

Doug Rolfe And His JN-D-4

as told to Paul Poberezny

The name Douglas Rolfe is synonymous with excellent aircraft drawings and those of us who have followed aviation through the years have recognized his drawings whether they be in the old Flying Manuals - past and present, or in "Air Progress" magazine - past and present. Many of us will find it interesting to know that Doug started his aviation career at an early age while living in Europe, but it is best to let him tell his story.....

I was born and educated in England, later moving to Germany where my education was completed. But my first contact with aviation occurred while attending English Prep School and the meeting of one Roger Saint Beuve who as a Frenchman was judged an authority on matters of aviation as France at that time was considered a world leader in the field of flight. This meeting of Roger by myself and my brother Monte, caused us to become very interested in models and after the construction of a great many we finally came up with a full scale man - carrying glider which we flew as a kite. Then I was sent to school in Germany. Almost immediately after that two things happened which had an effect on my future. My parents came to the USA and World War I broke



Doug Rolfe

out. As a then British citizen I was immediately arrested and spent some three weeks in various prisons in Bavaria before (with a lot of luck) I managed to escape into Switzerland and thence to England where I soon joined the army as a dispatch rider.

After a short spell as a gunner-observer (I trained with the great McCudden, then a mere corporal but later to become one of the great aces of World War I). I had my indoctrination in flying on the Morane Parasol at that time a wire-braced high-wing Monoplane powered with an 80 hp LeRhône rotary engine.

McCudden went on to become a great ace but I did not get my commission until late 1918 which probably explains why I am alive today. Gas tanks under the seat, fabric covering and no, NO, parachutes! I was checked out by Major Garrod, R.A.F., now Sir Guy Garrod, retired Air Marshall of the R.A.F.

Incidentally at this point I would like to warn these individuals who are busily rebuilding World War I types that they had better be careful. The Sopwith Camel for example, while a natural for stunting, had the most vicious habits in the hands of inexperienced pilots and a tendency towards an uncontrollable left spin. The little Nieuport Sesquiplane also was a killer in the hands of beginners.

After the war I came over here and teamed up with my brother, the late Monte Rolfe. He learned to fly at

the Curtiss Seaplane School in 1915 and toured the states flying at State Fairs and so on. When we finally got together we barnstormed the south with Jennies and Canucks. A wonderful life but very hard work. What with selecting possible airfields (?) and servicing the airframe and the motors we had little time for the very real pleasures available to visiting aviators in places where people had never even seen an airplane close up.

We were meticulous about maintenance, strained the rather poor gas available through a chamois, checked the valve clearances, drained the carburetor after each major flight and paid particular attention to the main L/G wires which on both Jenny and Canuck had a nasty way of parting after a rough landing. The so-called airfields we used were a nightmare and, thinking back, I wonder if I was out of my mind to take the chances we did. We got fifteen bucks per person for five minute flights and 25 bucks for the hardy souls who thought they might enjoy a little touch of aerobatics.

I recall flying fourteen miles one hot afternoon before getting to 400 feet with nothing underneath but trees and more trees. Another time, on the way to Atlanta from Athens, Georgia, with no pasture in sight for most of the 100 odd miles, the gas cap flew off and gas was flowing all over the place with those red hot exhaust pipes blazing away on each side of the tank.

I said that we were careful - apparently not careful enough. One hot day in Georgia I had the top cowl removed to help out in engine cooling and while gassing up some local helper evidently stepped on the magneto leads. Anyway, the moment I spun the prop the engine caught. It took off my left leg, paralyzed my left arm and cut my head. Two weeks later my brother flew in from Pablo Beach, picked me up and put on quite a show over the hospital for the benefit of the nurses. It was some performance.

Before this incident my brother and I took the remains of three crashed Jennies and rebuilt them into a very nice job. True, it had two major splices in the fuselage long-erons and no less than five wing splices but it performed beautifully and I last saw it at Daytona Beach where, after recovering from the accident, I was about to fly it to Cuba to join my brother who was now running the Cuban Aerial Transport of that period. I never even started as word came through that my brother had been killed when the Farman Tour-about he was flying at the time broke up in the air. And that was that. *Cont. page 24*

Doug Rolfe and Jenny at Daytona Beach, 1922





A Rolfe Jenny, 1922.

I quit active flying at this time and turned to other things. Fortunately I had a small gift for drawing and made this my means of making a living. As you probably know I have been published in most of the national magazines ever since, from Life on down, and am currently published monthly in two or more mags as well as being a contributing editor to Science and Mechanics. Biggest thrill was when I got the center spread in the "Aeroplane" some years ago. And that is about it. We live and work in my studio deep in the woods some fifty miles from New York and I rarely have to go into town, or that matter, anywhere. Thank God! I was married in Minneapolis and lived there until 1935 when we took the awful chance of coming East. New York is a very rough place for an unknown artist I can assure you, but it has worked out and we have no complaints.

One other thing. Believe it or not, I did some wing-walking. Not the acrobatic stuff, but nevertheless out on the wings. Not nearly as tough as it sounds what with those miles of wire bracing to hang on to. None the less, in retrospect, I have come to the conclusion that I must have been touched in the head or something. Well, all early fliers must have been somewhat touched, don't you think?

The only thing that has ever scared me in flying is fire. I have seen too many chaps shot down in flames or burned alive after a minor crash not to think this one over.



—Photo by Tom Henebry

One of Paul Mantz's Jennys is shown here for comparison with the Standard "J". At any distance these planes would present a recognition problem.



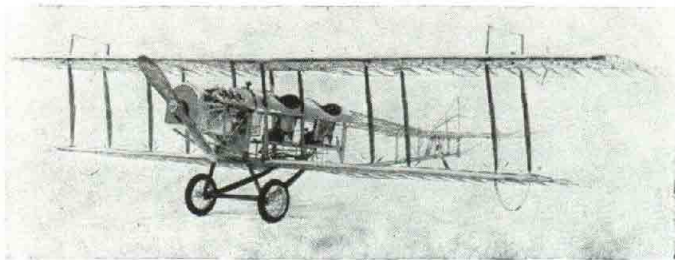
—Photo by Leo J. Kohn

A 175 hp Ranger Jenny - once owned by Dave Kratz and the late Frank Tallman. The present owner and location of the plane are unknown.

Les Klean's Beautiful Jenny Model

Dear Paul:

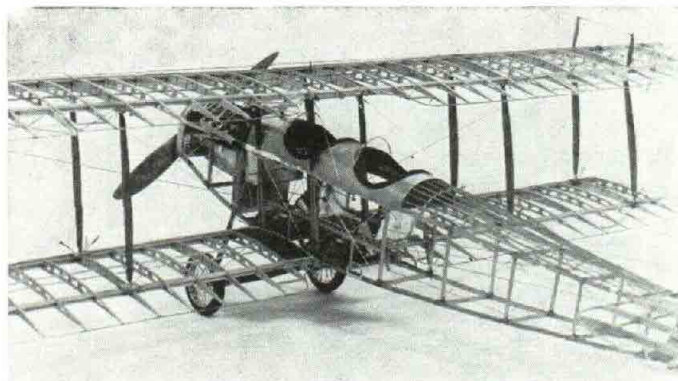
These are pictures of the scale model Curtiss JN4D2 I have just completed. My purpose is to show all the internal structure as it was in the full size airplane; as you can see it is interesting and unusual. This model was built from (4) sheets of authentic drawings from the Smithsonian Air Museum in Washington, D. C. It took about 2½ years to build but I enjoyed every phase of it. Many famous pilots learned to fly in the Jenny but little was said about its fine internal skeleton. Scale is ¼ in. to a foot. Wing span is about 32⅝ in., length 20⅝ in. Details are numerous; dual control sticks and rudder bars operate all the control surfaces. Wire wheels are hand



—Photo by York Studio, Elmhurst, Ill.

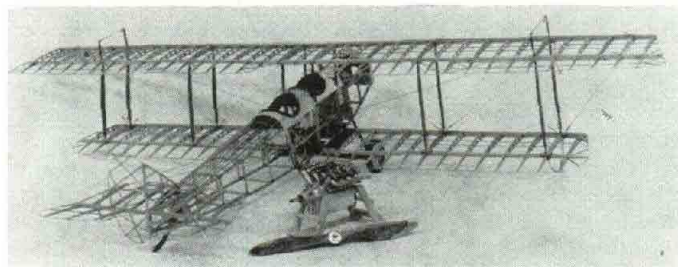
An excellent Curtiss JN4D2 model by Les Klean.

made and contain a copper rim with 42 wire spokes as the original had. Fuselage was built as in the full size airplane; routed longerons braced with fine music wire, front section contains the "Spider" on which is mounted the radiator and the motor beams. Copper fittings and routed uprights are detailed in the front section. Floor boards are plywood of scale thickness. Both cockpits are equipped with proper instruments; dual throttle, fuel shut off switch, Curtiss name plate, aluminum seats with old fashioned double safety belts and map case. Tail-skid swivels and is made of maple with metal inlay shoe.



—Photo by York Studio, Elmhurst, Ill.

Three-quarter rear view shows the many fine details and skill that went into this excellent model of a Curtiss JN4D-2



—Photo by York Studio, Elmhurst, Ill.

Can you tell the difference from the real thing?