

SOUTHERN CROSS

by Merle Olmsted

This marvelous historic photo, in the form of an original 11x14 inch print was obtained from my friend, and fellow AAHS member, Jay Wright. Jay grew up in the Oakland/San Francisco Bay area, where he joined the U.S. Naval reserve aviation unit in 1938, serving with the GOLDEN GATORS at Oakland Airport. However, he does not recall where or when he obtained this print.

The big Fokker SOUTHERN CROSS is well-known for Kingsford Smith's transpacific flight to Australia in the spring of 1928, but the husky-looking biplane with its tail on a trestle, was a puzzle.

At first glance, it was thought it might be one of the ill-fated Dole race entries. However, it soon became apparent that it did not match any of these aircraft. It was ruled out anyhow, since SOUTHERN CROSS did not arrive in the San Francisco area until several months after the Dole race hopefuls had departed Oakland in August 1927.

The biplane, which appears to have a long-range tank forward of the cockpit, and an earth inductor compass mast on the aft fuselage, has a number of interesting markings. On the left side of the fuselage is the name WANDA, and just below the cockpit is circular insignia with several flags on it and some wording, part of which is "DETROIT."

There is a movie camera on a tripod forward of the nose. The handsome roadster is unidentified.

The next step was to query one of the masters of U.S. aircraft of almost any era, our own Peter Bowers. To my surprise, Pete was unable to ID the biplane or the event. Joe Jupner's volumes on U.S. civil aircraft were consulted, but no match could be found. The partial registration, NX144 ? visible on the tail was also no help.

Bowers, like this writer, thought he saw some features similar to biplanes built by the Michigan-based Hess Aircraft Company, so Pete passed on the problem to Robert Pauley, a gold mine of information on Michigan-built aircraft.

Pauley quickly identified the airplane as a special Hess BLUE BIRD, built by the Hess Aircraft Company of Wyandotte, Michigan, and we are indebted to Pauley for the story of the event pictured in the photo.

By the time Charles Lindbergh ignited a frenzy of new aircraft companies in mid 1927, the Hess Company had been in business for two years, and had built a good reputation for solid biplanes of the conventional type, carrying a pilot, and two or three passengers. All of the airplanes were called BLUE BIRD.

A month after the Lindbergh flight, the Hess company was approached to build a special long-range aircraft to compete in the up-coming Dole race, from Oakland, California, to Hawaii. This was set to depart in August 1927, leaving little time for Hess to build the airplane.

The pilot was to be a Frederick A. Giles, who is said to have flown with the Royal Flying Corps in the late war. He later became an air mail pilot in Australia. Giles hoped to complete the the Dole race and then continue on to New Zealand.

Despite their best efforts, Hess was unable to complete the aircraft in time (as an aside, many of the Dole racers that showed at Oakland to race, were also not ready, although the crews were willing to overlook that little detail, with the well-known carnage that resulted.)

Giles, in the special BLUE BIRD, departed Selfridge Field on the 18th of August, and after a series of harrowing adventures, he arrived in Elko, Nevada, where he ground-looped the BLUE BIRD, ending up inverted. Giles and the aircraft went on to Oakland by rail, where a new top wing was installed.

Late in October, Giles was ready. The BLUE BIRD had the name WANDA on the forward fuselage, named for Miss Wanda Hess, a sister of one of the aircraft's builders. There was a circular insignia on the left side under the cockpit, bearing the flags of the United States, Great Britain, Australia, New Zealand and the Territory of Hawaii. Below this was the slogan, "DETROIT'S GOODWILL MESSENGER." The registration number was NX1445.

Mills Field, San Francisco, was chosen as the takeoff point and Giles took off on 10 November 1927 and headed out to sea. He did not get very far before he ran into heavy fog, and returned to Mills Field.

With the BLUE BIRD's tanks filled to capacity of 310 gallons, Giles tried again on 22 November, but again ran into severe weather, which caused the aircraft to become inverted. Although he managed to regain control, and right the aircraft, all of his supplies and maps had fallen out of the cockpit. Thoroughly discouraged by this turn of events, Fred Giles turned back again, reaching the coast of California near the Hearst Castle (then under construction). The aircraft was badly wrecked in the crash landing, ending Giles dreams of a flight to New Zealand.

Our scene, then, was taken at Mills Field, San Francisco, either just before the 10 November attempt, or the one 12 days later on 22 November 1927. The presence of the camera on the tripod would suggest a newsreel cameraman being on the scene, but who missed getting dramatic footage as SOUTHERN CROSS glided to a landing over the BLUE BIRD.

Kingsford Smith did not yet have the finances for the Australia flight, and was engaged, during this time period, in five attempts to break the world endurance record with SOUTHERN CROSS. All of these attempts failed.

Peter Bowers, prolific author and well-known to all aviation history buffs, was a young lad at the time these events took place. He does not recall



and the BLUE BIRD

Fred Giles or the BLUE BIRD, but friends of his family were among Kingsford Smith's backers, and as a 9 year old Pete got to meet him several times at their home. A letter to this writer, from Pete Powers, dated 8 January 2002, provides some fascinating personal history from those times.

"Kingsford Smith once gave me a tour of SOUTHERN CROSS, and I got to sit in the right side pilot's seat and work the controls. When the first endurance flight was ended by tail flutter, I was scared that I might have loosened the controls by moving them to enthusiastically, but Smithy later assured me that such was not the case. I also made him a cardboard model of the Fokker,

colored with Crayon.

"After one of the endurance flights Smithy came to our house and slept for 36 hours straight. Copilot Pond was at another neighbor's house. During the flight they killed time in the daylight hours by flying around the peninsula and droning over their friend's houses. I can still remember the sound of those three unsynchronized J-5 engines."

All of the record-setting attempts related above were failures, except for Kingsford Smith's flight to Australia a little later, but they provided us with this marvelous historic photo. □



(from the collection of Jay Wright – source unknown)