Al Williams and his Gulfhawks

Category: Scale Articles
Created on Thursday, 16 December 2010 04:46
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Hits: 417

PLANES AND PILOTS
AL WILLIAMS _-GULFHAWKS

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There was a time, some years before many of you were born, when aviation was simpler and more direct.An airplane could be drawn on a hangar floor.Built, and flown to glory.There were records galore to be established, and then broken.Real money could be made racing or flying in air shows around the country.

This is a story about one of those early pilots and the first of his historic aircraft.

Al Williams flew in the 1920's and 30's. He was a racer and a test pilot whose syndicated radio show held the public enthralled in the pre-TV 1930's.His regular aviation columns captivated youngsters and adults alike in the daily newspapers.His air-show performances in the U.S. and Europe thrilled thousands of onlookers.

Today Al Williams is considered to be among the great pilots of all time along with Bob Hoover, Jimmy Doolittle, and others.A few more words about his history and we'll look at his first professionally flown aircraft, a modified Curtis F6-C4 biplane.

Williams, born in 1896 and quite an athlete, graduated Fordham University in 1916, and joined Naval Aviation. His superiors quickly noted his ability as a natural flyer and made him an instructor.As a Navy pilot, in 1923 Al became a national figure by winning the Pulitzer Trophy in a Curtis aircraft at a record setting 243.7 MPH average speed – followed a dew weeks later with an absolute speed record of 266.59 MPH.Though unofficial, a Williams flight recorded at 322.6 MPH is believed to be the first flight over 300 MPH.

By 1925, he had convinced the military to provide parachutes for pilots and aircrew members.They had flown without benefit of these lifesaving devices up to that time.

In 1926 Williams had somehow managed to find the time to study law and obtain a law degree from Georgetown University.He was definitely an over-achiever.

1930 brought a major change in Al's life.He resigned from the Navy and began flying semi-professionally in a modified F6C-4 biplane he owned.His low level precision aerobatics were legendary, leaving audiences gasping.This caught the eye of Gulf Oil Company executives in 1931 who approached Williams to sponsor him to fly for them as an air-show pilot.By 1933 he had signed with Gulf and developed a distinctive paint job in GulfOil company colors of orange and dark blue with white pin-striping.The aircraft was one of several named the "Gulf Hawk" .

Williams went on to fly "Gulf Hawk II", Gulf Hawk III, and "Gulf Hawk IV", but this story is about that first "Gulf Hawk I".

Powered by a 600 HP Bristol Jupiter engine rather than the stock 400 HP Wright engine, and relieved of all military equipment, the biplane was extraordinarily capable of aerobatic flight.Years later the Jupiter engine was replaced during a Frank Tallman restoration by a 600 HP Pratt & Whitney 'Wasp' engine

The upper wing span is 31’ 6” and the lower wing-span is 26 ‘ , both tapered, and with ailerons on the top wing only.The landing gear is a conventional tail dragger configuration.The fuselage is regular steel tube and fabric covering, although the fuselage was later metal covered during restoration after a crash.The accompanying three views by Peter Westburg show the metal covered fuselage.

The lines are clean and distinctive. Williams flew this aircraft until 1938 and the aircraft is currently located at the Garberville facility of the Smithsonian Air & Space Museum.

As a model, the tapered wings offer some challenge, but the ‘look’ is worth the effort.Depending upon the scale chosen fiberglass cowls are available.Williams Brothers wheels should work as well.30”x42” Westburg drawings are available from the Smithsonian for$12.60, and various stages of kits for a Dick Katz design Gulf Hawk are available from Kit Cutters Inc. at priced ranging from $70 to $170 plus $29 for plans.This design is a 63” span, 42.8” L model.Designed for a 0.80 to 0.90 cu. In. glow engine.

At 35 oz/sq in loading, the model could weigh about 16 lbs.Lighter, of course, would increase performance.

Sources for this article were an article by Jack Cox in Sport Aviation, Jan 1993

Also an article by Max Peterson & Rich Burchell reprinted in RC Scale Modelermagazine in Nov 1990.Further info from web searches.

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