed, overweight, doing things that broke every rule and regulation in the book. But, it was the only way you could get it done.” But the pilots were literally risking their lives. The Flying Tiger Line, known in Canada as the Queen Charlotte Airlines, never lost a man, although another airline, the Associated Airlines, lost two airplanes with their crews. Flights were timed so that they would always arrive while there was some light. Once pilots landed they typically spent just enough time on the ground, an hour or two, to unload their cargo. They had to be extremely careful in warmer weather not to spill any gasoline or oil on the ice since it would create dangerous sinkholes. Eventually a small preliminary crew of 10 to 15 people was stationed on the site to construct the base. The ongoing flights brought them fuel, supplies, tents, and later modular sections of buildings. Once warmer weather came the ships could reach the bases and deliver further supplies. Furthermore, as runways were constructed to 5000 or longer feet, the Air Force was able to fly in the large C-124s. By then lights and beacons had been created for the landing sites. Long and his fellow pilots flew all over the enormous expanse of Central Canada, including Great Slave Lake, the James Ross Strait, Cambridge Bay, Yellow Knife, Peary Point, Boothia, and many others. The Central Sector, in fact, encompassed most of Canada. Long continued to fly for some time with the Flying Tiger line, but his assignments changed and he flew mostly in the United States, and he made some flights to Europe. He also flew with the celebrated pilot, Bill Odum, who had flown around the world in a B-26. Odum’s idea of flying around the world from pole to pole in a B-29. But Odum’s death in a plane crash ended that venture, but the idea persisted. No one had ever done it before from pole to pole. At the same time, Amelia Earhart was proposing to fly around the world at the equator. Such a flight would be the first by a woman around the world, and the first by any pilot at the equator. She promoted and financed her flight through numerous public lectures, and the fact that she would set some world records. Long decided he could do the same for his own flight. He favored a Piper Navajo, and estimated he could make the flight in 1970 dollars for about $50,000. The Flying Tigers and Delco Electronics helped refit the Navajo. The flight was sanctioned by the Federation Aeronautique Internationale and the National Aeronautics Association. To claim a proposed world record, it must be sanctioned before the fact by these associations. If achieved, the record is only accorded official status once the claimant has paid a substantial cash payment. Long set 15 world records on his flight, but could only afford to claim three of them. The cost then was $600 per record. The three records he set that were officially claimed were fastest solo flight around the world in a Class CE airplane over the North and South Poles, a new record from Pole to Pole, and a record from the Equator over a Pole to the Equator. The flight around the world from Pole to Pole started at Fairbanks, Alaska on November 5, 1971. Long next flew over the North Pole to Stockholm, Sweden. Since all directions are south heading away from the North Pole, Long had to use celestial navigation (since compasses would not work) to find the “right south.” He made precise calculations using the positions of the sun, moon, and stars. His next stop was London where he was greeted by his wife, Marie. Some repairs were made to his radio on this stop. His next stop was Accra, Ghana. Each stop was very busy with refueling, flight planning, finding a hotel, meeting the press, and getting a good night’s sleep. If full, the fuel tanks provided fuel for about 24 hours, but Long sometimes filled them only half full to keep down the weight. Fortunately the plane performed well throughout the flight. The next stop was Recife, Brazil, where once again he met by his wife, Marie, and also 150 reporters. Here some crucial and expensive repairs were made to his Inco computer system. The final stop in South America was at Punta Arenas, Chile, on the Strait of Magellan. Hotel accommodations there proved less than ideal, but somehow Long managed a good night’s sleep. He was wary of the local food, and so he consumed some canned baby food that proved to be surprisingly unobjectionable. On board he carried enough emergency supplies to last him six weeks. On November 21 he flew over Cape Horn and headed straight to the South Pole. Initially the weather was perfect, but once he approached Antarctica he was advised through the American Navy station at Palmer Peninsula that the weather was marginal at the Pole and worse at McMurdo. “Don’t waste any time,” he was told. Previously he had established good contacts with the Navy through Admiral Arlie Burke, and had received unusual official permission to make the flight. Indeed the Navy went further and dispatched a ski-equipped C-130 to the Pole to escort or rescue Long, should that be necessary. Again, he was warned by radio contact “Don’t go sightseeing.” Weather conditions were closing down McMurdo. He was flying at 13,000 feet, but the C-130 reminded Long that soon he would encounter the Queen Maud Range of mountains up to 18,000 feet. No doubt he knew this already since his preparations for the flight had been meticulous, but he was reassured by the added support. Fortunately he cleared the Pole and the mountains, flew easily over the Beardmore and Liv Glaciers, and crossed the Ross Ice Shelf to McMurdo Sound. All the time he was “having a ball.” He arrived safely at McMurdo before the foul weather hit, and met the C-130 crew in the mess hall. He thanked them for escorting him, but allowed that “actually I think I knew where I was better than they did.” Just one more leg of the first flight ever from Pole to Pole. At McMurdo he visited briefly the nearby Scott Station that was staffed by New Zealanders. They gave him a tour, and took him down a crevasse. This bothered him more than flying solo over the Pole. After only 18 hours at McMurdo he refueled and continued his journey. His INS navigational system worked very well His next flight was the first solo flight ever made from Antarctica to Australia passing en route over the South Magnetic Pole. He had now been to the South Pole and the South Magnetic Pole, and the North Pole and the North Magnetic Pole (on an earlier flight). “A real busman’s holiday.” He was also the first man to cross the Antarctic Continent solo via the South Pole and land on the continent. A flight that may have been his greatest claim to fame. His wife, Marie, as well as numerous newspaper, radio, and television reporters, greeted him in Sydney. By now the Elgen Long flight from Pole to Pole was front page news worldwide. After rechanneling all his radios for Pacific frequencies, he stopped at Fiji and Howland Island, the place where Amelia Earhart disappeared. He crossed the Equator at the 180th Meridian, the International Date Line. Since at that point all meridians converge, the 180th Meridian could be thought of as both the crossroads of geography and the crossroads of time, or even the four corners of the world. Indeed, Long named his famous flight the “Crossroads Flight.” At Wake Island he was the last guest ever to stay at the Pan American hotel since the tiny island was being abandoned as a regular stop for trans-Pacific flights. He also mailed several first class post cards that he received after his flight to his wife and to his children in New York. Some of those post cards were still uncashed when he arrived in New York. He continued on to Tokyo, his 7th continent on his flight. He had planned to fly directly from Tokyo to Honolulu, but uncertain weather forecasts forced him to return back to Wake Island, and from there on to Honolulu. San Francisco was the next and final stop. He was met there by some 300 people including Marie, and the actress, Shirley Temple. Long’s children were invited to go to school for the day with Shirley Temple’s children. The flight had been so successful that Long was sorry when it ended. Elgen Long had flown 36,000 miles, the longest sanctioned solo flight ever made. Honors and accolades followed. He received the Gold Air Medal, and in Paris he received the Federation Aeronautique Internationale Gold Air Medal. Piper Aircraft commissioned a film about the flight, “A Man, a Plane, and a Dream.” Fortunately he was able to recoup all of the $50,000 he and Marie had invested in the flight, funds all privately raised. A
Later project was to write a book on the Amelia Earhart expedition. Major Topics Long’s enlistment in the Navy Air Force in WW II Long’s career as an Arctic pilot principally with Flying Tiger Airline in Canada First solo Pole-to-Pole flight of 1971 around the world Brief comments about stops in seven continents during the famous flight Comments about planes and equipment of the era.

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