

The Schneiders

PART FOUR



CONTINUING OUR BOOK-LENGTH HISTORY OF THE RACERS THAT FORGED ADVANCED AVIATION DEVELOPMENT. IN THIS INSTALLMENT, WE EXAMINE THE AIRCRAFT AND PILOTS OF THE 1926, 1927, AND 1928 EVENTS

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PHOTOGRAPHS FROM THE WILLIAM T. LARKINS COLLECTION AND THE ALPHA ARCHIVE

1926: MINIMAL COMPETITION

Only two nations fought for the Schneider Trophy in 1926 — Italy and the United States. Britain had begun building two new aircraft for it, but they could not be completed because their specially designed engines were not ready in time. Seeing the chauvinistic direction that airplane race developments were taking, concerned parties in France and Italy sought to steer the emphasis back to Jacques Schneider's original commercial concept by requesting that a 400-kilogram (881-lb) payload be required to de-emphasize the pure speed aspect of the competing airplanes. Reflecting the intense competitiveness of the times, this proposal was promptly voted down by the governing FAI.

Since the USA had won in 1925, it was again the host, but the site was moved to the Naval Air Station at Hampton Roads, Virginia. The course was seven laps of a 50-km (31.06-mi) left-hand triangle. The date originally scheduled was in early November, but a fatal crash with the Italian team and chronic engine troubles prompted Italy to ask for a short postponement, which was granted. The date was extended to 13 November, much to the dismay of the British, who had already withdrawn because their planes could not be made ready by the originally scheduled date.

The Italian crash was the

third fatality associated with the Schneider Trophy. A few days before the Italian tragedy, US Marine Corps pilot Lt. Harmon J. Norton, in the 1924 Curtiss R2C-2 standby racer, stalled his aircraft while trying to fly formation on slower planes at low altitude and was killed. Another American Schneider team pilot also died in a crash, but it was a routine flight in a standard service airplane and had no connection with racers or the race.

AIRCRAFT AND PILOTS FOR 1926

American officialdom seemed to lose interest in the Schneider competition after the 1925 victory, and provided only minimum support for the 1926 effort. No new airplanes were built; the three 1925 Curtiss R3C-2s were simply upgraded. The old Curtiss CR-3 A-6081, now redesignated CR-4, was pulled out of storage and used as a trainer. The Italian government, on the other hand, made up for its feeble 1925 support by providing funds and direction for an all-out effort to develop new airplanes and engines capable of winning the trophy. Actually, the support extended to the very highest level — Dictator Benito Mussolini, fully aware of the prestige that a win would bring his Fascist regime, ordered the Italian team to take the trophy home “at all costs.”

One airplane manufacturer, Macchi, was given a contract for six airplanes — three outright racers, two derated models as

crew trainers, and one static test article. Cost was no object.

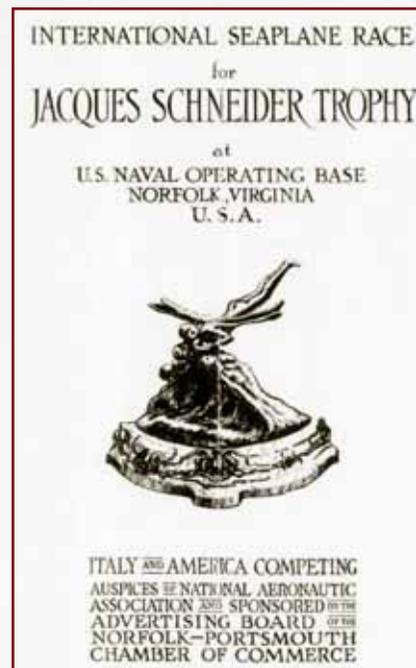
CURTISS R3C-2: This was the 1925 winner, serial A-6979, flown under Navy jurisdiction and retaining its 1925 engine and designation. No notable changes were made other than installing new floats. These could be distinguished from the 1925 models by the gentle downward curve of the tops forward of the front struts.

The pilot was to have been Marine Corps Lt. Harmon J. Norton, but he had died in the R2C-2 on 13 September. His replacement was Lt. Christian F. Schilt, another Marine, who was to win a rare peacetime Medal of Honor for heroic action against Nicaraguan bandits in 1927. The R3C-2 carried Race 6.

CURTISS R3C-3: The Navy pulled R3C-2, A-7054, out of storage at the Naval Aircraft Factory and gave it a major upgrade. In addition to more streamlined floats as on the R3C-2, the plane received a new geared Packard 1A-1500 engine that delivered 700-hp at 3000-rpm. Because of the spur gearing, the propeller turned to the left. The engine sat lower in the nose so the cylinder banks did not project as high as on the Curtiss engines, resulting in a much more streamlined nose. Because of the spur gearing, the thrust line was now higher as well.

The scheduled pilot was Navy Lt. Frank H. Conant. Unfortunately, he, too, was killed in the crash of a Navy service plane and was replaced by Navy Lt. C.C. Champion, later to become famous for high-altitude flights. However, Champion became ill before the race trials and was replaced by Navy Lt. D.W. Tomlinson. Tomlinson had flipped over the R3C-3 — now carrying Race 2 — on a hard landing during practice; he was unhurt but the plane was a write-off.

CURTISS R3C-4: Curtiss R3C-2 A-6978 was sent back to Curtiss for improvements that included new floats and a direct-drive Curtis V-1550 engine, a further development of the D-12 and a prototype of the famous 600-hp Curtiss



Poster for the 1926 event.



Proudly standing in the cockpit of his Macchi M.39, Maj. Mario DiBernardi was photographed after setting a new world's seaplane record. DiBernardi recorded a speed of 258-mph and this added greatly to the international prestige of Italian dictator Benito Mussolini. While Britain and America lagged in supporting their racers, Mussolini realized that the speed records would garner international headlines and thus keep his Fascist regime in the news in a most positive manner. This view shows the racer's rear airfoil-shaped fuselage to advantage.