



(Beech Aircraft Corp No 2754)

Louise Thaden

By
H. GLENN BUFFINGTON

When a college student's major shifts from Journalism to that of Physical Education and then to Pre-Med, it is axiomatic that the student is searching for a niche in life. So it was with Louise McPhetridge as she attended the University of Arkansas. A native of Bentonville, Arkansas, born November 12, 1906, Louise had actually wanted to fly since the age of seven when she jumped off the barn under an oversized umbrella.

After two years of college, she worked a year at Wichita, Kansas, "The Air Capital of the World", for the J. H. Turner Coal Company, selling coal, fuel oil and building material. Saturday afternoons and Sundays usually found her at the Travel Air factory where Walter Beech was starting to make a name for himself. Mr. Turner was a large stockholder and a director in Travel Air, so he was influential in helping Louise align herself with the manufacturer to which she has been identified for so many years.

When Louise returned to college for her third year in 1925, she was firmly convinced she would get into aviation at any cost. The following fall she headed for Wichita and embarked on the fascinating new career. Walter Beech arranged for Louise to join forces with D. C. Warren, the Travel Air Pacific Coast distributor, who had agreed to teach her the aviation business and the elements of flight. The assignment in the Bay area not only taught the fledgling the rudiments of flying, but she was able to chalk up three international flight records and also meet Herbert Von Thaden who was to become her life's companion. Her arrival in San Francisco, April 7, 1928 via Travel Air, prompted this report to the homefront. "I am so grateful you let me come. Flying gives me better understanding, peace and content. Isn't it a wonderful thing that the one who created the mountains and the valleys and the deserts should take care of an infinitesimal bit of humanity? How can we become egoists enough to forget Him, and think only of our own little heartaches and happiness?"

Sandwiched between the fixed-base operation and the distributor office work, Louise went after her first record in the winter. She had received her private pilot's license May 16 when the 10-hour solo ruling was in effect. Flying a Travel Air with a Hispano-Suiza

180 hp engine, December 7, 1928, she climbed to a new women's altitude record. Although one altimeter indicated almost 29,000 feet and the second 2,000 feet less, the official barograph reading was 20,200 feet. It had been necessary to use a make-shift oxygen apparatus, a scarce item in the early era, and to don a fur-lined flying suit to combat the -24° temperature at the peak altitude.

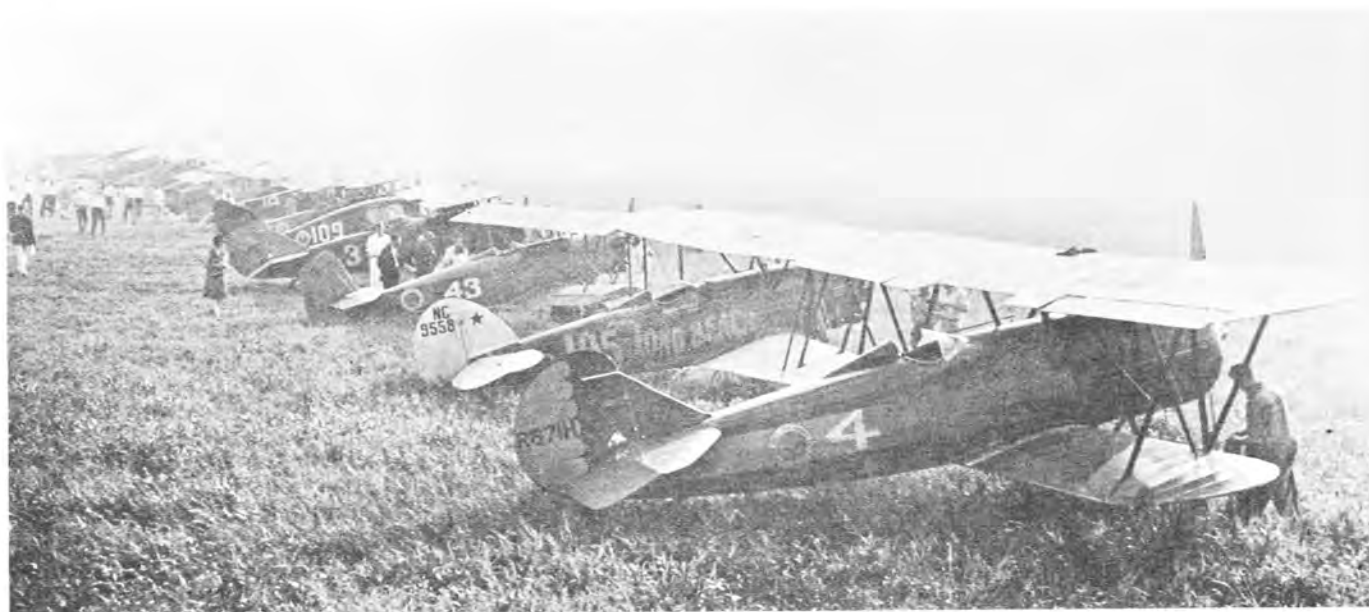
In the spring, March 16-17, 1929, using the same plane, Miss McPhetridge garnered more prestige for herself and the Travel Air Company, by remaining aloft 22 hours, 3 minutes and 28 seconds, a new women's non-refueling endurance record. Although the loss of the prop spinner during the flight was an eye-opener, the young pilot claimed the speed boat ride from Oakland over to San Francisco after the flight was the most harrowing experience of the day!

Speed wings were trucked in from the Kansas factory to be used on the plane Louise was to fly in attempting a new speed record. After preliminary work and trial flights were made, the late afternoon of April 13, 1929 was chosen for the record attempt. Two runs each way over a measured mile course across Oakland Airport were required, with altitude limits between 300 and 500 feet, and the official record observers credited her with 156 mph.

The required 200 flight hours for a transport rating had been logged by this time, so Louise took the written exam and flight test to acquire the coveted transport license, the fourth woman in the United States to do so (license #1943).

Herbert V. Thaden, ex-Army pilot and engineer, had been on the scene during this time and thrilled to Louise's accomplishments. He was in the throes of assembling an 8-place, Wasp-powered, all-metal monoplane of his own design, the Thaden T-1. Mutual interests developed the friendship which led to their secret marriage in Reno. However, the secret was short-lived and the news hit the front page of San Francisco papers.

Mrs. Thaden, with the aid of J. H. Turner, persuaded Walter Beech to build a plane for her on loan to enter in the first Women's Air Derby (JOURNAL, Fall 1964). The race was flown from Santa Monica to Cleveland, August



Partial lineup of the 1929 Women's Air Derby planes at Parks Air College, East St. Louis, Illinois, on August 25th, before takeoff for Cincinnati, Ohio. Aircraft are: 4-Louise Thaden, Travel Air; 105-Gladys O'Donnell, Waco; 43-Jessie Keith-Miller, Fleet; 3-Blanche Noyes, Travel Air; 109-Edith Foltz, Alexander Eaglerock; 113-Vera Dawn Walker, Curtiss Robin. (Fred H. Mueller, Parks Air College)

18-26, 1929. Louise had to practice patience in accepting delivery as four other racing planes were on the factory production line, and they had to be finished first as the pilots were purchasing their planes. On the flight to the starting line, Louise was overcome with carbon monoxide poisoning as she approached Ft. Worth from Tulsa. Mr. Beech remedied the situation by running a four-inch pipe back from the front of the cowl into the cockpit to feed in fresh air. Louise flew a stellar race, (Travel Air J-5, R671H, racing number 4) turning in the best flight time to win first place in the field of 20 pilots.

Immediately after the National Air Races, the

Thadens moved to Pittsburgh where a group had purchased the Thaden Metal Airplane Company, and the name was changed to Pittsburgh Metal Airplane Company. Louise took a part time job as Director of the Women's Division of the Penn School of Aviation and a second assignment as Public Relations Director for the Pittsburgh Aviation Industries Corp. The Thaden monoplane was affectionately referred to as 'The Tin Goslin' and Louise piloted company officials to numerous meetings. General Motors acquired the company in May 1931, merged it with Fokker Aircraft and moved to New Jersey. During the late summer, Louise flew the Thaden T-4, Wright J-6 C502V, racing number 46, in the Cross Country Derby from



The Thaden T-4, designed and built by Herbert Von Thaden and flown by Louise Thaden in the 1931 Derby from the West Coast to the Cleveland National Air Races. (Thaden Collection)

Santa Monica to Cleveland in conjunction with the National Air Races. She placed fifth, ahead of the other heavier planes in the women's division.

"Casey" Jones was first to approach Mrs. Thaden about the possibility of a refueling endurance flight with Frances Harrell Marsalis, to which she agreed. The flight was flown from Curtiss Field, Valley Stream, Long Island, under the management of Viola Gentry, and used the Curtiss Thrush, Wright J-6, NR9142. The Curtiss Robin tanker was manned by Stewart Reiss and Johnny Runger.

The first record attempt was cut short after 18 hours of flight when the rope attached to a metal container used for food delivery tore off a section of the left wing tip. After repairs and a brief rest, the fliers took off again August 14, 1932 and remained airborne 8 days, 4 hours and 5 minutes for a new record. Louise admits endurance flights are lots of fun--years later! During the grueling flight, they used 2338 gallons of gasoline, 32½ gallons of oil, effected 78 refueling contacts and 16 radio contacts.

Two additions were made to the Thaden roster during this era. Bill was born in July 1930 at Pittsburgh and Patsy was born in September 1933 at Kansas City.

When 1934 rolled around and plans for the MacRobertson International Air Race had been announced, the Thadens were living in Kansas City where Herb had joined forces with TWA. The Thadens planned to enter the race as a team and Walter Beech agreed to build a veritable flying gasoline tank in the form of a Staggerwing with a Wright Cyclone. They hoped to cruise at 15,000 feet and 220-plus mph. However, when the deadline could not be met, the plans were abandoned.

Phoebe Omlie and Amelia Earhart promoted the air marking idea with the Bureau of Air Commerce, and in the autumn of 1935 four women pilots were assigned to the project--Louise Thaden, Helen MacCloskey (Rough), Nancy Harkness (Love) and Helen Richey. In less than one year they "sold" air marking projects to state Works Project Administrators and obtained approval in every state for more than 16,000 air markers costing more than one million dollars.

Olive Ann Beech instigated Louise's entry in the 1936 Bendix Trophy Race with a phone call to San Antonio where she and Blanche Noyes, a newly-appointed air marking pilot, were on an assignment. The Thaden-Noyes team flew the Staggerwing Beechcraft, Wright 420, R15835, racing number 62, from Floyd Bennett Field to Mines Field, September 4, 1936 in 14 hours and 55 minutes with a brief refueling stop at Wichita. They placed first, arriving within the hour before the 6 o'clock deadline, and to cinch a sweep for the women that year, Laura Ingalls was second in her Lockheed Orion. Pre-race favorites Maxine and Benny Howard in "Mr. Mulligan", and also Joe Jacobson in a Northrup, were forced out during the race. Roscoe Turner had cracked up his Wedell-Williams en route to Floyd Bennett.

Subsequently, Mrs. Thaden left the Bureau and became a Beechcraft factory demonstrator-pilot. A number of inter-city records were set during this time, one for which she received official credit was flown January 21, 1937 from Detroit to Akron in 40 minutes and 43 seconds. At the St. Louis International Air Races, May 29, 1937, Louise flew a Beechcraft Wright 450 over the 100 kilometer course at 197,958 mph for a new record.

Louise Thaden has always been a stalwart member of the Ninety-Nines, and as a charter member and secretary handled much of the paper work and organizational matters. She served as vice-president of the Ninety-Nines in 1931-32, when the organization had its first full slate of officers with Amelia Earhart as president. Louise was secretary of the National Aeronautics Association in 1935-36. She was awarded the Harmon Trophy as outstanding United States woman pilot in 1936.

This thought-provoking pilot has an interesting outlook on various phases of flight. Pertaining to the altitude record, "I realized that an altitude flight is



Pioneers in the Air Marking field, l to r Blanche Noyes, Helen Richey, Helen MacCloskey and Louise Thaden. (NAA)

like life--the going up is as difficult as the going down is easy." Referring to records in general, "Records are made to be broken. On the face of it, it may seem strange that months of work and many hundreds of dollars go into a flight which requires mere minutes to complete. But that is one of the prices of progress and it IS fun." She further comments, "Demonstrating new airplanes is not all it seems on the surface--it is very exhausting; hence the gray hairs." Concerning flight safety, "I say flying is safe, as safe as anything in which the human element has a part."

Louise was one of the featured speakers at the 1966 Powder Puff Derby Awards Banquet, Clearwater, Florida. It was held July 7 after the cross country race from Seattle. Her subject: "A Glance Backwards." The Thadens are living at High Point, North Carolina nowadays. They own the Thaden Engineering Company which specializes in developments in reinforced plastics, products and equipment. Louise keeps current by flying mostly for fun and, as you might suspect, in a Beechcraft.

ADDENDUM: William C. Yarbrough, President of the Staggerwing Club, has offered some interesting information regarding the Bendix winning Beechcraft R15835. The data was reaffirmed and detailed by Beech Aircraft Corporation spokesman Vern Modeland, Press Relations.

R15835, serial number 77, was painted Sherwin Williams Blue with white trim. Shortly after the Bendix Race the plane was sold to the Honduran government and the registry number was removed prior to shipment.

A nearly identical aircraft, Model C17-R, Wright R975, serial number 81, was completed October 10, 1936 and was flown by Louise Thaden as a demonstrator with registration number NC15835 assigned. The aircraft was Consolidated Blue with white trim. This plane is currently owned by Lt Col James T. Winkler, USAF, and is presently stored at Gastonia, North Carolina.