

117th ARW the Early Years: World War I to Roberts Field

TEAM TALK AUGUST 2011 8

By Capt. Lisa Weaver

117th ARW Executive Officer

When World War I began, the military saw little use for aircraft in warfare. Airpower was limited to reconnaissance and, late in the war, rudimentary bombing. Aerial combat was extremely rare and, early in the war, often involved throwing rocks, bricks, grenades, or firing handheld pistols at enemy aircraft. Typically, enemy pilots simply saluted each other and went about their business. Mid-war, the “synchronization gear” was introduced. This allowed machine guns fire between the propeller blades and, hopefully, strike the enemy aircraft rather than the aircraft firing the weapon. The U.S. was woefully behind the times in aviation development by the time we entered the war in 1917. Nevertheless, American pilots, many of them volunteers, made names for themselves overseas, including Eddie Rickenbacker, Frederick Libby, Frank Luke Jr., and James Meissner.

Airpower had come a long way in the 16 years since Orville Wright lay prone on his engine-powered glider and made the first heavier-than-air, 12 second, 120 foot flight. At the end of World War I, powered flight remained a novelty and the usefulness of airpower to the military was considered limited at best. Returning from Europe and finishing his engineering degree at Cornell University, Major James Meissner found employment with Tennessee Coal & Iron in Birmingham, Alabama. In late 1919, Major Meissner and Henry Badham created the Birmingham Flying Club. Nicknamed the “Birmingham Escadrille”, after the famed American volunteer Lafayette Escadrille, it would be home to 11 American aces of World War I. The Birmingham Escadrille was comprised of about a dozen World War I aviators and aimed, among other things, to promote aviation in Birmingham and the State of Alabama. Major Meissner, however, immediately began promoting federal recognition of the Birmingham Flying Club as part of the Alabama National Guard. Partnering with Colonel Hartley A. Moon, the Adjutant General of Alabama, and using his fame as a World War I ace to overcome public opinion that did not, at the time, look favorably upon the National Guard, Meissner and Moon successfully convinced the War Department to establish the seventh air unit of the National Guard in the United States. On 21 January 1922, the Birmingham Flying Club was organized as the 135th Observation Squadron, Alabama National Guard, with seven Curtiss JN-4Ds, or “Jennys” and an authorized manning of 26 officers and 120 enlisted men under the command of Major Meissner.

Within the first two years of existence, the 135th Observation Squadron changed names twice: first to the 114th Observation Squadron and again, on 1 January 1924, to the 106th Observation Squadron. The early years were challenging. Land was donated for what would become Roberts Field. Steel was salvaged from old wartime hangars to build new hangars. Birmingham citizens donated money to defray construction expenses. Squadron members even returned their pay to the squadron to defray costs and supplied much of the labor themselves. In the first few years of operation, while constructing the facilities at Roberts Field, the Squadron participated in mine rescue work, began a program of providing aerial

photographs of points of industrial and historical interest throughout Alabama, and provided the first Air Mail service in the State of Alabama.

By 1929, the Squadron had transitioned from Major Meissner to W.V.M. Robertson, Jr., and then to Lt. Col. Sumpter Smith. Under the command of Lt. Col. Smith in 1929, the Squadron rendered its “greatest service to the State of Alabama” when the entire Squadron was ordered to active duty for flood relief in south Alabama. Twenty-five officers and 100 men participated for 14 days and nights, flying a total of approximately 300 hours dropping food and medicine to marooned families. The airdrop of supplies was among the first of its kind in aviation history.

By 1930, the facilities at Roberts Field were long-since declared inadequate by numerous inspectors, but the Squadron did not have the funds to move. A steady campaign of publicity and pressure on legislative and local government was maintained until the decision was made to build new facilities for the 106th Observation Squadron at the Birmingham Municipal Airport as part of the government works project in 1934. When Colonel Smith moved up to the 31st Division, command of the Squadron passed to Henry Badham, Jr., one of the founding members of the Birmingham Flying Club. On 16 January 1936, James Meissner, the father of the Alabama Air National Guard, died from pneumonia. The city held a memorial service involving a flyover by the planes of the unit he founded and his old friend and former World War I wingman, Eddie Rickenbacker, returned to Birmingham to be an honorary pall-bearer. Major Meissner is buried at Arlington National Cemetery.

It took nearly four years to complete the construction of the new home of the 106th Observation Squadron at the Birmingham Municipal Airport, but in 1938 the Squadron was finally able to move into its new quarters. Eventually, the base was named after the colonel who helped ensure its construction, Colonel Sumpter Smith.

Sources: “31st Division Aviation, Alabama Air National Guard (106th Observation Squadron)”, *Air Corps News Letter*, Vol XIX, No. 10, May 15, 1936

“James Armand Meissner”, Arlington National Cemetery, ww.arlingtoncemetery.net [15 July 2011]

“Jennys to Jets 1919-1969: Alabama ANG Celebrates Golden Anniversary,” *Tactical Air Reconnaissance*

Digest, Vol 3, No. 2, May 1969