

Urban F. Diteman, Jr.: Exploration Was in the Blood

A man with dreams of adventure, and Sir Francis Drake's blood in his veins. What more could he do than take to the skies? Such a man was Urban F. Diteman, Jr., and in 1929, he determined to make those dreams a reality.

Diteman wasn't looking for glory when he decided to see if he could do what Charles Lindbergh had done two years earlier. In fact, the only person who knew of his plans was his wife, Lucille.



*Urban F. Diteman, Jr. and the Golden Hind,
photo courtesy of Hagley Museum & Library*

On October 22, 1929, Diteman lifted off from Newfoundland, heading for London. It was only the third attempt ever at a solo flight across the Atlantic. Back home in Billings, and indeed across the country, the news was both startling and big.

Diteman and Lucille, with 7-year-old Jack and 4-year-old Eddie, had recently moved to Billings from Missoula. He made a living trading cattle and other stock. But he was entranced by aviation, and had started flying lessons while in Missoula and completed them after his move to Billings, receiving his license in May of 1928. He thought a lighter plane could follow in Lindbergh's footsteps, and that may have been his impetus to make the attempt. He planned carefully and meticulously for over a year, studying routes, and considering the feasibility of non-stop flights.

After moving to Billings, he was ready to get a plane of his own, and settled on a Barling monoplane in September of 1928. He had the two-seater plane modified, adding fuel tanks in the wings and another tank taking the place of the spare seat. His maternal grandfather, Joseph T. Drake, was said to be descended from the great British explorer Sir Francis Drake, and Diteman christened his airship the *Golden Hind* in honor of Drake's own galleon. He carried no floatation device, flares or raft, as he had no plans to need them.

By the time Diteman left Billings for Newfoundland, North America's easternmost point, he had about 200 hours as a solo pilot, with experience flying over water on the Great Lakes, and through the adverse weather experienced on the High Plains. His was the first American plane to land in Fredericton, New Brunswick, along the way. In Newfoundland, he was ostensibly on a mission to investigate the Drake genealogy and to search for relatives there. Instead, he left a brief note thanking the Newfoundlanders for their interest, and explained his next stop was London. He took off shortly after midday. The weather looked favorable, and the moon would be bright that night. It was thought that he carried enough fuel to last him 41 hours, but should need around 25 hours for the flight with a cruising speed of 80-110 miles per hour.

Unfortunately, 25 hours passed with no word. And then the 41-hour mark passed as well. Diteman's plane was not spotted by passing ships, nor was any wreckage ever found. His wife and parents waited in desperate hope for some news, but none ever came.

The news of Diteman's disappearance was anxiously watched by the Billings community. In fact, the headlines of October 25 were mostly about him, while also acknowledging the Stock Market crash in a smaller article. While Urban Diteman's attempt failed, the reaction back home was not that he was a foolish dreamer, but that it was a noble attempt at moving aviation forward. Two years later, his father placed a monument to Diteman in the family's cemetery in Yakima, WA. It depicted a cowboy on a cliff overlooking a vast sea, where clouds shaped like a galleon sailed the sky, next to a small plane.

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