



Ruth Nichols in high altitude gear, March 1931, before Lockheed Vega NR 496M loaned to her by the Crosley Radio Corp.

RUTH NICHOLS AND THE VEGAS

By H. GLENN BUFFINGTON

It was during a brief stopover in Cincinnati in the late summer of 1930, while becoming the first woman passenger to make a "through" airline flight from New York to Los Angeles, that Ruth Nichols had an opportunity to use her friendly persuasion on Powe) Crosley for the loan of his Lockheed Vega. She suggested that a series of new records would serve as good publicity for the Crosley Radio Corporation. Mr. Crosley deliberated and conceded. Thus, he became Miss Nichols' benefactor in the loan of Lockheed Vega, NR 496M, c/n 619.

The plane had already made a niche in history as it had been flown by William Brock and Edward Schlee during some of their record flights and it had also served as the official radio plane for the 1930 National Air Reliability Tour as station KHILO.

Ruth had her own ideas about advancing aviation and had been quoted countless times, "Records are made to

be broken, and I only wish that more girls could get good ships and keep setting new marks all the time. It has long been my theory that if women could set up some records, in many cases duplicating the men's, the general public would have more confidence in aviation. As we are considered the frail sex, flying would appear easy, as it really is. Moreover, if records are constantly broken, commercial aviation is bound to improve."

Being of Quaker heritage and a person with strong convictions, Miss Nichols set out to practice what she preached, and by the end of 1930 she had established new trans-continental records for women. She bettered the flight times of Jessie M. Keith-Miller who had flown an Alexander Eaglerock Bullet for her round-trip across the continent.

Ruth left Roosevelt Field November 24th in the Vega (named "The New Cincinnati") and spent a week enroute to



Vega 496M in May 1931 after being readied by Clarence Chamberlin for Ruth Nichols' solo Atlantic crossing attempt.

Burbank with stops at Columbus, Wichita, Amarillo and Albuquerque. Her total flying time was 16 hrs. 59 min. 30 sec. She departed the west coast December 9th and by flying high to take advantage of the prevailing westerlies, she winged into Wichita non-stop in 6 hrs. 21 min. The following day she sped on to Roosevelt Field in 7 hours--total time, 13 hrs 21 min. 43 sec. It was an outstanding performance for the era, only fifty-six minutes short of the existing record of Frank M. Hawks in his Travel Air Mystery Ship.

The year 1931 proved both a high and a low for Ruth. She established three international records with 496M for altitude, speed and distance. However, she had a near miss with death when she cracked up the Vega at St. John, New Brunswick during a projected trans-Atlantic hop.

The altitude record flight was flown from the Jersey City Airport March 6th, and she was officially credited with the height of 28,743 ft. During this flight, due to freak headwinds and a steep rate of climb, after fly-

ing in a westerly direction for an hour and a half, she was right back over her point of departure! The phenomenon was later used by Ripley in one of his "Believe It or Not" cartoons.

The 3 kilometer speed record of 210.65 mph was flown at Grosse Isle Airport, Detroit on April 13th. The flight started at 6:50 A.M. to take advantage of the smoothest air possible. The speed dashes were made at 500 feet and two round-trip runs were required in order to offset any help from the wind. A Cincinnati stop was made enroute to New York, after the speed record, to gain permission for the Atlantic attempt. Powe I Crosley was reluctant at first, but finally gave Ruth the go-ahead with, "Go fly the ocean if you must."

Clarence Chamberlin supervised the modification work in preparing the Vega for the ocean flight. This included the removal of the six passenger seats and the installation of extra fuel tanks totaling 570 gallons of gasoline and 25 gallons of oil giving the plane an estimated range of over 3,000 miles. Of course, the



The "Crosley Radio Ship" during tests at Floyd Bennett Field, New York by Miss Nichols on the 20th of May 1931.



Miss Nichols after takeoff for Harbor Grace, Newfoundland on June 22, 1931 at start of her Atlantic attempt.



After crash-landing at St. Johns, New Brunswick, NR 496M was "Rebuilt by Chamberlin" as proclaimed by line above Lockheed symbol on tail. Under pilot's window on "Akita" were words, "Loaned to Ruth Nichols by Crosley Radio Corp."

600 hp Pratt S Whitney engine was completely reworked.

NR 496M carried a variety of different names on her nose cowling, including among others: "Crosley Radio Plane, Station KHILO", "The New Cincinnati", "Crosley Radio Ship" and "Akita". The plane was originally painted red with cream trim; however, prior to the Atlantic attempt, it was repainted white with a gold trim. While in the latter finish, Ruth named the plane "Akita", a word used by the Indians of South Dakota, meaning "to explore" or "to discover".

Other women, in addition to Ruth Nichols, who announced plans for flying the Atlantic in 1931 were: Laura Ingalls, Geraldine Gray Loffredo and Elinor Smith. Ruth was the only one to actually make a start and she left Floyd Bennett Field on June 22nd. The flight came to an abrupt end during an intermediate stop at St. John, New Brunswick. Landing into the sun, she overshot the short runway and wrecked the Vega.

Ocean fliers Holger Hoiriis and Otto Hiilig, who had used the same field the day before with their Bellanca,



After setting distance record from Oakland, California, "Akita" caught fire just before takeoff at Bowman Field in Louisville, Kentucky on October 26, 1931. Miss Nichols climbed from the plane safely but it was badly damaged.

attributed Miss Nichols' crash to the condition of the landing field which they reported to be only about 1500 feet long and covered with cinders. High bushes surrounded the field, they said, leaving only a small margin of space for a pilot to maneuver for a landing. The flier herself reported the field as a "tiny airport set like a bowl in the midst of surrounding wooded hills and cliffs".

Ruth suffered a broken back in the crash, but after four months of convalescence she made a gallant comeback by hanging up a new women's distance record. October 29-25, She flew the rebuilt Vega 496M from Oakland, California to Louisville, Kentucky, a distance of 1077.6 miles. This flight was made while she was still wearing a heavy back brace. Ironically, the plane caught fire and was badly damaged the following day as she prepared to leave for New York. Clarence Chamberlin, Miss Nichols' technical adviser, again lent his support and talent in helping to restore the "Akita".

The refurbishment led to the "sunken-wing Vega", as the wing was lowered fourteen inches into the fuselage and a bubble type hatch was added over the cockpit for better visibility. A wooden belly skid was attached and the conventional landing gear was made jettisonable.

While the "Akita" was in layup, Ruth borrowed the Chamberlin Diesel engined Lockheed Vega, NR 7426, c/n 19, and flew it to 19,928 feet to establish a new altitude record for that type aircraft. Three months later in May 1932, she flew as "Air Ambassadors" for five million women on a 3,000 mile good will tour for the National Council of Women, largest Federation of Women's Clubs in the United States. She obtained petitions asking foreign countries to send delegates to an international congress of women, to be held in Chicago at the Century of Progress in 1933, for the purpose of discussing woman's part in world problems.

After Amelia Earhart hopped from Harbour Grace to Londonderry, Ireland, on the fifth anniversary of Lindy's



NR 496M converted to a shoulder-wing Vega in 1932 bearing yet another name. The plane crashed on takeoff for a transcontinental record attempt, November 9, 1932.

epic flight, Ruth still planned some long distance flights with the rebuilt Vega. She had her sights set on a non-stop hop from New York to Paris and also one from Hawaii to the Mainland, neither of which materialized.

A sea voyage to Europe in order to look over the coastline and landmarks, coupled with more work on 496M led into Fall and inclement weather for flying the Atlantic. The national election was entering the home stretch at this time and an emissary of the Republican National Committee suggested backing a non-stop flight from New York to Los Angeles for Miss Nichols. Arrangements were made for a record attempt and the dropping of campaign literature along the way.

On takeoff from Floyd Bennett Field in the pre-dawn mist, the Vega ground looped and was damaged once again. This time it was beyond repair, and all because of an ill-swiveling tail stem. It was destined that Ruth continue her flying in something other than the historic Vega.

Ruth Nichols was a style-pacer in the wearing of flying apparel, which generally included a lavender-colored skirt and either a purple leather jacket or full-length coat. She had a flair for the regal color and garnered much newsprint during the Golden Age, winning the admiration of almost everyone. Not every pilot had the ability to rally after adversities as she did. Ruth never hesitated to sing the praises of those who aided her along the way, especially Clarence Chamberlin and his wife, Willda, Powel Crosley, Harry Rogers (first instructor), Margaret Perry Manser, and her favorite "Auntie". "With such friends, nobody could afford to give up."

As she adroitly points out in her autobiography, it takes a certain type of person to make the frontier-breaking pilot tick. In spite of the loss of everything "you can't clip the wings off his heart."

REFERENCES AND CREDITS

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The photographs accompanying this article are all from the Collection of the American Aviation Historical Society. They were originally made available to the Society through the kind services of Mr. Irv Rosenberg, President of the New York State Aviation Historical Association and were in effect the inspiration for this brief look at one of the great aviatrixes of the '30s.



Ruth Nichols in the Packard Diesel-powered Vega NR 7926 receiving parting wishes from Mrs. Lena Madison Phillips, President of the National Council of Women, before beginning 3,000 mile goodwill flight, April 15, 1932.