

PURSUIT CALLED TOMMY

THIS THOMAS-MORSE SCOUT S-4C IS OVER A CENTURY OLD AND STILL FLYING
BY ROGER CAIN



It was a perfect September morning in California. The sky was blue, temperature mild, and the wind was nil — ideal factors for flying an aircraft that was well over 100-years-old. The fact this has aircraft survived to be parked outside a hangar at Walt Bowe's Ala Doble field is pretty remarkable. Those of us old enough to remember the great Movieland of the Air museum established by Frank Tallman and Paul Mantz at Orange County Airport in southern California may well recall the covered entrance that led to the main museum doors. On the left side of this entrance were the artistically arranged remains of two Thomas Morse S-4C Scouts — the little biplane that was utilized as a fighter trainer for American pilots that would be headed "Over There" in the Great War.

Digging a little deeper into the memory banks, one might even recall that at least one of these very derelict airframes carried the art work of an angry wasp. What did that mean? Well, it meant that the Tommy had been used in that aviation classic *The Dawn Patrol*.

However, that was



Trent Davis running up the Le Rhone rotary. First-time observers are always startled by just how much noise the engine makes.

certainly not its only cinematic claim to fame. The little S-4C was even in the Howard Hughes production called *Hell's Angeles* — sort of the ultimate movie about World War One flying and derring-do. The young Hughes, while micromanaging every aspect of his lavish film, had his eyes on one of the Scouts

parked in the dusty grass at Caddo Field, which was directly west of today's sprawling Van Nuys Airport.

Without asking anyone or apparently getting any form of checkout, Hughes

grabbed a mechanic and pulled him over to the Scout. Hughes managed to shoe-horn his tall and lanky frame into the none-to-spacious cockpit. Giving a quick glance at the minimal panel, he leaned over the side and yelled at the mechanic, "Crank her up!"

The mechanic, realizing that Hughes had never gone up in the Tommy but also realizing what side of his bread was buttered by Hughes, jumped to it and gave a mighty swing to the wooden Paragon propeller that was mated to the 80 horse Le Rhone 9C rotary engine. Puking blue smoke and with an ungodly racket, the rotary burst into life. Howard waved for the mechanic to pull the chocks and, after fiddling a bit with the throttle, away he went. Facing into the wind coming down through the Newhall Pass, the Scout — and Howard — were airborne in almost a blink of the eye.

Howard was probably not all that familiar with the operating characteristics of a rotary engine but Hughes had a fine understanding of how mechanical things

The S-4C at Walt Bowe's Ala Doble airstrip. The pastoral setting is ideal for the Great War pursuit. Note the insignia that was used in *The Dawn Patrol* on the side of the fuselage.



The Thomas-Morse S-4C was originally built with the Air Service serial of AS.38898. Today, it carries the civil registration N3307T.