Photo courtesy of the Humphreys Collection, CPAM

Wilbur Wright and 1st Lt. Frederick Humphreys ready for takeoff at College Park Airport in 1909.

The College Park Century

At this airport in 1909, Wilbur Wright taught the first two military pilots to solo.

By Peter Grier

In the early summer months of 1909, 1st Lt. Frank P. Lahm often floated over the Washington, D.C., area in a balloon, looking for a suitable place to establish a military airfield. He saw a number of possible locations, but one in particular intrigued him.

It was a large, flat parcel of land in the town of College Park, Md., just north of the capital. It was next to the tracks of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, making it easy to get supplies to the site, which was large enough to provide lodging for personnel.

The deal was done. On Aug. 25, 1909, the US Army signed a lease for 160 acres there, at a rate of $200 a month. Trees were felled, a well and pump installed, and a shed built. By Oct. 6, the Army's first new airplane, purchased from Orville and Wilbur Wright, had arrived via wagon.

Thus was born College Park Airport, the oldest continually operating airfield in the world. This fall marks its centennial. Tucked inside the Washington Beltway, near a busy urban subway line, it is still in use for civilian general aviation.

A century ago, it was ready for a first step in aviation: the training of military pilots. "In a lot of ways, this really is the birthplace of military aviation," says Warren Kasper, program curator at the College Park Aviation Museum.

At this airport in 1909, Wilbur Wright taught the first two military pilots to solo. In 1911, College Park was the military home for initial aerial reconnaissance and bombing tests. In 1912 1st Lt. (later General of the Air Force) Henry H. "Hap" Arnold set an altitude record while flying from the base.

Lahm's fame was such that the Army had assigned him to help oversee acceptance trials for the US military's first airplane. This was easy duty: The young cavalry officer was a noted US aeronaut, having won the inaugural Gordon Bennett Cup—a balloon race from France to England—three years earlier.

The military trials had begun in September 1908, but the original location—the parade ground at Ft. Myer, Va.—was cramped and the fort's commanding of-

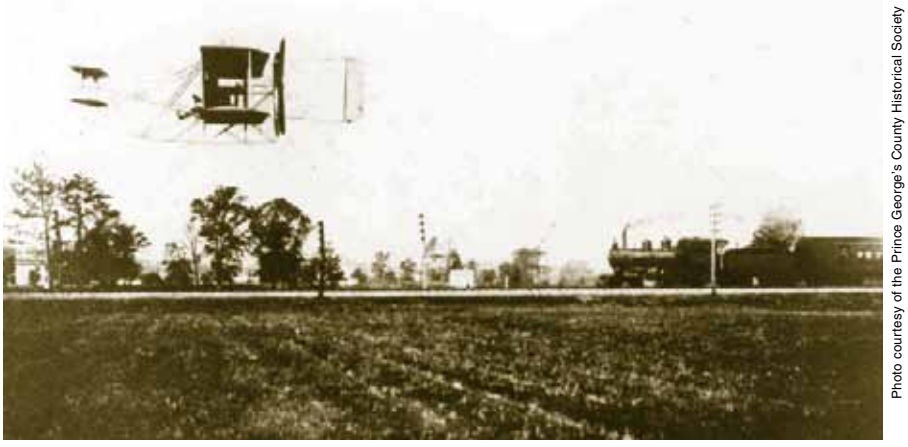

Photo courtesy of the Prince George's County Historical Society

A Wright Military Flyer races a train at the College Park Airport in 1909.

ficer was not happy about the situation. So Lahm went out ballooning, looking for a better field, and at length settled on College Park.

The age of flight had just begun. On Aug. 2, 1909, the Army officially accepted delivery of its first airplane, following a Wright brothers demonstration at Ft. Myer. But there was another item in the Wright contract with the military: training. The Wrights were obligated to teach two officers to fly the delicate pusher-prop biplane.

Lahm was an obvious choice for one of these slots. Initially, the second spot was to go to 1st Lt. Benjamin D. Foulois, who, like Lahm, was a member of the Army's Aeronautical Board and an outspoken advocate for aircraft. In September 1909, however, Foulois suddenly was ordered to attend an international aeronautical conference in France. He was replaced by yet another Aeronautical Board member, 1st Lt. Frederick E. Humphreys.

Ten enlisted men were also assigned to the field. Some had helped out with the Wright trials at Ft. Myer; others had previously been assigned to balloon units. They lived in the new field's shed, with the aircraft. During down times, they were required to practice telegraphy.

The officers, plus Wilbur Wright, stayed in private homes across the railroad tracks, in College Park proper, home of what is now the University of Maryland.

On Oct. 7, 1909, Wilbur Wright unpacked the airplane from its crates, and reassembled it in the presence of his students, according to an Air Force Historical Foundation account. Just after five in the evening, Wright asked Lahm to crank up the engine. On the eighth attempt, the power plant sputtered to life. Further instruction was put off to the next day.

On Oct. 8, crowds began to arrive via carriages and autos. In those days, College Park was distant from Washington, but not distant enough. Brig. Gen. James Allen, chief of the Signal Corps, arrived for the occasion. Weather was ideal, and at about 3:30 p.m., Wright climbed aboard the aircraft, launched it down its starting monorail, and took off.

He circled the field for a few minutes, then landed. Satisfied with the aircraft's performance, he asked Lahm to join him, and they flew to an altitude of about 150 feet, returning after five minutes. Wright then took Humphreys up.

"And it was with these simple activities ... that the College Park Aviation School was opened," states the Air Force Historical Foundation.

Photo via College Park Aviation Museum

An aerial photograph of College Park Airport taken in 1929, when it was used to test radio navigation aids. The airport's remote location was part of its original appeal.

Throughout October, Wilbur Wright and his pupils flew nearly every day except Sundays. Flights typically began before 7 a.m., or in late afternoon, after the day's breezes had died down. The flights were short, with the student pilots taking over for the calmer portions.

On Oct. 19, five minutes into a flight and with Lahm at the controls, the engine suddenly died. Wright took over, and calmly guided the airplane to a graceful landing. Thinking the problem might be a balky magneto, Wright tinkered with the engine for hours, but could find nothing wrong. Finally, at the end of the day, he opened the gas tank and discovered that the airplane had simply run out of fuel.

A Popular Spectacle

"The joke is on me, boys," he said, according to news reports of the era. "The bird won't fly without gasoline."

Crowds continued to be a problem. On at least one occasion, spectators dashing across the field during landing came within a hair of causing a terrible accident. Given the novelty of flight, reporters were in constant attendance. By Oct. 26, the day on which both Lahm and Humphreys were scheduled to solo, hundreds of people were gathered around the edges of the field.

Humphreys went first, simply because it was his turn. At 8:15 a.m., he took off, circled the area, and made a perfect landing, hurdling a tree stump as he did so.

"I suppose I ought to congratulate you, but it is such a matter of course," said Wright.

Lahm followed, flying for about 12 minutes. Neither pilot rose above 30 feet, but it was the beginning of independent US military flight.

As winter approached, the flying year was drawing to a close. Foulois returned from Paris, and also received some instruction, but did not have enough time to solo. The Wright contract with the government was completed, but Wilbur made two last flights on Nov. 2. That would be the last time he ever flew in public, and among the last times he would ever pilot an aircraft at all. In subsequent years, Wilbur Wright spent much of his time fighting to protect the brothers' patents. He died of typhoid in 1912.

After November 1909, military flight did not return to College Park for two years. Key members of Congress had been skeptical about the military utility of flight, and of the Army's ability to manage the development of flying machines. In 1910, Congress denied the Army's request for an additional $200,000 for aircraft operations.

But by the fall of 1910, the Army's Wright aircraft, Signal Corps No. 1, was worn and weary. Flight technology had advanced. And on March 3, 1911, Congress appropriated $125,000 for Army aviation.

The Army bought five new aircraft—and sent their original machine back to the Wrights, for refurbishment and eventual display at the Smithsonian.

Now the Signal Corps needed a site for a larger aviation school. College Park was nearby and ready. It was another historic moment for military aviation.

"At the time, they were really organizing what they were planning to do with airplanes, and where they would fit into the military," says Kasper of the aviation museum.

This time, the Army leased a larger plot of land—200 acres along the B&O line. Four hangars housed the Army's new

Photo via College Park Aviation Museum

A parasol wing aircraft on the runway in 1960. The field is still open for civilian general aviation, but security concerns since 9/11 have slowed traffic considerably.

airplanes—two Wright Bs, two Curtiss types, and one Burgess-Wright. They were maintained by enlisted mechanics in a detachment which grew to 39 personnel by the end of the year.

Among the first group of instructors was a young second lieutenant named Hap Arnold.

The Curtiss aircraft were not powerful enough to carry more than one person, so students learned via the "grass-hop" method. Students first taxied the aircraft from one end of the field to the other. Then, using increasing amounts of power, they hopped up for quick flights, learning takeoffs, landings, and turns in the process.

The Wright aircraft had dual controls and more power. Instructors took pilots aloft, letting them get the feel of the controls and making wide turns until they were deemed ready for a solo.

When throttled back for landing, the Wright engines leaked gas, which was caught by a metal pan under the wing.

"Since in about 50 percent of the landings the dripping gas caught on fire, ground crews or 'volunteers' had to stand by with firefighting equipment," notes an Office of Air Force History study.

By this time, officers were billeted in Washington. They had to arise early to make it to College Park for 6:30 a.m. takeoffs. In the long summer twilight, evening flights could stretch to 8:30 p.m.

In the fall of 1911, the Army conducted a number of experiments at College Park that produced aviation firsts. Pilots photographed the airport from an altitude of 600 feet, inaugurating the era of aerial photography. They tried out methods of signaling via puffs of smoke discharged by compressed air, in an early test of what became skywriting. They dropped practice bombs into on-base goldfish ponds.

When the school packed up and moved to Augusta, Ga., for winter training, a number of civilian flight organizations and nascent aeroplane companies moved onto the field. The civilians never left, and College Park Airport was born.

Military flying resumed there in April 1912. On June 1, Arnold set a new altitude record of 6,450 feet. A week later, the Army made its first try at firing a machine gun from an aircraft: Two pilots took off in a Wright B with a low-recoil Lewis automatic weapon resting on the airplane's crossbar footrest. They flew over a 6 foot by 7 foot cheesecloth target three times, at an altitude of 250 feet. They made five hits. The next day, with a better target, they did even better, with 14 hits out of 44 shots fired.

Imaginery Air Battles

"Though these experiments made good newspaper copy, a General Staff officer made it clear to reporters that airplanes were suitable only for reconnaissance and that thoughts of air battles were purely the produce of the young fliers' 'fertile imaginations,'" says the Office of Air Force History.

By November, the Signal Corps had eight aircraft of various types at College Park, along with one civilian mechanic, 39 enlisted men, and 14 flying officers. With winter weather approaching, the school was split, with the Curtiss aircraft, pilots, and mechanics sent to San Diego to work with Glenn H. Curtiss at his school. The Wright Bs, with their personnel, returned to Augusta.

The next spring, Congress considered legislation to buy the College Park site, but the head of the Signal Corps recommended against it. The Army's lease expired on June 30, 1913.

"By 1913, the Army was out of business at College Park," says Kasper.

The College Park Airport itself continued as a thriving private air hub as the aircraft industry developed. In 1918, the Post Office Department launched air mail service from the field. In the 1920s, vertical flight pioneer Emile Berliner experimented with helicopter designs there.

In the late 1920s and early 1930s, the National Bureau of Standards used it as a field site to test new radio navigation aids.

From 1927 until 1959, the airfield was run by George Brinckerhoff, who hosted air shows and taught hundreds of civilians how to fly at his own flying school.

The Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission bought the airfield in 1973, following an effort by supporters to save one of the nation's most historic aviation sites. The College Park Aviation Museum, opened in 1998, is an affiliate of the Smithsonian.

Today the 70 acres of College Park Airport and the College Park Aviation Museum often ring with the sounds of children—summer camp or school groups on organized visits. They, and adult visitors, can see a restored 1919 airmail hangar and the directional compass rose built into the field. They can visit the museum's 27,000-square-foot building, just off the runway, and view a replica of a Wright Model B, a Curtiss JN-4D Jenny, and a Berliner helicopter—a pioneering vertical flight craft flown at College Park in the 1920s.

For decades, College Park was the Washington area's primary general aviation airport, and its runway reverberated with landings and takeoffs of Cessnas, Pipers, and Ercoupes.

The runway still is in use, but traffic is "much slower" than just a few years ago, according to curator Kasper.

Sept. 11, 2001 was a fault line in the history of College Park Airport.

College Park is inside Washington's protected airspace. Pilots must now undergo a background check before they can use the airfield. Their airplanes must carry transponders, and they must receive government permission to come and go.

Ironically, an airfield once chosen for its distance from Washington is, a century later, damaged by the fact that it is now too close to the Capitol, White House, and other centers of US government power. ■

Peter Grier, a Washington editor for the Christian Science Monitor, *is a longtime defense correspondent and a contributing editor to* Air Force *Magazine. His most recent article, "Russia on the Rebound?" appeared in the August issue.*