

WEST MILFORD

75 years ago Gloria ingloriously entered history

Greenwood Lake to WM flight was a large bust

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On February 23, 1936, the ice of Greenwood Lake became the host to one of the more curious events in local and aeronautic history and possibly the nation's first interstate rocket-powered airplane flight.

Though it was conservative - two single, unmanned rocket-powered monoplanes carrying mail a few feet from New York into West Milford - the effort became, quite possibly, the most spectacularly unsuccessful delivery in the history of post. Both high-winged, fixed gliders crashed after only being able to stay airborne for a few seconds.

Still, the launch 75 years ago is considered a pioneering moment from a few bold, forward-thinking minds. It was also a money-making scheme from some focused capitalists, who exploited a scientific stunt to create rare memorabilia for collectors worldwide.

Although Austria began using solid-fuel rockets to launch mail between cities in February 1931, the attempt on Greenwood Lake five years later was allegedly the first of its kind in the United States, which lagged behind Germany and Russia in rocket development before World War II.

The record-setting victory was small but it should not be construed as insignificant, according to accounts from the members of the Experimental Aircraft Association (EAA) Chapter 501 based in Lincoln Park.

"Some people who were really up in rocket science at the time were out on the ice," the chapter's newsletter editor, Don Provost, said. "It was an important step in the quest of these scientists ... to get more funding and continue with their experiments."

The chapter is the local authority on the details of the prototype aircraft, one of which was being stored, more or less continually, in the Greenwood Lake Launch Works until 1986 when it was discharged for posterity by a few local history and aircraft enthusiasts, according to local historian Stephen Gross, of Warwick, N.Y. From July 1987 to the end of 1991, the EAA affiliate completed a full restoration of the duralumin plane, while its eventual home was being built.

The co-owner of Greenwood Lake Launch Works, Michael Morin, ended up with one of the rocket planes shortly after the flight, Gross said. He reportedly seized the plane that he constructed the launch ramp for a New York City stamp dealer, who orchestrated the mail-flinging event seeking to cash in on the spectacle the new rocket technology could provide.

The stamp dealer, Frido Kessler, was allegedly inspired to organize a record-breaking launch in the states during a trip to Germany in 1934. There Kessler saw the collectability of rocket mail.

"This was designed to give him a product to sell," Gross said.

According to a 2007 compilation from the Federal Writers' Project, Kessler claimed to have not made enough money to fund the experiment at Greenwood Lake, the site recommended by local resident John G. Schleich.

Schleich, the treasurer for the Village of Greenwood Lake, N.Y., was a fervent stamp collector in his own right and took part in organizing the venture, according to historic accounts. The planes, commissioned from the Guggenheim School of Aeronautics at New York University, were both named after his daughter.

Gloria Schleich, however, fared much better than the rocket planes on that day in 1936 when she became a local celebrity on her own.

Accounts say as many as 1,500 people were on hand to witness what was the second launch attempt in two weeks. The first was a failure. The rockets barely moved, Gross said.

According to Gross, a disgruntled mechanic was unhappy with his level of recognition amongst the group, consisting of aeronautical engineers, scientists

Historical presentation on rocket launch this afternoon

The Greenwood Lake Public Library will host a special informational session regarding the 75th anniversary of the rocket mail flight from 12:30 to 2 p.m. this afternoon. "The Greenwood Lake Rocket Mail (1936-2011): A 75th Anniversary Celebration," with photos and newsreel footage, will be hosted by historian Stephen M. Gross at 79 Waterstone Rd., Greenwood Lake, N.Y.

and the American Rocket Society, and bent the fuel lines the night before the flight. He was later tried for his act of sabotage.

In and of itself, the rocket ignition was visually brilliant. Newsreel footage shows the kerosene torch-bearing Willy Ley, a famed German rocket enthusiast and author, approaching a spitting, pressurized mixture of liquid oxygen, methane, alcohol and gasoline in an asbestos suit to light the mixture emanating from the exhaust pipe.

Both were purportedly given enough fuel to reach 500 mph, according to the May 1936 issue of Popular Mechanics Magazine. They never did.

The first of two rocket-propelled airplanes - Gloria I - only flew around 20 feet, never getting to West Milford. Shortly after catapulting off a 10-foot ramp, the 12-foot-long craft delicately belly-flopped on the ice. Its wings flapped on impact.

The second plane allegedly reached New Jersey. Still, it failed more impressively than the first.

Once the mail was reloaded, Gloria II glided - nearly vertically - 20 feet in the air before dropping onto its belly. After pausing for a brief moment on the ice, it began picking up speed and scudded along like a penguin for around several hundred feet before it became airborne once again. It popped up at a diagonal before losing wing stability and spiraling down to the ice after climbing to only around 40 feet.

While the display was enough of a production to call attention to the collectable stamps, the flight itself simply did not do any favors for the amateur rocket scientists seeking investors to fund more experiments.

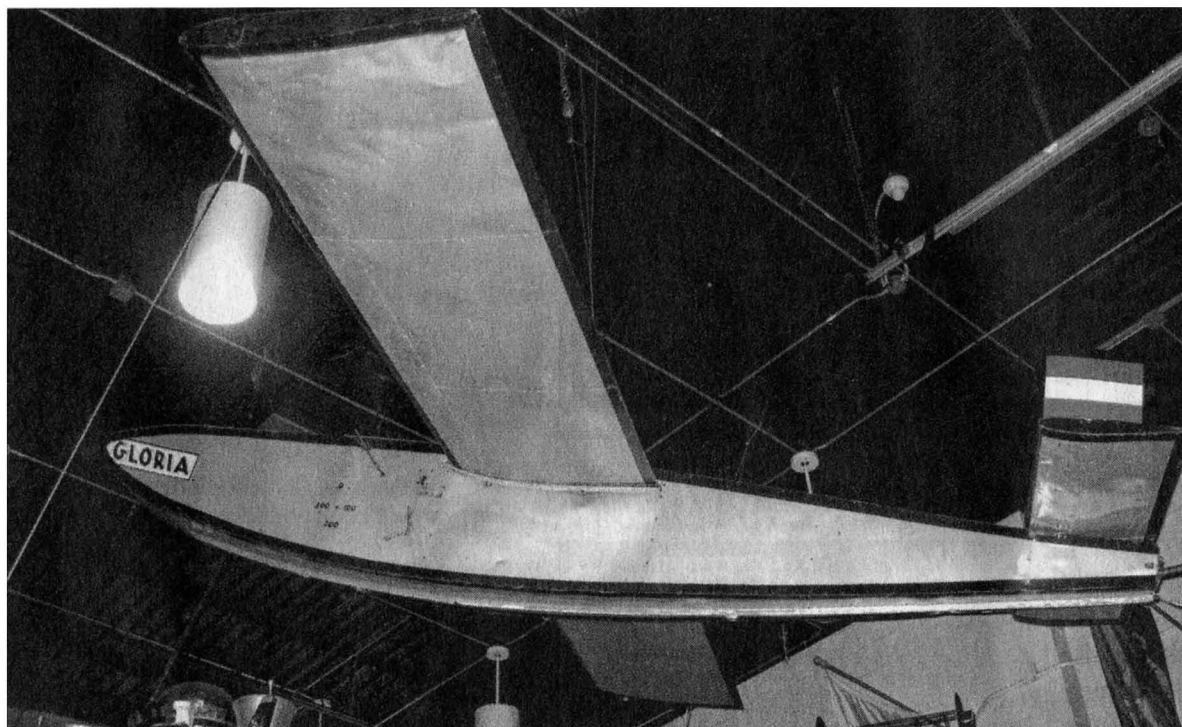
West Milford resident and owner of the Greenwood Lake Seaplane Base David MacMillan, who helped pull the plane out of its cobwebbed coffin in Ringwood, said that the designers may have overlooked some crucial preparations. The planes had fittings for landing wires, which help stabilize wings - most noticeably on biplanes. However, those wires may not have been installed properly or entirely, he said, causing air resistance to fold the wings up during flight.

The mail - all 6,149 pieces - was then taken out and delivered to the post office in Hewitt on foot. Gross said they were all hand-cancelled for collectability by a seriously unhappy Lou West, who was charged - almost unlawfully - with working the post office on a Sunday.

Stamp collectors pre-ordered 75-cent envelopes and 50-cent postcards with commemorative markings and stamps. Today, postcards autographed by Ley can run \$75 or more.

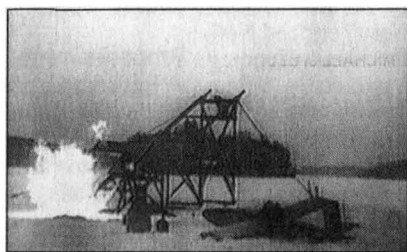
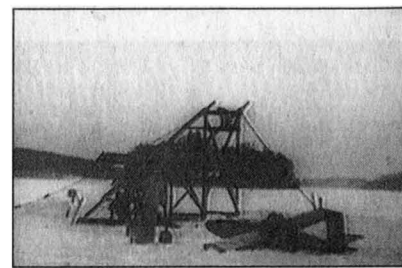
Which of these time-honored aircraft currently resides in Teterboro is still uncertain. However, Provost, a Kinnelon resident, is confident it is Gloria II, since the chapter has detailed accounts of repairing the 16-foot-wide craft's nose and the video shows Gloria II suffering significant front-end damage. Gloria I, on the other hand, was relatively unscathed by its brief flight, he said.

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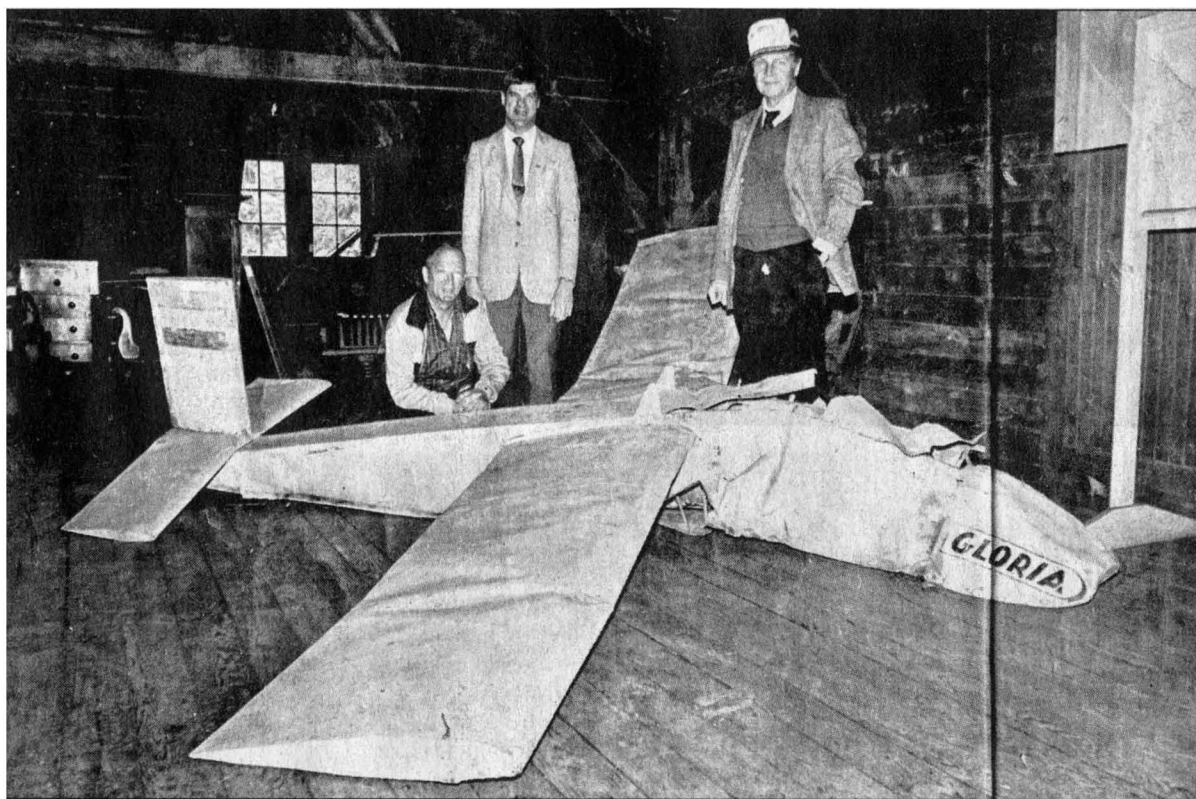
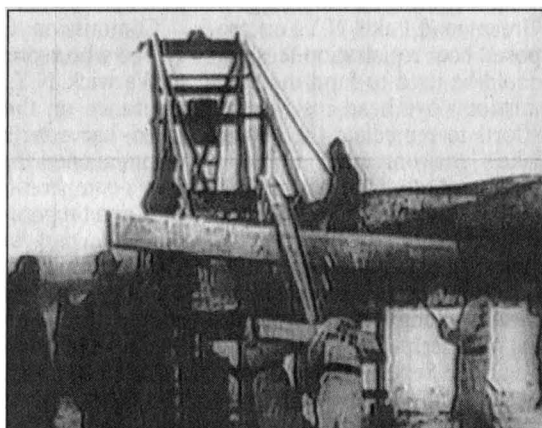
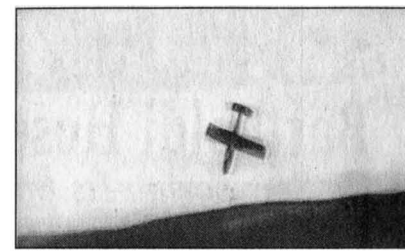


PHOTOS COURTESY OF EXPERIMENTAL AIRCRAFT ASSOCIATION CHAPTER 501

One of the two rocket planes - Gloria II - suffered significant damage during its flight in 1936, leading some to claim that the record-breaking craft is the one that now hangs in the great room of the Aviation Hall of Fame of New Jersey in Teterboro. Others, like local historian Stephen Gross, lean the other way, saying it is probably the less heralded Gloria I.



These screen shots from a newsreel account of the Feb. 23, 1936 rocket plane launch on Greenwood Lake provide a glimpse of the day's spectacle.



West Milford resident David MacMillan (l) brought the Gloria plane down from the rafters of the Morin family boat launch where it was "rediscovered" in 1986. He was assisted by Pat Reilly (r), the founder and then director of the Aviation Hall of Fame in Teterboro, and Elbertus Prol, the former curator of Ringwood Manor.

Greenwood Lake's rocket planes take place in history

The world's first rocket-powered aircraft, which flew three-quarters of a mile in about a minute on June 11, 1928, was developed in Germany. The Ente, meaning duck, was powered by two rockets and kept aloft by sail-like wings.

The Greenwood Lake effort eight years later became highly publicized, in part, because the operation was supervised by German author and former Verein fur Raumschiffahrt (VfR), or Society for Space Travel, member Willy Ley. In addition to providing the blueprint for the liquid-fueled rocket design used by the American Interplanetary Society for its first rocket - fabricated in Stockton in 1932 - the VfR's concept of mixing liquid oxygen and gasoline in an alloy fuselage was used by Ley and his team during the Gloria project.

The German was a notable rocket enthusiast who was on to the

benefits of rocket propulsion, which were mostly unknown in the states in 1936.

The new technology was dangerous - literally combustible - and its future was uncertain until its utility in armed combat became clear, said Don Provost, the newsletter editor for Experimental Aircraft Association (EAA) Chapter 501 in Lincoln Park.

"Neither the United States or its growing military had any interest in rocketry at the time," he said. "These guys were saying: 'We really have something here.'"

The men on Greenwood Lake 75 years ago Wednesday were innovators, explorers in uncharted and perilous terrain, not just amateur adventure seekers, Provost said.

It was their quest to get more funding and continue experimenting with rocket motors, which were proven that day to be able to lift

and propel 50 times their own weight, Popular Mechanics Magazine noted in May 1936.

"Despite the short distance covered, the rocket mail flight has been termed a success because it proved certain basic principles important to the world-wide research program," it said, comparing the launch to the Wright brothers' historic flight at Kitty Hawk, N.C.

Still, the science behind the technology was simply too raw during these early stages of rocket engineering and rocket mail never took off, as other, more efficient methods came to the fore. As a result, the straightforward flight - by today's standards - will always go down in some accounts as an overhyped stunt.