

# Pioneer aviator on new course

## Dodge hangs up captain's wings after 34 years as a Western pilot

By KIM RICH  
Daily News reporter

In 1946, Red Dodge, like a lot of other former World War II pilots, was out of work.

Needing cash, he and another pilot hired on with a Los Angeles used car salesman who needed some pilots to fly a bunch of C-47s and C-47s out of the Arizona desert.

After the war, the government had parked hundreds of the planes near the small cowboy town of Kingman, Ariz., turning the surrounding brown landscape a silver-gray.

Dodge and the other pilot were each paid \$100 cash for every plane they flew to Los Angeles.

"We worked our hearts out in that damn desert," he remembers.

Later that same year, the businessman asked Dodge to fly a C-47 full of freight to Juneau. Dodge took the job, then went on to Anchorage. For the next 40 years, his red,



Red Dodge and the Waco in August 1948

handlebar mustache and wavy, red hair were a familiar sight on airport runways across Alaska. In January, after flying 34 years with Western Airlines, Dodge retired his captain's wings.

Dodge's friends decided to throw him a retirement party. They invited several hundred people, who were treated to free drinks and a buffet din-

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ner. The venue was a large airplane hangar, festooned with a hand-painted banner that read: "If you ain't a pilot, you ain't s-t."

"How ya doing, kid?" Dodge greeted guests young and old, telling them he'd been offered a job as the Adak regional forester, but lost the job when a dog urinated on the island's only tree and killed it.

"He can be in the absolutely most serious situation in the world and he can always come up with a remark that will make you laugh," said his wife, Marianne "Mike" Dodge. "That's what appealed to me when I first met him and it still does."

Mike Dodge describes her husband as an extremely generous man who has filled every spare room the couple ever had with new and old friends needing a place to stay. The Dodge's five children grew up always having somebody staying at their house.

"He has tremendous empathy and compassion in the treatment of his friends," Mike Dodge said.

Like the retirement party. None of the guests was asked to pay for anything. The friends who planned it didn't pay for it either. Over their objections, the man who paid for Red Dodge's retirement party was Red Dodge.

Earl Dodge was born Feb. 4, 1926 in a small Wisconsin town. He has two sisters and a brother, but that's all he'll say about his family. Mike Dodge said his reticence stems from his belief that his life began again when he came to Alaska.

"Alaska's home. I think he just believes that everything before didn't happen, or wasn't important," she said.

Anchorage was a frontier town when Dodge arrived here in 1946. The place was full of former World War II pilots, who outnumbered the available women and frequented bars with names like The Anchorage Grill, the Mermaid and the South Seas Club.

"This was the place for the

future of aviation," Dodge said.

But the pioneering pilots had to literally build that future from the muskeg up. Merrill Field, the only airport in town, was a narrow gravel strip. The big planes of the day — DC-3s and DC-4s — landed and took off from Fort Richardson, now Elmendorf Air Force Base.

Anchorage also was the kind of town that could support only five lawyers.

"That's all I can remember, five lawyers," Dodge said laughing. "But you know what they say about lawyers, one moves to town and he starves to death, two do and they both prosper."

Dodge's eldest son, Steve, is an attorney. Dodge has been known to tease his other kids. One night when he and a bunch of guys were whooping it up in the family's bar in their home, his daughter Karla — a tall slim woman with large brown eyes and short dark hair — stumbled out of bed to check out the ruckus. When she walked into the bar, Dodge turned to her saying, "Meet my daughter, Karla, who has the face of an angel and the personality of a caged cougar."

The humor worked both ways. The kids decided one day they wanted a Saint Bernard.

"Dad said we couldn't have a Saint Bernard until we had a bigger house," said another daughter, Karel Dodge. "So we bought him a Saint Bernard and a month later he brought us a bigger house."

The family still owns the house.

Dodge landed his first steady aviation job in Alaska as a mechanic with Alaska Airlines. One day while standing on the Fort Richardson runway, he spotted his future wife.

The former Marianne Porter was walking off of an Alaska Airlines plane from Seattle. She and a girlfriend had hired on as stewardesses with Alaska Airlines after Mike Dodge decided she wanted to come to Alaska.

"It was pretty simple," Mike said describing their

first meeting. "Red was standing at the bottom of the steps and asked me for a date and took me for an airplane ride.

"I will never convince him that I didn't come to Alaska looking for a husband." The couple married a short time later.

To make ends meet in those early years, Dodge took a job driving a taxi.

"There weren't any meters or anything. Everything in town cost \$1. To go to Fort Rich cost \$2," he said. "We damn near went broke."

Back then, he said, cabbies made good tip money running male customers to the dozens of downtown bordellos. He said the military eventually ran the girls out of town, to a strip of dirt road the electrical power lines didn't reach — Fireweed Lane. Dodge quit driving cab after he was robbed one night for \$11.

From 1948 to 1950, he joined the ranks of the Bush pilots when he flew for the Civil Aeronautics Administration on the Naval Petroleum Reserve, near Barrow.

"We had no navigational aids back then and the maps were no good," he said. "About half the time you were lost."

As a result many good pilots did not survive to tell about their experiences.

"For some strange reason, we lost some of the better ones," he said. "That's what makes you want to stop flying when some of the guys you thought were better than you start bumpin' earth."

Dodge's grandfather had been an architect and, as a small boy, Dodge said he had dreamed of becoming one. He didn't, but in the early 1950s he began what became a life-long sideline of building airplane hangars. He started with five wooded lots on the undeveloped south side of Merrill Field and went on to build 14 around Anchorage.

In 1952, Dodge landed his first commercial airline piloting job with Pacific-Northern Airlines, which later merged with Western Airlines. His starting pay was \$227 a month.

While piloting full time,

Dodge started Red Dodge Aviation, that began as a Bush firefighting operation and ended, in the early 1970s, as an oil-field transport company.

George Spemak, who has run Spemak Airways from Merrill Field for 30 years, said Dodge was known on the strip as the guy with all the airplanes.

"Go see Red," Spemak said he told anybody looking to buy a used plane. "Everybody knew Red Dodge."

Spemak laughs when he talks about what he calls Dodge's "Pink" phase.

"I don't where, but it seemed he got 10,000 gallons of pink paint," Spemak said. "Anything he had, he painted it pink."

Including a P-51 fighter plane, "The Pink Lady."

"He had a pink phase and then he had a yellow phase," said Mike Dodge. The yellow phase included a B-25, used to fight fires with, that had painted on its side "Happiness is a thunder storm," a slogan born of the storm-caused fires that kept Dodge in business. There was also a yellow DC-3 dubbed "Something Special."

For several years in the late 1960s, Nancy Lane worked for Dodge at Safeway Airways, a light aircraft, fixed-base operation. Lane, now a commercial airline pilot, was one of the few female pilots in Alaska.

"He had his finger in my career all my life," Lane said. "Anytime something was offered to me, Red set it up."

Lane said Dodge expected high performance from his pilots, but was understanding when things went wrong. She said she learned the hard way that he did not tolerate excuses.

In the fall of 1968 Lane was involved in two airplane mishaps, the first involved an emergency landing with six passengers near Hope. No one was hurt but the landing destroyed the \$30,000 plane. She said the crash left her devastated.

Dodge met her at the airport when she was flown in from the crash site.

"He put his arm over my

shoulder and said, 'What did you do kid?' 'Oh Red, I really screwed up,' she remembers saying.

"Then he said, 'Don't you worry about it, that's fine.'"

The second incident occurred at a gravel airstrip in Cordova. Lane caught the plane's prop on the runway's dirt embankment. Again no one was injured, and this time the plane suffered only minor damage. When she saw Dodge afterward, she blamed the runway's designers for the mishap. Before she finished speaking, Dodge turned and walked away without saying a word. He didn't speak to her for days.

"I thought, 'What did I do?'" she said and after days of the cold shoulder, she finally asked Mike Dodge.

"She said, 'Don't you ever make excuses for something you've done wrong,'" the bottom line, Lane said. "If you screw up, eat it."

It's a lesson she thinks of every time she climbs in the cockpit.

On one recent sunny afternoon, Dodge sat in the bar of his east Anchorage home puffing on a cigarette. He looked out sliding glass doors toward an aging tennis court in the back yard. The court hasn't seen a serious game of tennis in years.

He thinks the court might make a nice parking lot for a helicopter he just bought. He calls helicopters "frustrated palm trees."

After owning some 42 airplanes, it's his first helicopter. But it's not a retirement toy. In the 1970s, he flew John Denver's film crew to get aerial footage for Denver's television special on Alaska.

Dodge's brother does aerial cinematography in Hollywood and now Dodge is going to start a similar business in Alaska.

Mike Dodge was in Hawaii, where the couple has a condominium, when she learned about the helicopter. She wasn't surprised.

"Flying isn't work (to Red)," she said. "He enjoys flying so much that it doesn't really feel like a job."