

VII. *Hard times ahead*

EARLY IN 1931, Stinson's ace test pilot/salesman, Jack Kelley, found himself weathered in at Springfield, Massachusetts. Kelley took refuge in a modest factory, Granville Brothers Aircraft, home of the famous Gee Bee Sportsters. His hosts, Bob Hall and Bob Ayer, had been responsible for translating the ideas of Zantford Granville into practical designs. The little company's days were numbered, but its greatest moments were yet to come. Kelley was highly impressed by the Gee Bee's performance. "We need a designer who can put some speed into the Junior," he told Ayer. "How about coming to work for us?"

The depression had closed scores of aircraft companies and opportunities were scarce. Ayer, a Harvard graduate with a Naval Reserve commission, was supporting himself as a part-time pilot for Brinton & Bayles Flying Service. The Granville job provided valuable experience but no salary. Ayer decided to take pot luck at the Stinson company and arrived in Detroit

in March 1931. He was hired immediately on Kelley's recommendation. The job paid \$200 a month.

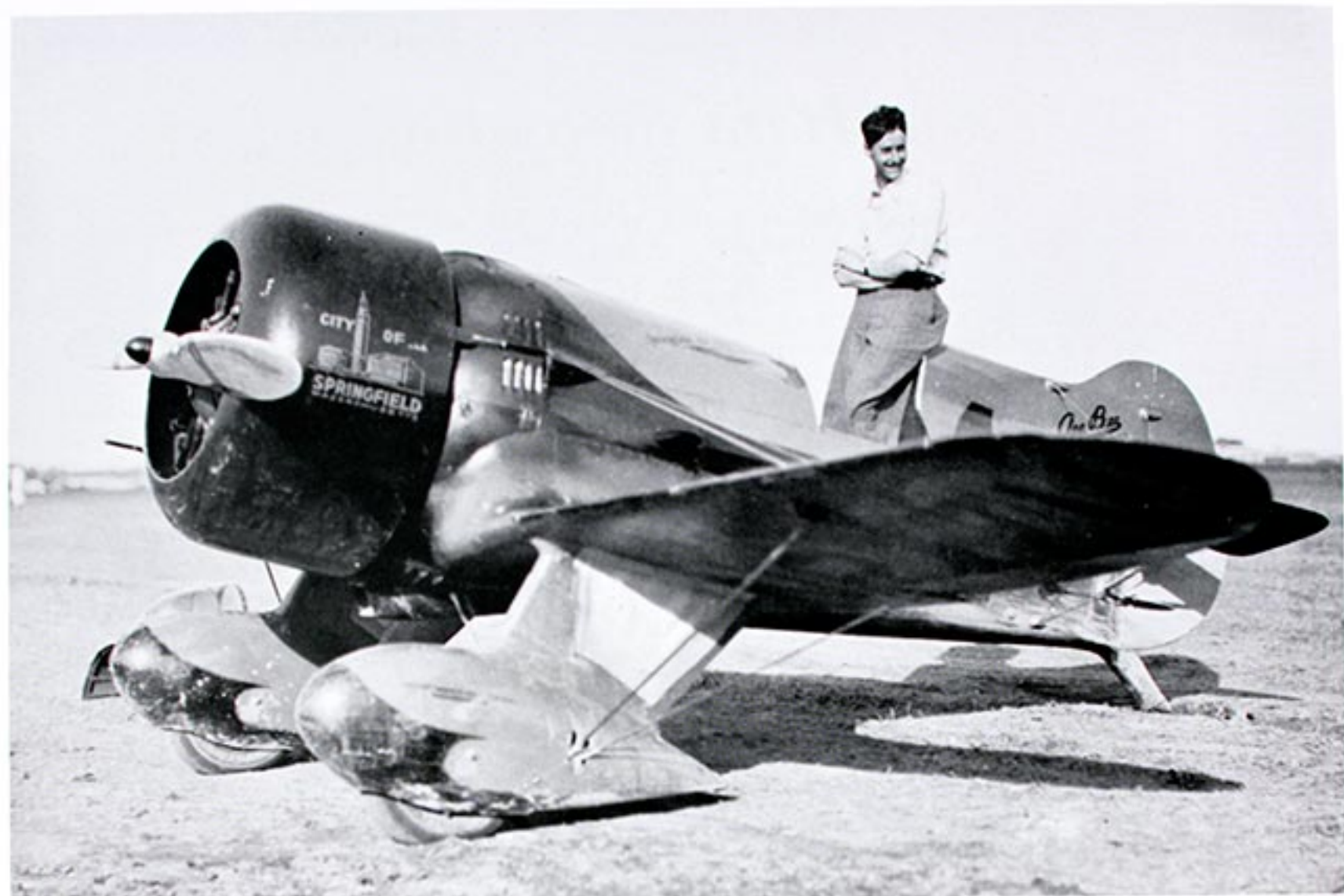
The Model R program, essentially a revamping of the Junior, was initiated in the spring of 1931. The management had called for optional undercarriages, both fixed and retractable. Ayer tackled the problem with C. R. (Jack) Irvine, the new project engineer. After much preliminary study they decided to employ an adaptation of the semi-cantilever gear which had been so successful on the Gee Bee Sportsters. It was cleaner than the Junior's split-axle gear and lent itself to the retractability requirement.

Ayer, influenced by his Gee Bee background, advocated a reduction in fuselage length, both for aerodynamic gains and the savings in weight. Thus the Model S fuselage was shortened nearly three feet in its transformation into the Model R. Although the basic Junior airframe remained unchanged, the airplane received a general face-lifting by Stinson's talented



Eddie Stinson, the "Dean of American Airmen" with nearly 15,000 hours, posed beside Model R on fateful Monday, Jan.

25, 1932. Plane was awarded Dept. of Commerce approval same morning and EAS headed west in search of customers.



Designer/test pilot Robert L. Hall in Gee Bee "Z" cockpit after winning speed event at Cleveland National Air Races.

Gee Bee influenced Stinson designs. Hall engineered Models O, L and SR-7, then went on to greater things at Grumman.

stylist, Lloyd Skinner. The prototype Model R, test flown by Stinson and Kelley in the fall of 1931, passed its final Department of Commerce tests late in January 1932.

Stinson had a couple of beers with Bill Mara Sunday evening, January 24th. He knew, as did Mara, that it was going to be a very rough year. Just how rough they could not imagine. The Model R was not going to shatter any sales records,

everyone knew that, but it was a good airplane built in the Stinson tradition. Eddie was leaving the next morning on a demonstration tour to California. He had misgivings, however, and confided later to his wife that he didn't feel quite right about the trip. Only a few weeks earlier Eddie had made a forced landing with his friend Monsignor Dunigan. Their deliverance, in the clergyman's view, had been miraculous. Stin-



Wandering Model R, NC12157 was assigned to Mobiloil's London office in 1932. Club de Aviateurs de Bruxelles ac-

quired it in 1933 and plane remained in Belgium until 1939. It returned to England and became RAF staff taxi in 1940.

son contemplated the odds and wondered how long his luck could last. "If I can see what's ahead," he told Estelle, "I'll make it. If I can't, well . . . who knows?"

Late the next morning Eddie headed for Chicago by way of South Bend. His thoughts were on making sales, nothing more. He was determined to make the most of every opportunity. It was mid-afternoon when he landed at Chicago Municipal Airport. Stinson spent the rest of the day giving demonstrations with his local sales representative, Clark Field. Shortly before dusk he parked the "R" on the flight line to talk to a prospect, the head of a large steel company. A gas truck pulled up and stopped, but Eddie waved the driver on. The tanks could wait until later.

The prospect wanted a ride. Tired after a full day's flying but eager to make a sale, Eddie took off and headed out over Lake Michigan. They had been flying only a few minutes when the Lycoming suddenly sputtered and quit. A glance at the fuel gauge told the story. Eddie cursed himself out and swung back toward the twinkling lights of Chicago's south shore. "We'll go down on the beach," he told his passengers. "Might get our feet wet, but we won't wreck the plane."

The prospect, who had moved to the rear with the two other passengers, scrambled to the window directly behind Eddie and peered into the darkness. "Wait a minute," he exclaimed. "I know this area. You can land on the Jackson Park golf course!"

"Okay," said Eddie, "but sit down and fasten your seat belt." It was against his better judgment, but he banked according to the passenger's directions and pointed the nose toward the blackness of the golf course. The only sound was the whistling of the airstream as the altimeter unwound . . . 300, 250, 200 feet. A moment later the right wing disintegrated with an explosive report. The plane lurched crazily and dove obliquely into the ground. A few yards from the point of impact, black and unyielding, loomed the huge, 150-foot Jackson Park flag pole.

The plane lay on its side. Its undamaged wing pointed like an accusing finger at the sky. Eddie had been thrown against the control column when the unsecured passenger hurtled forward. He'd broken some ribs, but crawled out through the shattered windshield and got to his feet. The fuselage was intact and no one seemed to be injured critically. Eddie was driven to the Illinois Central Hospital. He got out, walked up the front steps and collapsed in the admitting room. The "Dean of American Airmen" had walked away from his last crash. Eddie never recovered consciousness and died early the next morning.

It can truthfully be said that Americans everywhere mourned Eddie's passing. He was the idol of air-minded youth and a figure of world-wide renown. Two thousand mourners streamed through the family residence on Kingsbury Road to pay final tribute to the fallen airman. Msgr. Dunigan celebrated a requiem mass and the funeral dirge was the droning overhead of a single plane flown by Jimmy Doolittle. The sky was gray and misty and it began to rain as the seemingly endless procession filed into Dearborn's Holy Sepulchre Cemetery. Msgr. Dunigan spoke briefly and Eddie Stinson, surrounded by the great airmen of his era, was laid to rest forever.

Nineteen thirty-two was the worst year in the history of the Stinson company. With Eddie gone and the future in doubt, morale dropped to an all-time low. Early in the spring everyone was asked to take a voluntary pay cut. A second similar appeal was made in August. There was barely enough business to keep the factory open and drastic measures were necessary to avoid a winter shut-down. Each salaried employee was asked to draw minimum subsistence pay. Fewer than fifty planes were built during the entire year, but the company managed to keep its labor force intact.



R-3 featured retractable landing gear, 240-hp Lycoming. Engineer/test pilot R. W. Ayer nearly forgot to lower prototype 449M's gear for first landing. NC12187, below, had special cowl with rocker-box blisters. Only five R-3's were built.



Model R, NC10861, was official pathfinder for Cord Cup Handicap Derby—Cleveland National Air Races, Aug. 1932.