Memories of McCook Field

Charles Otterbein Adams

Charles O. Adams, a member of the Barn Gang, is a surviving twin and author of "The 1913 Dayton Flood Twins," to be published in 2002.

McCook Field, Circa 1925

Looking out the windows of the Loggia of the Engineers Club, the view is of Riverscape and Deeds Point at a northeast angle. That view 60 years ago -- the view I had as boy -- included the the first military aviation research air field -- the busy U.S Army Signal Corp Research Air Field, called McCook Field.

In July, 1917, the Army decided to establish a "temporary" installation at the north edge of Dayton to conduct aeronautical research and development. Located within the bend of the Great Miami River, just east of Island Park, McCook Field began operations in December, 1917.

The field was named for the McCook family, prominent from Civil War days. It continued operations, including research, design, testing and construction of early Army airplanes, until its functions were transferred to the newly dedicated Wright Field, close to Huffman Miami Conservancy Dam, east of Dayton, in 1927.

One of the memories I have of McCook Field occurred in 1924. I rode my bicycle to the levee separating Island Park from McCook field. From my location on the levee, I watched the 1924 "Round the World" Army Air Force Flyers land at McCook Field on that leg of their trip around the world. Just three of the four planes that started out on this "Good Will Tour" planned by the Air Force landed here. The initial commander of the four-plane group crashed against a mountain in Alaska. Although this plane's crew survived, only the remaining three planes completed the "Round the World" trip.

These were days of open cockpit airplanes. It was a very grueling trip for all the pilots involved. But it accomplished its purpose, which was to show the world the capabilities of our American air forces and perform diplomatic chores at each stop.

My father and I were on a hilly spot on Triangle Park, overlooking McCook Field on the opposite side of the Great Miami River. We saw a strange, four-sided assembly made up of what looked like water pipes, with a vertical axis propellor at each of the four corners. When the engines were fired up, the propellors caused a great cloud of dust to rise and almost obscure the machine. It raised about three feet above the ground, then suddenly collapsed into a dusty pile of pipes. We think it was an early attempt at a helicopter

One of the structures on the grounds of McCook Field looked like a big, inverted "U". It was actually a huge sandbox, within which was a wooden propellor test stand. The propellor being tested was put through all its tests. Upon completion of the tests, the propellor was spun up to destruction. The broken pieces slammed into the sand box with loud bangs that could be heard all over the Riverdale section of Dayton. Sometimes this happened even at 3 a.m.

McCook Field was a relatively small flying field. In fact it was so small, across the top of one hanger was painted in large letters "This Field is Small - Use it All." But it was big enough to support many major flying events. In making a record high-altitude flight, one pilot reached such a high altitude that the cold air froze his eyeballs under his goggles. He had to fly around for a while at a low altitude until his eyeballs reached the lower temperature from which he could see to land his airplane.

Dad took my two sisters and me for a visit through the research buildings. In one large room were huge layout tables. They were being used to develop the folding patterns for folding parachutes to fit the packs strapped to the pilots. The folds had to be developed in such a way that the parachute would be sure to open properly when the pilot pulled the rip cord. The tables had to be big enough to lay out the cloth of the parachute and stretch out the lines attaching the parachute to the pilot's pack without tangling. This was impressive and stuck in my memory.

In 1924, the International Air Races were held at what is now known as Patterson Field, a large area east of Dayton that included Huffman Prairie, used by the Wright Brothers in their early experiments and early record flights. In 1924, it was know as Wilbur Wright Field.

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One event was a rubber-band powered, model airplane duration contest. I made a model airplane to enter this contest using a 3" diameter by 6' long aluminium tube for a body. The rubber "wind up lines" stretched inside the tube, powered the large propellor at the front of the tube. The silk-covered main wing had balsa wood ribs, 12" front to back edge, and was 40" wingtip-to-wingtip. The rudder and small back wing were of thin balsa wood.

It flew very well. Dad and I took it to Triangle Park for a last moment test before going to the contest. Unfortunately, when over a large pavilion at the park, cross air currents upended the plane and it crashed on the concrete pavement surrounding the pavilion. Dad and I went on out to the Air Show, anyway.

One closed-course race, around three pilons, used "diving, flying starts." For the diving starts, the pilots too their planes to a high altitude, descended at a steep angle to gain high speed, and pulled out of the dive just in time to pass the starting line at pilon height, close to the ground. We were horrified when the wings came off one plane half way through the diving start. The pilot, Captain Skeel, the fuselage and the engine went about 12 feet into the ground about 200 yards from where we were sitting. That was the end of diving starts

In 1927, when McCook Field functions were transferred to Wright Field, Wilbur Wright Field was renamed Patterson Field, and the entire complex became Wright Patterson Air Force Base, or WPAFB.

In 1967, a large plaque was erected to commemorate McCook Field. The plaque was placed at about the spot from which I watched the 1924 "Around the World" Army flyers land. On the plaque are shown the outline and the location of McCook Field, since now it is the site of low-income housing and commercial buildings. In 1995, some of us from the Engineers Club of Dayton attended the rededication of that plaque commemorating McCook Field.

Learn More About McCook Field

Did Mr. Adams' artricle pique your interest in the history of McCook Field, America's first site for aviation research and development? If you would like to learn more about the history of McCook Field, early aviation achievements, or just aviation history in general, visit the USAF Museum's website at http://www.wpafb.af.mil/museum/history/postwwi/mccook.htm. The museum's website is an excellent source of information for all of us aviation junkies.

In addition to the above mentioned historical web pages, an Alta Vista search turned up another nugget hidden on the internet. If you own a copy of Microsoft's Flight Simulator (FS98), you can download imagery which will let you fly into McCook Field at http://web.idirect.com/~hland/mccook/mccook.htm. A gentleman by the name of John Frum, who hails from Aurora, Ontario, Canada has built this scenery, which includes imagery of Dayton as it appeared in the 1920s!

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the Dayton Journal Herald, and RAP Magazine.

Over thelast 11 years, Mr. Patterson has published several books about aviation history, including, *Shoo Shoo Baby, A Lucky Lady of the Sky* (1989); *MUSTANG, North American P-51* (1995); *Messerschmitt Bf 109, Luftwaffe Fighter* (1997); *American Eagles, A History of the Unites States Air Force, featuring the collection of the US Air Force Museum* (1997); and many others. His publishing portfolio will soon swell again, with two publications planned for 2002: *FULL POWER, Aircraft Engines That Made History* (Spring 2002) and *The Aviation Century, A World of Change 1900 - 2000*, with Air Vice Marshal Ron Dick (Fall 2002).

How To Go

What: Technical Education Committee Lecture – *Faces From the Aviation Century*
Dan Patterson
When: March 28th, 7-8 pm
Reception Immediately Following Presentation
Where: The Engineers Club, of course!
Cost: Free and Open to the Public
Call (937) 225-7705 for more information
The Dayton Aviation Heritage Speaker Series is jointly sponsored by the Dayton Aviation National Historical Park and the Engineers Club of Dayton

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Mrs. Johnson subsequently began extensive research into the Miami Valley's aviation heritage, which lead to the writing of a book entitled: *A Field Guide to Flight: On the Aviation Trail in Dayton, Ohio*. This successful book, a revised edition published in 1996, describes more than 40 significant sites on the "Trail." A second book is currently underway which will tell the story of McCook field, the country'd first military aviation research and development center. Mary Ann remains active in Aviation Trail, Inc.

Members Help Out on i-Lab Project

Jeff Stukenborg

With funds running low, several club members are giving their generous time to help finish the lower level, including the i-Lab. I would like to thank Chuck Allport, Kevin Buchanan, Chuck Buchanan, Bill Dirkes, Fred Dudding, Mike Kohli, and Susan Seibel, who all helped spackle the walls and hang dry wall last Saturday (February 23rd). We will be continuing to work each Saturday (starting at 8:00 AM) to finish the lower level. Anyone who would like to put those hidden remodeling talents (repair, spackle, sand, paint, etc.) to work, or would like to learn, is welcome to join us. For more information contact Jeff Stukenborg at 937-455-6130 or email at jeffrey.s.stukenborg@delphiauto.com.