



# A True Original



*Kathleen Hanser tells the colourful story of American aviatrix Pancho Barnes, who broke air speed records, flew in Hollywood films and was the toast of all the top test pilots*

**Above right**  
The always-exuberant Pancho Barnes in typically manly clothing and her trademark beret.  
ALL AFTC HISTORY OFFICE/BARNES ESTATE

**Below**  
Her purchase of the Travel Air Mystery Ship aircraft made Pancho the envy of many.

**P**ancho Barnes adhered to the profile of a 'man's man' in every way but one – she was a woman. She smoked cigars, always wore trousers, preferred hanging out with men, swore like a sailor, drank with the best of them, craved adventure and feared nothing.

Born Florence Leontine Lowe in 1901, Pancho grew up in southern California, USA. Her grandfather, Thaddeus S C Lowe – who created President Lincoln's Union Army Balloon Corps during the American Civil War, and was later known as the father of US military aerial reconnaissance – took her to one of the country's first airshows when she was a child. He told Florence that everyone would be flying aeroplanes when she grew up and that she would be a flier, too. It turned out he was right, and in a big way.

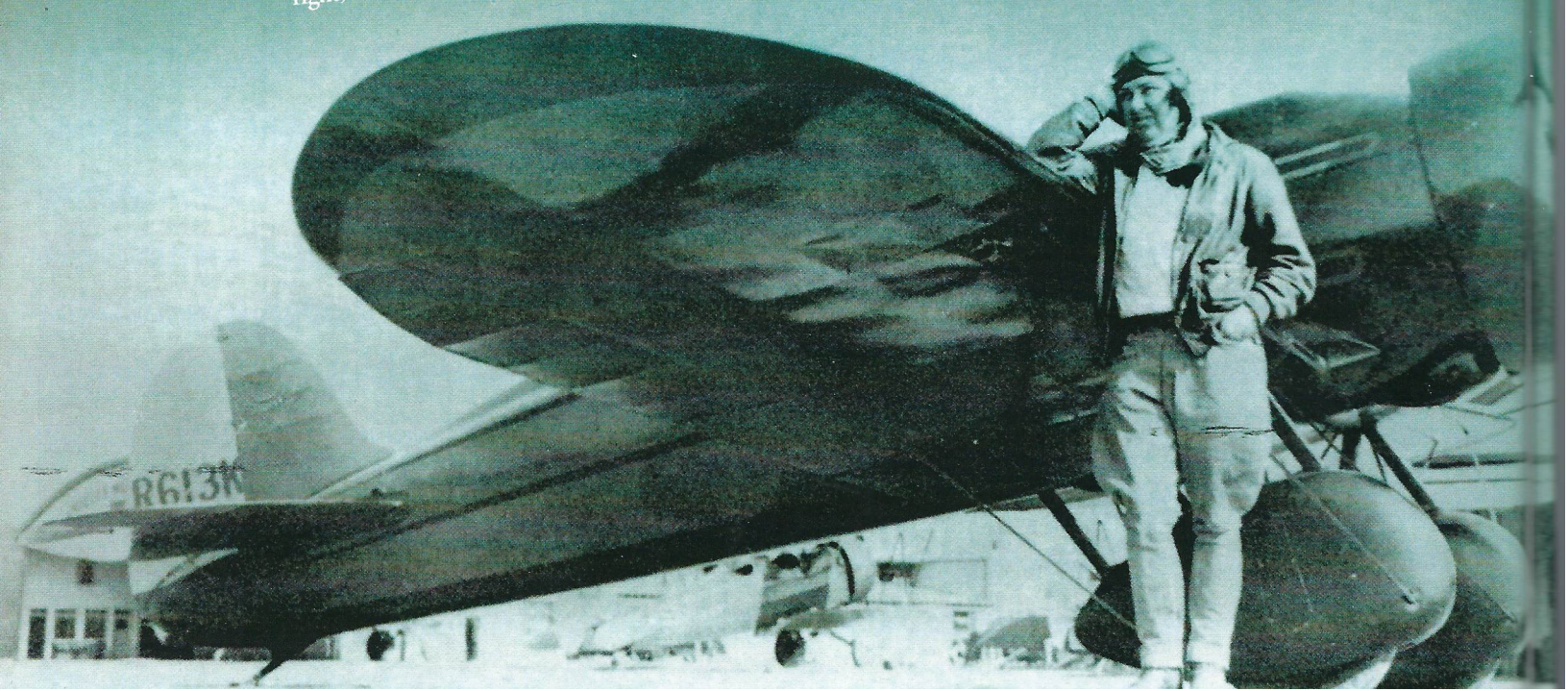
## ALSO KNOWN AS...

The surname Barnes came through an arranged marriage to a preacher when Florence was 19 (they were separated for most of their wedlock), but she acquired the moniker 'Pancho' during an adventure in Mexico, when she commented that her travelling companion, riding a horse, looked like Don Quixote (the titular character from the famous Spanish novel). He replied that Florence, riding a burro (donkey), must be Pancho, Quixote's squire. Florence pointed out that he meant 'Sancho Panza' and not 'Pancho,' but they both preferred the ring of the latter. From then on, she went by the name Pancho Barnes.

In 1928, Pancho decided it was time to learn to fly and she asked her cousin's instructor, Ben Caitlin,

to teach her. A cantankerous World War One veteran, Caitlin told her he'd had 33 women students previously and not one had soloed. She was not deterred, although their first 'lesson' together was a real hair-raiser. Caitlin thought he could scare her away from her quest to become a pilot, but he didn't know Pancho. He took her through the most rigorous aerobatic exercise imaginable, but it didn't frighten her one bit – in fact, it thrilled her – and she couldn't wait to go up again. He charged \$5 for a 15-minute lesson, and the enthusiastic Pancho, with Caitlin, took to the air several times a week.

The aircraft she flew for her lessons was downright primitive. It had one instrument... an oil gauge. To figure out how much fuel they had left, they would dip



a piece of string in the tank. A key chain hanging from the control panel told them if they were flying level. And to judge their altitude they merely looked over the side. With no talking tube between the two open cockpits, Caitlin gave his instructions by hand signals.

Soon after learning how to land, Pancho bought her own 'mount', a second-hand Travel Air biplane that cost her \$5,500 – about ten times what the average barnstormer paid for a surplus World War One machine. But money was no object for Pancho, as she had inherited \$5m when her mother died in 1923.

### FAST LEARNER

Caitlin was amazed at how quickly Pancho caught on and pleased to see how much joy she took in the act of flying. She soloed after just six hours of formal flight instruction, and became hooked, visiting the airfield daily to practise every aspect of being a pilot. Pancho told a friend: "Flying makes me feel like a sex maniac in a warehouse with a stack of \$20 bills!"

After a fire forced her down on the final leg of a flight from San Francisco, Pancho traded her original Travel Air biplane plus \$2,500 cash for a Travel Air Speedwing previously owned by film director Howard Hawks. "It was the sweetest ship that ever lived," Pancho said. She spent her days making the rounds of the airports in the Los Angeles area, and easily became one of the gang of pilots who also frequented them. They had never known a woman like Pancho, who told salty stories, dressed like them and was her own mechanic. On Sundays, she operated the 'Pancho Barnes Mystery Circus of the Air', which featured herself flying stunts and a handsome parachutist named Slim.

It was the Roaring Twenties and Pancho was living off her inheritance. She earned a reputation for her frequent wild parties at both her homes – the family mansion in San Marino and a Laguna Beach estate high on the cliff top overlooking the ocean. At the former location Pancho hosted famous aviators such as Jimmy Doolittle and Roscoe Turner, plus her airport companions. At the beach, her many Hollywood friends – including John Wayne and Gary Cooper – were

frequent guests. Liquor was flown in from Mexico (due to Prohibition) and guests could enjoy horseback rides on the beach, cavort in the pool and keep up with their "horizontal exercise" as she called it. She even had a landing strip added so friends could fly in to visit.

Pancho was earning money as a test pilot for Bach, Lockheed and Beechcraft during this time. Aircraft manufacturers were eager to take advantage of her being a woman, so they could say about their machine: "It's so easy to fly even a woman can do it!" Pancho was

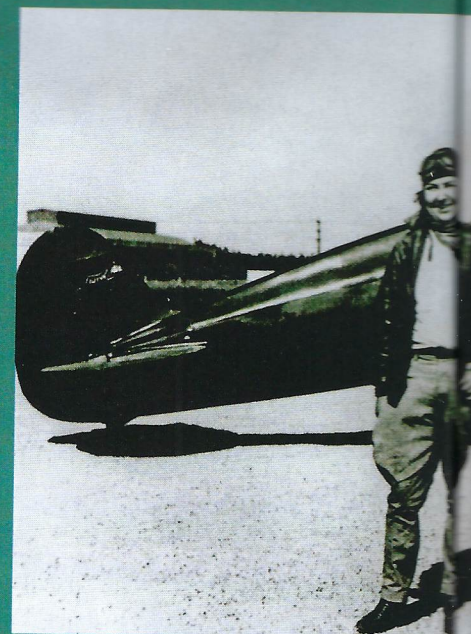
aware they were using her... but would never turn down the chance to fly.

### CROSS-COUNTRY COMPETITION

Pancho turned to air racing less than a year after her first solo flight. Her debut event on February 22, 1929 was a women's two-lap, 40-mile race between Glendale and Van Nuys, Los Angeles, with three entrants. Pancho easily won, lapping both of her

Below  
A formal portrait  
of Pancho Barnes  
in full flying  
regalia.





**Above**  
Pancho, centre, with good friend Chuck Yeager to her left and other test pilots at the piano in the Happy Bottom Riding Club. The wording on the back of the photo reads: "The Fraternity of Test Pilots (L to R) Jackie Ridley, Ike Northrop, 'Pete' Everest, Pancho, Chuck Yeager and Bud Anderson. At the piano keys is Gust Askounis."

**Right**  
The welcoming sign at Pancho's Mojave desert ranch, which became a haven for the locally based test pilots and their families.

opponents. Soon after, as a publicity stunt, she took on the famous, flamboyant air racer Roscoe Turner (and his pet Gilmore the lion) in a race between San Francisco and Los Angeles, besting him by 20 minutes. She had a great time teasing Turner about his loss at a celebratory banquet that night.

On August 18, 1929 Pancho joined 19 other aviatrixes in the Women's Air Derby, a race across the US from Santa Monica, California, to Cleveland, Ohio. Unfortunately, she crashed into a vehicle that darted across the runway in Pecos, Texas, and failed to finish, but she took it all in her stride. Afterwards, Pancho was watching the rest of the National Air Races, where a new Travel Air type caught her eye – a low-wing, snub-nosed monoplane. It was the Model R, also known as the Mystery Ship because the company was very secretive during its design and production. Several months

later, she bought one, painting it red with yellow accents. Only four had been built, and owning one appealed greatly to Pancho, as it helped make her the envy of almost every pilot.

With the Mystery Ship, Pancho knew she could break the women's world speed record held by Amelia Earhart, which was 184.6mph (297.08km/h). But her first attempt on August 1, 1930 failed. She made a second effort on August 4 and broke the record with an average speed of 196.19mph. She was the world's fastest woman at the age of 29. (Pancho continued racing for several years, setting more records along the way.)

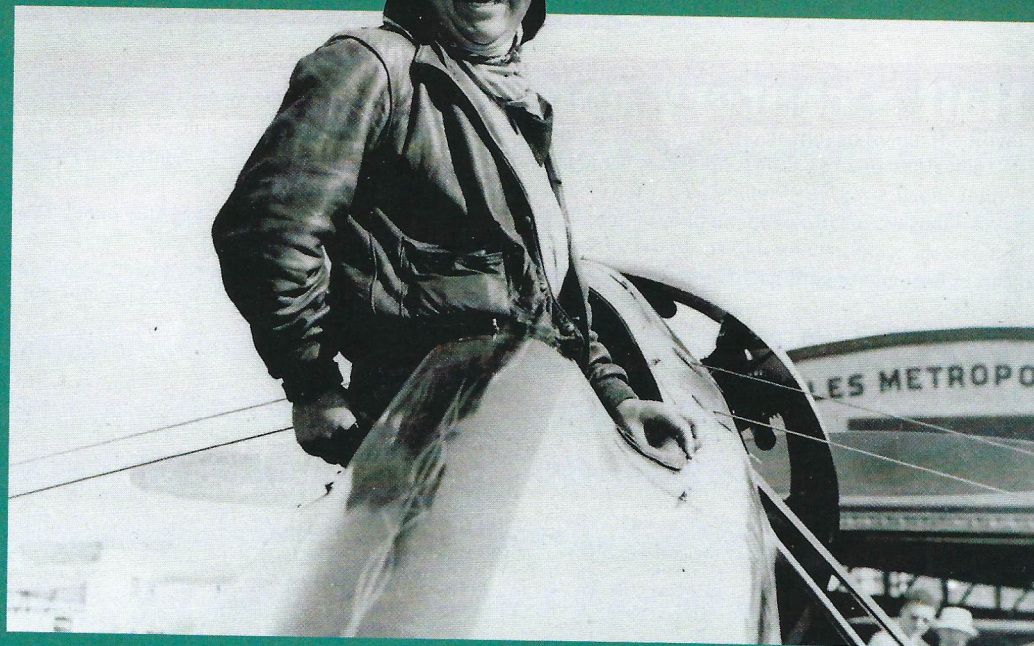
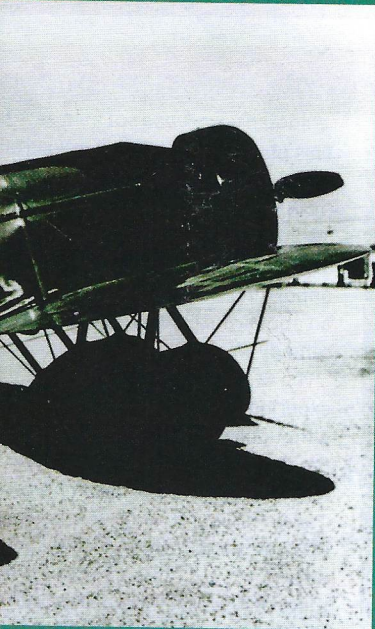
## HOLLYWOOD BECKONS

At that time, Howard Hughes was busy creating the epic aviation film, *Hell's Angels*, which was released in 1930. Shot originally as a silent movie, the sudden advent of 'talkies' compelled Hughes to add sound to his half-finished feature, despite the considerable cost and effort. Pancho's reputation earned her a job as a stunt pilot in the film, and later she recreated some of the aerial sounds to be added to the flight sequences. This meant performing various manoeuvres while flying past tethered balloons fitted with sound equipment. Her work led to considerably more employment as a stunt pilot, notably in Howard Hawks' famous *Dawn Patrol*, celebrated for its dogfighting sequences. Eventually, she was responsible for forming a stunt-fliers union, the Associated Motion Picture Pilots.

As the Great Depression worsened, Pancho was generous to a fault towards her down-on-their-luck friends and continued her constant, expensive, anything-goes parties until she was almost broke. She could no longer afford hangarage and other fees for the Mystery Ship, which she reluctantly sold. She lost her beach house to the bank and had to rent out her childhood home. Life as a leading air racer was ending too. Her women's world speed record had been broken; new, more glamorous-looking pilots were on the scene, and the male stunt fliers were performing manoeuvres she could no longer replicate. It was time for a drastic change.

Remembering a ranch she'd seen in the Mojave Desert while test flying the Lockheed Vega, Pancho went out and bought it. Its close proximity to the future Edwards Air Force Base allowed her to transform it into an off-hours' entertainment oasis for the local test pilots. These airmen were putting top-secret jets and rocket-powered aircraft through their paces; they were the men with the 'right stuff', championed by Tom Wolfe's eponymous 1979 book (and film of the same name). Eventually, Pancho turned the ranch into a private club for them and others she selected, and worldwide membership totalled approximately 9,000 at its peak.

Ultimately known as the Happy Bottom Riding Club, members could land at her private airport or drive over from Edwards and enjoy the many activities there: a bar, horseback riding, a rodeo, dancing (with the hostesses on staff), a restaurant and swimming. She also



ffered a guesthouse and a family friendly 'dude' ranch and sponsored aerial treasure hunts. All the major best pilots of the day (including future astronauts such as 'Buzz' Aldrin) frequented the venue, but her favourite was 'Chuck' Yeager. She put in place a standing offer of a free steak dinner to any pilot who broke the sound barrier. When Yeager was the first to do so on October 14, 1947, he went straight to Pancho's to celebrate (even though his feat was not publicised straight away) and collect his 'winnings'.

But the good times did not last forever. Air force bosses were planning to expand Edwards and needed Pancho's land, then a fire destroyed the club during the ensuing legal battle. She won a large amount of money in the suit, but much of it only just covered the legal fees. She tried to start over but just couldn't manage her money and there was no appetite for her hospitality, since Edwards had grown into a major military community that could provide its own entertainment.

Pancho began having serious health issues. She lived in a small house with a dirt floor offered by a friend rent-free. The one thing she had going for her was her ability to tell colourful tales about her life, which she did at numerous speaking engagements. Florence Leontine Lowe died alone, surrounded by squalor in her tiny desert house, in the spring of 1975. She had lived life on her own terms and as she always said: "We had more fun in a week than most of the weenies in the world have in a lifetime!" ●

**Top left**  
Pancho seated at the nose of her Travel Air Type R Mystery Ship monoplane.

**Top centre**  
Pancho with her Mystery Ship, in which she broke Amelia Earhart's air speed record on August 4, 1930.

**Top right**  
Pancho poses in the cockpit at Los Angeles Metropolitan Airport.

*Pancho's*  
**GUEST RANCH HOTEL**  
*and HAPPY BOTTOM RIDING CLUB*

