

THE SIKORSKY S-35 AND THE FIRST NEW YORK TO PARIS ATTEMPT

by

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On September 21, 1926, the first attempt at non-stop flight across the Atlantic Ocean from New York to Paris ended in failure. At stake was the \$25,000 Raymond Orteig prize and a large share of aviation history. However, events, from the first conception of the idea, to the choice of pilots, to the final days of testing bespoke of failure. Fraught with controversy, indecision and just plain hard luck, the ill fated venture had little chance of success at the outset.

The airplane which was to play a major role in the venture was the big trimotored Sikorsky S-35. A masterpiece of aeronautical engineering, the S-35 was one of the most modern aircraft of 1926. Originally intended for a commercial airliner, it had been extensively modified for the long distance flight.

The wings were extended to 101 ft. and were strengthened to take extra gas, At the same time, the structure was lightened so that the major portion of the load could be in fuel and oil. The empty weight of the big S-35 was only four tons.

The fuselage was an all metal structure covered by fabric, The entire framework of the body was composed of duraluminum 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, and dual controls had been provided for the pilots. Behind the cockpit the passenger cabin contained space for 450 cu. ft. of cargo or 12 passengers. The cabin was four ft. wide, six ft. high, and fifteen and one half ft. long,, At the front of the cabin were two doors which would enable the mechanics to inspect the side motors while in flight. Radio equipment was installed for regular or short wave transmission.

Sikorsky installed self compensating rudders so the plane could fly with any two of the three motors in operation. The wing structure was made up entirely of duralumin. The main spar was built up to I-section by four duralumin angles, riveted to the central web of flat sheet duralumin. The ribs were formed from light sheet duralumin channels and angles. High tensile strength tie rods were used in the internal drift bracing system.

The ailerons were hinged to an auxiliary spar behind the main spar. They tapered at the tip and blended into the wing at point of attachment. The tail surfaces were built similar to the wings and were fabric covered. The stabilizer was adjustable for trim during flight. The landing gear, of the divided axle type, was made entirely of steel and was bolted together. The wheel spread of the gear was 18 ft, 4 inches.

The plane was capable of flying 4330 miles, and of taking off at the proposed weight of 24,200 pounds with a 21.85 pound wing loading. Its three Gnome-Rhone Jupiter engines developed a total of 1,260 horsepower, power enough to sustain flight on any two operating engines. Just before the flight, designer Igor Sikorsky said,

"The plane is in as excellent condition as any machine has ever been," And yet the venture failed. Leading up to the final tragic conclusion of what could have been one of aviations most historic flights were a whole series of minor accidents, culminating with the fiery crash of the beautiful S-35 and death of two men.

To start with, one of the originators of the flight idea, Captain Homer Berry, United States Army Air Service, Ret.,, was informed that he would accompany the trip only if there were three pilots. Berry said in a statement to the press, "Two years ago I got the idea of this flight and went around the country to get backers for the project, I was at that time told that I would be pilot of the attempt as soon as the plane was ready, I went to South America on a business trip and when I returned was informed I would be co-pilot. Now I find that I am out in the cold altogether**"

This controversy, between Captain Berry and Captain Rene Fonck, the chief pilot, was to continue for several weeks and become bitter at times.

French air ace, Reno Fonck, credited with 75 German kills, with claims for 50 more had been selected as chief pilot for the trip with a weekly salary of \$250 and power to choose his crew. During the war, the fighter pilot had been decorated 21 times for bravery in combat.

Backing the flight was the organization known as, "The Argonauts, Inc." Robert Jackson, paper manufacturer from Concord, N.J., was president of the organization. At the time of the argument he was in Paris "awaiting" the arrival of the S-35 and crew, Vice-President of the Argonauts was Colonel Harold E. Hartney, wartime commander of the First Pursuit Squadron in France, Hartney was the coordinator of the project on the American side of the Atlantic,

There were conferences, Bernard Sadler, attorney for the Argonauts, arrived at the airport breathing determination and left two hours later downcast. He had, along with Hartney, Berry, Lt. Allen Snody, Fonck, and an interpreter been discussing the problem of the pilots. Sadler said to Fonck, "You are just an employee and can be fired at any time," He further intimated that just that might happen if the row wasn't settled soon. The group huddled in a corner of the hangar, Sadler talked, Hartney talked, Fonck talked. The interpreter talked. Pencils were tapped on chests, hands were waved, and there was much repressed excitement in the group.

Fonck, dapper little French ace, was apparently too cocky for Berry, At one point in the disagreement, with Fonck in as chief pilot, Hartney in as arbitrator, and Berry out in the cold, Fonck said, "Homer Berry did not get his rank of Captain from the United States Army. He got it from the 'business trip' to South America when he fought for Pancho Villa in Mexico, He fought for both sides for the fun of it. In the American army in France during the war he was only a sergeant. He is trying to force my hand, to make me take him along. Perhaps at the end of the week I will announce the names of the men of my crew - a radio operator and a mechanic - but I will not take Berry, About 200 pilots in America have asked for permission to go along, and as many in France, naturally Berry is disappointed, but he is an out sider."

At this statement, Berry really flew off the handle. "So he calls me an outsider does he? I will show him that he is badly mistaken," he exclaimed, "No Frenchman, no matter how many medals he has can come over here and push me out of this flight."

However, four days later on Sept. 4, Captain Homer Berry dropped out of the flight and gave up all claims to the honor of piloting the S-35 across the Atlantic. This gave Lieutenant Allan P. Snody, U.S. Navy pilot and aide to Navy Air Chief, Rear Admiral William A. Moffett, clear sailing as Official co-pilot to Fonck. Snody was on leave from the Navy to participate in the New York to Paris flight.

Berry's dropping out by no means cleared up all of the controversy. In the midst of the Fonck-Berry row, Lieutenant G. O. Neville, an automotive engineer for the Vacuum Oil Co., and flight engineer on the New York to Paris S-35, withdrew from the organization. A dispute had arisen over the oil to be used for the flight. Lt. Noville, who had been with Commander Richard E. Byrd on his Polar flight in a similar capacity, said the Gargoyle Mobiloil "B" would be used on the Trans-Atlantic attempt. The Fonck faction said that a British motor oil would be used. Noville quit. Prior to his work on the S-35, Noville had used the same oil in the "Josephine Ford," Byrd's Fokker, and had found it satisfactory, even in the Arctic conditions encountered.

Robert Jackson, in Paris all this time awaiting the arrival of the flight said that there were minor differences between Fonck and various members of the organization. He said that Noville couldn't have resigned as flight engineer as he didn't have any connections there in the first place.

The problem of paying for the giant S-35 plagued the Argonauts. By September 4, they had paid a total of only \$20,000 on the plane which cost \$105,000. Robert Jackson had paid \$10,000, and John Jameson of Concord, Mass., had paid another \$10,000. Igor Sikorsky, manufacturer of the S-35, donated the remaining \$80,000 to the cause when it became apparent that he would not receive more money for the plane. Rene Fonck, as part of his agreement with the Argonauts and Sikorsky was to have secured three British designed, French built Gnome-Rhone Jupiter engines from the French government at no cost.

Hartney was indignant over the matter of payment. At one point, with a suit threatened, Hartney produced a bill of sale dated April 2, which stated that the Argonauts had paid all but \$8,000. He stated that the remainder of the price would be offered later the same week. Hartney added that the engines which were to have been free had cost them \$43,000 which brought the total price of the plane to over \$150,000.

During the period of controversy between Fonck and Berry, over piloting, Fonck and Noville over the oil, and the Argonauts and Sikorsky over payment, the flight testing had been carried out.

All flight tests were to have been under the control of Sikorsky and were to last not less than six weeks. He was to have had the opportunity to test the plane under official auspices to set new records for altitude and speed with a heavy load. However the accelerated flight program did not allow the full utilization of the S-35's capabilities.

On the morning and afternoon of August 23, the plane underwent two successful flights. In the air for only half an hour in the morning, the afternoon flight lasted over an hour while Sikorsky, Fonck and Snody took turns piloting the plane. The flight was along the course of the Harlem River, over the Yankee Stadium, down the Hudson River, around the Statue of Liberty, across Brooklyn, then back to Roosevelt Field. This was the first real air test of the S-35 - it had carried a payload of 4,000 pounds, or one fourth the load to be carried to France. At one time during

the flight, the center motor was stopped and the S-35 had sufficient power remaining to climb.

When the plane landed, Sikorsky was seized by a dozen of his Russian countrymen employed at the field, and carried shoulder high away from the plane. Immediately after landing, the S-35 was taken to the hangar where final streamlining and addition of gas tanks was accomplished,

Snody, as co-pilot and navigator had been working on weather charts and maps for several weeks, compiling reports from between 20 and 40 ships at sea each day. Snody stated that approximately 70 percent of the time the wind would be favorable. The course would be 3,611,8 miles long, of which 1,900 were to be over water.

The tests continued. After one flight, the left wheel of the plane struck in a hole in the runway but there was no damage. On Sept, 8, Mayor Walker of New York City christened the plane the "NEW YORK-PARIS".

On the 9th, Fonck flew the S-35 and 13 passengers from Roosevelt Field to Washington, D.C. Cruising at 120 m.p.h. at 350 rated horsepower, the plane made the trip in two hours against a stiff headwind. At Washington there were no hangars large enough for the giant so it had to be left in the rain overnight. To keep the curious away, a naval guard was posted. After returning to Roosevelt Field the next day, it was announced that this was one of the last times the S-35 would go up except for the official weight lifting, speed and altitude tests.

There were still a number of changes to be made on the plane. The tail skid was replaced by a wheel so that there would be less ground drag during take-off. An auxiliary set of landing gear of four extra wheels was installed behind the main gear "On the last flight prior to the trip, these wheels will be dropped to test the release mechanism. They can be rebuilt easily if they are smashed. Captain Fonck doesn't want them to cause drag or make an extra load across the Atlantic so they will be dropped as soon as he gets over water, probably Long Island Sound," stated designer Sikorsky,

Tension was at a high pitch during the last few days of the preparation for the flight. Lieutenant Snody, who had been sick with a cold for several weeks developed acute bronchitis which affected his hearing and eliminated him from the trip. Early on the 13th, U.S. Navy Lieutenant jg. Frederick Nelson left the field with Fonck, Later Nelson returned with a new flying suit and a number of smoke bombs for drift detection. There was speculation that he would accompany Fonck,

On the 14th, it became apparent that Lt. Nelson would not go either. Lieutenant Lawrence William Curtin, also of the U. S. Navy, arrived and it was announced that he would fly with Fonck. Bubbling with enthusiasm, Curtin jumped at the chance to go. Curtin had been an aid to Commander John Rodgers who was killed attempting a long distance flight to Hawaii,

During the day, Lieutenant C. H. Schildbauer arrived from Philadelphia with some more smoke bombs for Curtin, Lieutenant H. C. Rood brought some parachute flares. Lieutenant Stanton Wooster and Lieutenant H. W. Lucas arrived at Roosevelt in a DH with field glasses, helmet, goggles, and a new uniform cap for Curtin. All Navy friends of his, they expressed envy and wished him luck.

This sudden chance to go to Paris did not interrupt Curtin's plans to fly to Panama with two Navy planes from Philadelphia. "I'll do that when I get back, it

isn't until October," Berry, on hand all this time, noticed Curtin had no gloves and ran to his car at the side of the field and gave his to Curtin.

Curtin re-routed the scheduled flight saying that it was longer than necessary. He changed it to a great circle route which cut north of Cape Cod, bisected Nova Scotia and Bonavista Bay, Newfoundland, and came out on a wide, sweeping curve far north of the steamship lanes. The route came back to land about ten miles south of Cape Clear, Ireland, then over Falmouth, England, Cherbourg and on to LeBourget in Paris. This great circle route was 114 miles shorter than the previous one, making it a total of 3497.8 miles.

Sept, 16th arrived. In the early dawn the big S-35 was wheeled to the end of the runway, its exhaust stacks spitting fire. The field had been carefully gone over during the week and all holes and depressions had been filled. The plane was being fueled in the early dawn when a leak developed in the right outboard gas tank. At first only a trickle, it quickly developed into a steady stream. The flight was aborted because the time required to make repairs would force the plane to land in Paris in the dark. Berry helped to pump gas by hand as the field generator had overloaded and quit work.

For four days weather prevented the flight. To bystanders, it seemed that everyone was continually glancing aloft, vainly attempting to tell the state of the weather off the Grand Banks by sniffing the air of New York,

The whole world was waiting. A message to Lt. Curtin from President Coolidge was received,

"I am glad to extend to you and Captain Fonck good wishes for the success of your flights. I hope that this may prove not only a fine and courageous adventure, but a step in the development of aviation which shall bind closer together the countries of the world," CALVIN COOLIDGE.

Captain Fonck received a similar, but not so friendly a message from Captain Wesier of France who had only a few days before set a worlds record flight of 5,200 kilometers between Benderabbas, Persia and Paris. His message:

"Start, even if it means that you will fall into the sea and have to swim,"

In the darkness of the early dawn of Sept. 21, the S-35 was again hauled to the end of the runway at Roosevelt Field. Men swarmed over the big airplane, tightening every nut and bolt for the last time. The struts, fuel lines, hinges, motors, anything that could be reached was checked again and again. Lights flashed in and out of the cockpit where a final check was given the instruments,

French Captain Rene Fonck appeared, resplendent in his blue Army uniform, his short legs encased in leather puttees. Casually remarking in typical French fashion, "Tuesday, Wednesday, dinner in Paris? Who knows?" He tossed an imaginary glass towards his lips. U. S. Navy Lieutenant Bill Curtin also arrived in his service uniform, flashing his boyish grin in suppressed excitement. Both uniforms were quickly covered by flying suits as the men got to work.

The other crew members arrived. The Frenchman, Charles Clavier was on hand as radio operator. Clavier was returning to his wife and three children loaded with gifts as he did not anticipate returning to the United States. Friendly, and well liked by everyone because of his cheerfulness, Clavier had helped install the radio equipment.

Also on board the plane was _____ Ismaloff, in charge of fuel consumption on the S-35. A refugee, he had graduated from the Russian Naval Academy during the first part of World War I, and had been a radio operator on a Russian Polar expedition. For three and a half years he had worked in a Russian observatory in Constantinople. He was returning to Constantinople to visit his parents.

There was anxiety at the field as the three Jupiter engines roared into life. The plane had originally been designed as an airliner, then converted into a long range plane designed to take off at a gross weight of 24,200 pounds with a wing loading of 21.85 pounds. However, it was found just prior to take-off that the weight was 28,000 pounds, two tons more than planned on, giving the S-35 a wing loading of 26 pounds per square foot. The plane was so heavily loaded that the wheels sunk into the dry turf.

Things started to go wrong as soon as the plane was taxied from the hangar to the end of the runway. Purple flame spitting from the exhausts in the darkness, the S-35 moved towards the end of the runway, then the tail skid slipped off the doily, bending the lower end of the center rudder.* It took only a minute to fix this. Then in turning the plane around towards the west and the mile long runway, one of the auxiliary wheels was bent. This was straightened. The flight was ready.

Cars raced down field to watch the take-off. With men pushing the overloaded plane to get it started, the three Jupiter engines strained forward, propellers tearing into the still morning air. A long cloud of dust engulfed the ground crew as the S-35 started down the runway.

Calculations called for a take-off run of 2,200 ft, in 51 seconds, Igor Sikorsky stood watching the plane move down the runway, his fists tightly clenched, straining with his body to help the plane into the air.

Three hundred yards from the start wore a series of small bumps where a road crossed the field* Two thirds the distance of the field there was another road and more bumps. Fifty yards from the end of the runway, just before a twenty foot embankment was reached, there were two more roads.

The start made, the lumbering, overloaded S-35 moved down the field. Then, without warning, it began to come apart. As it bounced over the first bumps, an auxiliary wheel tore loose, spun around and leaped into the air. The plane lurched to the left but Fonck and Curtin were able to control it. Then the right auxiliary gear started to fall off. The wheels flew into the air, dropped and spun away. The wheel under the tail skid gave way, dropping the tail heavily on the skid. One of the auxiliary wheels hit the lower part of the left rudder, breaking it loose and partially caving in the tail section. The tail was dragging the ground, holding the plane to the earth.

The struggling S-35 made a little hop, but the drag pulled it back down. The end of the runway was reached. Its long wings outstretched, the giant S-35 sailed over the top of the 20 ft. embankment and dropped out of sight.

There was a long moment of suspense. Just as the racing cars reached the crest of the hill, a great ball of flame shot up from the plane, searing the countryside with the 2,500 gallons of gas and oil. The roaring inferno from the crumpled plane lit up the early dawn darkness with an Eric orange glow, casting long shadows behind the spectators.

Sikorsky outdistanced many younger men in the dash to the wreck. Captain Berry, with tears streaming down his face and crying, "What a shame! What a shame!" had to be held back from dashing into the inferno to save the trapped men.

At first it was thought that everyone was killed. Then a dazed and shocked Fonck, tattered and bleeding appeared, Curtin came up, marked only by a little soot but outwardly composed. Inside the crushed S-35 were Cavalier and Ismaloff.

Fonck and Curtin had escaped through a hole in the top of the cabin. They crawled free, dodging a still turning propeller. Hoping that their companions were safe, they barely had time to clear the wreckage before the thousands of gallons of fuel burst into flame, consuming the entire plane. Fire trucks from nearby Mitchel Field were helpless. Finally after an hour of intense flame the fire died down.

Fonck later stated that he had seen soon after the start of the flight that he not only couldn't take off but could not control the lit ton monster. His only hope was to continue at full power and hope to clear the drop off at the embankment and land straight ahead. As the S-35 hopped the top of the bank and glided down, the right gear struck, then on the second bounce collapsed. The right wing buckled and over they went.

Later the same day, showing his strong spirit, Curtin said, "It is the fortune of the air, it could not be helped. Now is the time for you fellows to get us another plane,"

Immediate reaction to the flight's failure was shock. However, when the shock wore off, there was a demand for an investigation of the cause. Some thought over-loading did it, others thought that Fonck was at fault. Very few blamed the Sikorsky S-35.

In an inquest a few days later, Col. Hartney testified that in his opinion, "Fonck was incompetent. He demonstrated poor pilotage and irresponsibility and there was a lack of preparation for the flight." Hartney further added that there had been no teamwork in the crew and that Fonck wanted all of the prize money and publicity.

The French also criticized their one-time hero. An official in the aeronautics branch said that, "Fonck had no value whatsoever as an experimental pilot. It is a special profession requiring highly technical training. A fighter pilot is one thing and a test pilot is another," Other capable persons said he had too little practice time in the S-35 and very little time in multi-engine aircraft.

Many jumped to his defense, Lt. Curtin said that he would fly in anything, anywhere, provided Fonck was pilot.

At first Fonck blamed Ismaloff for releasing the auxiliary wheels. However, a few days later he retracted this statement with the comment that he had misunderstood the situation. It had appeared to him that Ismaloff had panicked when the wheel assembly was smashed and had released it. Bystanders took issue with Fonck saying the gear had gradually broken up along the entire course, rather than come off all at once.

Sikorsky said there were two major causes of the crash. The first was a last minute shift of the wind to the east. This wind change forced the take-off along the prepared runway to be downwind. He listed the second cause as damage to the auxiliary gear and the resultant drag.

The general consensus of opinion was that there were several related causes. The big S-35, great machine that it was, nevertheless was very heavily overloaded and had not been tested fully. The rough field caused the initial damage to the plane and the dragging parts held the plane back, keeping it from attaining flying speed. The tailwind further complicated the take-off.

However experienced pilots who had witnessed the crash stated that the plane, overloaded as it was, could have flown had Fonck raised the tail.

The engine switches had three separate cut offs. George Honneur, French engine expert who had installed the three Gnome-Rhone Jupiter engines said that had there been a single cut off, and had Fonck been able to cut the ignition, it is possible there would have been no fire.

The Grand Jury holding the inquest turned in the verdict that it was an unfortunate accident and all concerned with the flight were cleared,

Igor Sikorsky said simply., "We will go ahead. Aviation must be prepared to meet these things as they occur. From the disaster itself may come great strides forward. No one who flies ever becomes disappointed by death and discouragement."

The first attempt at a non-stop flight between New York and Paris ended. The lessons gained from the tragedy on Sept, 21, 1926, when the beautiful Sikorsky S-35 was destroyed and two brave men were killed, were applied almost nine months later when a lone pilot, in a single engined monoplane completed what was started by the S-35.

SIKORSKY S-35 SPECIFICATIONS

Span, upper wing	101 ft.
Span, lower wing	76 ft.
Height	16 ft.
Total wing area	1095 sq. ft.
Weight empty	8000 lb.
Loading per horsepower	19 lb.
Loading per sq. ft. of wing area	21.85 lb.
Crew of three	510 lb.
Special equipment	590 lb.
Total weight of fuel and oil	15,200 lb.
Total weight of S-35	24,200 lb.
Gnome-Rhone Jupiter engines (3)	420 hp. each
Maximum speed	148 mph
Cruising speed	120 mph

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