Ely Air Lines –

The Clipper and the Cowboy

by Mike Ely and Linda Street-Ely

Imagine crawling through the inside of an airplane wing, four enormous engines roaring nearby, with thousands of feet of empty air between you and the Atlantic Ocean.

It's 1939, and this is no ordinary airplane. It's a Boeing 314 Clipper, one of Pan American Airways' magnificent flying boats. And for 25-year-old assistant flight engineer, Shelby Kritser, of Amarillo, Texas, keeping those engines running is part of the job.

While passengers relax in spacious cabins, enjoying fine meals and sleeping accommodations, the flight engineer has other concerns. Oil levels, fuel systems, engine temperatures, and mechanical checks that can't wait until landing.

This aircraft's wings are thick, and built into them are narrow passageways leading to the engines. From there, a flight engineer can inspect equipment and make certain repairs while the airplane is still flying. Imagine opening an access panel and realizing that just beyond the metal skin lies nothing but rushing air all around and cold, raging ocean waves below. Shelby has come a



long way from the ranch country of the Texas Panhandle.

Born in Amarillo in 1914, he grew up fascinated by airplanes, building models before learning to fly. He first flew solo at 19, studied engineering at the University of Texas, and joined Pan American Airways in 1937.

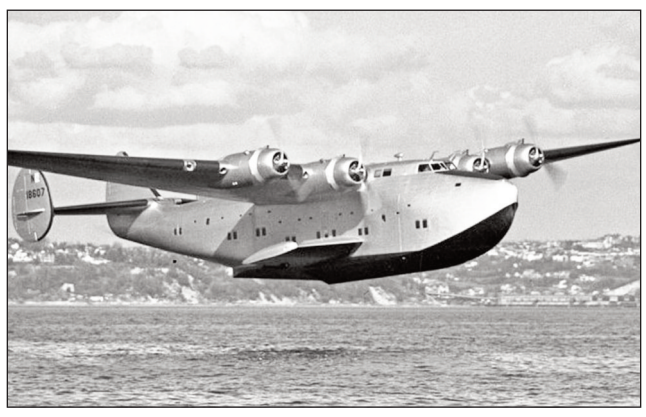
In just two years, he's advanced from second assistant to assistant flight engineer. His next Atlantic trip will bring another promotion: flight engineer aboard one of the most sophisticated aircraft in the world.

By July 1939, Shelby has completed four round trips across the Atlantic. Twice aboard the Yankee Clipper, once aboard the Atlantic Clipper, and once aboard the Dixie Clipper. Two of these journeys followed the northern route through Newfoundland, Ireland, and England; two took the southern route through the Azores and Portugal. At a time when most people still cross the pond by ship, Shelby has already crossed the Atlantic eight times by air. These flights are helping to establish an entirely new era of international travel. But beneath the luxury and glamour is the demanding work of the engineers who keep the great flying boats operating, hour after hour, far from land.

And now Shelby is coming home. The Amarillo Globe reports that he's taking a two-week vacation with his family, eager to return to ranch life after spending so much time flying over water. He's also looking forward to flying a small airplane again. It's quite a contrast, from enormous flying boats crossing oceans to a little airplane over the Texas plains. Within weeks, Europe will be at war, and aviation will enter another extraordinary era.

In the years to come, Shelby will establish Tradewind Airport in his hometown, creating a place for pilots and business travelers who would shape aviation's postwar future. The young man who helped connect continents will find another way to bring people together.

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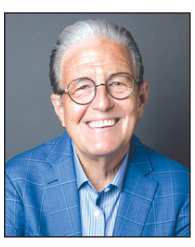


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