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JIMMY DOOLITTLE'S 1932 LAIRD

by

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Almost any aviation enthusiast can recall the beautiful Gee Bee R-1 (No. 11) which Jimmy Doolittle flew to first place in the 1932 Thompson Trophy Race. Jimmy has become so definitely linked with this airplane that the fact that he was not intended to be its pilot in the first place has been virtually forgotten.

The wheels of fate started turning when a decision was made early in 1932 to modify Doolittle's sleek green and yellow Laird "Super-Solution" in an attempt to increase its top speed. The biplane's rather narrow fuselage was completely torn down and rebuilt as a fatter, tear-drop shaped structure that was somewhat similar to the 1932 Gee Bees in top planform. The wings were also completely rebuilt although they resembled the 1931 design in outline. To make a long story short, let it suffice to say that when Doolittle and his workers were finished, there was nothing left of the 1931 ship but the engine and the horizontal tail surfaces. The rebuild was sponsored by Doolittle's employers, the Shell Oil Company. It was painted with the familiar dark yellow and red Shell colors. The two most interesting modifications were the new transparent cockpit canopy and the novel retractable landing gear. In an attempt to overcome the problem of insufficient forward visibility, the pilot's seat was raised enough to allow Doolittle to see over the flush, upper wing. The cockpit was completely enclosed and also featured transparent sides increasing visibility even more.

The retractable landing gear operated on the vertical plane with the wheels protruding slightly when fully retracted. In the down position, the landing gear resembled a conventional fixed arrangement because it consisted of a single strut to each wheel with a cross member. This cross member traveled up and down a track projecting straight down from the center of the fuselage. The wheels moved toward each other and straight up into an opening in the bottom of the wide fuselage. The wheels were retracted mechanically but gravity was expected to bring them back down. This arrangement worked fine in Beech hangar No. 2 at Wichita, where the modifications were made, but in the air it was another story.

On August 23, Doolittle took the ship up for its first flight. Everything went fine until he was ready to land. To Doolittle's dismay the new landing gear refused to emerge from the fuselage. For half an hour Jimmy dived, looped and stunted the plane all over the sky trying to move the balky gear. Finally, he managed to get both wheels part way down and decided this was all he could do. He brought the Laird down and it skidded across the field, twisting the propeller and generally messing up its undersides. It was a fairly good landing, as belly landings go, but the plane was damaged enough that it could not be repaired before the National Air Races.

Meanwhile, in the east, distance flyer Russell Boardman, who held controlling interest in the new Gee Bees and was to fly model R-1 at the races, was severely injured when one of the Gee Bee Sportsters he was flying went out of control and crashed. On August 27, the day the National Air Races started, Doolittle made arrangements with Z. D. Granville by telephone to fly the Gee Bee R-1. He arrived in Springfield the next day, climbed into the Gee Bee, which he had never seen before, and flew it straight to Cleveland. What happened at the races is well known. It is this historian's opinion that Doolittle would never have achieved the same results with the Laird. This is just another example of the strange twists of fate that make history.