



THOSE WILLING TO DARE

By Leo C. Forrest, Jr.

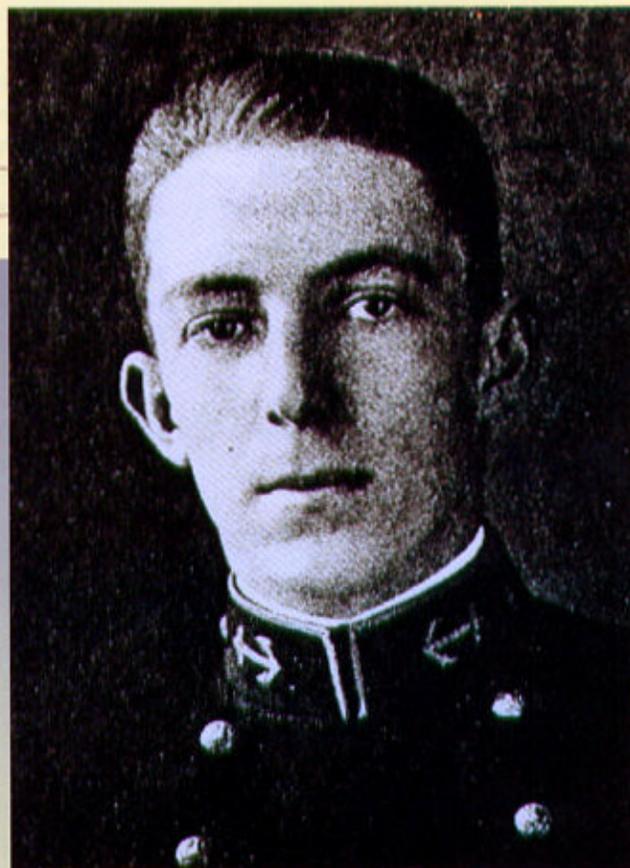
Monday, 25 April 1927, Langley Field, Va.: Several reporters gathered at Langley Field this morning are questioning two Navy pilots about their preparations for the first nonstop air crossing of the Atlantic Ocean, from New York to Paris. But the winds are unsatisfactory for today's test flight, allowing the two Naval Aviators a few minutes to answer some questions.

Commander Noel Davis and Lieutenant Stanton Wooster are standing in front of their aircraft, christened *American Legion*. Cdr. Davis, the pilot, gives an update on the project.

"We are almost ready to get away now, but there is no hurry about the trip. We want to have everything in our favor and I think the May full moon will give us favorable weather."

He continues with a description of the *American Legion*. "I have never piloted a better plane. Some of us had feared that when the machine was loaded to capacity, as she will be when we start on our long flight, a large field would be necessary for her to get up, [but] the machine rises in less space than is required for some smaller planes. It is the best mechanical bird I have ever seen, and I believe we will make the flight to Paris with few difficulties."

A reporter directs a question to Cdr. Davis: "Do you really believe



these big flying machines, manufactured in this country, are capable . . ."

Davis interrupts and looks directly at the reporter. "A few years ago we held all the aviation records. We have lost nearly all of them. We make as good planes and motors as any country in the world, and we have as good pilots. I want to see some prestige in the air return to our country."

Later, another reporter asks, "Are you ready?"

No two aviators are better prepared.

A graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy, Noel Davis is described

by his classmates as a "sturdy little giant who can do anything, exceptionally well." Davis went to NAS Pensacola, Fla., in 1920, and became a Naval Aviator in August 1921. He later headed the Naval Reserve Flying Headquarters in Washington, D.C. In his spare time he solved a persistent aircraft navigation problem by creating the Davis aircraft sextant. The first one to be manufactured is to be used on his nonstop flight across the Atlantic. The Navy has ordered several of them, confident in Davis' assessment of its functionality.

In flying, having total confidence





*“I want to see some prestige in the air
return to our country.”*

— Commander Noel Davis

in your copilot is paramount. Lt. Stanton Wooster meets Davis' high standards; some say he's the top Naval Aviator at flying large, heavy airplanes. Wooster actually pilots the airplane more than Davis, who is frequently busy with instrumentation data and calculations.

Wooster attended Yale University and graduated from the Naval Academy in 1917. He was later assigned to NAS Pensacola for flight training, qualifying as a Naval Aviator in June 1920. Since his

assignment to the Bureau of Aeronautics in September 1924, he has assisted Davis with planning the Atlantic crossing. Wooster has some ideas he believes will improve the operation of flying machines. For example, he supports the use of metal propellers, with which the *American Legion* is equipped. Many experts continue to doubt the capabilities of metal propellers versus the proven wooden designs.

Both pilots supervised the construction of the airplane, a Keystone

Pathfinder, at Bristol, Penn., and have made all of the test flights together. The *Pathfinder* at Langley Field has been modified with several tanks totaling 1,500 gallons, five times the usual capacity. The fueled airplane weighs in at 16,000 pounds. Some say it's a flying fuel tank. Today, the airplane will fly at its maximum weight for the first time.

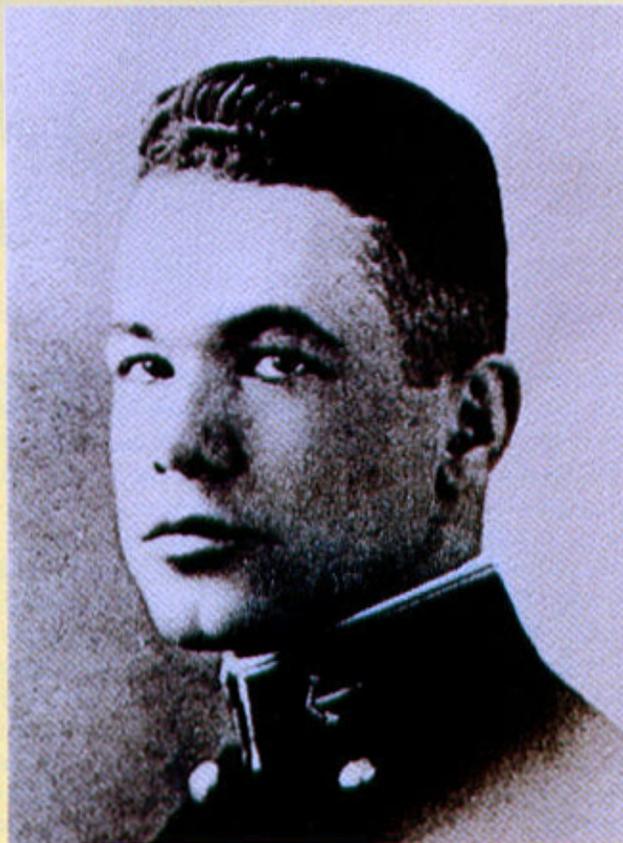
The dimensions of the aircraft are also impressive: 45 feet long, with a wing span of 67 feet. The *American Legion* is equipped with three Wright J-5 Whirlwind engines, rated at 220 horsepower each—one in the nose and one on the upper surface of each lower wing. If one of the engines fails during flight, the airplane will be able to continue flying.

Tuesday, 26 April: Everything is “go.” When the ground crew reports to Langley Field, they find the three large propellers turning. Wooster is at the controls. Everything is operating perfectly, and the morning weather is ideal for flying.

Davis meets with ground crew members for some last-minute instructions. He directs the mechanics to go down the field, spaced far apart so they can measure the take-off. This is it: the final test flight! After returning to Langley Field, the next flight of the *American Legion* will be to New York for final preparations and then the prize—the first nonstop air crossing of the Atlantic Ocean.

A few minutes later, Davis joins Wooster in the cockpit. With the pre-flight checks completed, Davis orders the brakes to be released. The *American Legion* begins to tremble

Pictured here as Naval Academy midshipmen, Noel Davis, opposite, and Stanton Wooster, below, set their sights on the first nonstop Atlantic crossing.



Photos courtesy Leo C. Forrest, Jr.





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as Wooster takes the airplane to the end of the runway, where he idles the engines and prepares for takeoff.

As the plane begins to move down the runway, the tail begins to lift as the speed increases, but the wheels are still on the ground. A few individuals have pocket watches and are timing the takeoff. Ten . . . 20 . . . 30 seconds . . . the airplane is not lifting off. And, then, finally—wheels off! The aircraft has required a quarter mile of runway to become airborne, and it just misses touching a thicket of pine trees at the end of the runway by only a few feet. From the dirigible hangar the ground crew and officers watch as Wooster keeps the airplane close to the ground. Moments later, the *American Legion* is over the waters of Back River on the northern boundary of Langley Field.

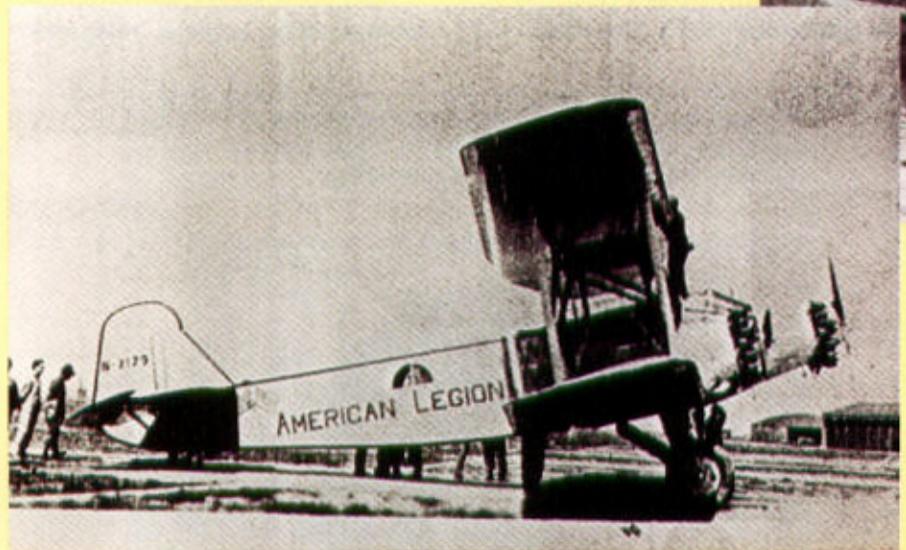
Suddenly, there's a problem. Both are looking at the instrumentation panel, engines and wing surfaces. Wooster adjusts the controls and turns the *American Legion* into the northwest wind. This maneuver results in a limited increase in altitude, which is around 50 feet—far less than normal at this point in flight. On the present course, the *American Legion* won't be able to clear the approaching tree line. Davis decides to circle back toward Langley Field, but as the plane banks right it loses the benefit of the head wind. Almost immediately, the airplane side slips and decreases in altitude. It's obvious that the flight will have to be aborted. Working together, Davis and Wooster bring the airplane under control for an emergency landing in the marshes that border Back River.

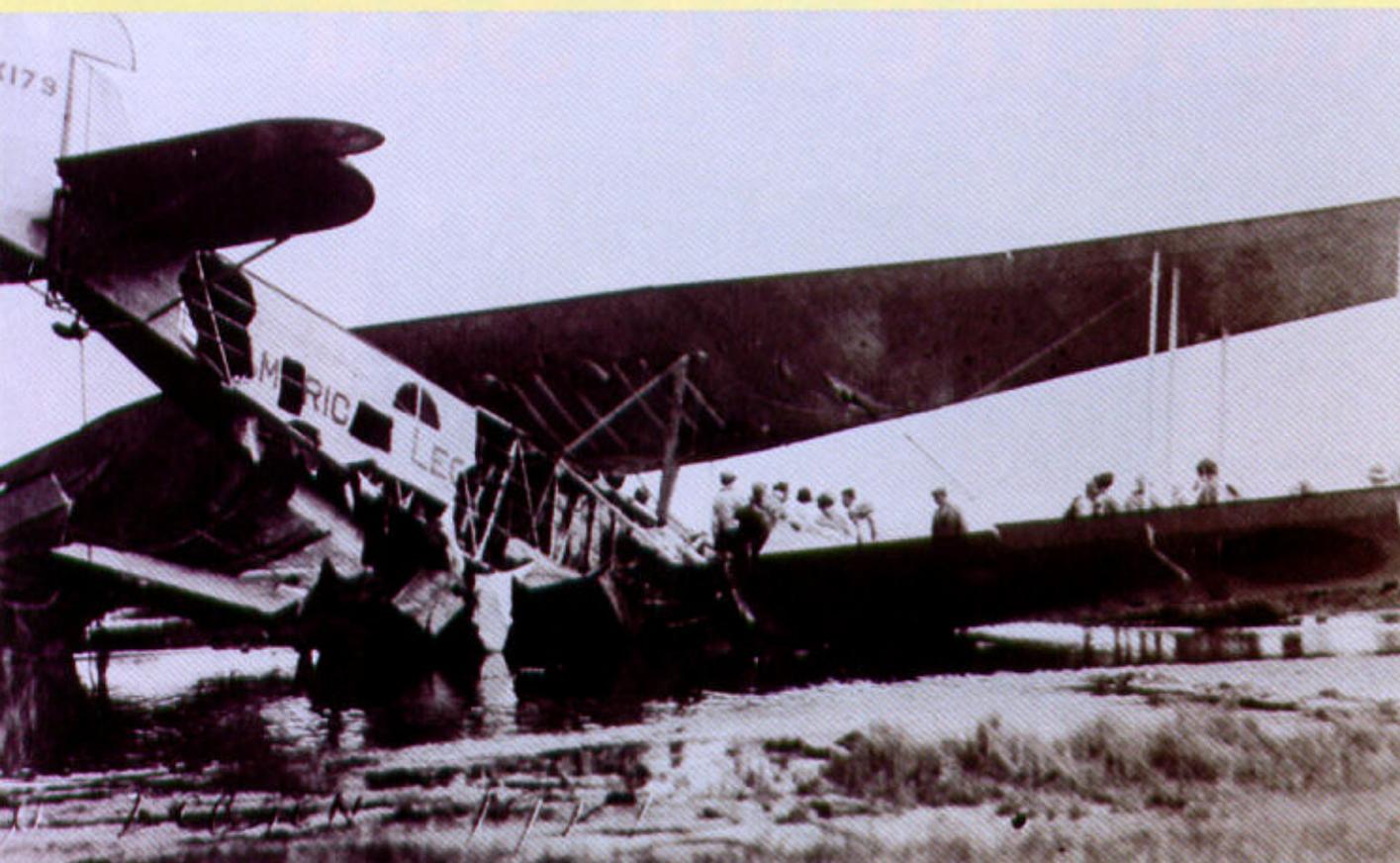
Within moments, the aircraft passes over a small section of shoreline. The right wheel touches first, then the tail and the fuselage hit. For about 125 feet the plane skids across the marshes, kicking up mud and water. Major damage occurs on impact, especially to the landing gear, engine propellers and port-side wing. The *American Legion* continues to skid across the marshes until it hits a large pond. When it reaches the other side, the airplane crashes nose down and the center motor is torn from the mounting.

Local Virginia watermen, working their fish nets in Back River, witness the crash and stop their work to rush to the aircraft. The area contains leaking aviation fuel, and the engines are smoldering. Disregarding the danger, they know they must provide assistance if there is any chance of saving the pilots.

The watermen retrieve an anchor rope from a nearby boat. Several climb onto the airplane, securing one end of the rope to the tail section. Pulling on the rope in an effort to right the airplane, the rope snaps.

Photos courtesy Leo C. Forrest, Jr.





Opposite, the American Legion rests on the ground at Langley Field before its final test flight, which ended in tragedy, above.

A stronger rope is tried, but it also breaks. They attempt to reach the pilots by digging through the mud, but are unsuccessful. The two aviators are dead.

The bodies of Cdr. Davis and Lt. Wooster are removed from the aircraft by midmorning. Both pilots were found buckled in their seats; they had died from injuries received during the crash. Their bodies are transported to the Langley Field hospital.

Word quickly spreads throughout the world of the crash and the untimely deaths of the pilots. Polar explorer Commander Richard E. Byrd, who is also preparing to be the first to fly nonstop across the Atlantic, issues a statement later in the day. "The deaths of Davis and Wooster came as a distinct shock. We were rooting for each other. I hoped that both would make Paris for the advancement of science.

Only several days ago I wrote [Davis] offering what assistance he cared to ask of me, and his last message to me before taking off was to offer some good advice. It was this type of splendid American that aviation has lost. It was this type that makes one feel proud to strive for the same goal. Both Davis and Wooster have given their lives to the science of aviation. They were my old friends. Each was a brilliant, courageous air pioneer. Their loss to aviation is irreparable."

Both aviators are later buried with full military honors, Cdr. Davis in Pensacola and Lt. Wooster in Arlington Cemetery, D.C.

Although others will soon succeed where they have failed, Davis and Wooster nonetheless leave their mark on the early years of Naval Aviation. For future generations, they will represent the spirit of all those pioneering pilots who dared lay their lives on the line to reach for new heights in Naval Aviation. ✈

Mr. Forrest is a mechanical engineer at Naval Weapons Station, Yorktown, Va.

Each year the Navy commemorates Cdr. Davis and his achievements with the prestigious Noel Davis Trophy. Since 1927, the award has been presented to the naval reserve squadron that is judged to be at the highest level of readiness. Squadrons are graded on the use of resources and training systems, flight hours achieved, personnel retention, safety records and wing commander evaluations. Personnel from the winning squadrons are authorized to wear the Navy "E" ribbon.

