

THE FLIGHT OF OLD GLORY

THE YEAR 1927 SAW A FRENZY OF RECORD-SETTING FLIGHTS WITH SOME SUCCESSFUL, SOME NOT. BACKED BY WILLIAM RANDOLPH HEARST, THIS FOKKER HAD A GOOD CHANCE OF MAKING THE NEW YORK TO ROME RECORD FLIGHT
BY HOWARD CARTER



A coin toss would put James Hill in the pilot's seat of *Old Glory*. Hill was 21 when the Wright Brothers made their first flight but he had been enamored with aeronautics since childhood.

With his seat belt pulled tight, pilot James Hill glanced out of the side cockpit window of his Fokker F.VIIa monoplane at a gray, churning Atlantic just a few hundred feet below his aircraft. The date was 7 September 1927 and Hill was having problems. He was battling with the wooden control yoke of the Fokker and it was taking all of his strength to push and turn the control

column in order to keep the lumbering craft on a straight line. At about 5:00 pm, he turned to his right and shouted back to his friend, fellow pilot, and radio operator Lloyd W. Bertraud, "Lloyd, the controls are too heavy. Something's wrong." Unstrapping from his seat in the cabin, Bertraud fought his way forward to the cockpit and he could indeed see that something was wrong. The strain on his friend's face was evident as he fought with the controls. Ahead lay a dark sky lashed by occasional rain squalls. James DeWitt Hill was born on 2 March 1882 in the community of Scottdale, Pennsylvania, as the fourth of five children. Growing up, his childhood spanned the beginning of heavier-than-air flight and as he matured, he began to read everything he could find in the local library that pertained to man's conquest

of the air. This led the young fellow to get his mother's best tablecloth and fashion sort of a parachute from the material. He then proceeded to jump from the family stable and promptly crashed into the ground. Dazed but relatively uninjured, he concluded that the parachute would only work if its load was lighter. He quickly corralled his younger brother Frank and it was soon Frank's turn to take a dive off the stable roof. Once again, James' calculations did not work and Frank also smacked into the ground. At this point, their father found out what was going on and put an end to the experiments. From that time on, it seemed that James Hill had a distrust for parachutes.

Breezing through high school, the young man picked up excellent grades and after graduation, he headed to college and studied mechanical engineering but returned home after a year when he found out he did not enjoy the curriculum. He then went to Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, and studied civil engineering, which he found more to his liking.

But after three years he was again forced home, this time due to ill health. Ithaca at the time was a center of industry that included Ithaca Gun Company that made rifles for the famous Annie Oakley. There was also the beginning of an aeronautical industry but perhaps more important is the fact that while Hill was going to college, the area was plagued by a typhoid epidemic that was later traced to having sewers merging into the water supply and this was perhaps the

OLD GLORY

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Fokker F.VIIa *Old Glory* atop its hastily-built takeoff ramp at Old Orchard Beach, Maine. The bottom of the ramp was supported by heavily-packed sand so that it would not collapse as the Fokker's 12,700-pound weight descended down the ramp.