

THE CONQUEROR

EVEN THOUGH THIS RACER COULD NOT CARRY THE GEE BEE NAME, THE R-6H SEEMED TO HAVE A LOT GOING FOR IT UNTIL FALLING VICTIM TO "THE CURSE OF THE GEE BEES"

BY TIM WEINSCHENKER

COLOR PROFILES COURTESY GAETAN MARIE • COLOR PAINTING BY STEVE COX

The sheriff's sale held during October 1933 spelled the end of the Granville Aircraft Company but it did not mean the end of the ideas flowing from Grannie Granville, Pete Miller, Don DeLackner, and other loyal company members that had created the record-setting Gee Bee R-Series racers. It had been only six years since Lindbergh conquered the Atlantic and "aviation fever" was still sweeping the country — even though the nation was in the grip of the Great Depression. For a



myriad of reasons, there was always another race and always another well-heeled investor determined to make both fortune and fame by winning those races.

At the end of 1933, the big new prize was going to be an astounding event titled the MacRobertson Trophy Race. Described in pre-race publicity as the "World's Greatest Air Race," it was scheduled to take place in October 1934 and would be international in scope — to a degree previously never imagined. The race was to be a part of the celebration of the 100th Anniversary of the City of Melbourne in Victoria, Australia.

It would be sponsored

by Sir MacPherson Robertson and would begin at the newly-opened Royal Air Force airfield in Mildenhall and then conclude at Flemington Racecourse in Melbourne — a stunning distance of approximately 11,300 miles! The race was named after his MacRobertson Confectionary Company and the overall purse was 15,000 pounds sterling (equal to a whopping US\$1,400,000 in 2022) — a huge amount in the middle of the Great Depression. In addition, each contestant would receive an 18-karat gold medallion if they completed the course within 14-days.

None of Grannie's faithful followers had

any reason to doubt their abilities to design airplanes capable of winning air races. Jimmy Doolittle, Russ Boardman, and Lee Gehlbach had demonstrated that a competent pilot could handle an R-Series racer and that the designs were capable of record-setting performance. It was only a series of misfortunes that caused events to turn against the Granville Aircraft Company. The newly-announced MacRobertson race provided an opportunity for fortune to move in their favor. Surely, they could sell the idea of an upgraded Super Sportster to an investor willing to toss his or her hat in the ring of this prestigious race?

Grannie thought the pilot should be Clyde Pangborn, a pilot that had gained considerable fame as a long-distance flyer. Joining the Air Service in the Great War, he had learned to fly in Curtiss JN-4s and after the war he flew the same planes as a barnstormer with the Gates Flying Circus, becoming a part-owner of the enterprise with Ivan Gates. The Flying Circus rapidly gained popularity and Pangborn demonstrated



Floyd Bostwick Odlum was a rather colorless lawyer who would go on to become a powerhouse in American business and one source described him as "possibly the only man in the United States who made a great fortune out of the Depression." He became enamored with Jackie Cochran (whom he married in 1936) and the pair set out on a number of aviation activities including sponsorship of Amelia Earhart. Photographed with Cochran, Odlum financed the construction of the R-6 as a hedge in case the Northrop racer failed.

As typical with many racing aircraft of the time period, construction of the "Q.E.D." was completed in a very short time frame. As noted in the article, the original design called for the installation of a Curtiss V-12 but this was replaced by a Hornet.

