

Virginia Aviation History Project



Jesse Lee Boland: The One and Only Master X

Pilots have always been characters. It's hard to say which came first – did the pilots become eccentric after they learned to fly or does flying just attract those who are already flamboyant? Who knows? But one of the most colorful was Jesse Lee Boland,



also known as Master X. In the 1940's and 50's, he ruled as the king of Richmond's fortune-tellers and "hoodoo" practitioners, often using his piloting skills as a backdrop.

Boland's start in life certainly wouldn't indicate that he would become a premier confidence man as an adult. Born in Roanoke, he was the son of Dr. Robert Boland, a well-known and respected physician. The elder Boland was the first African American to attend

the Detroit-based Michigan College of Medicine, graduating in 1883, and the first one to take and pass the examination that the new Virginia Board of Medical Examiners administered to new physicians. In 1886, he moved to Virginia with wife, Perdita, and opened his office in Hampton. The family moved to Roanoke in 1891 and Jesse was born in 1904. Unfortunately Dr. Boland died in November, 1918, when Jesse was only 14 years old. It cannot have been an easy life for young Jesse. In the first half of the twentieth century, the U.S. wasn't an easy place for any

African American to get an education or to make a living. He wanted to become a magician, but found that his thick fingers (he was heavy-set even as a youngster) did not lend themselves to prestidigitation. So he joined a carnival as a fortune teller and

as time went on, he realized that people would pay handsomely for personal advice and self-confidence.

There are no records as to when or where he learned to fly, but by the time he settled in Richmond in 1938, he already owned two small aircraft, one of them an open cockpit WACO, which he kept at Hermitage Airport in Richmond. Ray Tyson was also flying out of Hermitage at the time and points out that Boland's bulk made entry into the aircraft very difficult. One of the flight instructors described it as "stuffing a cork into a bottle." Boland immediately set up business at North First St, downtown Richmond, in a shop whose shelves were lined with "hoodoo" items such as jars of powdered cat bones and dead snakes. Outside the shop was a large sign proclaiming that "Master X" was open for business. The Richmond News Leader would later describe him as a "soothsayer, metaphysician, amateur psychologist, compounder of love potions, and resident wizard." For a fee, ranging from \$1 to \$1,000 (which he later admitted was based on the customer's ability to pay) he would tell fortunes, sell amulets and lucky charms, and dispense "spiritual advice." A master showman, he was a huge man – upwards of 400 pounds at his death - with a large personality to match. His flamboyance reached to his work clothes – a bright yellow tunic and a scarlet cape or a bright purple silk shirt reminiscent of a gypsy. Almost universally liked and trusted, he had thousands of customers in Richmond – both black and white. His stock in trade was good old-fashioned personality. He was easy to talk to; people were comfortable sharing their troubles with him; and with his deep voice, he would dispense advice on luck, love, and healing. Nevertheless, while most people found him likable, others were not so certain, some convinced he was a sorcerer, and others that he could "mess up your mind in a minute."

In the early 1940's, he acquired property in Hanover County where he eventually housed his airplanes. One of his most lucrative ventures was the sale of healing stones. These rocks were "irradiated" using

"cosmic rays from the atmosphere." And how did this healing irradiation come about? Simple. Boland would load them into one of his airplanes and soar through the sky, exposing them to the rays. At over \$20 a stone, he sold thousands of dollars' worth of the stones. Indeed, at a spiritual show which he hosted in Richmond's civic auditorium, his expenses – renting the venue, advertising, etc. – came to less than \$500. He reportedly cleared \$2,000 in tickets and \$12,000 in the sale of lucky stones.



He was an enterprising and far-sighted individual, if not the most principled. When World War II loomed, he realized that shortages and rationing were not far behind. So he stockpiled large quantities of canned meat and vegetables, gasoline, and spare tires. He spent the war years in conflict with the wartime rationing boards. Once when he was having trouble getting tires because of rationing, he bought 11 derelict cars to justify his need and put 50 spare tires on them awaiting sale.

After the war, his business prospects really took off (literally.) He obtained a dozen military surplus aircraft, including 3 T-6 Texan military trainers, 2 B-17 bombers and a B-25 bomber, for which, according to Richmond News Leader, he paid \$147,000 in cash. By one account, he pulled the wool over the government's eyes to purchase the aircraft. The War Assets Administration was allowed to sell aircraft to schools

for educational purposes. Boland was able to get an endorsement from a Superintendent within the school system for the purchase, although there are no records indicating that the planes were ever used for education. Boland's first plan for the aircraft was a scheme for "super irradiated" rocks. He planned to load the B-17 with 15 tons of rocks and fly them over the Atlantic at 35,000 feet, exposing them to the "super-cosmic rays of the sub stratosphere", resulting



in rocks with even more powers. He also advertised that he would take along his grandmother's "wishing pot". Clients would pay to write their wishes (3 wishes for \$1) on slips of paper and these wishes would be burned at altitude, so that the smoke and ashes containing the wish would waft into the stratosphere. This strategy received a great deal of publicity locally and one of Boland's followers told the News Leader in later years that the flight actually occurred and that Boland made \$250,000 on it. However, Ray Tyson reports that no one recalls ever seeing the B-17 fly, and it is "highly doubtful" that it happened. Following the success of this publicity, his scheme got even more audacious. Hiring a local pilot named Al Curry, the plan was for Curry to strategically and deliberately crash the T-6 Texans, while ensuring that he wasn't injured. Attempting to land in a pasture Boland owned, Curry intentionally turned two of the airplanes over and put one on its nose. Boland's selling point was his claim that Curry was safe and walked away from these terrible crashes because he

was carrying the irradiated rocks. Tyson reports that the local FAA representative was driving north one day on his way to meetings in Washington, when he saw the overturned aircraft in the field, and "he went ballistic." Possibly with the assistance of reports from the FAA, these shenanigans put Boland afoul of the War Assets Administration. The government claimed that Boland was using the airplanes for profit (imagine that!) rather than for educational purposes.

While it caused Boland some time and frustration, no charges were filed nor were the aircraft confiscated.

Then in 1950, Boland embarked on a scheme which eclipsed all the ones before it. He purchased a defunct 40-ton Yankee Clipper berthed in Baltimore Harbor. The Yankee Clippers were a unique family of aircraft. Prior to the war, Boeing produced 12 flying boats, 314 and 314A models.

These aircraft, purchased by Pan American Airlines, were capable of crossing the Atlantic and carrying in complete luxury those passengers well-heeled enough to afford the tickets. At that time, the scarcity of runways and land airports made the flying boats an extremely successful addition to aviation. Unfortunately, the records on the history and ultimate disposition of the aircraft are very sketchy. What we do know is that the aircraft purchased by Boland was NC18607, the Bristol. She was one of the later 314A models, an upgraded model with more powerful engines, larger diameter propellers, and greater fuel capacity than the original 314's. Six 314A's were produced and three, including the Bristol, were sold to British Overseas Airways Corporation for use in the war effort. (They were not technically "Yankee Clippers" because that designation was reserved for Pan Am aircraft, not BOAC.) The Bristol made her first eastbound crossing of the Atlantic from New York to Foynes, Ireland, via Bermuda on 22 May 1941 piloted by Capt. Kelly-Rogers. During

the war, Winston Churchill was a regular passenger and was very impressed with the airplane. After the war, the flying boats were scrapped by the major airlines. They were expensive to maintain and operate; qualified pilots for such large sea planes were hard to find; and the war effort had resulted in an adequate supply of land airports and runways. So commercial aviation shifted to land-based airplanes. BOAC returned the three 314As to Pan Am which promptly sold them. The Bristol went through a series of owners until eventually it was acquired by World Airlines operating out of Baltimore and apparently that company sold to Boland. Boland made quite a stir in the publicity department when he announced that he and his sons were going to repair and refit the Bristol to fly it to Moscow and meet with Joseph Stalin and end the Cold War. Boland apparently thought he could convince Stalin to change the political situation. This scheme received a lot of press, not only locally, but nationally, including some notices in Boeing newsletters of the time. It all came to naught when the Bristol sank. Some sources say it was swamped in a storm, but the more colorful story, related by Ray Tyson, is that Boland took off with the plane's anchor still on the bottom of the harbor which tore a hole in the hull.

After the loss of the Clipper, Boland decided to branch out into naval vessels. He looked into purchasing a decommissioned Navy aircraft carrier. He proposed two uses for the vessel. First, he planned to load it with dirt (representing minerals and connection with the earth), position his war surplus B-25 on it loaded with his special stones, and proceed to a point out at sea. Then he would take off in the B-25 and deliver specially irradiated stones back to his customers. However he also told the News Leader that he planned to turn the vessel into a cruise ship with which he could take his African American followers to Africa on vacation. The deal fell through, ostensibly when Boland refused to pay the Navy \$4,000 to tow the ship from North Carolina to Virginia.

His colorful escapades continued unabated. In February, 1954, Jet magazine reported that a woman had

sued him for \$10,000 claiming that he knocked her down and sat on her. The woman was his next-door neighbor, Nannie Stuart. Boland admitted hitting her but said it was in self-defense. One has to wonder about the outcome of the case (not recorded) since she was 140 pounds and Boland at that time almost 400 pounds. Perhaps common sense prevailed and a settlement was reached by the parties.

Boland died in January, 1962, and 8,000 people attended the funeral at A.D. Price Funeral Home in Richmond. Some people speculated that Boland might be worth his weight in gold – which would have been a substantial fortune considering his 400 pounds. His casket was eight times larger than normal and required 14 pallbearers. The vestibule doors had to be removed to allow the casket to pass through.

Amazingly, especially considering the time and the cultural backdrop of the Deep South, the Richmond News Leader published a fairly glowing eulogy. In part, it read “In a world that sometimes seems to get a little drabber and more regimented all the time, the Master will be sorely missed. He was the most colorful character we ever met.”

SOURCES:

Virginia Living Magazine, February 15, 2011, “This is Master X” by Dougald Blue

Richmond News Leader, February 3, 1962, Editorial Page: The Master

Bonner, Daisy Estelle Brown. Biographical Dictionary of American Physicians of African Ancestry.

Encyclopedia Virginia. Robert J. Boland (1850-1918). Contributed by John R. Kern and the Dictionary of Virginia Biography.

Jet magazine, Feb 15, 1962 and Feb 25, 1954

<http://www.jimsladesairlines.com/fortyminutesto-pearl2.html>

Johnson, E.R. American Flying Boats and Amphibi-