

A Waco for Miss Johnston

A biplane with a past





BY ALTON K. MARSH

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MIKE FIZER AND CHRIS ROSE

Connie Johnston's father was very good at finding gold and zinc; that's why her childhood was spent on a luxurious estate in Greenwich, Connecticut. The family fortune eventually allowed "Miss Johnston," as Waco factory supervisors referred to her, to buy an extravagant airplane in the middle of the Great Depression and live the life of an adventuress in search of social status. Unfortunately, that life was cut short by an airliner crash in Africa.

It was rare in the 1930s for women to fly, let alone own an airplane. There were 700 to 800 women pilots at that time who contributed enormously to aviation development and history.

She wasn't one of them and never made it past student status. Instead of altitude, speed, or distance records, her legacy is a beautiful Waco and support for an art museum in Africa where she lived as the wife of an airline manager. Thanks to Rare Aircraft in Owatonna, Minnesota, and the Waco's present-day owner Jerry Wenger, Miss Johnston's airplane still flies today with the "low N number" she wanted, although there is no indication it had any special meaning to her: NC15700. A low N number was just a status thing.

Wenger wanted to restore an aircraft that had a little history to it. This one had a lot, although most of it came after Johnston sold it. The aircraft came to Roy Redman at Rare Aircraft as a hopeless basket case, yet most of the parts were there, somewhere in that pile. When built in 1935, Johnston demanded that her 124-knot Waco YPF had to be better than any Waco in the country. The struts were to be chromed, not painted. There could be no Waco logo, because Johnston had designed one of her own: its pinstripes, now fully restored, resemble her initials on one end—the letters C and J lying on their sides. No ego there.

The colors were purple and blue—or more properly, Berrychrome bronze plum and Berrychrome Nassau blue—

royal colors, perhaps? The landing lights retracted and the wheelpants—since they were made of aluminum—were rare in 1935. The rear pilot's cockpit was enclosed for protection against the wind, but not the front two-passenger cockpit. The order book is laced with directives: "Miss Johnston is very particular about the paint and finishing," and, "Customer is very particular about the leather trim and requests that we take special care not to scratch the leather while the front seat installation is being made."

While the front cockpit was open, the opening was to be small as if for one person, thus offering better protection from the wind. The fuel capacity was increased to 75 gallons, bringing the useful load to useless. Fully fueled, it could carry only one person (remember that for later in the story). One more thing: She wanted the aircraft delivered the instant it was completed, not two weeks later when the government would have had time to approve the type certificate. Waco officials asked her to sign a statement agreeing to bring the airplane back to the factory if the government asked for design changes.

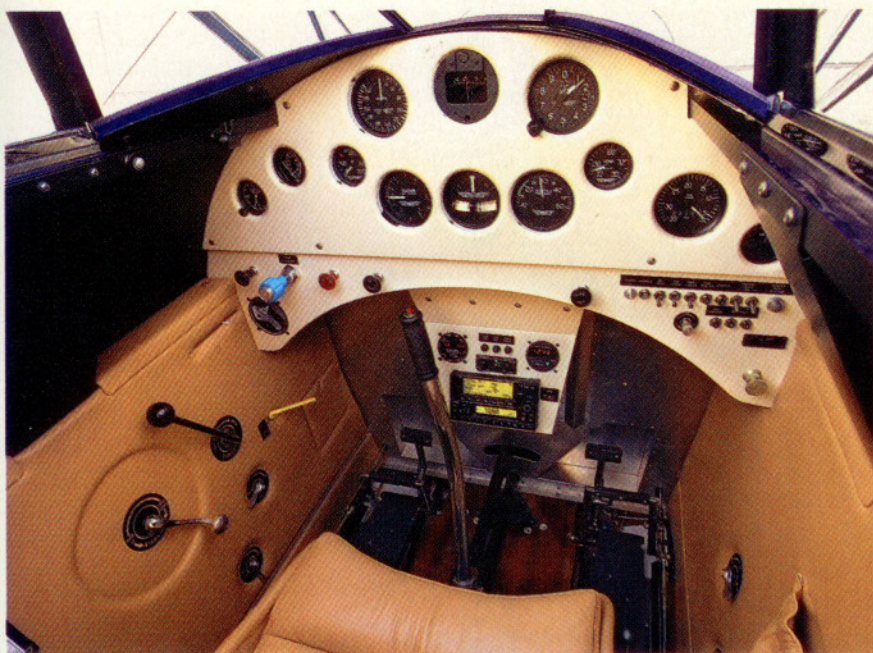
Delivery was made—it is unclear just where—on November 2, 1935, to the then 24-year-old Johnston, who had started

flying lessons the previous July. She flew it to Minnesota (where she summered at a lavish resort) and later made a flight to Wisconsin in April 1936, where she flooded the notoriously cantankerous engine at start-up. A fire started in the cowling that spread to the wing before it was extinguished. After that she didn't want it anymore, but the aircraft's adventures were destined to continue without her.

Johnston sold the Waco by letter to a man in Minnesota who had flown with her there. Some suspected they were more than aviation friends, but at about that time she was forwarding her mail to a Chicago hotel in care of a man who became her first husband, Soaring Hall of Fame member John K. O'Meara. He was killed testing a glider in 1941. Johnston's student pilot license was renewed in July 1937, but did she continue to fly? Who knows? The 99s Museum of Women Pilots has no record of her, and neither has the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum research department. She was to the aviation world what a dilettante is to the art world—but maybe a new word is needed, an *aviattante* in this case.

The royal colors of Miss Johnston's biplane were Berrychrome bronze plum and Berrychrome Nassau blue.





The snug cockpit has been restored to like-new circa-1935 fashion (left) with a few modern conveniences. Miss Johnston's Waco YPF is still flying, wowing admirers wherever it goes (below).

Although she listed her address as Wings Field in Philadelphia (where AOPA was founded in 1939), Johnston seems to have spent little time there and a Philadelphia historical society has no records of her. She appears to have owned a company at Wings Field—Wings Corp.—and her tricked-out Waco was that firm's second airplane but may never have been based there. The first was based at the field and was probably a more pedestrian trainer.

Newspaper clips show she was remarried in 1944 to John Beach and spent a great deal of time in Nassau, Bahamas, where her mother frequently joined her. That marriage must have ended, because a few years later she married Sir Malin Sorsbie, manager of East African Airways, now defunct, and moved to Nairobi, Kenya, as Lady Sorsbie (achieving the social status she sought). Among her activities was the launching of a museum in her home based on works she had collected in Nassau. One painting shows tropical fish in shallow water.

She died in May 1955 when an East African Airways Douglas C-47B Dakota crashed into Mount Kilimanjaro's twin peak at 15,200 feet during poor weather. She was only 44, but by that time her airplane was getting a reputation on its own, thanks to Chuck Doyle.

Charles P. "Chuck" Doyle would have had an earlier start on his airline career, except for a flight he made as a high school student. He decided in 1934 to buzz his school's football game in an OX-5-powered Travel Air and was expelled.

He began a stunt career with barnstormers that included climbing from a



car to an airplane on a rope ladder, crashing airplanes into fake houses, and making parachute jumps. He made more than 60 jumps, 25 or 30 of them from NC15700, after its cowlings and wing were rebuilt to repair Miss Johnston's fire damage. Doyle couldn't get into Johnston's tight front-cockpit opening with his chute on, so he hung onto the wing struts during takeoff and jumped when over the crowd. A shortage of pilots later opened the way for his airline career, even without a high school diploma. Now 90, he has an honorary high school diploma and a spot in not only the Minnesota Avia-

tion Hall of Fame but the EAA Warbirds Hall of Fame.

Doyle once saw Johnston and her aircraft while she still owned it, using it to make flashy arrivals at her destinations. Redman, who interviewed the 90-year-old Doyle for this article, said Doyle thought it was the most beautiful plane he had ever seen "...and she wasn't bad, either," Doyle recalled with a smile.

After airshow work there was still more history to be made. A subsequent owner, Clyde Ice, bought the airplane in 1942 to use in the government's Civilian Pilot Training Program. By that time it had migrated to Miami, and when Ice

brought it home to Minnesota he spotted a German submarine hiding in a coastal river under camouflage. He landed at the next airport and alerted the Army Air Forces. Ice never heard if it was sunk, but he recalled that his report set off a flurry of military activity, making the airplane unofficially a war hero. The public was never told of enemy submarines close to shore, or inland in this case.

As a military trainer the airplane was used to teach aerobatics to advanced students, but this particular one was a hangar queen always in need of repair. Its still-cantankerous 225-horsepower Jacobs L4 engine resulted in one off-airport landing (with no damage), according to Cecil Ice, his now-82-year-old son. Today it has a much better 275-horsepower Jacobs R755-B2 engine. Cecil Ice added that he and all his brothers became pilots.

He provided one additional tidbit of the aircraft's history. The aircraft has had

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10 owners and one of them, Spencer “Bud” Harper, was seen by Cecil Ice coming back from a deer hunt. He asked Harper whether, given the Waco's low useful load with full fuel, the deer exceeded the aircraft's weight and balance limits. “It wasn't that big of a deer—maybe 150 to 200 pounds,” Ice said. Redman later explained that in the Golden Era of aviation, weight and balance were just numbers to be ignored. “You estimated how far the fence was, and if you thought you could get over it, you went.”

Under Wenger's ownership NC15700 no longer suffers the indignity of a dead deer soiling its cabin floor. Now it is admired wherever it travels and pampered when at home—much like the life Miss J made for herself. **AOPA**

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