



SEVERSKY THE SKY

BASED ON THE AIR CORPS' NEWEST PURSUITS, THE SEVERSKY RACERS PUSHED ASIDE AIRCRAFT CREATED BY SOME OF AVIATION'S MOST DARING PILOTS AND DESIGNERS - BY TIM WEINSCHENKER

When one thinks of the racing aircraft of "The Golden Age" (1929-39), images come up of homebuilt, one-off designs — some of which were constructed in a barn or backyard. Commercial-built aircraft did participate but they were not the main competitors.

It was not until after World War Two that racing would be dominated by surplus military aircraft. This romantic image of the pre-war era was how the "Golden Age" name came about.

However, this image is not exactly true. Commercially available aircraft did participate in the most popular events but any significant race results occurred when unusual problems

were suffered by the purpose-built race planes. Such an incident took place when a Beechcraft Staggerwing won victory in the 1936 Bendix. What has been conveniently overlooked was the dominance of the 1937 to 1938 Bendix Trophy Races by a special, civilian version of the Seversky P-35 — the top pursuit aircraft in Air Corps service. Hopefully, the

following will serve as an introduction to this interesting era in the history of the National Air Races.

SEVERSKY COMES TO AMERICA

Alexander de Seversky was born to Russian parents of noble descent on 7 June 1894. Alexander's father would be one of the first Russians to own an airplane, having purchased a Bleriot XI that had been modified by a Russian aircraft designer. Alexander was enrolled in a military school by the age of ten. At 14, Alexander had been taught by his father how to fly. He graduated with an engineering degree at age 16 and was assigned to a unit of the Russian Navy.

As World War I began, Alexander was reassigned to the Military School of Aeronautics in the Crimea. Upon completion of a post-graduate program, he was made a pilot at an aviation unit attached to the Baltic Fleet. It was while serving in this unit that Seversky would suffer a life-changing injury. While attacking a German surface vessel, he was shot down by anti-aircraft fire before he could release the small bombs the aircraft was carrying. The bombs exploded in the crash and this seriously injured Seversky, resulting in the amputation of a leg. After replacement of the missing portion with an artificial leg, military authorities deemed him unfit to fly. Seversky protested this by flying an airshow in front

of dignitaries — at which point he was arrested when he returned to earth!

Undeterred, Seversky took his case to Tsar Nicholas II. The Tsar ruled in Seversky's favor, and he was able to return to combat duty. He was given command of the 2nd Naval Fighter Detachment but was again seriously injured in an accident when a horse-drawn wagon overturned, breaking his good leg! Recovering once again, he would claim a total of 13 victories by the end of the Great War to become the leading Russian naval ace (however, some of these claims were disputed).

When the Russian Revolution began, Seversky was stationed in Saint Petersburg but was reassigned as Russian Naval Attaché to the United States



One of the strangest appearing racing aircraft was Seversky's SEV-3. Although odd, it set records and its bright bronze paint scheme brought Seversky recognition wherever he flew.

Jackie Cochran striking a typical Jackie pose with NX1384. The aircraft was the AP-7A (Seversky aircraft designations are some of the most confusing) and on 6 April 1940 Jackie set a *Federation Aeronautique Internationale* speed record over a 2000km (1242.742 miles) course from Mount Wilson, California, to Mesa Giganta, New Mexico, with an average speed of 331.716-mph. The next June, she would become the first female pilot to ferry a bomber across the Atlantic for the Royal Air Force.



Seversky waves from the cockpit of the SEV-3. This view shows how the struts could move within the floats, thus changing the angle of the aircraft.