

# Thor Solberg and his expeditions

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**After a successful flying career in the United States of America, Thor Solberg had only one dream left: Flying from the USA to Norway in the footsteps of the Norwegian Viking explorer “Leiv Eiriksson”. He made a first attempt in 1932 but had to abort it and he had to wait until 1935 before he could resume his flight. Upon arrival in Norway he formed an airline company and started with taxi- joy ride and charter flights. At the beginning of the Second World War he stored his aircraft and resumed business as soon as the war ended. We describe the beginning years of Thor Solberg, a man honoured in the USA. He has even been taken up in the “New Jersey Aviation Hall of Fame”.**

## **Where from? Where did he go?**

Take the European Highway E39 from Bergen, the capital of the fjords, in the northern direction and continue along the shores of numerous fjords, until you come to Oppedal. You can board the ferry across the Sognefjord, the longest and deepest fjord of Norway, to Lavik. After disembarkment you continue along the shores of the fjord to Vadheim and proceed through a mountainous landscape to a small village called Førde. Turn off in western direction and proceed to picturesque fishing town of Florø and its airport. On your approach of the airport you might notice that you drive on the “Thor Solberg vei” (*vei* is the Norwegian word for street). Many will wonder who Thor Solberg was. For us Norwegians he is one of the aviation pioneers. He was one of the first American-Norwegians to cross the North Atlantic. Some had tried it before and it is important to remember those who did not manage the flight. We would like to mention the American-Norwegian pilot [Parker Dresser Cramer](#) (nicknamed “Shorty”) and his Canadian navigator Oliver Paquette, who in August 1931 had flown with a Bellanca 38-30, registered NR687E (c/n Q-7006) of the Trans America Airline Survey from the USA via Labrador and Greenland to Island. They had managed to fly to the Færøy Islands. They started for the last leg to Copenhagen, but were swallowed by the North Sea and never arrived back in their home country. Some wreckage was found on September 16. Thor Solberg remembered him during his flights.

## **The start of his aviation life**

Thor Solberg was born on the Solberg farm near Florø on March 28, 1893 and had ten brothers and sisters. In 1910 he moved to the city of Bergen searching for work. He also loved driving a motor cycle and even made a trip from Bergen to Berlin that took him 48 hours. The family was a family that kept together. They helped each other in all possible ways. Thor Solberg loved flying and dreamed of it at an early age. Due to his age (he was 26 in 1919) he could not get into the Norwegian air force to learn flying. He decided to return to Germany. After eight to ten flying hours he managed to take his flying certificate. One of his wishes was to be the first to fly from his home country Norway to the USA, the land of opportunities. He wanted to fly the route the Viking Leiv Eiriksson had followed by boat from Norway via Iceland to North America. But who was this Viking from the dark ages in which footsteps Thor Solberg wanted to travel? Leiv Eiriksson or Leiv den hepne (in Icelandic: Leifur Eiríksson) was born on Iceland in 975 and died in 1020. He grew up in the Viking village of Brattalid in Eiriksford on Greenland. His father was Eirik Raude (Eric the Red) son of Thorvald Asvaldsson and Thjodhild from Jæren, south of present Stavanger. He left Brattalid and sailed further south to the northern end of Newfoundland that he called for Vinland. It is generally accepted that he arrived here on October 9, 1000. The group stayed there during the winter and returned several times. In 1960 Helge Ingstad found the remains of this settlement near L'Anse aux Meadows, Canada. A statue was erected in Reykjavik (see picture). The route from Norway via Iceland and Greenland to the USA was the route Thor Solberg wanted to fly. He thought like this: "If a Norwegian manages to fly from America to Norway along the same route as our landsman did he would manage to show the world that a Norwegian discovered America" (1).

Thor Solberg admired Norwegian aviators like Roald Amundsen and Bernt Balchen. During a meeting with Roald Amundsen he was advised to make the flight from America to Norway rather than in the opposite. There were better aircraft and more capital available in America. Thus in 1925 he decided to pack his suitcase and travel west to the United States of America. His German flying certificate was no longer valid so he took new flying lessons at the Roosevelt Field, Long Island. The lessons were expensive: \$ 35 per flying hour. In order to earn some money he started his own airline company Thor Solberg Aviation Corporation based at New York. Already in 1929 he bought his first aircraft: a second-hand 85 hp Cirrus Mk III-powered Great Lake 2-T-1 two-seater. His first flight went from Curtis Field, Long Island to Buffalo, New York. He sold the aircraft in September 1930 after 150 flying-hours. By then he had made no less than 25 emergency landings due to a bad engine. In September he bought for \$ 14,000 a new aircraft that was more up-to-date: a five-seated Bellanca CH-200 Pacemaker with a 225 hp Wright J-5-engine. This was an aircraft known for its speed and efficiency. He used the aircraft to improve his skills in long distance and night flying. He searched for bad weather and learned how to cope all kind of weather situations. His most

hazardous landing and take-off was during a flight to Miami, Florida when he landed in the middle of the night within the walls of the prison of Philadelphia! The next day he stripped the aircraft for all luggages, removable objects and managed to take off and fly to an airport where he picked up his passengers again and continued to Miami.

On September 4, 1931 Thor Solberg had the pleasure to meet and fly Bernt Balchen to Cleveland, where he was to hold a speech at a club. They departed from Floyd Bennett Field together with the Norwegian-American journalist E Holmer Hoven of the *Nordiske Tidene* (Nordic Times) and their friends Vik and Flatemo. The aircraft touched down at Teterboro Airport, where Bernt Balchen was picked up. Bernt Balchen asked if Thor Solberg allowed him to fly. Solberg agreed and Balchen took over the controls. They entered a fog area and Bernt Balchen showed his skills and managed to fly them through the fog. Heavy rain and a problem with the oil tube could not stop Balchen. He managed to make an extra-ordinary landing without any problem. After the repairs they resumed the flight. Thor Solberg was impressed of Bernt Balchen's handling of the aircraft.

### **The first flight to Norway**

Thor Solberg purchased now a new and larger Bellanca aircraft: a Bellanca K with the registration NX4864. The aircraft was designed as a biplane with a cabin for 12 passengers. The seats had been stripped out and the aircraft reconstructed for a Trans Atlantic flight to Roma (Italy). This sample had a range of 5,500 miles and the planned flight had to be aborted. After that Thor Solberg purchased the aircraft.

He asked his friend Carl O Petersen to join him on the flight to Norway. Carl O Petersen was born in Borre, Norway on July 14, 1897 and had participated on the first Byrd Antarctic Expedition (1928-30) as radio operator and later joined the second Byrd Antarctic Expedition (1933-35). Petersen died on November 10, 1941. The 1932-flight was to go from New York via Newfoundland directly to Ireland and across Scotland to Oslo in Norway. Thor Solberg's venture was financed by Norwegians living in Brooklyn, first of all the photographer Knut Vang and entrepreneur Ole Axelsen. His biggest financier was however the Enna Jellick Shoe Company and its American owner F L Emerson. The Bellanca K was therefore called after this company: "Enna Jellick". Also Bernt Balchen gave financial backing and advice to Thor Solberg. He felt that he left well prepared.

His aircraft was ready on August 10, but first on August 23, 1932 at 5.42 am Thor Solberg and Carl O Petersen took off from Floyd Bennett Field. The first leg would go to Harbour Grace, Newfoundland. They were however not the only one to depart that day. Another Norwegian-American, Clyde Lee (from the Norwegian name Lie) and the American John Bockhorn also took off from the same airport with the same type of

aircraft. Their aircraft was christened "Great Mountains". Unfortunately they did not manage to reach their goal: Oslo. They flew through a storm and reached Harbour Grace. They continued on August 25 with fuel for a 37 hours flight. Nothing was heard from them after their departure from Harbour Grace. Nobody knows what had happened to them...

In a way Thor Solberg was luckier. He too flew towards Harbour Grace and encountered the same storm as Lee and Bockhorn. This storm was one of the worst he had ever encountered. He tried to get over the storm and climbed to 1,500 metres, but came in stead into snow showers. He was now flying blind and had no idea if they were flying over land or water. The engine stalled and they decided to go down. Fortunately they landed on water, but their aircraft was destroyed beyond repair and sank to the bottom of the Placentya Bay, some 100 kilometres from Harbour Grace. Some fishermen picked them up and brought them on land. The first attempt ended in this bay. They returned back to the USA and Thor Solberg picked up his work: taxi, advertisement and joy ride flights.

### **Preparations for the second attempt**

Two years past, but Thor Solberg sat not still. He tried to persuade rich Norwegian-Americans to support his new venture, but there was no interest from that side. By the spring of 1934 he found an aircraft that he felt he could afford. It was an amphibian from Loening. It was constructed and built as a bomber. The original Air Yacht (the C-1-W with one pilot and powered by a Wasp engine) was rolled out and made its first flight on March 28, 1928. The successor, the C-2, was ready by October 1, 1928. The amphibian Thor Solberg purchased was originally built as a bomber for a Latin-American air force, but not delivered. It had been stored and Loening was interested in selling the aircraft as soon as possible. The Loening was converted into a Model C-2-C 2PCAB (C = Commercial, 2 = twin-seat cockpit, C = 575 hp Wright Cyclone engine) and was originally registered as NC10239 but later re-registered as NR10239, because it had a restricted licence authorization (only to be used for the Trans Atlantic flight). The serial number was 308 and it was registered for Trans-Atlantic flight in easy stages. No passengers other than bona fide members of the crew were to be carried. He registered the aircraft for the first time in 1934, but we only know that the second registration expired on August 16, 1935. The aircraft (see picture) in the Norwegian Technical Museum has the registration NC10239 and not NR10239. Possibly Thor Solberg did not bother to repaint the registration. He registered the aircraft on his own company Thor Solberg *Avaition* Corp (*Avaition* is as written in the paper), address 6714 Fifth Avenue, Brooklyn, New York. The technical specification of the aircraft were: Span (upper and lower) 46 ft 8 ins, chord both 72 ins, wing area 517 sq ft, aerofoil type Loening, length 34

ft 8 ins, height wheels down 13 ft 2ins, height wheels up 11 ft 5 ins., empty weight 3894 lbs, useful load 2006 lbs, payload 996 lbs, gross weight 5900 lbs, maximum speed 124 mph, cruising speed 102 mph, landing speed 52 mph, climb 870 ft/min, ceiling 13800 ft, fuel capacity 140 gallon, oil 10 gallon, range 550 miles. The fuel capacity and the range were later improved on Thor Solberg's Loening Air Yacht.

The financing of the aircraft was a problem. His brother Lars Solberg in Bergen, Norway sent over the first down payment. Actually, Thor Solberg was uncertain how he could raise the necessary money. Together with his good friend Knut Vang they sat up a list over potential money lenders. But after five weeks of hard work they had not raised one single dollar. Most of the persons they asked felt that he should finance his private ventures himself. They did not see any reasons why they should give them any money. Just as Thor Solberg thought he had to abandon his plan, he received a telegram from his brothers Alfred and Halfdan: "We support the purchase of the aircraft". The money was sent and Thor Solberg left together with Knut Vang and Alfred Beck for the factory of Loening at Bristol, Pennsylvania, where they paid for the aircraft. He was finally the owner of the aircraft. Knut Vang joined Thor Solberg on some trial flights and said as a layman that he could not understand how Solberg dared to fly this aircraft from the USA to Norway. Thor Solberg returned with his guests and the aircraft to Floyd Bennett Field and parked it in Hangar 6.

Of course Thor Solberg knew that the aircraft was far from ideal. But it was the only aircraft he could get and afford. He now started to reconstruct the aircraft and prepare it for the scheduled flight. He had to build in three extra petrol tanks in the passenger's cabin and had to install a radio and new blind flying instruments.

The Norwegian-American newspaper *Nordisk Tidene* tried to sell on behalf of Thor Solberg postcards that would be taken along on the Trans Atlantic flight. They tried to sell them for \$ 1 per postcard but had due to lack of interest reduced the price to \$ 0.50. But the income did not cover the printing cost. Since he had no money to pay a mechanic he had to do all the work himself. He installed the petrol tanks and strengthened the cabin. Furthermore, he installed a new improved instrumental panel that balanced on rubber holders. The instruments thus worked more secure and helped him a lot during the flight. He worked nearly 12 to 15 hours daily in three months on the reconstruction of the aircraft.

Now that the aircraft was ready he could take it to Aeronautics Branch of the Department of Commerce for approval and registration. After this he send in an application to the Department of State in which he asked for permission to fly from the USA to Norway via Canada, Newfoundland, Labrador, Greenland, Iceland and Faeroe Islands. Before he could get the permission he had to take an exam in blind flying. He

managed this test without any problems, thanks the experiences gained on his flights in bad weather and fog.

Next he had to organise the petrol and oil supplies along the route. Petrol and oil was shipped to Montreal (Canada), Antecosti Island, Cartwright, Labrador, Julianehaab (Greenland), Angmasalik (Greenland), Reykjavik (Iceland), Hornefjord (Iceland), Tórshavn (Faeroe Islands) and Shetland Islands. In order to finance the petrol and oil storage Thor Solberg asked his closest friends Bernt Balchen, Dr T Petterson, Ole Axelsen and the newspaper *Nordisk Tidene* to support them and they gave him a total of \$ 550. Beside them Jahn Knudtsen of the *Norske Amerika Linje* (the shipping Norwegian America Line) in New York donated the \$ 200 it had gathered from selling special envelopes to American philatelists. If the trip would not take place, the NAL would guarantee for the money. In addition Hermann Kjær, manager of the Norwegian Trade Office in New York, tried to gather \$ 1,000 but “only” managed \$ 250.

The biggest challenge was of course navigating over sea. Thor Solberg had studied Air Navigation at the New York University and started to draw up the route. He calculated and recalculated all figures again and had them checked by Captain Georg Bull, New York. He even flew from New York straight to sea, turned and tried to fly exactly the same way back again. He had no money for a directional gyro and thus had to orientate on the landscape and the sea. Different weather situations were experienced and Thor Solberg managed to learn a lot on these flights. But before his departure he managed to get a directional gyro and thus could fly a lot safer.

### **Christening and engine problems**

On Sunday, May 20, 1934 a large crowd had gathered at Floyd Bennett Field to witness the christening of the aircraft. The interest for the ceremony from the Norwegian contingent in New York was huge. It would start at 1 pm and thousands of guests had arrived. Extra police forces had to keep the crowd away from the aircraft. Vice Consul Olav Tostrup represented the Norwegian Consul and held an impressive speech. At exactly 1 pm, Mrs Solberg climbed on the pontoon and smashed the bottle of champagne against the aircraft. Meanwhile she said: “I christen you Leiv Eiriksson”. The Norwegian and American flag were pulled aside and the name of the aircraft could be clearly seen. Subsequently, a representative from United Press wanted to know from Thor Solberg who this man Leiv Eiriksson was and where he could be found. He wondered if Leiv Eiriksson was to join Solberg on his flight.

“No”, Solberg answered, “Leiv Eiriksson is dead”.

The journalist continued: “Aha, how did that happen? Did he crash? And where did he crash?”

Solberg replied: "Leiv Eiriksson was a Norwegian, who died for approximately 900 years ago after he had been the first white man to discover America".

The journalists said that it was Columbus, who had discovered America, but Thor Solberg continued, telling them that Leiv Eiriksson had come to the USA well 500 years before Columbus. They accepted this, but could not understand what it had to do with his aircraft. He finally explained that he wanted to follow the route Leiv Eiriksson had used. Not many of the journalists knew where Norway was. Some of them thought it was a part of Sweden and even believed men like Roald Amundsen, Frithjof Nansen, Sonja Henie, Bernt Balchen, Birger Ruud, Ivar Ballangruud were either Danish or Swedish. At least the Americans had learnt something new that day.

But during subsequent trial flights the engine started to stall and caused several extraordinary landings. In June 1934 an expert from the Wright Motor Co from Patterson, New Jersey checked the engine and concluded that it was not suited for a Trans Atlantic flight. Thus Solberg had to find a new engine, but first of all money to pay for it. His friend Major S J Arnesen from Ottawa, Canada, suggested coming to Chicago and fly for wealthy Norwegians. He decided to do this and departed from New York with on board the photographer Knut Vang and passenger Aage Nilsen and a flying mechanic. The weather was dominated by strong north-western winds and the passengers did not have a nice flight. They made a number of extra-ordinary landings, but reached Ottawa in the end. Three army aircraft escorted the Loening Air Yacht to the airport of Ottawa. Unfortunately and despite a large enthusiastic crowd the whole venture ended without money for a new engine. Disillusioned they had to return to New York via Lake Michigan, Chicago and further to Cleveland (Ohio). Bad weather forced Solberg to use all his skills of blind flying. In the evening they arrived at Buffalo in nice weather. Suddenly Solberg realised that the American F L Emerson of the Enna Jellick Shoe Company, Auburn, NY lived nearby and he had supported Solberg financially during his first flight in 1932. He called at 11 pm Emerson at home and they agreed to meet the next day at 1 pm on a lake near his house. He landed the Loening Air Yacht near Emerson's yacht. They discussed the matter on board the yacht. Emerson listened to Thor Solberg, but suggested that the wealthy Norwegians in New York should support him. He was willing to help him with \$ 500. After the business talks were concluded Solberg took Emerson up and showed him Auburn from the air.

But where was Solberg to get this money? He decided to have a talk with the manager of the NAL in New York, Mr Henriksen to see if they could help him. A few days afterwards he was called by the manager Peter Berge and they made an appointment to meet each other. After their meeting in the office, Peter Berge promised to get back with a final answer within a few days. Two days later the two met again and Peter Berge could tell Solberg that the management of NAL approved the proposal and that the

money needed for the engine was at his disposal. He left the office with a check and drove straight to The Wright Aeronautic Motor Co in Patterson, NJ where he bought a new engine. Since the factory had a big order for engines for the American Army and Navy it took some time before they could help Solberg. It was therefore not until August 23, 1934 before the engine was installed. The flight to Norway had thus to be postponed. It was too late to make such a long and daring flight. Fortunately he met understanding from his benefactor NAL. The Norwegian and American press was informed subsequently.

### **The year 1935: Finally to Norway!**

A cold winter passed and when spring came, Thor Solberg started to finalise his plans. He did not want to set a specific date as a cancellation of this date would certainly give negative publicity. Therefore only a few were informed about his departure date. Since the Department of Commerce regarded the 1935-flight as a new flight he had to apply all over again. The New York Times was interested in his story and suggested to take along a radio on the tour. Thor Solberg understood what the publicity was worth and he installed a radio, but now needed a radio operator. The New York Times suggested Paul C Oscanyon, who had worked for Eastern Airlines and at that moment was employed at the airport of Washington DC. Again capital was insufficient and thus a cheaper radio was installed.

The day of departure was now set at July 17, 1935 and the place of departure Floyd Bennett Field, NY. The aircraft was lowered on the water. Solberg had taken the wheel undercarriage off the aircraft in order to save weight. The aircraft was loaded in accordance with a special list Thor Solberg had prepared. Journalists and photographers had gathered on the pier near the air field. A large crowd wished the two aviators good luck and asked them to send greetings to the homeland. The heavy loaded aircraft took off after a long start and they commenced on their long journey. First stop was Montreal, Canada. But once on their way, Thor Solberg felt that the aircraft was wrongly loaded and he decided to return to Floyd Bennett Field. Nobody was informed as he felt it was embarrassing to tell the press that they had to return. They reloaded the aircraft and were ready for departure on July 18. At 1.30 pm they took off again this time only waived out by their friend Peder Ellingsen. Now the aircraft had been correctly loaded and better to fly. Above Albany (at 2,500 feet) they encountered rain and thunder and sank with 1,500 feet in a few seconds. Everything went fine and they entered Canadian territory. At 4.30 pm they arrived at Montreal and landed the aircraft on the River Lawrence. Today's flight had taken exactly 3 flying hours. They spend the evening in company with the Norwegian Consul in Montreal Olaf Tostrup.

### **July 19, 1935: Montreal – Seven Islands, 4 hr 40 min flying time**

The next day they refuelled the aircraft and prepared for departure. Some Canadian Airways' pilots suggested dropping the landing at Anticosti Island in favour of a landing at Seven Islands. Petrol was therefore sent from Anticosti to St. Pierre. Because of that the fuel tanks were filled until the last drop and this made the aircraft extra heavy. Thor Solberg managed to lift the aircraft off the water and the second leg of the journey started. While flying above the harbour of Quebec they saw a ship of the NAL moored showing the Norwegian flag. On deck sailors were waving to Solberg and Oscanyon. After Quebec the landscape was not as populated as on the previous part of the tour. The flight to Seven Islands took 4 hours and 40 minutes and Thor Solberg saw clearly that the village Seven Islands indeed existed of seven islands. The harbour was deep and surrounded by some 15-20 small houses. He landed the amphibian and anchored for the night. The only disadvantage was that the population basically talked French, but one of the boat-owners mastered the English language so he helped with the formalities. This man turned out to be the local custom officer, the local postmaster, the local police commissioner, the local radio operator and the local hotel owner! Later that evening the local population came by and greeted the aviators who were on their way to a country most of them had never heard of.

### **July 20, 1935: Seven Islands – Harbour/St Pierre, 1 hr 30 min flying time**

The morning was as nice as the night had been: clear visibility and sunshine. Today's leg brought them to Harbour/St Pierre, 150 miles north of Seven Islands. The short flight started at 8 am and 1.5 hours later they reached their destination. This station was considerably larger than Seven Islands and even had a street with a shop. The original plan was to bunker petrol and oil, but upon arrival it turned out that the minerals had not arrived. After a telephone call they learnt that it had not left Anticosti Islands. Thor Solberg called the head office in Montreal and before he knew it the petrol was underway. It did take until the following day before it arrived. The Canadian pilot flew an aircraft specially constructed for the transport of petrol. They connected the petrol tanks in the Canadian aircraft with the petrol tanks in the Loening Air Yacht and pumped the petrol over.

### **July 21, 1935: Harbour/St Pierre – Cartwright, 4 hr 50 min flying time**

At 12.30 noon the two boarded the Loening Air Yacht for the next stretch of their flight. Paul Oscanyon sat in the rear of the aircraft where the radio had been installed, while Thor Solberg of course sat in the cockpit. There was during the flight not much contact possible between the two. The flight to Cartwright on Labrador was 650 miles long, so

this was a long flight. The waves in the harbour of St Pierre caused some exciting moments, but Thor Solberg finally managed to get airborne. This flight would be the last before the Atlantic crossing to icy Greenland. On their way they encountered strong winds and flew also in a storm. Thor Solberg had his hands full controlling the aircraft and keeping it on course. They passed Green Island (where Bernt Balchen had rescued German aviators) and came to Belle Isle Sound, where they for the first time on their flight saw drifting ice. Back in New York Thor Solberg was told by an experienced sailor that he should be aware of the landscape around the Belle Isle Sound. It was inhospitable and the sound was cursed by islands, rocks and drifting ice for many miles. It was also important to be aware where you flew, because if you missed the settlement Cartwright there was nothing for the next 4-500 miles! Thor Solberg remembered these words when he entered an area with fog. He tried to fly closer to the coast but did not manage to find open space. It was 5 pm and according to Solberg's calculation Cartwright should be around the next corner. Suddenly he could see the huge steamer *Blue Petter* in front of him. It was moored in the harbour of Cartwright. Solberg landed the amphibian near the steamer and a small motor vessel and three rowing boats came towards them.

The flight had due to the strong tail winds (60-70 miles per hour) lasted only 4 hours and 50 minutes in stead of the 7-8 hours Solberg had calculated with. Upon arrival they were checked by the local custom officer and police master before they could board the steamer, where the captain had invited them for dinner. The custom officer asked him thousand of questions and Thor Solberg wondered what was going on. It later turned out that the custom officer also represented the Canadian News Papers and when Thor Solberg wanted to send his story already sold to the New York Times!

Cartwright was owned by the Hudson Bay Co and it had a small hotel. The last guest that stayed at this hotel had been Charles A Lindberg and his lovely wife. They had arrived on July 21, 1933 and stayed there for eight days. Little did Thor Solberg know at that time that his stay at Cartwright would nearly last longer than he wanted. The next day they filled up the petrol tanks and checked the engine thoroughly. Thor Solberg felt that he was ready for one of the most dangerous stretches of the tour: the crossing of the near 700 miles wide David Street between Labrador and Greenland.

The local radio operator Mr Moore had four times per day contact with Julianehaab (Greenland) to check the weather conditions. But every time they were told there was fog outside Julianehaab. They were grounded for many days to come. During their stay Solberg visited the local hospital and helped the doctors with one of their patients, which turned out to be a Norwegian sailor who did not speak English. Finally the doctors could treat him. Thor Solberg also gave him \$ 12 so he could get

home and made sure that the *Blue Petter* would take him back to England. There he could go to the Norwegian Consul and let them help him to get back to Norway. Upon return to Norway the sailor returned the \$ 12 to Thor Solberg.

Thor Solberg had to wait a long time before Mr Moore could give him positive news. On Saturday July 27 it looked like that they could take off for Julianehaab. They started up the engine (it took a half hour to warm up the engine) and were ready to take-off when Mr Moore came down to them to give them the bad news. The weather had changed dramatically: rain, fog and more bad weather to come. Thor Solberg decided to wait one more day.

### **July 28, 1935: Cartwright – Julianehaab, 8 hr and 55 flying time**

At 6 am Thor Solberg and Paul Oscanyon took a straw to the radio operator to hear the latest information from the radio operator at Julianehaab. They received the message that the weather was clear in Julianehaab and that Thor Solberg should standby for departure. The luggage was taken to the aircraft and the engine was given a last check-up. At 7.30 am Thor Solberg rowed back ashore and Mr Moore to receive the latest information. Julianehaab wired that the weather was clear and that Solberg could take off and keep contact over the radio with Julianehaab every half hour. They said goodbye to Mr Moore and promised to stay in touch throughout the day. Thor Solberg had also promised to send the radio operator of the Norwegian freighter *Thorland* (sailing in the area) messages during their flight to Greenland. This ship was some 100 miles north of Cartwright. They took off at 12.45 noon for one of the longest legs of the trip. Thor Solberg flew straight into the fog and decided to climb above the fog, but this turned out to be impossible. The layer was far too thick. He had to rely on his blind-flying skills. They had flown two hours through the fog and still were no signs of improvement. Paul Oscanyon sat in the rear of the aircraft and listened to his radio. Solberg was waiting for some information about the position of the aircraft so he could calculate the aircraft's drift-off. Since this did not come Thor Solberg sent a note to Paul Oscanyon asking for information. He received a return note with the message that the radio had broken down! They had no possibility to send nor receive a message! This made the flight rather dangerous. They could not return to Labrador since the northern winds had pushed the fog towards Labrador. They could only pray that Julianehaab was free of fog. The magnetic compass started to act strangely and was not much worth anymore. Fortunately, he had installed a directional gyro from Sperry Gyroscope Co, Brooklyn. Now his earlier made calculations were the only thing that was correct. The directional gyro was now only a second aid. They tried to orientate them and Solberg lowered the aircraft to nearly sea level (30 yards), but here the fog was just as thick as above. Since they had used some 500 kg petrol, the aircraft was now so light that it could easily climb to 15,000 feet. They finally came out of the fog and flew now in the sunshine. After many

hours in the fog they had to put on their snow glasses in order not to get snow blind. Thor Solberg was however sure that he was on the right course and he kept his course. They had been in the air for no less than eight hours and both Solberg and Oscanyon stirred out of the windows to see if they could see any mountains. Suddenly Thor Solberg could see in front of him the top of snow-covered mountains. He turns around and shouts to Paul Oscanyon: "Greenland, Greenland, it is Greenland"! Paul turns to Thor and shouts back: "Congratulations skipper, you're the best pilot in the world!"

Thor Solberg needed now to find out where he was and he noticed a huge mountain range west of them. He calculated that he would be north of Julianehaab and it turned out that he was four kilometres south of the settlement. It was unbelievable, but Thor Solberg had flown for eight hours through fog and managed to get to Julianehaab. The local population was jumping around and greeted the two aviators. Thor Solberg found some space between the icebergs and landed the amphibian near the colony. They were picked up by a vessel on which the Danish governor E Wedel was among the passengers. Also Dr A Laurent Christensen and the local radio operator Tanne were on board. Thor Solberg and Paul Oscanyon would be the guests of E Wedel and were taken ashore. After a medical check by Dr A Laurent Christensen they could finally explain the radio operator Tanne why they did not take contact with them. A message was sent to Mr Moore in Cartwright and the radio operator of the steamer *Thorland* that they had arrived after eight hours and fifty-five minutes.

The dinner that followed was one of the best they had for many years. The whole colony was invited to a dinner with piano music. Again Thor Solberg could sleep in the same room and bed as Charles A Lindbergh had used.

The next day was used to overhaul the aircraft and Paul Oscanyon tried to fix the radio. Solberg discovered a damaged oil cooler. This damage made Thor Solberg to investigate the aircraft thoroughly. The damaged oil cooler could well have led to a fatal accident. Paul Oscanyon also managed to get the radio to work again.

### **July 30, 1935: Julianehaab – Angmagssalik, 9 hr and 20 min flying time**

Tuesday morning they boarded the aircraft and departed for the next leg of the journey to the settlement Angmagssalik. Thor Solberg flew in southern direction to Cape Farewell and they could enjoy the fantastic nature of Greenland from 5-9,000 feet. After rounding Cape Farewell they continued in north-eastern direction and flew along the eastern coast of Greenland. It was not easy to find Angmagssalik as it was situated against a mountain wall and behind a hill. But Paul Oscanyon managed to contact the radio station at the outpost and soon they arrived above Angmagssalik. Unfortunately Thor Solberg could not land here due to the numerous icebergs floating in the harbour of Angmagssalik. He was advised to continue to an inland lake situated between high

mountains. It was possible to land there, but the lake was too small to take off from. Once in the narrow valley he was forced to make a sharp turn to get away from the mountains. He climbed to 10,000 feet to get out of the area. After an hour in cold layer of air they saw a small fjord. The fjord was filled with icebergs. From 10,000 feet they looked small, but once at sea level they were larger than hoped. During the approach Thor Solberg turned off the engine and touched the water at low speed. Solberg jumped out of the cockpit and stop the aircraft before it could be damaged from ice or stones. Meanwhile, Paul Oscanyon tried to establish connection with the radio operator in Angmagssalik. He told him their position that was 10 km from their destination. Afterwards he helped Thor Solberg to secure the aircraft. There was 60 meter under the aircraft so they had to push the aircraft closer to ashore.

They waited for the vessel that was to come and that would bring them to Angmagssalik. They took along their luggage and a mailbag with 100 letters from Julianehaab. It was the first time mail from Julianehaab to Angmagssalik was delivered within one day. After a few hours waiting they noticed that the aircraft started to move. They looked out of the aircraft's windows and saw that the aircraft was floating straight towards land. Also the anchor was visible ... on the beach! Solberg jumped into the water and stopped the aircraft before it came too close to the beach. During one hour he held the aircraft steady and managed to save it from destruction. Soon he understood what had happened. They had anchored at 10 feet depth, but it turned out that the ebb was 30 feet! Together with Paul Oscanyon he secured the aircraft again. But during the process Solberg pushed the aircraft towards water with such a force that he landed with facedown in the water. He was able to swim to the aircraft and was helped on board. Quickly he changed clothes and again they sat down waiting for the vessel. "Night" fell (there was nearly 24 hours daylight), but at 2 am they could see a beautiful sunrise. At 8 am the motor vessel arrived from Angmagssalik, but they had not taken petrol along. So they had to get back to Angmagssalik to pick up the petrol. Since they could not fly they towed the aircraft to deeper grounds. After ten hours sailing by vessel they arrived at Angmagssalik, where they could finally get some sleep. The governor of Angmagssalik Mr G Rassow invited the aviators for dinner. He wondered if Thor Solberg knew Lindbergh in person. When he confirmed that he knew him Rassow gave Solberg a fur coat that was a present for Mrs Lindbergh. And since Thor Solberg was to return to the USA he was asked to take the fur coat to her. Upon return to New York Thor Solberg delivered the fur coat to Lindbergh, who was surprised to get it. During their stay in Angmagssalik Solberg visited some Eskimos and learned about their way of life and even had dinner with one family. The stay in Angmagssalik lasted until August 2, when they returned to their aircraft.

### **August 2, 1935: Angmagssalik – Bildudal, 8 hr flying time**

Finally the crossing to Iceland stood on the programme. They were transferred back by boat from Angmagssalik to the fjord where the aircraft was moored. Upon arrival near the aircraft they filled up the petrol tanks with the help of some locals. Despite unstable weather near Iceland they decided to start for Iceland. The icebergs in the fjord started to drift towards the aircraft, so Thor Solberg decided to take off as soon as possible. The empty 5-gallon jerry cans were donated to the local populations and the aircraft was ready for departure. After a long take-off the aircraft alighted and set course for Iceland. Since the radio did not work anymore Thor Solberg would fly to Angmagssalik. In that way the radio operator of Angmagssalik could inform Iceland that the Loening Air Yacht had left Greenland. Since the weather conditions near the capital Reykjavik were not favourable, Thor Solberg decided to fly to Bildudal, north of Reykjavik. The storm area came as predicted and Solberg took the aircraft to 9,000 feet, but here he encountered fog and later also ice. He descended to a lower altitude, but had to struggle with heavy rains. The aircraft was further lowered to 100 feet. Thus Thor Solberg could check the speed of the aircraft. Again, Thor Solberg had to use all his blind flying skills. Suddenly they crossed three fishing vessels. Paul Oscanyon had fixed the radio and tried to get contact with the fishermen in order to be able to find out their position. But no contact was made. After eight flying hours they finally saw land and landed the aircraft on the Arna Fjord, just outside Bildudal. They enjoyed a fine dinner and took contact by telephone with Reykjavik to announce their arrival to Iceland.

### **August 3, 1935: Bildudal - Reykjavik, 1 hr 30 min flying time**

The next day the aircraft was filled up with petrol again and at 8 pm departed for the Icelandic capital. After a short one and half hour flight they arrived above Reykjavik. After some round above the city they tried to find a place to land. The harbour was filled up with numerous boats with people, who were awaiting the arrival of the two. Thor Solberg landed the aircraft outside the harbour and was immediately surrounded by small vessels. They were greeted by the Vice Consul of Norway in Iceland, Wilhelm Fegth. The population of Reykjavik were waiving their flags and greeted the heroes from the USA. The aircraft was moored and Solberg and Oscanyon were ferried ashore. They were taken to the Hotel Borgen, but Solberg said he could not afford it. In stead of a single room they took a double room and the bill was paid by Thor's brothers Lars and Alfred.

During one week they stayed in Reykjavik and enjoyed the hospitality of the wife and daughters of the General Consul Bay and of the Vice Consul Fegth. They were taken to the inlands and saw the famous geysers. The Post Master of Reykjavik even bought a car and asked Thor Solberg to take him to the mountains. But Thor Solberg wanted to fly on

and get to Norway. He studied the weather reports that turned out not to be too positive. There was all the time fog either near Reykjavik or on the south side of the island, while the north was as a rule free of fog. For future flights between Europe and the USA this would be an interesting fact.

### **August 10, 1935: Reykjavik – Hornafjord and back, 3 hr and 30 min flying time**

After one week in Reykjavik they decided to give it a try and start on the flight to the east towards the Faeroe Islands. The Loening was towed to a sight 3 kilometres north of Reykjavik, where Thor Solberg had found a save place to start from. This site would be ideal for future flying boats to land and take-off from. The harbour of Reykjavik was not suited at all. Upon arrival Thor Solberg performed a final check up of the engine and the aircraft before they turned the aircraft with its noose towards the sea for the take-off. It was not possible to get the aircraft airborne and thus he returned to the starting point for a new attempt. One hour later he made a second attempt, this time closer to the coast. He managed to get into the air. They flew towards Reykjavik and made a circle above to the city as tribute to the hospitality of the population. The Postmaster had given a mail bag to Thor Solberg with the first Icelandic mail to be carried from Iceland to Norway. Today's flight was to bring from Hornafjord, but again bad weather forced Solberg to fly a low altitude (100 metres). Again fog stopped a flight and Solberg had to make the decision to turn and fly back to Reykjavik. It was impossible to find and even land at Hornafjord. In order to save time, he decided to fly across land back to the take-off site. Paul Oscanyon was not too pleased with this decision, also because of the low clouds and fog above land. But Thor Solberg had no problems landing the aircraft. A local farmer picked them up and gave them shelter.

### **August 11, 1935: Reykjavik – Hornafjord, 2 hr and 15 min flying time**

After refuelling they departed at 1 pm for a pleasant 2 hours and 15 minutes flight to Hornafjord, where they were met by Dr Kuirter and fishing owner T Danielsen. The next day they refilled the aircraft and overhauled its engine. During their stay in Hornafjord, Solberg drew a detailed map of the fjord that could be useful for others. He received weather reports from the radio operator Mr Gisslasson in Seydisfjordur (eastside of Iceland). In case of fog near the Faeroe Islands Thor Solberg would fly directly to Norway. It was therefore important that they had enough petrol on board to make a direct flight to Norway. They tried to take off during their stay, but the calm sea made it impossible.

### **August 13, 1935: Hornafjord, 1 hr and 30 min flying time**

Thanks to some light breeze they managed to take off that day and flew towards the Faeroe Islands. Directly outside the Hornafjord they entered a fog area and flew some 40 minutes on instruments. Thor Solberg regarded it as irresponsible to fly in the fog to the Faeroe Islands and decided to return to Hornafjord.

Their extra stay in Hornafjord made it possible for them to check the aircraft and its engine. Again they were ready for a new take-off.

**August 16, 1935: Hornafjord – Tórshavn, Faeroe Islands, 3 hr and 30 min flying time; and Tórshavn, Faeroe Island – Bergen, 4 hr and 30 min flying time.**

Thor Solberg was informed that the weather the following day would be ideal for a flight to the islands, situated somewhere in the Atlantic Ocean. It would be a tough flight. Solberg would need all his skills. In the early hours Solberg and Oscanyon rowed out to the aircraft and started the engine. The engine needed 30 minutes to warm up before it could give maximal power. After a long take-off they were finally flying towards the Faeroe Islands. Departure had been at 8.30 am and again they faced fog. On their way they passed some fishing-boats, where the crews waved to the crew and the aircraft. The radio was still not useable and Paul Oscanyon got more and more frustrated and surely wanted to through the radio overboard. In addition, the Faeroe Islands were just some islands in the Atlantic Ocean and Thor Solberg needed all his navigation skills to find this group of islands. The low fog (up to 200 metres) forced him to fly low and through the narrow sound. They reached Tórshavn and made a fly-pass over the city. After the landing small vessels met them in the harbour. The lord major of Tórshavn invited them for a superb dinner at the city's hotel and they accepted this invitation without hesitation.

At the same time Thor Solberg received a telegram: "Aviator Solberg Tórshavn. Weak variable wind, partially clouded, 200 metres near Faeroe Islands and 1000 metres near Bergen. Since situation will not change today, no further messages will be transmitted".

This was good news that even deafened his lust for food. He decided to return to the aircraft, refuel and check the engine. Paul Oscanyon would join the lord major for dinner. Thor Solberg excuses himself and said that the weather report was so favourable that he would like to continue. They had experienced so many negative weather reports, but this report was one of the best. The aircraft needed seven barrels of petrol and a man was sent out to get it. Since this would take some time, the lord major offered Thor Solberg to join them for dinner. But Thor Solberg was restless and when he saw the petrol arrive by vessel at his aircraft he excused for his sudden departure.

The lord major stood up as well and held a short speech about Norway and the Vikings and wished them a safe journey to Norway. Their stay in Tórshavn lasted only two hours and after Paul Oscanyon had returned to the aircraft, Thor Solberg took off for the

last leg of his journey: To Norway!

## Crossing the North Sea

On their way to Norway, Thor Solberg remembered his friend [Parker Dresser Cramer](#), who was killed during his attempt to reach Norway. The clouds forced him to fly at low altitude but they soon climbed above the clouds and enjoyed the sunshine. He saw blue clouds in front of him and expected a storm front, but he discovered that they actually were clouds “touching” the sea. The wind had turned and made it necessary for Thor Solberg to adjust his course. They passed the Norwegian ferry “MS Lyra” of *Det Bergenske Dampskipsselskap – BDS* on its way from Bergen to Tórshavn. Again the flag was hoisted and the passengers waved to the crew of the “Leiv Eiriksson”.

After this encounter he thought about his final wish that he wanted to be fulfilled on this tour: See the Norwegian mountains rise out of the sea. He had had this feeling before when he arrived by ship, but this time he had looked even more forward to the event, since he had completed Leiv Eirikssons route after many years of preparations. He also hoped that his family would wait for him upon arrival in Bergen. Especially he looked forward to see his father (78 years old) and mother (74 years old). He had before departure from Tórshavn telegraphed his brother Lars that he expected to arrive after a five hours flight.

Finally he arrived at the west coast and mountains of Norway and after a short orientation on the map he found out that he was just outside the island of Askøy. He was a little bit disappointed about the view of the mountains. He flew well above them and thus could not see them rise. At 9.30 pm the sun sat in the west. Thor Solberg noticed the large crowd packed at the pier in the harbour of Bergen and he decided to land at Sandviken, the inner harbour of Bergen. But due to the numerous small vessels they had to land the aircraft near Storemøllen. From this position they cruised towards Sandviken, but had to give up their attempt as they were surrounded by small vessels. It was too dangerous to continue with a turning propeller. An official harbour tug-boat pulled them to Sandviken and everybody was shouting “*Velkommen til Norge!*” (Welcome to Norway). After mooring the aircraft the mail was handed over to the Post Office in Bergen. It was the first airmail from the USA to Norway. They were officially welcomed by Captain Manshaus of the harbour ship and taken ashore. The crowd got more and more enthusiast and as a result one of the provisional piers started to sink. They managed to evacuate the pier, but some got wet feet.

Solberg and Oscanyon were lifted on the shoulders of the enthusiastic crowd and carried around. Suddenly, Thor Solberg saw his brother and managed to get down on the pier and shake hands with his brother, who had supported him all the way. Other

brothers and sisters joined him, but unfortunately his parents were not able to come. He immediately decided to fly to them the next day. The Chairman of the *Norsk Aero Klubb* - NAK (Norwegian Aero Club), Rolf Sundt, welcomed the crew and the NRK (Norwegian Broadcasting Company) interviewed them. After the interview they returned to the Solberg brothers and sisters and joined them for dinner. He was called to the telephone numerous times, but only one journalist was to get the story first: the well-known journalist Odd Arnesen of the Oslo newspaper *Aftenposten*. Also the New York Times office in London had been contacted for the last part of the story. He also received numerous telegrams, among them from Knut Vang (his friend in the USA). That night they went to bed at ... God knows what hour! At that moment he realised that he had concluded the first transatlantic flight from the USA to Norway. A flight that had taken 57 flying hours.

The next day they returned to the aircraft. They checked the engine, refuelled the aircraft and in the afternoon at 5 pm he departed Bergen for a flight to his parents near Florø. Four of his brothers flew along. After 45 minutes they arrived at Florø and again five minutes later they were above the farm Solberg. The local population ran to the pier, but Thor Solberg had to disappoint them as he wanted to land the aircraft as close as possible to his parent's house. An emotional meeting followed: his mother awaited them at the shores of the fjord. Neighbours rowed to the aircraft to pick them up and took them ashore. When she saw her son again after so many years, she just said: "I knew you would make it Thor, because I have prayed to God all the time". Soon his father joined them.

Vessels had come from Florø to meet their Thor Solberg, but unfortunately he had to depart for a scheduled flight to Oslo, where he was invited by the NAK. On Sunday, August 18 at 12 noon, they left Bergen for Oslo. They flew along the coast of southern Norway passing Stavanger, Kristiansand and Horten and arrived at Oslo. On board were Lars Solberg, Paul Oscanyon and of course Thor Solberg. After a four hour flight they arrived at Ingerstrand, the base of the Norwegian airline company [Widerøe's Flyveselskap AS](#). Before they landed Thor Solberg made a low-pass over Oslo and the Royal Palace.

During the NAK-dinner he received the Gold Medal of the NAK from the hands of Ole Reistad, a Norwegian celebrity. This dinner was followed by a speech in the famous *Aula* of the University of Oslo. Hundreds of people had come to hear him speak. He also visited King Haakon VII and handed over the banner of the Norwegian flag that he had taken along from the USA to Norway.

If this was not enough he was transported as guest of the Deutsche Lufthansa AG from Oslo via Göteborg (Gothenburg, Sweden) to København (Copenhagen, Denmark),

where he was guest of the Danish aero club. Again he was awarded a Gold Medal. In addition the Dutch airline company KLM – Royal Dutch Airlines invited him and transported him on one of her aircraft to Amsterdam. His two days visit to KLM included a visit to the hangars at Schiphol, the head office in The Hague and the workshops at Rotterdam/Waalhaven. The company's director Albert Plesman was certainly also interested to hear the Thor Solberg's experiences on this impressive flight.

### **Other duties**

Subsequently, the Loening Air Yacht C 2 C was registered in Norway on July 18, 1936 as LN-BAH and used for joy-ride flights from the large hotels in the Norwegian fjord area. A forced landing on the Hardanger Fjord made an end to these flights. On June 12, 1937 the registration was cancelled and the aircraft stored. In 1960 it was donated to the *Norsk Teknisk Museum* (Norwegian Technical Museum) in Oslo, where it after a restoration is currently on display.

### **Thor Solbergs Flyveselskap A/S**

Finally, worth mentioning is the Thor Solbergs Flyveselskap A/S that was formed in December 1938 by Thor Solberg. He wanted to form an airline company for the Bergen-area. Aircraft belonging to the company were the Aeronca K, LN-EAU and the Cessna C37 Airmaster, LN-FAK. The airline company performed taxi-, ambulance- and joy ride flights. The Cessna was temporary chartered to the A/S Vest-Norges Flyveselskap in Bergen that used it for taxi and joy ride flights. In 1939 latter went brook and Thor Solbergs Flyveselskap A/S took over. He stationed his aircraft in the Geiranger Fjord and started also with the transportation of goods to remote mountain lodges. At the start of the Second World War in September 1939 these flights were disrupted by the restriction laid upon civil aviation. Thor Solbergs Flyveselskap AS was allowed to continue to fly until January 1940. During this time he also flew for the Royal Norwegian Navy. From December 1938 until August 1939 the company transported 3,191 passengers. Nineteen ambulance flights were performed as well.

On April 9, 1940 (the start of the German attack on Norway) Thor Solberg was on board the NAL-steamer with a new Beechcraft D-18S (with floats). This was a low-wing, all-metal, twin-engine monoplane intended as a 6-8 passenger feeder airline transport. Surprisingly, this was a version with floats! Thor Solberg wanted to use this aircraft for a scheduled air service Bergen - Tórshavn – Reykjavik in correspondence with planned regular flights between Iceland and the USA. But he could not get back to Norway and returned to the USA where he started a training centre at his own airport, [Solberg Airport](#) at Readington, New Jersey. Here he trained thousands of airmen for the US Air Force.

After the war (on December 23, 1946) his concession was renewed and in 1950 Thor Solberg took over the exploitation of the Jarlsberg Airport near Tønsberg, south of Oslo. He started a flying school and a service centre for Cessna aircraft. During the fifties he continued to make taxi and joy ride flights and operated a number of Cessna's. He also started the assembly of ten imported Seabee's. In 1957 he changed the name of his company into Solbergfly A/S. During the summer of 1958 he operated under licence for Braathens SAFE (now known as SAS Braathens) regular air services between Oslo and Hamar and Oslo and Notodden. Beside regular flights he continued to fly mostly taxi and charter flights. Unfortunately it is out of the context of this article to write about the post-war development of the company.

This article has been compiled with the help of Malcolm Fillmore, Kay Hagby, Tim Badham, Dave Reid, Peter Vercrujisse and Vic Smith. Picture from author's archive and Kay Hagby.

(1) From the book: "Med Norge som mål", by Thor Solberg.