

THEA RASCHE

THE FLYING FRAULEIN

By H. GLENN BUFFINGTON

It was love-at-first-flight and Thea Rasche knew she would one day learn to fly herself. However, there were obstacles to overcome before realizing her ambition as she lacked parental approval and money to start an aviation career. Thea was born August 12, 1899 at Unna in Westfalen where her grandfather owned a brewery. By her fifth year the family had lived in Berlin, Cologne and then Essen, her present home, where her father became Director of the Aktien-Brauerei. He was steeped in German tradition and disliked all sorts of sports for girls, especially flying, so Thea secretly started taking flying lessons from Arthur Laumann at Munste, Westfalen. This flying school soon closed its operations, however, and in 1924 she went to Hamburg which became her "second



hometown." Her instructor there was Paul Baumer, a famous ace from WW I. His flying school, the "Baumer Aero", was at Hamburg-Fuhlsbuttel-Airport. The following year Thea qualified for her pilot's license, as well as a license for aerobatics, and became the first German woman stunt flyer. She then participated in exhibitions with such famous German flyers as Fieseler, Udet, Graf Castell, Achgeles and many others.

During this era after WW I, German flying was restricted to only small sport-planes, and airports were not permitted in the Rhein and Ruhr sections. Also, the planes could not fly higher than 3000 meters and no longer than four hours duration, so no "big records" could be attempted. German women were not allowed to make money out of advertising and passenger flights at this time, but Thea helped to promote air-mindedness throughout her country at "Flugtage" and inspired the people to build more airports, as meadows and fields served as their "airports" on occasion.

Thea acquired her first airplane in 1926 as a gift from her father, ending a two-year breach brought about by Thea's refusal to marry a man chosen by her father. Her parent attended one of her stunting exhibitions and proudly announced, "That is my daughter!" With the biplane "Fleming", built by the Bayerische Flugzeugwerke at Augsburg, she became known as Germany's "Flying Fraulein." For several years she was the only woman in her country with a pilot's license and a plane of her own.

With the advent of "Ocean Flying Fever" in 1927 Thea met Clarence Chamberlin when he visited Berlin with the Bellanca "Columbia." She had come into national fame by being the only woman aerobatic and racing pilot to fly in competition with the leading aviators of the era. Chamberlin invited her to Paris and, as the first German aviatrix to do so, she visited the French capitol, performed aerobatic exhibitions and met the crew of the "America"--Byrd, Balchen, Acosta and Noville. They suggested Thea return to America with them, so she sailed with all the famous ocean flyers on the Leviathan, after having flown her little "Fleming" from Paris to London. The flight made her the first woman in the world to fly this challenging course solo over the English Channel.

Fraulein Rasche acquired FAI license #477 in 1927.

A.A.H.S. JOURNAL



Thea Rasche in "Fleming" D1129 ready to leave her home in Essen, Germany for the flight to Paris, France, 1927.

Her license was later renewed by the Department of Commerce as #6700. Flying the "Fleming", license number D-1229, as the only girl competitor, she won top honors in stunting contests at Providence, Rhode Island and Worcester, Massachusetts, vying with military and civilian pilots. These exhibitions tended to promote airmindedness in America. She was thrilled with her American reception and received some wonderful offers from various aircraft factories. The visitor's visa limited her earning capacity to \$365 monthly, and when it was suggested that she become an American citizen, she declined out of respect for her father's wishes. She was received at the White House by President Coolidge during a reception for Charles Lindbergh and was the first woman to be made an Honorary Member of the "Quiet Birdmen." Only two others, Ruth Elder and Amelia Earhart, were admitted and then the rules were changed to exclude the distaff side.

Also in 1927, Thea made a forced landing with the "Fleming" in the Hudson River at Poughkeepsie after the engine quit. This occurred on her birthday! The plane was subsequently replaced by insurance, and the Poughkeepsie Mayor pointed to the water-landing as ample proof of the need for a local airport.

Thea returned to her native country after six months in the U.S. However, her association with the ocean flyers left her with the inspiration to make a trans-Atlantic flight herself. After three months at Berlin and Hamburg, she sailed again for America aboard the Columbia the latter part of April 1928. The first backers of the projected flight proved to be an unreliable corporation that was unable to pay for the Bellanca J (NX3789), so the plane was repossessed by the Bellanca factory. A specified start-date had been written into the contract and when it was exceeded, Thea was free again. A Hollywood organization agreed to re-purchase the Bellanca for the flight, but the pilot would have been bound to a two-to-three year contract as an actress. This she declined.

Mrs. Fifi Stillman, wife of the banker, came to the rescue and bought the Bellanca, christened it "North Star" and named Thea Rasche as pilot. For the first time in history a woman was pilot-in-command of a proposed ocean flight as the six predecessors had flown as either co-pilot or passenger. When the original backers heard of Mrs. Stillman's affiliation, they claimed breach of contract, and Thea was served with an injunction forbidding a start from American soil. However, the Court recessed, and unable to answer the charges, Mrs. Stillman suggested a Canadian start from the private airport on the family's country estate. It was a case of "fleeing" the country and made good news copy. The public was highly amused with the development!

On June 27, 1928 Thea, grounded by the court order, took a train to Cap de la Madeleine, Canada close to where the "North Star" waited. Ulrich Koenemann was to fly as co-pilot and B. Zebora as engineer. The following day it was found that a takeoff was impossible from the soft-surfaced airport with the heavily loaded plane, and the flight was temporarily cancelled. She sailed for her homeland later in August and returned again in March 1929.

Although she eventually won the law suit and was so advised aboard the liner on the return voyage to the U. S., the Bellanca was finally sold to the backers of Roger Q. Williams and Lewis Yancey for their projected flight to Rome. Miss Rasche visited the takeoff site at Old Orchard Beach, Maine, briefing the new crew with her knowledge of the Bellanca's flying characteristics. The "North Star" became the "Pathfinder", and the takeoff was made from the beach July 8, 1929. Thea accompanied them during the first few miles over the ocean in a Savoia-Marchetti amphibian. It was then her unpleasant task to sell her famous "Fleming" in order to settle accounts associated with the suit brought by the unethical tactics of her original backers.

When the plans were announced for the first Women's



Fraulein Rasche and Clarence Chamberlin standing before the Bellanca "Columbia" at the airfield in Berlin, 1927.



At Curtiss Field, New York after a 1928 test flight in the Bellanca "North Star" with Lt Jack Iseman, USN.

Air Derby from Santa Monica to Cleveland, August 18-26, 1929, Thea agreed to fly a Gipsy-Moth for the Moth Aircraft Corp. of Lowell, Massachusetts. The promised racing plane was not ready in time, so arrangements were made for the loan of an older Gipsy-Moth in Los Angeles

(NC372H). It had a hole in the gas tank which was quickly repaired and the race was started without a test hop, a harbinger of a forced landing near Holtville, California during the San Bernardino-Yuma leg of the race. She found the other contestants good comrades, flew a good race and chalked up the best time with the smallest engine entered. (See JOURNAL for Fall 1964 and Fall 1965). During this interval Thea had occasion to thrill to the accomplishments of some of her fellow-countrymen. At El Paso she met F. K. Baron von Koenig-Warthaussen who was making an unprecedented world tour with his Klemm, and while at the Races in Cleveland the Graf Zeppelin flew over in salute as it neared the finish of its record-breaking world flight.

Thea flew the Gipsy-Moth in two of the closed-course races at the '29 National Air Races. Nine women entered Event No. 1 the day after the Derby flyers finished their cross-country, but Thea withdrew from this 50-mile race because of engine trouble. In Event No. 30 she finished second to Gladys O'Donnell and was followed by Frances Harrell, Jessie Keith-Miller, Louise Thaden and Ruth Nichols. Event No. 31 brought her top honors around the pylons finishing ahead of Louise Thaden, Gladys O'Donnell and Jessie Keith-Miller.

Miss Rasche returned to Germany in November 1929 and purchased her third airplane shortly afterwards, the BFW M-23, a low-wing monoplane from the same factory that had built the "Fleming" and its replacement at Augsburg. In 1932 she acquired her seaplane rating at Warnemunde, becoming the first German aviatrix to do so, and passed her examination as "Steuermann auf kleiner Fahrt." She earned her gliding license in 1938 in Berlin.

When the Nazis came to power in 1933, she sold her airplane and became Chief Editor of an aviation magazine, "Die Deutsche Flugillustrierte." Even in 1934 Germans were not permitted to have racing aircraft, so Thea entered the renowned MacRobertson Air Race from Mildenhall, England to Melbourne, Australia as a reporter aboard the "Flying Hotel", a Douglas DC-2, crewed by the Royal Dutch Airline pilots K. D. Parmentier and J. J. Moll. The 20 racing aircraft were flagged away on October 20, 1934 and the route covered 11,300 miles, nearly half-way around the world. The KLM DC-2 finished first in the Handicap Race, completing the flight in 90 hours, 13 minutes, 36 seconds after a history-making forced landing at Albury, near the finish of the race. Thea was the only woman in the world who finished this race in Australia.

Miss Rasche continued her world tour aboard the Mariposa, together with the MacRobertson racing team of Roscoe Turner and Clyde Pangborn, who had placed second in the Speed Race with a Boeing 247. They arrived at Los Angeles in December 1934. She lectured in the U.S. regarding the race and was received by Mrs. Roosevelt

at the White House the following month before returning to her native country.

After the world tour, the Nazis surprised Miss Rasche by forbidding her editorship of the flying magazine. Later they banned her three aviation books, claiming she had written with too much sympathy for the Anglo-American "enemies". She had also praised the international friendship between all flyers of the world. She then became a photographer and spent the duration of WW II living in Berlin while her many American friends wondered about her well-being.

Thea immigrated to America in December of 1951 and returned to Germany in September 1953. Altogether, she has visited the U. S. six times, having lived a total of three years and seven months in America.

In addition to the mentioned Honorary QB affiliation, Thea Rasche is a Charter and Life Member of the Ninety-Nines, International Women Pilots' Association. She became an Honorary Member of the Aviation Fraternity, Alpha Eta Rho, at the University of Southern California in December 1934 and also an Honorary Member of the International Aero Education Research Organization, Inc. for distinguished service in the educational advancement of Aeronautics, Wright Anniversary Award at San Diego, California. She served as Vice-President of the Women's International Association of Aeronautics up until WW II and continues as a member in New York. She became a member of the Civil Air Patrol (Auxiliary of the United States Air Force) in 1953.

Thea's health does not permit her to fly now, but she hopes to start again soon. She works on her books and plans to republish them. She maintains a favorable outlook on life and has a sense of humor which leads to quotations at times:

"Flying is more thrilling than love for a man and far less dangerous." "In early times many girls flew only 'with their mouths' and had a big fantasy!" "To have a husband who is also a flyer is always very helpful, when he is not - Jealous!" "Sex bombs are as dangerous as atom bombs." "Always keep smiling." And, regarding racing, "May the best man (or woman) win--Aviation without politics!"

Thea Rasche is an interesting and inspiring pioneer pilot who continues to advocate world friendship in all aviation circles.

REFERENCES AND CREDITS: Correspondence with Thea Rasche; RECORD FLIGHTS by Clarence Chamberlin, Beechwood Press; ATLANTIC AIR CONQUEST by Frank and Elsie Ellis, William Kimber and Co., Ltd; WOMEN IN AERONAUTICS by Charles Paul May, Thomas Nelson & Sons; AIRMAN FRIDAY by William Courtenay, Hutchinson & Co., Ltd.

All photographs illustrating this article are from Thea Rasche. The opening photo shows her on shipboard, returning home in 1929 with two of her trophies.



The Gipsy-Moth after making a forced landing near Holtville, California during 1929 Women's Air Derby.



Thea Rasche in her third airplane, a BMW M-23 purchased in 1929. Shown at Hamburg sometime in the early 1940s.