

# FRANCES' FINAL FLIGHT

WHEN A SIKORSKY S-36 NAMED *THE DAWN* TOOK OFF IN DECEMBER 1927, IT BECAME THE LAST AIRCRAFT LOST IN WHAT WAS KNOWN AS THE "ATLANTIC BLOODBATH"

BY JAMES THOMPSON



Registered NX1282, *The Dawn* trundles up onto the sand at Old Orchard Beach. Note that American and Danish flags had been painted on the vertical tails.

Using their large Speed Graphic cameras fitted with massive flash attachments, press photographers snapped a series of photographs of a group of aviators that had banded together to cross the Atlantic during December 1927 — the year that pilots were dying in unprecedented numbers as they tried to cross that dark span of ocean. In the still images, they look tired and concerned. Of course, the Orteig Prize of \$25,000 for being the first to cross that foreboding stretch from New York to Paris had already been captured by Charles Lindbergh during his May flight in the Ryan monoplane *Spirit of St. Louis*. The allure of the transatlantic crossing and winning the Orteig Prize had claimed the lives of six men killed in three separate crashes while a further three were injured in a fourth crash. That

was only part of the toll, since others were attempting the Atlantic crossing but not leaving from those specific locations.

On 22 May 1919, well-known New York hotel owner Raymond Orteig decided to offer a cash prize for the first aviator completing the hazardous Atlantic crossing. Orteig, in a letter to the president of the Aero Club of America, stated, "As a stimulus to the courageous aviators, I desire to offer, through the auspices and regulations of the Aero Club of America, a prize of \$25,000 to the first aviator of any Allied Country [EDITOR'S NOTE: This was soon after the end of the Great War and emotions against Germany and that nation's allies was still running very strong] crossing the Atlantic in one flight, from Paris to New York or New York to Paris, all other details are in your care."

Even though aviation had made great strides during the Great War, the transatlantic crossing was challenging even with the most advanced aeronautical technology of the time. In one of those unusual coincidences, the Atlantic was successfully crossed just a few weeks after Orteig had issued the notice of his prize. Using a converted twin-engine Vimy bomber, the daring British team of Alcock and Brown completed the first non-stop flight over the Atlantic when they winged their way from Newfoundland to Ireland. This was, of course, not within the parameters of the Orteig Prize but the pair did win considerable financial rewards by claiming an earlier prize offer. Then, in late June 1919, the British airship *R.34* made an east-west crossing from East Fortune, Scotland, to Long Island,

New York, returning by the same route in early July. Even though these two attempts were successful and showed tremendous daring and courage, the technology was really not yet in place for a reliable crossing.

As the "Roaring Twenties" progressed, so did aviation. Orteig has specified that his prize would expire in 1925 if no aviator had made the crossing but he was convinced that the flight could be accomplished and on 1 June 1925 the prize was reinstated. By this time there were several parties seriously interested in competing for the prize and for the fame — which would result in a fortune in endorsements and advertising. Famed French Great War ace Rene Fonck began making plans for an assault on the Atlantic and he was backed by Russian emigree and noted aircraft builder

Igor Sikorsky who put \$100,000 towards the attempt and built a one-off aircraft designated S-35 for the flight. A large sesquiplane fitted with three Gnome-Rhone Jupiter radials, the S-35 had originally been built with two engines and a 1000 mile range but was extensively modified for the non-stop flight. Sikorsky figured a maximum takeoff weight of 24,200 pounds and the aircraft first went aloft on 23 August 1926 at Roosevelt Field. This led to a series of test flights but none were done at the maximum weight and even at the lesser weights there were performance problems. Fonck wanted other modifications including a landing gear that could be jettisoned along with the totally unreasonable installation of a sofa and refrigerator in the cabin!

Sikorsky was perhaps not overly confident in the modifications and wanted to delay the crossing until early 1927 but he had other promoters and investors in the project and they were all clamoring for the flight to take place as soon as possible for they had gotten word that the other

competitors would soon be flying. After fuel leaks and weather delays, the flight was scheduled for 21 September 1926. After the fuel tanks were filled, the plane was weighed and found to be about 4000 pounds *over* its maximum weight. Apparently this did not overly concern the Frenchman, and Fonck wanted to press ahead. Along with his copilot, a mechanic, and a radio operator, the S-35 had all three engines started and, after a run-up, began a very sluggish takeoff roll down the bumpy Roosevelt runway. The aircraft would not fly and as speed built up part of the landing gear tore off and the S-35 began a sideways slide, went down a slope, and came to a very sudden halt as it stood on its nose as the airframe crumpled. After a moment, smoke began to rise from the wreckage and then the fuel tanks exploded. Both pilots managed to escape but the other two crewmen were incinerated and the accident made international headlines.

In the USA, three other teams were preparing for the prize as was a team in France. A Fokker tri-motor named *America* would be led by famed polar explorer Richard E. Byrd and his



Frances Wilson Grayson with the Sikorsky S-36. Prior to her visit to Sikorsky's factory, she had no idea what the S-36 was nor how an amphibian aircraft functioned.

When it came to aircraft instruments and aerial navigation, Brice Goldsborough was a genius. He was photographed (on the right) with Walter Beech. The pair won the 1926 Ford Reliability National Air Tour with a Travel Air B6.

