

August 21, 2022

Grand Canyon History Tidbit by Kim Besom

100th anniversary of the first airplane to land in the Grand Canyon.

In honor of National Aviation Week, a tidbit to mark the **100th anniversary of the first airplane to land in the Grand Canyon.**

By August 1922, a handful of planes had flown over and through the Grand Canyon, but the air currents were so squirrely that most considered it a risky endeavor. In a 1922 article by A. Gaylord, *In Mile Deep Tailspin Into Bowels of Earth, Former Lincoln Flyer Lands in Grand Canyon*, the Canyon air currents were described as being much like river currents, “Mountains, canyons, cliffs, rocks and trees, ravines and valleys disturb the air currents almost exactly the same as water is affected when flowing over and around huge boulders, cliffs and other obstacles, and the air has its eddies, whirlpools, up currents and down currents; its airfalls like the waterfalls.”

World War I flyer and stunt pilot from Kansas, Royal “R.V.” Thomas, was paid \$100 by Ellsworth Kolb to land his plane on the Tonto Plateau. Kolb planned to accompany him as a passenger, and film the stunt.

According to Gaylord, Thomas first did a reconnaissance of his Canyon landing site. He left his airplane in Williams, took the train to Grand Canyon, then rode down to Indian Garden with a mule party. “At Indian Gardens Thomas left the tourists and struck out across the valley and soon found a likely looking spot [for a landing]... that was fairly level and about 60x450 feet. The following day he obtained permission from Colonel Crosby, Park Superintendent, to attempt the landing, and the latter sent a park ranger down with Thomas to mark the landing place and to estimate the time necessary to clear and put it in shape for a landing. This was accomplished by five men in one day.”

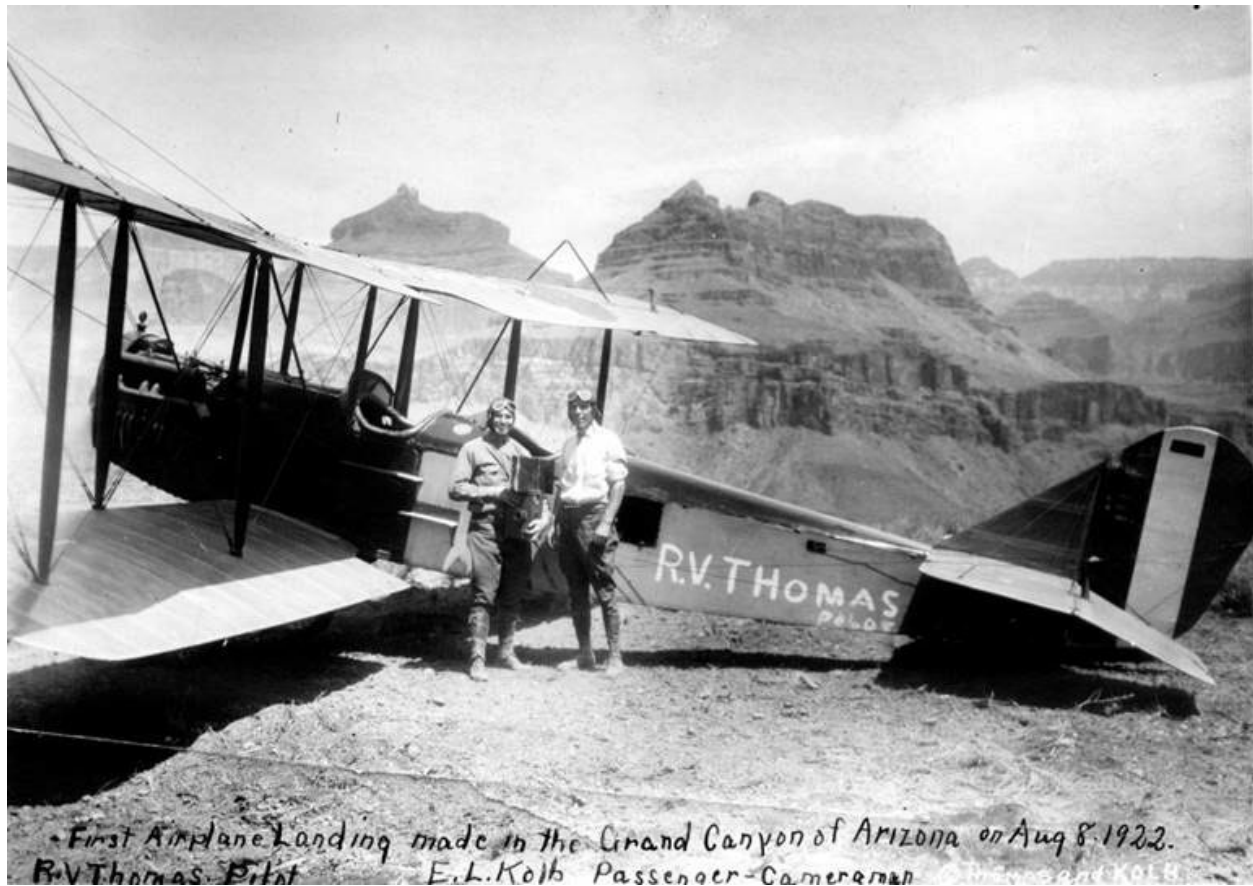
On the morning of August 8, Thomas and Kolb took off from the Williams airport, and followed the railway line to the Grand Canyon. After a quick loop over the Canyon to test the air currents, “flying low over the heads of the on-lookers about the rim, [Thomas] headed straight as a bullet for the edge of the crater... Up to the rim, and then, with a throttled motor, he dropped slowly over and down- down into the very bowels of the earth!”



GRCA 31366: RV Thomas flight into the Grand Canyon, August 8, 1922

“A group of pygmies on toy donkeys steals gradually into view under the nose of the plane. It is a party of tourists on their way to the bottom. A wave of the hand and an instant later they are looking down upon the airplane- it is far below them. Do they envy his easy, graceful descent? Or do they prefer the surefootedness of their tiny donkeys?”

Gaylord continued, “Not content with this wonderful achievement- dropping over the rim of this monstrous freak of nature in a machine made to climb up and away from the earth instead of down into it,” Thomas began to climb his plane upward, instead of landing as planned. In an OI’ Pioneer article titled *The First Flight into the Grand Canyon*, author Bill Suran, explained that the wind direction had changed, preventing a reliable landing on the first attempt, and that Thomas “advised Kolb to loosen his seatbelt and prepare to jump.” The next landing attempt, however, was successful, and “the plane rolled to within ten feet of the edge of the plateau and stopped.”



#05255: FIRST AIRPLANE LANDING IN THE GRAND CANYON, AUGUST 8, 1922. R.V. THOMAS & ELLSWORTH KOLB. KOLB PHOTO

The winds prevented Thomas from taking off that day, so he and Kolb headed up the Bright Angel Trail, only to hear that a gust of wind had buffeted the plane and broken the tail skid. The next morning Thomas repaired the damage with some wire and an automotive spring, before attempting the return trip to the rim. Gaylord again: "Getting a short but fairly good run for it, Thomas banked the plane steeply against the wind and began to climb in very small circles, keeping always within easy gliding distance of the landing spot. After circling the small field in this manner until the plane gathered speed, he gradually widened the circles, reaching the rim at 10:17. Thus it required five minutes to climb the mile from bottom to top." That marked the first landing AND subsequent take-off of an airplane from within the Grand Canyon depths.



#05235: RV THOMAS & AIRPLANE AT PLATEAU POINT, WITH FRED HARVEY MULES, AUGUST 1922. FRED HARVEY PHOTO

According to Suran, Thomas was paid by the Fred Harvey Company- the Kolbs' main business competitor at Grand Canyon- to repeat the stunt 10 days later, with another photographer aboard to film promotional footage for the company. This footage was shown in theaters across the country.

Postscript: Aviator R.V. Thomas only lived another 6 years after his Grand Canyon first. According to the online Motorsport Memorial, he and his mechanic were both killed May 9, 1928, when Thomas' plane crashed near Teterboro, NJ, during a speed test. The plane went into a dive when a wing came loose. Only a week before, Thomas had set a solo flying endurance record of 35 hours, 25 minutes and 8 seconds.