Lincoln Beachey landing at the Vancouver Barracks, 19 September, 1905.
American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics

Historic Aerospace Site

Pearson Field
Vancouver, Washington
On the morning of September 19th, 1905, an odd-shaped, bulbous object lifted off from the banks of Guild’s Lake, in Portland Oregon, flew over the Columbia River, and 40 minutes later landed at Vancouver Barracks, in Vancouver, Washington. The Gelatine, as it was named (because it was sponsored by the Knox Gelatine Company), was an Army Signal Corps blimp that had just made the first controlled flight in the Pacific Northwest. Piloted by Lincoln Beachey, the Gelatine set an endurance record, and because it carried a letter from a Fair official to the Barracks commander, it also marked the first time an airship was used to deliver a letter.

One hundred years before, Meriwether Clark and William Lewis had led the Corps of Discovery through the Pacific Northwest Wilderness and had camped over the winter of 1805 in what was now Astoria, Oregon. To mark the anniversary of their achievements, Oregon staged the Lewis and Clark Centennial American Pacific Exposition and Oriental Fair from June to October of 1905. Part of the purpose of the fair was to showcase modern technology, and the Gelatine proved an exciting example of advances in air travel. The rich heritage of aviation in the Pacific Northwest can be traced to the successful completion of the airship journey to Vancouver Barracks, setting the tone for many eventful years to come, with the Vancouver Barracks site often playing a central role.

After Lewis and Clark's exploration, the U.S. and Britain spent many years disputing the territory of what is now Washington and Oregon. After the Treaty of 1846 established the boundary between the U.S. and Canada, the U.S. began establishing a military presence in the Pacific Northwest, and in 1850 built Columbia Barracks, later called Fort Vancouver after an earlier fort built...
nearby by the Hudson’s Bay Company. Fort Vancouver served as the main military headquarters in the area, and during the Civil War, detachments of the 1st Washington Territory Infantry Volunteers and 1st Oregon Cavalry were stationed there. In 1866, most of the fort burned down in a large fire. The Army rebuilt the fort, and in 1879 renamed it Vancouver Barracks. It was used for ammunition storage, a blacksmith shop, and gardens, and later became popular as a polo field.

The field at Vancouver Barracks was officially recognized as an “aviation camp” by the U.S. Army in 1911, and became a base for the fledgling U.S. Army Air Service. On June 15, 1911, Vancouverite Charles “Fred” Walsh made the first fixed-wing flight from the polo grounds in his “Curtiss pusher” – so called because the engine and propeller were situated behind the pilot’s seat.

Silas Christofferson was also setting records that year at Vancouver’s flying field. He was first to carry passengers there, and in returning to California, established altitude and single-day distance records.

On 9 June 1912, in conjunction with Portland’s Rose Festival, Christofferson flew off a ramp built above the rooftop of the Multnomah Hotel in downtown Portland, and landed at the aviation camp in Vancouver. It was the first airplane flight ever from the roof of a building. His flight to Portland was also the first airplane flight from Washington into Oregon across the Columbia River.

And in August of that year, Walter Edwards carried the first U.S. Post Office sanctioned airmail between two states: Washington and Oregon. The facility also welcomed Glenn Curtiss, who held an air circus at the site.

During World War One, the U.S. Army Signal Corps converted land to the west of the airfield into the largest spruce milling operation in the world, to provide the War Department and U.S. allies with spruce for airplane construction. An average day at the Vancouver Barracks mill produced half a million feet of lumber – enough to build three hundred airplanes.

In the first four years after WWI, the army air service focused primarily on practical applications of flight – aerial mapping and, in cooperation with the Forest Service, fire spotting in the vast Pacific wilderness.

Starting in 1923, the airport played a key role in the development of U.S. air power and general aviation in the Pacific Northwest. In 1924 Lieutenant Oakley Kelly was transferred to Vancouver Barracks to command the new 321st Reserve Observation Squadron and expand the role of both military and civilian aviation. Lt. Kelly, one of the crew members of the first non-stop crossing of the continental U.S., was instrumental in the development of the field as a major airport and U.S. Army Air Base. What began as the polo field for Vancouver Barracks evolved by the mid-1920s into one of the premier Army Air Corps installations on the West Coast, largely through Kelly’s efforts.
On September 28th, 1924, the airfield became an intermediate stop on the final 240-mile leg of the Army’s epic Douglas World Cruisers’ round-the-world flight. The DWCs had landed at the airfield five months earlier on the way to Seattle to begin their journey. After nearly six months and 27,000 miles of flight, two of the four original aircraft completed the world record flight.

In 1924, John Gilbert Rankin, known by almost everyone as “Tex,” moved his well-known flying school to Vancouver Barracks. Rankin, a famous aviator of the time, was known both as a world record aerobatic champion and flight instructor. At one time his students numbered over 400, the most of any aviation school in the world. One of Rankin’s instructors was Elrey Jeppesen, who is probably best known for his “Jepp Charts,” which remain the worldwide standard for instrument navigation to this day.

The army renamed Vancouver Barracks Aerodrome as Pearson Field on
September 16th, 1925, in honor of Lieutenant Alexander Pearson Jr., who was killed while preparing for an air race the year before. Pearson had been a prominent figure in the Army Air Service, and set the land speed record in 1923.

Pearson Field also helped give rise to a major U.S. airline. In 1926, Vern Gorst, the owner of Pacific Air Transport, applied for and won Contract Air Mail Route 8 in January, 1926. He based his company at Pearson Field because the nearby city of Portland, Oregon, did not have a suitable airport at that time. Pacific Air Transport carried the mail, and then passengers, up and down the West Coast for two years, until it merged with Boeing Air Transport. The Pacific and Boeing partnership later merged with Varney Air Lines and National Air Transport to form United Airlines.

In 1929 a Tupolev ANT-4, *Land of the Soviets*, made a stop at Pearson Field during its historic goodwill flight from Moscow to New York. After a pioneering flight across the Soviet Union, and then across Alaska, the plane reached Washington State. By that point, however, the airplane was experiencing mechanical difficulties, and Pearson Field was selected as the ideal place to conduct repair work, given its military pedigree and its ability to limit the crowds around the airplane as repairs took place. The plane successfully departed the next day for San Francisco, before heading eastward to complete its journey to New York.

In 1929 Lieutenant Carlton Bond took command of the 321st Observation Squadron at Pearson Field, serving until 1933, in what became the first of his two assignments to Pearson (he commanded it again in the late 1930s). His tenure was marked by rapid expansion of commercial operations on the field, which was accompanied by much political intrigue between Vancouver, Washington and its neighbor across the Columbia River, Portland, Oregon. The dispute concerned the future of commercial aviation operations in the area, and ultimately led to the decline of Chamber of Commerce Field, as Pearson's civilian sector on the east end was called. Although it had become the region's premier
commercial airfield, it found itself unable to compete with big money interests bent on luring airmail contracts and other lucrative businesses to Portland’s new Swan Island Airport.

Pearson Field continued to make history, however. At 8:22 on the morning of June 20th, 1937, a transpolar flight by three courageous Russians brought worldwide attention to Vancouver and Pearson Field. Their giant single-engine ANT-25, Stalin’s Route, touched down at Pearson Field more than two and a half days – 63 hours and 16 minutes – after departing from a small airfield near Moscow. The landing at Pearson Field marked the first non-stop flight over the North Pole and helped pave the way for future transpolar flights.

Somewhat ironically, the historic nonstop transpolar flight landed at Pearson Field, as had the Moscow-to-New York goodwill flight eight years earlier, due to mechanical difficulties. Once again, Pearson Field had the facilities and personnel to resolve the problems.

The commanding officer of Vancouver Barracks from 1936 to 1938 served as the official escort of the Russian crew during their stopover. That officer, Brigadier General George C. Marshall, helped ease tensions, and also helped promote Soviet and American cooperation during World War II. During the war, General Marshall was one of nine in the U.S. military who were promoted to Five-Star rank.

With U.S. Involvement in WWII,
the army imposed a military zone all along the west coast. Private flying was prohibited except for civil air patrol and commercial flights. The field was used as a staging area for the Seattle Port of Embarkation, and had billeting space for 250 officers and 7,295 enlisted persons. Italian prisoners of war were billeted at one time in one of the old hangars.

After WWII, Vancouver Barracks became a sub-installation of Fort Lewis and maintained a small contingency of active duty troops. The majority of billeting space was transformed into military offices and became home for Army Reserve and Washington National Guard troops during this time as well. The installation remained the oldest military installation in continual operation west of the Mississippi river, until it closed in 2011. It was declared a U.S. National Historic site in 1961. It’s airport facilities continue to operate today, making it one of the oldest operating airports in the country, and it is the only working airport to operate completely inside a National Historic Preserve.

References


THE AIAA HISTORIC AEROSPACE SITES PROGRAM

For over 75 years, the American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics (AIAA) has served as the principal society of the aerospace engineer and scientist. Formed in 1963 through a merger of the American Rocket Society (ARS) and the Institute of the Aerospace Sciences (IAS), the purpose was, and still is, “to advance the arts, sciences, and technology of aeronautics and astronautics, and to promote the professionalism of those engaged in these pursuits.” Today, AIAA has more than 35,000 individual members worldwide, and more than 90 corporate members.

In addition, AIAA sponsors many technical conferences, seminars, and short courses per year, and publishes Aerospace America, the AIAA Student Journal, and seven archival technical journals. The Institute also publishes conference papers and proceedings, technology assessments, position papers, many books, and a variety of career-related educational materials. The Institute conducts a rigorous public policy program and works closely with other societies and with governments in broad areas of mutual concern.

AIAA established the Historic Aerospace Sites Program in January 2000 to promote the preservation of and to disseminate information about significant accomplishments made in the aerospace profession. In addition to Pearson Field, among the many other sites recognized by the committee are the NASA Langley Research Center; the Travelair Manufacturing Company in Wichita; Oakland Municipal Airport; and the site of the first balloon launch in Annonay, France.

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