

# I Learned About FLYING From That!-No. 12

by **GEORGE ARMISTEAD**

This prominent pilot entered a race and spent most of those hours learning things. This is the story of a jinx airplane and a good flyer.



George Armistead

I LEARNED about flying from a blunt-nosed, souped-up Gee Bee that held 975 metal horses under its cowling and boasted a 14-to-1 supercharger.

It was a lesson that darned near cost me my life. And it was a tutoring session at 19,000 feet in a thunderstorm over Arizona with everything going wrong. Next day the newspapers summed it up pretty succinctly with this little paragraph: "George Armistead was forced out of the Bendix Race at Winslow, Ariz., because of engine trouble." That's a 16-word laugh!

I had engine trouble, all right, but I had a deuce of a lot more things wrong. In September, 1938, I had entered the annual Bendix cross-country derby with a plane built more than four years earlier—for Jacqueline Cochran's London-Melbourne attempt in 1934. Charley Babb, my boss and America's largest used aircraft dealer, owned this "hoodoo ship" that had never finished a major flight.

Even the Gee Bee type spelled Jinx (see POPULAR AVIATION, December, 1939). Cecil Allen, Russell Boardman and Lowell Bayles had been killed flying 'em in competition. Probably Maj. Jimmy Doolittle had the best experience with Gee Bee's, for he clipped a new record of

252.68 m.p.h. in one in the 1932 Thompson Trophy dash.

Mine was a slightly modified "Q. E. D."—which means "it has been proven"—version of the Gee Bee. Slightly less clipwinged, it was more maneuverable. But not very.

Before the big race, for which I'd been preparing as a pilot since I patched up a smashed Jenny in 1926, I shook my ship down on a cross-country hop that ended in a Texas soil erosion project near Amarillo. That should have warned me. The Gee Bee with its 975 h.p. *Hornet* was plain dynamite. Under 10,000 feet I had to hold 'er in. If I gunned the plane, the 14-1 supercharger would whip the engine into a million pieces. Naturally, I didn't. Twelve years of flying had given me a healthy respect for my equipment.

I'll never forget the dismal before-dawn September morning when my turn came 'round to take off from Union Air Terminal, Burbank, for Cleveland. Most of the gang had already headed east in their ships. There were Lockheeds, special racers and Beechcrafts. And, brother, it was as black as the inside of a deserted mineshaft! I trundled the Gee Bee to the starting line and waited. They'd crammed me into the cockpit

and all around me were dials, radio apparatus and equipment for my oxygen mask. Suddenly, as I peered sideways out of the glass-covered hatch, I realized: "Armistead, you can't see the boundary lights for this take-off!"

Nor could I. The Gee Bee's bulging flanks completely shut off my forward vision. And just as Starter Larry Therkelsen's flashlight swung down in the Go signal, I knew it'd be a dead-blind departure.

Despite my 400 gallons of gasoline—enough to get me to Wichita, but equally enough to overload the plane at 8,000 pounds—I managed to crawl over the fence at the end of the runway and start booming toward Cleveland. By the time I got into the skies I was scared as hell. But I climbed out through San Gorgonio Pass, pulling up to 14,000 feet, and began using oxygen. I bulleted toward the Colorado River with the airspeed showing doggedly near 300 m.p.h. and the old supercharger sending the *Hornet* into a whirling dervish dance.

Over Kingman it started happening. In a routine scanning of my instrument panel, I suddenly noticed that the oil-pressure needle had dropped alarmingly. And the oil-temperature indicator seemed stuck against the boiling point peg. Brother, that was no fun! I figured a bearing had blown. But I was damned if I'd give up yet. That Bendix dough looked awfully good—and I thought maybe I could nurse the Gee Bee into Cleveland.

Because I didn't want to get stranded without an engine above the clouds, I tried to keep under the ceiling. That was considerably easier said than done. As fast as I'd drop down, so would the ceiling itself. I could see I was in for it.

And the weather! Like something over the Baltic Sea, it gave me the whole

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This is the Gee Bee Q.E.D. flown by the author. It was known as a jinx airplane.



tracted gears. Some high-powered flying boats retract their wing tip floats. There is a trend at present to retract the whole flotation gears of a hydroplane or of a flying boat as illustrated in Section 15.

The retractable landing gear design offers a very active field for specialization; it offers many problems to be solved that involves simplicity, weight and best aerodynamic performances.

END

## I Learned About . . .

(Continued from page 51)

works. First it would rain. Then it sleeted. Then it just plain iced-up. My first scare, occasioned by the take-off, had pretty well worn off. So I said "What the hell!" and gave 'er the gun. Up went the altimeter needle to 19,000 feet, with the *Hornet* hollering bloody murder. Finally, I found myself between two cloud layers and right smackdab in the muckiest part of the nasty weather. Ice formed in the carburetor and the heater didn't even faze the stuff. At the risk of sending a cylinder head wingdinging off into the night like a rocket, I was finally forced to blow the rime out by backfiring my motor. Luckily, it worked.

All this time I was riding TWA's radio beam from Albuquerque to Amarillo. Then, to help me, the knob of my wireless receiver fell off and I was up the creek without a paddle. It was at this unhappy moment that I thought about bailing out. My earlier recollections, however, told me that what used to be a nice, soft dustbowl probably had been furrowed into something quite impossible to land on. They informed me, also, that the altitude of the ground down there was plenty high. Here I was, 200 pounds of Armistead, with a dinky little 24-foot parachute. As I did once before—when my engine had conked—I chose to ride 'er in. Somehow or other I got into Winslow in one piece.

The Gee Bee? Francisco Sarabia, president of a native Mexican airline that flies practically anywhere you want to go down there, bought it. And maybe it's the luck of the Latins—but Sarabia hopped from Los Angeles to Mexico City in the jalopy in six hours and 20 minutes. That's the first time the darned machine had ever finished a flight. . . . Then, not long ago, the jinx caught up with Sarabia. He was *drowned* when her engine quit on a take-off from a Washington, D. C., airport and dropped him into the Potomac River.

See what I mean by a lesson? Twenty minutes more of flying with that Gee Bee over Arizona and it would have been me instead of poor Sarabia. There are times when you have to say: "I've had enough!" It's tough, but it must be done. You wouldn't drive your automobile with a busted oil line. So you certainly shouldn't try it with an airplane that's all that intervenes between you and a 400 m.p.h. dive into Nowhere.

END

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