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Oskar Omdal

Born on the 11th of October, 1895, Oskar Omdal was the first surviving son of shoemaker John Osmundsen Omdal and his wife Marta Omdal, née Nilsen. His three sisters, Ingeborg, Berta, and Kitty, were born in 1898, 1900, and 1902 respectively. Marta suffered from tuberculosis, and passed away when Oskar was 11 - his father remarrying to Anna née Olsen in 1910. During this time the family lived at Skippergade 92, 0007 in Kristiansand, Norway, before later relocating to nearby Tovdal.

After attending Porsgrunn Technical School, in the summer of 1916 Omdal became a student at the Navy's newly established aircraft mechanic school. Following this, he received training as a student pilot at the flight school in Horten beginning on 1st October 1918 along with 11 other pupils. By 1919 had obtained his pilot's license.

EARLY CAREER 1920

In 1920 Omdal was employed by the airline A/S Aero, owned by fellow pilot Tancred Ibsen. Under contract from the newspaper 'Nationen', between the 19th and 21st of June, the two flew roundtrip between Kristiania and Kristiansand, carrying seven passengers and 1,000 letters onboard their first flight. A Freidrichshafen FF49C, N.6 was used for this service following a stormy test flight in a Hansa Brandenburg W29, N.4 - during which Ibsen had been flung into the water.

By 13th August 1920, Omdal and the Freidrichshafen N.6 had been lent out to Det Norske Luftfartsrederi A/S. The transfer of the plane from Kristiania to Stavanger was to be the first airmail flight to Stavanger, and was made into an event by newspaper 'Aftenposten'. Odd Arnesen, journalist and future editor of 'Polarboken', recalled arriving at 5am to find Omdal buried headfirst in the engine. To Arnesen's surprise he had been working on the aeroplane continually through the night. He also recorded how Omdal spoke reassuringly to the engine before take-off, "There there, now we're going", and his childlike glee when finally in the air and, despite some emergency repairs, the mail made it safely to Stravanger in 4 hours 10 minutes. The Freidrichshafen used was eventually taken out of service when, on the 10th of September, its float filled with water and partially submerged the plane. It and Omdal had flown 52 hours on the Bergen-Haugesund-Stravanger route since it's aunergration on the 16th of August.

Towards the end of Oct. 1920, Omdal and famous aviator Leif Leir worked on a Brandenburg B.I, N.17 at Kjeller, taking her on joyrides to Hamar until another of Leir's planes, the Phonix Brandenburg Ci (N. 19) was chartered by Tiedemanns Tobaksfabrik for an advertisement flight. Upon reaching Trondheim on the 28th of December, the crew threw leaflets and cigarettes to the townspeople below. Much to everyone's displeasure, a number of local children were among those who benefitted from the free cigarettes. Following repairs to the N.17 after it skidded aground on lake Jonsvannet, joyrides were offered over Trondheim between the 16th and 24th of January, 1921, before a catastrophic engine malfunction occurred, and the Brandenburg crashed into the director's garden. Happily, no-one was injured, although the plane would never fly again.



(Oskar Omdal and Roald Amundsen wearing 'Ever-Warm' flying suits in front of Junkers plane, 'Elizabeth', 1922) 2

Recommended by Kammandörkaptein vd. Lippe, the 26 year old Omdal wrote to Leon Amundsen on the 3rd of August, 1921 to accept a position as pilot and machinist onboard Amundsen's upcoming Maud expedition. Travelling with Amundsen, Omdal arrived in New York onboard the S.S Stavangerfjord on the 28th of March 1922, in transit to Seattle. A note pencilled across his immigration form simply read: "going to North Pole with Amundsen".

MAUD 1921-1923

For this enterprise Omdal suggested a Hansa Brandenburg of the kind he had flown previously, and a Sopwith Baby F. 108 already stationed at Horten airfield. In the end however, Amundsen opted for a Curtis Oriole to do surveillance over the ice (donated free of charge by the manufacturer), and a larger Junkers Larsen JL-6 for a transpolar flight. Unfortunately, after departing New York on April 10th the Junkers' motor overheated at 6000ft, prompting an emergency landing near Clarion, Pennsylvania. The aeroplane was a write-off, with Amundsen recalling in a letter to his brother, "If the plane had been less solid we would all have been mincemeat. As it was we got away with a few bumps and bruises." A replacement Junkers was sent direct to Seattle.

On July 28th, Amundsen, Omdal, and the Junkers were transferred from Maud and put ashore at Wainwright, Alaska. There they constructed a small cabin to overwinter in, 'Maudheim', whilst Maud was to continue it's transpolar drift with the Curtis Oriole and pilot Odd Dahl in tow. Whilst Amundsen sledged to Nome, Omdal overwintered at Maudheim, although he refuted the solitary picture painted by the newspapers, describing to a journalist the Christmas tree he constructed using a painted broom handle and acorns, "It was indeed a merry Christmas with the world's finest Christmas tree."

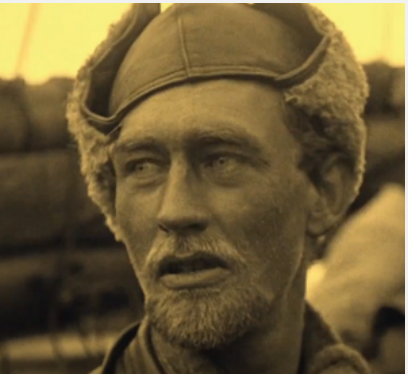
Not one for the spotlight, Omdal nevertheless had ambitions of flight independent of Amundsen. Augusta Mueller, who was working as a nurse in Barrow at the time, recalled, "He's a young chap about twenty-seven years old, good looking, and as nice as he can be...He says even if Captain Amundsen doesn't fly over the pole, he's going to. It's a twenty-hour flight." Unfortunately when it came time to test the Junkers on the 11th May, 1923, the ski axel collapsed on landing. Repairs were made, but when it broke again on 10th June, the flight was called off for good. Omdal was sent back to Seattle with the remains of the aeroplane, and carried the broken axel around to demonstrate its unsuitability to interviewers. Omdal spent Christmas 1923 with Amundsen, and the following year was engaged for a new attempt on the North Pole - this time with two aeroplanes.



(Kolumbus and Mikkel outside 'Maudheim' photographed by Omdal, 1922/3) 3



before 4



after 5

DORNIER-WAL FLIGHT 1925

In mid-January 1924, Omdal travelled to the Rolls-Royce factory in Italy to accompany the construction of two Dornier Do J Wal flying boats for a new transpolar flight. Due to issues with funding however, the flight had to be deferred until the following year when backing was secured through American millionaire Lincoln Ellsworth. The aeroplanes finally embarked on their transpolar flight on the 21st of May, 1925, piloted by Leif Dietrichson and Hjalmar Riiser-Larsen, with Omdal serving as mechanic. Described during his previous experience in Kristiansand as having almost “supernatural abilities” in this field, Omdal was equal to the task, with Amundsen amusingly describing him as having, “several limbs more than the rest of us”.

Eight hours later, the aeroplanes landed to take navigational readings - but soon found the N24 irreparably damaged and the N25 without a suitable runway. And so began three weeks at 87°43' N. On the trek towards the N25 - the two planes had landed miles apart - Omdal and Dietrichson fell through thin ice. To Ellsworth's alarm, Omdal cried out in English, “I'm gone! I'm gone!” as he scabbled at the edge of the ice. Both men were fortunately pulled to safety by Ellsworth, who was later awarded the Polar Medal. During a visit to America the next year Omdal showed him where five teeth had broken off during the incident.

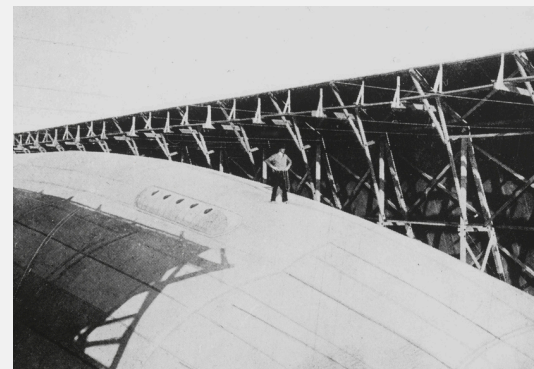
Despite this, the crew tried to keep their spirits up as they cleared a runway, with Riiser-Larsen and Omdal treating the crew to a cheerful rendition of the Norwegian song, ‘Better and Better, Day by Day’. After three weeks on the ice, they were able to lift off in the N25, and on the 15th of June landed off the coast of Svalbard, where they were picked up by the vessel Sjøliv. Throughout the ordeal Omdal had been shooting film later included in the silent film, “Roald Amundsen - Lincoln Ellsworth's flyveekspedisjon 1925”

NORGE 1926

They had come back from 87°43' N as heroes, but the Arctic was yet to be crossed. When asked what he would do now Omdal replied, “We're going to the North Pole, if we have to fly on a washboard.”

This “washboard” would by 1926 take the form of an Italian airship named ‘Norge’, with Omdal once again signed on as mechanic. By takeoff he was reportedly suffering from a bad cold and had been ordered to stay in bed. Nevertheless, he declared himself quite well and - returning to his roots as a mail carrier - asked attending journalist Arnesen if he needed any mail delivered the other side of the Pole.

From a mechanical standpoint the crossing was largely uneventful, and the airship touched down in Teller, Alaska on the 14th of May, 1926. The people onboard are now regarded to have been likely the first to reach the North Pole. Writing about the post-expedition work, Riiser-Larsen had this to say, “The more I left to him the better pleased he was...That's the sort of man Omdal is!”



(Oskar Omdal walking across the top of the airship 'Norge' in Ny-Alesund, 1926) 6



(Left to right, Brice Goldsborough, Frances Grayson, and Oskar Omdal in front of 'The Dawn', 1927) 7

SOMETHING LEFT UNDONE..

Following the expedition, Omdal gave an interview to Fredikstad Dagblad indicating he would now go home to rest, “although there will be no rest in Kristiansand either”, where, to his mild embarrassment, they were throwing him a folk festival. He however still planned to come to Horten airfield later in the winter to “do a bit of fiddling”. But by late 1926 something had changed; a friend meeting Omdal in Oslo described him as, “sad and withdrawn. The happy-go-lucky boy had suddenly become a completely different person.” What had happened? Although the details are somewhat unclear, it appears after the Norge flight and his promotion to First Lieutenant in the Navy's Air Force, Omdal was assigned mainly administrative jobs, for instance as head of photography at Karljohansverns station. Finding it increasingly difficult to be paid for flying hours, or indeed get into the air at all, he appeared listless to friends and family. In 1927, his father recalled, “When Oskar was at home this summer, he was restless and uneasy...He gave the impression of leaving something undone.” With Amundsen now retired, a career so far marked by constant occupation had stalled. To a man who evidently enjoyed his work, this came as a great blow - and he made up his mind to travel to America in hopes of becoming a reserve pilot on Byrd's upcoming Antarctic expedition.

Among the work he did get during this period was as a participant in trial flights for a mail route between Horten and Harwich in March of 1927. Importantly, this included piloting the Dornier-Wal, N25 who's construction he had accompanied in 1924 and which had brought them back from 87°43' N. According to newspaper, ‘Gjengangeren’ he was sad to leave the N25 for the final time, and wrote on her side, “Adjø, kjære ven. Tak for alt!” (Farewell, dear friend. Thank you for everything!)

THE DAWN 1927

On the 22nd of September, 1927, Omdal and his friend Bernt Balchen arrived in New York, to the news that Byrd's Antarctic expedition had been delayed. In the meanwhile, Omdal got a job at the Fokker manufacturing factory, although he was reportedly not happy there, writing to his father of his deep disappointment about the whole business. It was there, however, that he would encounter a new challenge; transatlantic flight. Frances Grayson, aviation enthusiast and niece to Woodrow Wilson, sought to become the first woman to fly across the Atlantic. For this task, she intended to use a Sikorsky S-36 and, just as Amundsen had in 1921, asked Omdal to fly it. His answer was a foregone conclusion, and along with navigator Brice Goldsborough and radio operator Frank Koehler, they would make up the crew of ‘The Dawn’.

On the evening of December 23rd, 1927, they set off toward Newfoundland on the first leg of their transatlantic flight. 'The Dawn' was last seen off the coast of Cape Cod at 7.10pm, heading into a storm. Reports suggest the aeroplane had gone down somewhere between Cape Cod and Nova Scotia, but no remnants of the plane or crew were ever found. Afterwards, the newspapers would bemoan, with distinctly misogynistic sentiment, how the young pilot had been lured into a dangerous flight by a rash hobbyist. Yet it was the sky, and its myriad frontiers which had always preoccupied Oskar Omdal, and it is perhaps fitting that it was there he met his end.

On learning of his death Roald Amundsen concluded, “He was one of the few truly beautiful characters I have met in my life, and an excellent aviator.”

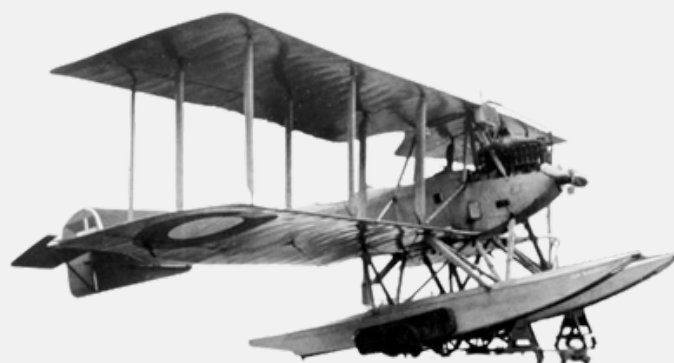
AEROPLANES OF EARLY POLAR AVIATION



FARMAN MF.11

First built: 1913
 Manufacturer: Farman Aviation Works
 Wingspan: 15.7 m
 Hp: 80 hp
 Top speed: 116 km/h

In 1914, Polish aviator Jan Nagórski became the first person to fly an aeroplane over the Arctic during a rescue mission for three missing Russian expeditions.



FREIDRICHSHAFEN FF49C

First built: 1917
 Manufacturer: Flugzeugbau Friedrichshafen
 Wingspan: 17.15 m
 Hp: 220 hp
 Top speed: 140 km/h

The German manufactured Freidrichshafen planes did not operate primarily in the Arctic, but were important in Norway's early airmail routes after four FF49C were bought by A/S Aero, owned by Tancred Ibsen.



JUNKERS LARSEN JL-6

First built: 1919
 Manufacturer: Junkers Flugzeug und Motorenwerke
 Wingspan: 14.82 m
 Hp: 182 hp
 Top speed: 173 km/h

The American version of the Junkers F.13, these were the world's first all metal aeroplanes. One of these planes, named 'Elizabeth', was to be used by Amundsen for a trans-Arctic flight in 1923, but was scrapped following unsuccessful test flights.



SOPWITH BABY

First built: 1915
 Manufacturer: Sopwith Aviation Company
 Wingspan: 7.82 m
 Hp: 110 hp
 Top speed: 160 km/h

The smaller cousin of the Sopwith Camel, ten Baby's were bought by the Norwegian Navy Air Service in 1917 and used in cold weather operation. Two of these Baby's, including the above pictured F.108, were made available for the Maud expedition, although they were not used. In 1928, they were again lent out, this time for the search effort following Amundsen's disappearance.



CURTIS ORIOLE

First built: 1919
 Manufacturer: Curtiss Aircraft
 Wingspan: 10.97 m
 Hp: 90 hp
 Top speed: 138 km/h

The Curtiss Oriole was an American manufactured general purpose aeroplane. Pictured above is 'Kristine', one of two planes Amundsen took onboard the Maud expedition. It would however prove unsuitable, and its parts were reconstituted into a model by pilot Odd Dahl. A Curtiss Oriole was also taken to the Arctic with Byrd in 1926 for short distance work.



DORNIER DO J WAL

First built: 1922
 Manufacturer: Dornier Flugzeugwerke
 Wingspan: 22 mm
 Hp: 710 hp
 Top speed: 185 km/h

Two Dornier Wal aeroplanes were used during the Amundsen-Ellsworth Arctic expedition in 1925, during which they became stranded at 87°43' N. After three weeks the N25 pictured above was able to takeoff using a short, manmade runway and fly to the coast of Svalbard. The aeroplane would survive until 1944 when it was destroyed in a bombing raid.

FOKKER F.VIIA TRI-MOTOR / FOKKER SUPER UNIVERSAL



First built: 1924
 Manufacturer: Fokker
 Wingspan: 21.70 m
 Hp: 660 hp
 Top speed: 185 km/h

Richard E. Byrd used a Fokker Tri-Motor, 'Josephine Ford', for his attempt on the North Pole in 1926. He would go on to use a Fokker Super Universal during his 1928 expedition, when it became the first aeroplane to land on the Antarctic continent - before being put out of service by high winds.

NORTHROP GAMMA

First built: 1932
 Manufacturer: Northrop Corporation
 Wingspan: 14.6 m
 Hp: 710 hp
 Top speed: 359 km/h

During Lincoln Ellsworth's third Antarctic expedition in 1935, a Northrop Gamma, 'Polar Star', completed the first trans-Antarctic flight.



CONTACT ME

madelinewberyl@gmail.com

@fata_morgana0 on twitter

A NOTE ON SOURCES

Where possible I have tried to use Omdal's own words from existent interviews and personal letters, and of those who knew him well. Some quotes have been truncated for the sake of brevity, indicated by ellipses, but the meaning has not been altered. For my research I have drawn on a number of Norwegian language sources, and have translated quotes and information where relevant. Please note the source list covers the majority of information in the poster, but is not comprehensive due to space restrictions. Feel free to email me with any questions regarding sources or translations.

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(Photographs for the slide, 'Aeroplanes of early polar aviation', were taken from editions of Windsock Datafile, the David Horn Collection, and Wikipedia Commons)

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'Oscar Omdal' Fram Museum website

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