

Air and Space this Week

Item of the Week

THE UNITED STATES AIR FORCE AT 75

Originally appeared July 25, 2022

KEY WORDS: U.S. Air Force Air Force Academy Donald Lopez

*The military forces of the United States had been divided into the Army and the Navy since Revolutionary times. The military establishment adopted the use of first balloons, then airplanes, but did so under first the Army's jurisdiction then also the Navy's. Many organizational changes followed. WWII showed the importance of air power in both strategic and tactical operations, including the "tri-phisious" concept (land-see-air) of invasions. After the War, both services would retain an air component as part of their fundamental mission, but air power had become so important, especially in the long-range delivery of rather-large bombs, that the need for a third military service was needed and approved. President Truman signed the National Security Act of 1947 on **July 26, 1947**, seventy-five years ago this week. It created the Department of the Air Force, which oversaw the newly-created U.S. Air Force. W. Stuart Symington became the first Secretary of the Air Force on September 18, 1947, and General Carl A. Spaatz became the USAF's First Chief of Staff on September 26, 1947. I'm looking out my window at the U.S. Air Force Academy here in Colorado Springs; join with me as I wish the USAF a Happy Birthday!*

PRE-WWI MILITARY AIR

Thaddeus Lowe demonstrated the military value of hot air balloons to President Lincoln during the early part of the Civil War, on the site very close to where the National Mall Unit of the Smithsonian Institution's National Air and Space Museum now stands. Lincoln was impressed, but there was only a little use of the air in mid-1860's combat operations. Little was done in the four decades that followed (the Army purchased a grand total of 8 observation balloons).

The Army's interest in aviation began growing in 1907, when the Army Signal Corps bought two more balloons and then a small dirigible, but the first Army balloon pilots did not qualify until May, 1909.

Meanwhile, the Wright brothers built the first heavier-than-air craft, and quickly refined it to be usable in some military circumstances. The Army Signal Corps was very interested, and began working with the Wrights to test the value of the new invention. Alas, a demonstration flight piloted by Orville crashed on September 9, 1908, killing Lt. Thomas E. Selfridge, his military observer passenger; Orville was hurt badly. Neither the ASC nor the Wrights were daunted by the mishap. The Wrights improved their design and tested a second aircraft. This one the ASC

bought it, renaming it the “Airplane Number 1,” on August 2, 1909. Congress began providing modest funding, allowing the ASC to acquire 11 Wright aircraft. One was destroyed in a crash and the first went to the Smithsonian, so only 9 aircraft were available by mid-1913. They were organized and re-organized that year into the 1st Aero Squadron (the precursor for the still-extant 1st Reconnaissance Squadron).

There were a number of organizational changes and very slow growth at first. The fledgling air force had originally been placed administratively in the Army Signal Corps’ Aeronautic Section. On July 18, 1914, the Congress created an Aviation Section under the ASC, and directed it to operate and supervise all military aircraft and train officers and men in matters pertaining to aviation.

Then WWI broke out in Europe, in August, 1914.

WORLD WAR I

When WWI began, the entire Aviation Section of the ASC had a grand total of 320 officers and men. The 1st Aero Squadron had six aircraft, 12 officers, and 54 enlisted men. The U.S. would not join the War for another two years. But war clouds loomed, and the nascent air force began to grow rapidly.

The first military use of U.S. combat planes would not be in Europe, but rather came during the Punitive Expedition of 1916, where planes of the 1st Aero Squadron were used to drop small bombs on a small force led by Pancho Villa after a minor border incursion.

By 1917, the Aviation Section had grown to 24 squadrons, but only the 1st was fully-equipped and staffed. On April 6, 1917, America entered the War and headed “over there.” It took a number of months before our air units were in place, and we entered air combat in February, 1918.

A total of 740 American aircraft were assigned to the front during the 9 months that followed. They flew 150 bombing attacks, dropping a total of 138 tons of bombs. They accounted for 756 enemy aircraft and 76 balloons, but lost 289 planes and 48 balloons in return.

The Armistice ending the War to End All Wars was signed on November 11, 1918 (Armistice Day – later to be America’s Veterans Day).

BETWEEN THE WARS

Demobilization was rapid after Armistice Day, but the importance of air power as demonstrated in WWI kept aviation on the forefront of military planning, but growth, not so much. The Air Service was made a combatant arm of the Army in 1920, and its strength level was pretty much static for the decade, with one pursuit, one attack, and one bombardment group in the U.S. and smaller squadrons stationed in the Philippines and Hawaii. A major engineering department and test flight station was established at McCook Field, outside Dayton, Ohio (see also [here](#)). Flight training and technical schools were set up in different parts of the country.

The Air Corps Act of 1926 changed the name of Army's aviation unit from Air Service to Air Corps, but its mission stayed intact. By 1932, it had ~14,700 personnel and 1,709 aircraft of all types. It had two airships and two balloon squadrons. Growth and the attendant organizational changes continued until things started heating up in Europe again. By this time, the Chief of the Air Corps controlled the Army's entire air arm.

German air power had provided decisive support for Germany's annexation of the Sudetenland, Czechoslovakia, in September, 1938. FDR was already a big proponent of air power, and German successes paved the way for a big expansion of the Air Corps starting the following month (to 7000 aircraft). There was another expansion in 1939.

WORLD WAR II

This Item is about the creation of the U.S. Air Force, not the Army Air Forces' great successes in WWII. The one point that was made clear at this time was that air power was an important thing that was independent of military operations on land or the sea. The Army and the Navy should retain their own air arms to support their operations, but the strategic missions like the bombing of German and Japanese war facilities and supplies, and of carrying nuclear bombs to the enemy bespoke the need for a separate service branch.

EVOLUTION

Demobilization was rapid after V-J Day, as it had been in 1918. The Army Air Forces were downsized, and many warplanes were surplus or destroyed. But a core of competence was retained. The War Department made important changes in the Air Force structure. The existing Continental Air Force command was redesignated as the "Strategic Air Command" and some of the CAFs elements were moved to two new commands, Air Defense Command and Tactical Air Command. The AAF retained the Air Transport Command. The four main missions of any new, separate Air Force were covered: strategic, tactical, defense, and transport.

The National Security Act of 1947 was signed by President Truman on **July 26, 1947, 75 years ago this week**. It created the Department of the Air Force, headed by a civilian Secretary, and the United States Air Force, under the DAF's control, led by a new position, the Chief of Staff, USAF.

There was still a lot of inter-service rivalry, especially as new technologies came on line, but overall, the system has worked pretty well.

One important task remained – the development of a service academy for the new Service. Rumblings about the need of a school specializing in aeronautics began as early as 1918, but things didn't go far until the end of WWII and the establishment of the Air Force as a separate Service. The first step was a policy that allowed a specific number of West Point and Annapolis graduates to go to the Air Force, rather than the Army or Navy, and a number of famous pilots of the 1950s, including some of the early astronauts, did take that route. Inter-service issues prevented change, to the point where Secretary of Defense James Forrestal established a Service Academy Board advisory group. General Eisenhower was appointed to be its Chair, in

addition to his post-War post as president of Columbia University. In 1950 the SAB concluded that the two existing Service academies were inadequate for the task at hand. Congress did not take decisive action until 1954, when they passed legislation authorizing the construction of the U.S. Air Force Academy. Now-President Eisenhower signed it on April 1, 1954.

The new law named an advisory commission to select a site for the new Academy, picking a number of famous aviators as members, including Lindbergh, Spaatz, and General H.R. Harmon. They considered a total of 582 locations and came up with three finalists: Alton, Illinois; Lake Geneva, Wisconsin, and Colorado Springs, Colorado. The Secretary of the Air Force announced the winner on June 24, 1964. Land acquisition and planning began immediately, and the Air Training Command began working up an appropriate curriculum.

REFERENCES

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Military.com: <https://www.military.com/air-force-birthday/air-force-history.html>

AFA: <https://www.usafa.edu/about/history>

National Museum of the United States Air Force: <https://www.nationalmuseum.af.mil> [This is an amazing place, and their website is a great source of info!]

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DIDJA KNOW?

Much of the land on which the **U.S. Air Force Academy** would be built was called the Cathedral Ranch, owned by Lawrence B. Lehman, whose family was a major investment company (up to 2008 anyway). Other land parcels were added (139 more) making the Academy footprint almost 18,500 acres.

Long-time Deputy Director of the National Air and Space Museum was the famous WWII fighter pilot and post-War test pilot, [Donald Lopez](#). He was one of the founding faculty members of the **Air Force Academy**, and was the chief of academic counseling there, before coming to Washington to join the team that the first NASM Director, Michael Collins, had assembled to create the National Air and Space Museum. I had the pleasure of making his acquaintance

there; he was a fine gentleman and a great leader. He's gone now, but left a wonderful legacy along with two books, *Into the Teeth of the Tiger* and *Fighter Pilot Heaven: Testing the Early Jets*. I treasure my signed copies of both. Don even took me to the National Archives as his "date" for his seminar on the latter book. Through Don, I was able to meet famed WWII and test pilot "[Whitey](#)" [Feightner](#) and a number of other heroes. He also had a legendary fondness for crème brûlée! I had the honor of attending his funeral at Arlington, along with many of my NASM colleagues. [Donald Lopez](#) is sorely missed.

Last Edited on 23 July 2022