

FLIGHT TO DISASTER

CAPTAINED BY FRENCH GREAT WAR ACE RENE FONCK, IT SHOULD HAVE BEEN APPARENT TO ALL INVOLVED THAT THE NEW YORK TO PARIS FLIGHT OF THE SIKORSKY S-35 WOULD END IN FAILURE

BY MITCH MAYBORN

On 21 September 1926, the first attempt at a non-stop flight across the Atlantic Ocean from New York to Paris ended in explosive failure. At stake was the \$25,000 Raymond Orteig prize and a large share of aviation history. Events from the first conception of the idea to the choice of pilots to the final days of testing bespoke tragedy. Fraught with controversy,

indecision and just plain bad luck, the ill-fated venture had little chance at success from the very outset.

During the following spring, another, far less imposing assault would be made on the Atlantic. Modest in its single-engine equipment and one-man crew, it would succeed where the much larger tri-motor had failed. But that is another story. This account is not as

well known... failure seldom is. But had the men who launched their campaign to fly the Atlantic — one year before Charles Lindbergh did it — planned more carefully, theirs might have been the glory. They had an exceptional aircraft. Their pilots were well-known, if not experienced in multi-engined aircraft, and they had the backing that Lindbergh did not. Still, they failed. Yet their failure was but



The Sikorsky S-35 photographed with the amount of fuel and oil needed for the transatlantic flight (some 15,200-lbs). With wing and fuselage tanks full, nearly half this load was stored in the cabin, which measured some 15 feet in length.

another chapter in the heritage of flight.

This history of the airplane which was to play the major role in the first New York to Paris flight was the tri-motor Sikorsky S-35. Often described as a biplane, it was in reality a sesqui-plane. Somewhat clumsy in appearance, the aircraft was an aeronautical innovator for 1926 and remarkably free of drag for a three-engine craft, its between the wing-mounted engines were fitted into streamlined nacelles and braced between wings with a minimum of extraneous support.

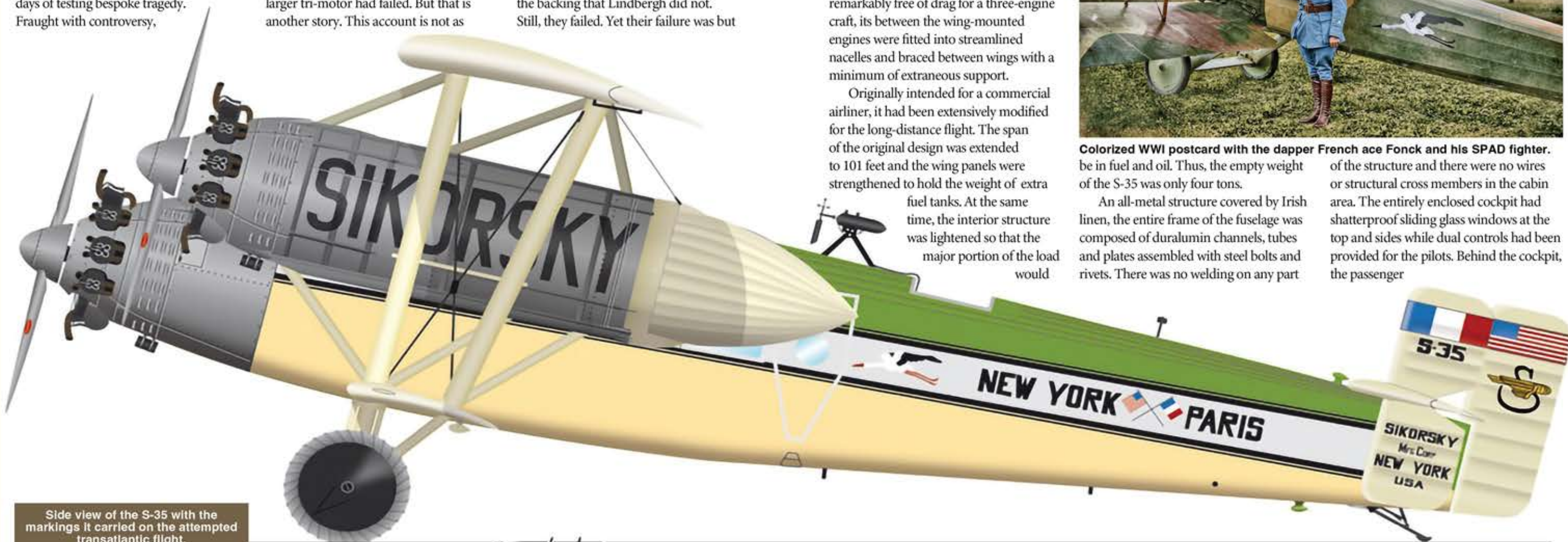
Originally intended for a commercial airliner, it had been extensively modified for the long-distance flight. The span of the original design was extended to 101 feet and the wing panels were strengthened to hold the weight of extra fuel tanks. At the same time, the interior structure was lightened so that the major portion of the load would



Colorized WWI postcard with the dapper French ace Fonck and his SPAD fighter. be in fuel and oil. Thus, the empty weight of the S-35 was only four tons.

An all-metal structure covered by Irish linen, the entire frame of the fuselage was composed of duralumin channels, tubes and plates assembled with steel bolts and rivets. There was no welding on any part

of the structure and there were no wires or structural cross members in the cabin area. The entirely enclosed cockpit had shatterproof sliding glass windows at the top and sides while dual controls had been provided for the pilots. Behind the cockpit, the passenger



Side view of the S-35 with the markings it carried on the attempted transatlantic flight.