

# DISASTER IN DETROIT

THE GRANVILLE BROTHERS, LOWELL BAYLES, THE MODEL Z AND THE QUEST FOR SPEED

BY TIM WEINSCHENKER

One of the most dramatic images from the Golden Age of Air Racing is the crash of Lowell Bayles and his Gee Bee Model Z racer while attempting to set a new 3-km speed record during December 1931. The roll into the ground followed by the explosion and fire was captured by numerous newsreel cameras and this clip seems to find its way into air racing documentaries that want to underscore the dangers of Gee Bee racing aircraft. The Super Sportsters were not simple

airplanes to fly. The fact that Jimmy Doolittle walked away from the R-1 after his 1932 Thompson victory, combined with the 1933 death of Russ Boardman in the R-1, convinced the aviation public that the Gee Bees were death traps. Sadly, this perception overshadows the story of the Granville Brothers and their contribution to aviation. The focus of this article will be on the early days of the Granville Brothers



leader among his siblings. He was a self-taught automobile mechanic with a formal education only going to the eighth grade, but he had an affinity for anything mechanical and was really a workaholic. At age 17, he chose to leave New Hampshire, moving to Boston to sell Chevrolets. Within a year, he established an auto repair business in Arlington, Massachusetts, where he was repairing Chevrolets as well as

Wilfred and Belle Granville were living in Madison, New Hampshire, with their seven children — four boys and two girls. Zantford, nicknamed Granny, was the oldest. His brothers were Edward, Tom, Robert, and Mark. His sisters were Pearl and Gladys. Granny was the

selling them. By the age of 20 his interests had expanded into aviation and he began visiting the East Boston Airport where he would exchange his mechanical talent for flying lessons.

It did not take long for Granny to discover his future was in aviation. In 1922, he summoned brother Tom to move to Arlington to run the auto business while he became a full-time mechanic with the Boston Aircraft Corporation. Granny was ambitious and it became evident that he could make improvements to the airplanes on which he was working.

The Granville Brothers Aircraft Corporation came into existence with Granny's remaining brothers following Tom to Arlington to join him. Granny and his brothers spent their spare time building a side-by-side biplane powered by a 55-horsepower engine they had purchased for about \$500. It was given the designation Model A and was flown for the first time on 3 May 1929.

The Granville Aircraft Corporation was soon looking for suitable production space to begin building their Model A. This search landed them in Springfield, Massachusetts. On 17 May 1929, the brothers contacted the local Chamber of



Over the years, aviation artist John Amendola did a number of great paintings depicting classic racing aircraft. One of the most dynamic was his painting of the Model Z during the 1931 Thompson with Jimmy Doolittle in the background pulling up and out with his Laird Super Solution.

Today, only two original Gee Bee aircraft are known to exist. One is the Q.E.D. racer in Mexico and the other is this Gee Bee Model A, the last built, at the New England Air Museum.

