

OVER AFRICAN JUNGLES  
BY MARTIN JOHNSON 1935

Conrad G. Froehlich

INTRODUCTION

In the first half of the last century Martin and Osa Johnson, an American couple, captured the public's imagination through their films and books of adventure in exotic, far-away lands. From 1917-1936 they traveled to Africa, Borneo, and the South Pacific documenting the native peoples, animals, and lands they encountered as well as their own experiences.

Martin Elmer Johnson (1884-1937) described himself as a "Motion Picture Explorer." With his wife, Osa Helen Leighty (1894-1953), a crack shot and pioneer filmmaker in her own right, they produced dozens of commercial movies, lecture films, and shorts, shot more than 10,000 photographs, and wrote 20 books and over a hundred magazine articles.

The Johnsons' legacy is a record of the cultures and wildlife of many remote areas of the world which have undergone significant changes. It includes some of the earliest and best quality images of East Africa and other regions. Consequently, it is of great value to researchers, continues to be used in modern documentary programs, and inspires new fans.

Martin and Osa's expeditions included two through the South Pacific (Martin had earlier joined Jack and Charmian London on their 1907-1909 South Seas trip aboard the Snark), two to Northern Borneo, and five extended safaris across East and Central Africa. Through years of work in the field they innovated wildlife film techniques and made documentary movies superior to others of the time.

For famous explorers and documentary filmmakers such as Martin and Osa, in the 1930s utilizing airplanes became both practical and necessary to keep up with rapidly evolving technologies. However, Martin had only made his first airplane flight in October 1932 to visit his dying father.

Vern L. Carstens, manager of the Chanute Municipal Airport (now named the Chanute Martin Johnson Airport) in Osa's hometown of Chanute, Kansas took on the dual role of teaching them to fly and serving as their pilot during the famed 1933-1934 "Flying Safari" expedition. Martin and Osa became capable pilots but they knew the limits of their abilities and wisely relied on a skilled aviator to do most of the flying.

In a 1978 interview Carstens explained that when word got out the Johnsons planned to use airplanes on their next safari, they received inquiries from pilots throughout the country. Martin commented to Carstens "You know I've got a thousand applications from practically every pilot in the United States except one." Thus, he became their pilot. Carstens later served as manager of flight engineering and chief test pilot for the Beechcraft Corp.

Martin and Osa purchased two amphibian aircraft from the Sikorsky Aviation Corp. in 1932 for

\$20,000. A twin-engine S-38BS (Mfg. No. 414-20 and Registration No. NC-29V) was painted with zebra stripes and named Osa Ark and a single-engine S-39CS (Mfg. No. 914 and Registration No. NC-52V) was painted with giraffe spots and named Spirit of Africa. In a 1994 letter Igor I. Sikorsky, Jr. recalled that his earliest childhood memory was of the Johnsons' S-38 with its zebra markings.

The use of amphibians was an obvious choice due to the scarcity of airfields but abundance of lakes in Africa. Carstens supervised modifications to these amphibians for safari and film use. Another concession to the African environment was the installation of supercharged Pratt and Whitney Wasp engines to handle elevations ranging from sea-level to 18,500 feet.

The planes were flown from the Sikorsky factory at Stratford, Connecticut to the Brooklyn docks. They were hoisted on board the MS City of New York with the wings and wing floats removed. The sea voyage to Capetown, South Africa lasted from December 31, 1932 to January 23, 1933.

The Sikorsky amphibians allowed Martin and Osa to reach remote areas of East Africa without the large number of porters required in previous safaris. With a small African ground crew they were able to establish a series of basic airfields and depot sites at strategic points.

In addition to Martin, Osa, and Carstens, the American safari party included sound cameramen Arthur Sanial and Robert C. Moreno and film technician Hugh S. Davis (the long-time Tulsa Zoo director who built the iconic Blue Whale attraction on old Route 66) along with chief test pilot Boris Sergievsky (famed WWI Russian ace) and mechanic Al Moroway, both from the Sikorsky company. The latter two returned home after the planes were flown to Nairobi and tested. The Johnsons were later joined by their secretary, Helen Wauchope, née Joyce.

It is remarkable to consider that they flew over thousands of miles of unforgiving terrain with no radios or modern navigational equipment, unpredictable and changing weather conditions, unreliable maps, and, sometimes, overloaded aircraft.

## OVER AFRICAN JUNGLES

Who wrote Martin Johnson's 1935 book *Over African Jungles: The Record of a Glorious Adventure over the Big Game Country of Africa 60,000 Miles by Airplane*? To varying degrees the Johnsons' writings benefited from editors and ghostwriters. However, the Johnsons' storytelling skills indeed emanate from these books and their impact is not diminished.

A 1st edition *Over African Jungles* in the collections of the Martin and Osa Johnson Safari Museum contains a special inscription dated January 1936 from author and editor Hawthorne Daniel to his sister Meredith. Daniel writes "Here is another one of those books that I have written, but on which my name does not appear."

From 1927 to 1935 Daniel served as editor of *Natural History* magazine in addition to overseeing publications at the American Museum of Natural History. It was during this same time Martin contributed several articles for the magazine, including "Sky Trails in Africa"

(March 1933) and “Wings Over Africa” (November 1934). Daniel would certainly have known the Johnsons and been familiar with their Flying Safari. This made Daniel a natural choice.

Martin, however, was involved with *Over African Jungles*. In a March 18, 1935 letter to William “Bill” A. Steward, writer and illustrator of the *Danger Trails: True Adventures of the Famous Explorer Martin Johnson* daily newspaper comic strip, Martin wrote “...we are now traveling all over the East making personal appearances, putting last touches on my book, helping Osa with hers, doing magazines articles, preparing radio broadcasts, getting things lined up for our next safari...”

Understandably the terms and viewpoints expressed in *Over African Jungles* were written for an audience of a different generation. The intent was not to offend but modern readers may find it disconcerting. Keep this context in mind and understand it reflects another era.

*Over African Jungles* was published by Harcourt, Brace and Co. in 1935 and contained 100 of the Johnsons’ stunning pictures. Later editions reduced the number to 33. *Over African Jungles*, like other Johnson books, was translated into different languages – Czech, Dutch, Finnish, German (*Babuna*), and Polish.

The colorful *Over African Jungles* dust jacket art was created by prolific American illustrator Edward Shenton. It features a striking art deco style image of the S-38 flying over a map of Africa.

In addition to the *Natural History* articles, Martin wrote “Winging Through 60,000 Miles of the Skyways of Hell – For Thrills and Fun” for *New Dynamo*, “Baboon” Supplement (December 15, 1935) and Osa wrote “Flying Over Africa” for *Taxi-Strip*, Wichita Issue (June 1935).

Arguably the Flying Safari is the best documented of the Johnsons’ expeditions. Along with their writings, published accounts by other Flying Safari participants are Boris Sergievsky’s book *Airplanes, Women and Song: Memoirs of a Fighter Ace, Test Pilot and Adventurer* (memoirs published in 1998) and Vern Carstens’ “A Pilot on Safari,” a ten-part article series that ran in *The Sportsman Pilot* magazine, August 1935 to May 1936. Unpublished accounts include Vern Carstens’ “Flying Zebra, Soaring Giraffe” and Hugh Davis’ 293-page diary “While with Martin + Osa Johnson 1932-33.”

There are also audio interviews with Vern Carstens in 1978 and Pete Quesada “About his Safari to East Africa in 1932” in 1991. Elwood R. “Pete” Quesada (later to become a WWII General and tactical air expert) was the pilot for Dorothy “Dot” and F. Trubee Davison, president of the American Museum of Natural History. The Johnsons assisted the Davison party acquire elephant specimens for the dramatic center exhibit at the museum’s Akeley Hall of African Mammals. The Davison expedition is covered in a well-crafted 2006 documentary, titled *I Married Adventure: A Thrilling African Safari*, created by family members using Dot’s diary combined with the Davisons’ films and photos.

Additionally, Helen Wauchope was interviewed for an appearance in the 1993 “Memories of the Wild” episode of *Jack Hanna’s Animal Adventures* television series.

Among those who assisted Martin and Osa in Africa during the Flying Safari was Raymond Hook. His life is told in the 1963 book *African Zoo Man: The Life Story of Raymond Hook* by John Pollard. Unfortunately, more details were not recorded about native Africans employed by the Johnsons. This includes headman Orangi and Twarugoji or Terengosi, a Meru man who traveled to America to care for the Johnsons' animals.

Superb biographies about the Johnsons include *Exploring with Martin and Osa Johnson* (1978) by Kenhelm W. Stott, Jr, *They Married Adventure: The Wandering Lives of Martin & Osa Johnson* (1992) by Pascal James Imperato and Eleanor M. Imperato, *Osa and Martin: For the Love of Adventure* (2011) by Kelly Enright, and *Across the World with the Johnsons: Visual Culture and American Empire in the Twentieth Century* (2013) by Prue Ahrens, Lamont Lindstrom, and Fiona Paisley.

The Flying Safari was also well documented in a six-part article series "Osa and Martin Johnson's Famous Sikorsky Flying Boats" by Dave Straub that ran in the quarterly *Skyways: The Journal of the Airplane 1920-1940*, October 1998 through January 2000 (issue numbers 48-53).

These records combine to tell the incredible story of the Johnsons' final African expedition, traveling 60,000 miles by air up the length of Africa from Capetown to Cairo. Each provides unique perspectives and added stories, although details can sometimes differ.

For example, in the fall of 1933 Martin and Osa made a return visit to the Mbuti pygmies of the Ituri Forest. They previously filmed the Mbuti during their 1930-1931 "Congorilla" expedition. The Johnsons were greeted at Gombari in the Belgian Congo by 200 pygmies. Several pygmies were given a ride in the S-38. However, accounts as to the number and reactions of participants varied. In *Over African Jungles* it states there were 36 pygmies on the trip who easily identified features of their territory. While Carstens wrote in "A Pilot on Safari" that there were only six passengers who gave no sign of recognizing ground features.

## AFTERWARDS

### BABOONA

Following each expedition, the Johnsons developed a pattern of initially editing a silent lecture film. This was used during their popular nationwide appearances while a commercial movie version was being completed.

Martin and Osa arrived in New York City on August 9, 1934 aboard the new luxury liner SS Manhattan and later that year toured with their lecture film *Wings Over Africa*. With the help of Boris Sergievsky, they also used the S-38 in October to fly a baby elephant, brought back from Africa, to the St. Louis Zoo.

Osa writes about this elephant in an article, "Pantaloon, The Story of a Baby Elephant whose Birthday Suit was Too Big," that ran October 1935 in *Good Housekeeping* and is repeated in her 1939 book *Osa Johnson's Jungle Friends*. The young elephant later serves as inspiration for

Osa's 1941 children's book *Pantaloons: Adventures of a Baby Elephant*. To ghostwrite *Pantaloons* Random House hired celebrated children's author Margaret Wise Brown. The book tells a charming story of the adventures of a baby elephant in Africa with, presumably, the Johnsons and one of their planes making only a brief appearance as unnamed filmmakers.

The Johnsons along with their planes were also incorporated into various comics including "Wambi Tells About Big Game" in *Wambi, The Jungle Boy* (No.1, Spring 1942) and "Martin & Osa Johnson" by Christophe Gibelin in the French aviation magazine *Pilote* (No. 81, May-June 2020).

Importantly, in 1934 Martin and Osa Johnson became the first married couple, and Osa only the second woman, featured on a box of Wheaties. Beginning that year Wheaties put pictures of well-known people on cereal boxes to match the slogan "The Breakfast of Champions." Martin and Osa are pictured atop their S-39.

In December 1934, the Johnsons participated in a pre-release promotion of their Fox feature movie *Baboona*. Celebrated WWI "Ace of Aces" Eddie Rickenbacker was enlisted to fly an Eastern Air Lines plane around New York City while the movie was screened inflight. In the process *Baboona* became the first sound movie to be shown during flight. *Baboona* premiered January 22, 1935 at the Rialto Theatre in New York City.

Oversized movie press kits provided by Fox, and later Morro Films, to theater managers detail a myriad of ways to promote *Baboona* that included examples of ads and available lobby cards and posters. Corporate tie-ins were arranged with Coca Cola, Coleman, Gold Medal flour, Maxwell House, Shell, Winchester, and others.

*Baboona* was later re-released with the odd title *Bride of the Beast* and two silent home movie abridgements, *Flying Around the Big Game* and *Inside a Baboon Colony*, were distributed by Blackhawk Films.

Portions of *Baboona* were used in the 1940 Columbia movie *I Married Adventure*, based on Osa's number one bestselling autobiography by the same name. As an interesting side note, the zebra and giraffe paint schemes of their aircraft were used as the eye-catching cover designs of Osa's books *I Married Adventure* (1940) and *Four Years in Paradise* (1941) respectively.

In 1952 this footage was also included in the 26-episode *Osa Johnson's The Big Game Hunt*, the world's earliest television wildlife documentary series. Each episode was introduced by Osa Johnson or Ivan T. Sanderson.

Ivan's father was Arthur Buchanan Sanderson, an Edinburgh whiskey manufacturer and exceptional marksman who immigrated to Kenya. Arthur worked for the Johnsons during their 1924-1927 "Four Years in Paradise" expedition. In May 1925 Arthur was severely injured by a rhino near Lake Paradise and died a few weeks later in Nairobi. Ivan, also born in Edinburgh, Scotland, was a biologist who became well-known for his early writings about cryptozoology and UFOs.

The Library of Congress holds the largest surviving collection of Johnson film, nearly a thousand cans of safety and nitrate film, including Flying Safari footage. In the 1990s this collection was surveyed and cataloged by Johnson scholar Dick Houston. In commenting about the Johnsons' legacy Houston wrote "The aerial footage of Africa is priceless and was found in can after can. Because Africa's human population is expected to double in only 23 years, the landscape is changing drastically now month by month. In order to see what Africa's landscape once looked like in its pristine form, scholars will have to turn to the Johnson films."

## BORNEO

The Johnsons' last expedition together, August 1935 to October 1936, took them back to British North Borneo (Sabah, Malaysia) which they previously visited in 1920. With an American crew composed of pilot James Laneri and cameraman Joseph Tilton they established a base near Abia on the banks of the Kinabatangan River. Their Sikorsky S-39 amphibian, renamed "The Spirit of Africa and Borneo," was again used to facilitate travel, scouting, and the transport of supplies. The movie covering this expedition, *Borneo*, was released by Fox in 1937 and includes the dramatic capture of a full-grown male orangutan.

After their return to the U.S. Martin and Osa began a lecture tour with a program for several thousand students at the Mormon Tabernacle in Salt Lake City, Utah. On the following morning, January 12, 1937, they departed on a Boeing 247 Western Air Express flight to Burbank, California. In bad weather the pilot strayed off course and crashed in the San Gabriel Mountains. Martin died the following day from the injuries received complicated by a delayed rescue and his untreated diabetes.

Injured herself and devastated by Martin's death Osa, with the help of Tilton, bravely continued their interrupted tour from a wheelchair. After recovering she made a final trip to East Africa in 1937 to serve as a technical advisor for the filming of location scenes for the classic 1938 movie *Stanley And Livingston*.

Osa Johnson died in New York City on January 7, 1953. Martin and Osa Johnson are buried in Chanute, Kansas a few blocks from the house where she grew up.

## FATE OF S-38 & S-39

In 1937, following the Johnsons' final Borneo expedition, the S-39 was acquired by well-known used aircraft dealer Charles H. Babb. Babb purchased planes from all sources including celebrated aviators Amelia Earhart, Howard Hughes, and Wiley Post. With the approaching global war there was a need for training planes. This is likely the reason the S-39 was sold in 1939 to the Tucson flight school G&G Gilpin Air Lines.

During WWII the S-39, repainted in the blue and yellow Civil Air Patrol (CAP) colors of that era, was stationed at the Beaumont, Texas CAP base. On November 11, 1942 it was dispatched to a crash of a CAP Fairchild 24-C8F in the Gulf of Mexico. Unfortunately, the S-39 was damaged on landing in rough waters and the engine could not be restarted. It sank while being towed toward the Sabine Lighthouse by a U.S. Coast Guard vessel. Thus, ended the story of this

most recognized S-39.

The fate of the Johnsons' S-38 Osa's Ark is less certain. This plane was owned by Danny Dodge (son of industrial giant John Dodge of the Dodge Motor Co.) at the time of his mysterious drowning in Lake Huron off Manitoulin Island on August 15, 1938. The S-38 was used to aid the search and to eventually transport his body – possibly the only time an S-38 was used as a hearse.

The continuing saga of Osa's Ark was relayed by retired USAF Lt. Col. Haines Hower in a 1958 letter. Hower stated it “was purchased by Floyd Foren Flyers in Detroit just prior to World War II and sold to the Canadian Air Force a few months later.” After that, accounts state it was either destroyed in a 1941/1942 crash in Canada or damaged in Cuba in 1945. With 101 S-38s built (vs. 21 S-39s) perhaps there was an identification mistake.

A graphic novel published in 2020 in France and 2021 in Germany presents a third possibility. *Liberty Bessie – Volume 2: On the Trail of the Maylaros* is the continuation of Bessie Bates' search for her missing father, a World War II Tuskegee Airman. This leads Bessie to Tripoli where she discovers an “old seaplane,” a familiar looking zebra striped Sikorsky S-38. Bessie repairs this plane and uses it to resume her quest.

This story begins with a scene reminiscent of the first Indiana Jones movie *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. In this case two men are chased through a jungle by angry natives. They make their way down to a river and narrowly escape in the S-38. Is it possible the Indiana Jones chase scene was originally inspired by Martin and Osa's escape from the Big Nambas on the island of Malekula in 1917? Likewise for Captain Jack Sparrow being chased by natives in *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest*?

The spirit of the Johnsons' Sikorsky planes lives on! Dick Jackson restored a S-39, the giraffe spotted “Spirit of Igor,” that he salvaged in Alaska. This S-39, now owned by Kermit Weeks, is located at Weeks' Fantasy of Flight aviation facility in Polk City, Florida.

Weeks also owns a zebra striped S-38 named “Osa's Ark.” This plane, incorporating original S-38 parts, was built in 2001 by the late Buzz Kaplan and Born Again Restorations in Owatonna, Minnesota. When later owned by Tom Schrade it appeared, temporary painted silver, in the 2004 movie *The Aviator* about Howard Hughes. Weeks acquired the plane in 2012 and had it overhauled back in Owatonna.

On a smaller scale, model builders continue to scratch-build static and radio-controlled models of both Johnson planes. They provide a visually interesting but challenging project with the struts, pontoons, and paint designs. Various companies offer scale plans of the S-38 and S-39 as well as model kits.

### Paintings/Artists

The Johnsons were the namesake, inspiration and backstory for the 2006-2010 Martin + Osa clothing line and national chain of 28 Martin + Osa stores launched by American Eagle

Outfitters. References to the Johnsons' planes, including "S-38" and "NC-52V," were incorporated into clothing.

## MUSEUM

In 1961 the Martin and Osa Johnson Safari Museum was established in Osa's hometown of Chanute, Kansas to preserve the Johnsons' achievements and to encourage further research into their fields of study. It acts as the main center of the collection and distribution of information about their lives. In addition to the world's largest Johnson archive, the museum is also home to the Imperato African Gallery, Oceania Expeditions Exhibition, Stott Explorers Library, Selsor Art Gallery, and Henshall Archives.

The museum's Johnson Exhibition contains photographs and objects relating to their Flying Safari. Displayed items include Osa's flight suit, Martin's goggles, pilot licenses, maps, the "Carstens Airdrome" windsock made by Hugh Davis, and large models of the amphibians.

Located in Chanute's large and beautifully renovated Santa Fe train depot, the Safari Museum® is open to the public throughout the year. For more information about its collections, programs, newsletters, and available books and DVDs contact the museum at 111 N. Lincoln Ave., Chanute, KS 66720 or 620-431-2730. For updated information follow the museum on Facebook and visit [www.SafariMuseum.com](http://www.SafariMuseum.com).