



Sons of Norway
HERITAGE PROGRAMS



MiniPresentation#59

BEN EIELSON

BEN EIELSON

One of the aviation pioneers that the world seems to have forgotten was Ben Eielson. His grandparents came from Telemark, Norway, and settled in Wisconsin. Their son moved to Hatton, North Dakota, where he became an influential business man and where Ben was born in 1897.

Ben got his first flying experience in the newly started **Army Air Service**. He was also involved in exhibition flying during those early years, before he settled down to study law at Georgetown University in Washington. It was here he met a congressman from Alaska and became smitten with his great visions for the future of the region. Eielson went to Fairbanks in 1922 to become principal at the local high school. But he could not stay away from planes. He started to run supplies to remote mining camps and to bring sick or injured miners and trappers to the hospital. He also contracted to fly the mail to all the remote outposts in Alaska and acquired fame for his skill in flying under difficult and severe conditions.

At this time, arctic explorer and cartographer **Hubert Wilkins** took note of Eielson's abilities. Over the next several years the two of them struggled under the harsh arctic conditions and had many serious encounters. One time over the lonely reaches near Siberia the plane developed problems. A storm was brewing and it was getting dark. Ben guided the plane down through a blizzard—only to discover the next morning that they had landed on a tiny ice floe and were unable to get out of there. Leaping from floe to floe, they fought their way through the storm with the temperature dropping down to 70° below. It took them two weeks to reach the nearest outpost.

Incidents like this one would have scared off most people, but by the next spring Eielson and Wilkins were at it again. This time they made a successful flight over the arctic region, continued past **Greenland** and flew out across the Atlantic. Twenty-one hours and 2200 miles later they landed safely on the island of Svalbard—or Spitsbergen—north of Norway. This was a fantastic achievement in that time. The year was 1928, one year after Lindbergh crossed the Atlantic to Paris.

They received a royal welcome in Norway. Eielson was considered almost a native son and received both medals and honors. Wilkins and Eielson went on to triumphant receptions in Paris, Berlin, Amsterdam and London. They were welcomed in New York with a ticker-tape parade and were received by President Hoover who awarded Ben Eielson the **Congressional Medal of Honor**.

The next summer Eielson and Wilkins went to the South Pole. They were the first to explore that region by plane. But Ben wanted to return to Alaska since he was now in a position to realize his dream: to start an Alaska Airline. Then came word that a ship was frozen in off the coast of Siberia. The lives of fifteen people were at stake. Ben and several other pilots went to the rescue. On their first trip they brought out some of the people and cargo. On the second trip the weather became fierce. In the November blizzard that whipped the Siberian coast, Ben Eielson crashed into a hill some distance from the ship and the people he had set out to rescue.

Eielson did more than any one man to advance aviation in Alaska and the polar region. The United States Air Force named its airfield and installations in Fairbanks after him. Yet aviation history books and encyclopedias do not mention Ben Eielson today. **He deserves better!**