

James Armand Meissner

By Staff Sergeant Matt Scales



On the cold North Carolina morning of December 17, 1903, Wilbur Wright became the first man in the world to fly in a heavier than air powered machine. Flying for a total of twelve seconds and covering a mere 120 feet, Wilbur and his brother Orville had finally conquered a mystery that had been eluding man for centuries.¹ Military application of the new technology was slow in arriving however. One of the largest reasons for this hesitation was the military's prior experience with unsuccessful attempts at flying. The U.S. Army helped fund aviation pioneer Samuel P. Langley's efforts to invent the first airplane, but found their \$50,000 investment a waste when Langley crashed his attempt at an aircraft into the Potomac River in Washington D.C.² It was this kind of uncertainty that would cause the U.S. Government to initially turn down the offer from the Wright brothers to buy their newly invented aircraft.³ In the true spirit of Washington, it took a special interest group to finally convince the Army to take a chance on the airplane. The president of the Aero Club of America talked his brother, Congressman Herbert Parsons, into convincing the Taft administration to purchase airplanes from the Wright brothers. This idea worked and in June of 1909, the Army took delivery of its very first airplane.⁴ The majority of military leaders were still reluctant to spend too much money on the development of aircraft or the exploration of military uses for the new technology. It would take a major world conflict to convince them otherwise. World War One had caused Europeans to commit large sums of money to aeronautical development both technically and tactically. It was this same war that would lead a young man from Nova Scotia, Canada named James Meissner to learn the new art of flying and eventually become a major promoter of this new and exciting technology. Taking knowledge and skill he learned from one of the greatest pilots in World War One, James Meissner moved to Birmingham, fostered Birmingham's

fascination with aviation, and overcame obstacles to create one of the first Air National Guard Units in the United States.

The son of a U.S. Steel board member, James Armand Meissner was born on July 30, 1896 in Loudoudery, Novia Scotia on the east coast of Canada. After graduating from Brooklyn New York's Erasmus High School in 1914, Meissner enrolled at Cornell University. Majoring in engineering, Meissner was a Private First Class in Cornell's Cadet Corps and a member of the Sigma Phi Epsilon fraternity.⁵ The drums of war were beating louder than ever and on April 6, 1917 President Woodrow Wilson requested a declaration of war against Germany from Congress. They granted this declaration and the United States entered the war the next day.⁶ With this declaration came a flood of volunteers to go "over there" and fight the troops of Kaiser Wilhelm. James Meissner was no exception. Dropping out of Cornell, Meissner enlisted in the Army Signal Service (the branch of the Army then tasked with flying) as a Private First Class on May 28, 1917.⁷ After enlisting, Meissner's military career moved quickly. Meissner entered the United States Army School of Military Aeronautics on July 14, 1917.⁸ About a week after beginning this initial pilot training, Private First Class Meissner boarded a ship for France where he, like many other American Pilots in the First World War, continued his training under French military instructors.⁹ After completing his flight training in Tours, France, Meissner was commissioned as a First Lieutenant on November 20, 1917.¹⁰ Three months after receiving his commission, Lieutenant Meissner's military career would take a turn that would change his life forever.

On March 8, 1918, Lieutenant James Meissner reported to Major John Huffer, commander of the 94th Pursuit Squadron.¹¹ Known as the "Hat in the Ring Squadron", the 94th was the first entirely American unit to fly a fighter patrol.¹² Two days before Meissner arrived at

the unit, another young Lieutenant by the name of Eddie Rickenbacker reported to the 94th.¹³ Lieutenant Rickenbacker would go on to be the highest scoring American ace of the war, shooting down a grand total of twenty-six enemy aircraft.¹⁴ In addition to these new pilots, the 94th was also made up of veteran American pilots that had flown with the French before America entered the war. Named the Lafayette Escadrille, the squadron was made up entirely of American pilots along with two French officers.¹⁵ It was in the 94th that Meissner put his training to the test and proved himself as a pilot. On May 2, 1918, while flying the French-made Nieuport 28, Meissner won his first aerial kill. This action earned him his first Distinguished Service Crosses (D.S.C.), one of the highest honors bestowed by the U.S. Military. Lieutenant Meissner's D.S.C. citation reads:

The Distinguished Service Cross is presented to James A. Meissner, First Lieutenant (Air Service), U.S. Army Air Service, for extraordinary heroism in action in the Toul Sector on May 2, 1918. First Lieutenant Meissner attacked three enemy planes at an altitude of 4,800 meters over the Foret De La Rappe, France. After a short fight, he brought down one of the machines in flames. During the combat, the entering wedge and the covering of the upper wings of Lt. Meissner's plane were torn away and after the battle he was subjected to heavy fire from anti-aircraft batteries, but by skilful operation and cool judgment, he succeeded in making a landing within the American lines.¹⁶

On May 15, the French too showed their appreciation for Meissner's exploits on this mission when they awarded him their medal for bravery, known as the Croix de Guerre.¹⁷ About two weeks later on May 30, James Meissner won a second Distinguished Service Cross when he shot one plane down and "forced the other back into its own territory"¹⁸ Meissner would gain another two kills to his credit before the Army Air Service realized that a man with his skill and

knowledge needed to be placed in a leadership position. In July of 1918, Meissner was made the commander of the 147th Pursuit Squadron.¹⁹ With this squadron, Meissner began flying the improved French built Spad XIII fighter and would use it to claim another four kills (including one balloon).²⁰ While Meissner and Rickenbacker were shooting down Germans, another aviation group was also helping to end the war “to end all wars”.

The 106th Observation Squadron was organized at Kelly Field in San Antonio, Texas on August 27, 1917. Training at Kelly Field in the art of artillery observation, the new squadron moved to Garden City, New York on November 4 before boarding the ship R.M.S. *Tunisian* for Europe on December 7.²¹ Arriving at St. Maixent, France on January 2, 1918, the unit helped repair and maintain aircraft while assigned to artillery aerial observation schools. On February 1, 1918, the unit was redesignated the 800th Observation Squadron. Continuing its mission with aerial observation schools, the squadron moved across France including Champ de Tir de Souge, Camp de Coetquidan, Morbihan, Camp de Meucon, Morbihan, and Le Valdahon before returning to the United States and being demobilized at Mitchel Field, New York.²² This would not be the end of the 800th however. After the war, the observation squadron would once again come to life and continue to serve its country this time as part of the first Air National Guard units in the United States.

After the Great War ended in Europe, James Miessner returned to the United States and was discharged from the Army on March 25, 1919, having reached the rank of Major just five months before at the age of 22. Shortly after returning to the States, he returned to Cornell University and received his Masters Degree in Engineering in 1919. This same year, Meissner moved to Birmingham and began working as a rail mill for Tennessee Coal and Iron, a job he

presumably got through his dad's connections with U.S. Steel.²³ Shortly after his arrival, Meissner began to try and bring his love of flying to the Magic City.

Aviation was nothing new to the city of Birmingham. The first airplane had been brought to the city in 1909 when E.T. Odum brought one to the Alabama State fair. Interestingly, it was an employee of the Wright brothers by the name of Phil Parmalee that actually became the first pilot to fly over the city. This first introduction of aircraft with the city led to annual air shows. These air shows had a profound effect on the young people of Birmingham. In the words of aviation historian Dr. Donald Dodd, "Inspired ... some of the city's adventuresome youth entered the army's air service in 1917, served valiantly in the skies over Europe, and emerged as skilled aviators".²⁴ One such example was Second Lieutenant William Terry Badham. Flying with the 91st Aero Squadron, Lt. Badham became one of the first American aviators to perform a daylight bombing mission. When James Meissner arrived in the city in 1919 he found it to have only one airport, Dixie Field. A small grass strip east of Elmwood Cemetery, Dixie Field had been opened earlier in the year by the state's Adjutant General, Virgil Evans.²⁵ Meissner decided to help grow the city's love for aviation by creating a new flying club at a new location. The Alabama Air National Guard was about to be born.

Late in 1919, James Meissner along with Henry Badham created the Birmingham Flying Club.²⁶ Nicknaming it after the original French unit, the founding members called it the "Birmingham Escadrille".²⁷ Additionally, the club began to look for its own airfield to use. Their search ended when a steel company in Birmingham agreed to lease the club a tract of land by one of their furnaces in Ensley.²⁸ The proximity to the furnaces provided a benefit to the club as the hot iron provided a bright landmark for pilots to find the field.²⁹ Simply starting a flying club was not enough for Meissner however. The war hero from New York wanted to continue to

serve his country and his new state so shortly after forming the club, Meissner set out to get it formally recognized (and therefore funded) by the federal government as an air service unit of the National Guard.

The process of gaining Federal recognition for the “Birmingham Escadrille” was not easy. National Guard units at the turn of the twentieth century were not looked upon favorably due in large part to events such as the Homestead strike and other labor disputes that were broken up by National Guard units.³⁰ Meissner used his fame as a World War One ace (the equivalent of a major celebrity at the time) to help overcome this hindrance.³¹ Another obstacle for Meissner and his club was that the Federal Government worried that once they provided funds and aircraft to the Guard the unit would then use the new resources for commercial gain. The Adjutant General of Alabama, Colonel Hartley A. Moon in a letter to Congressman Almon assured the representative that while the unit would allow commercial use of their field (as it would not be federally controlled) they would not commercialize the actual unit itself.³² Yet another setback for the fledgling flying club was the simple fact that at the time, the National Guard did not have many air service units. The first state with an air arm of its National Guard was New York. Created by Captain Raynal Cawthorne Bolling and the state’s Adjutant General, Major General John O’Ryan, the New York Air National Guard was created in 1915 and according to historian Dr. Charles J. Gross, actually “became an important source of pilots and air leaders during World War I.”³³ Meissner and Colonel Moon, along with other members of the flying club finally overcame all of the setbacks and on January 21, 1922, officials in the War Department organized the 135th Observation Squadron, and allotted it to the state of Alabama.³⁴ Placing the unit under the command of Major James Meissner, the new observation squadron

became the very first Air National Guard Unit in the state of Alabama and only the seventh such unit in the United States.³⁵

Upon receiving federal recognition, the new air services unit immediately began work on its new field. The majority of work was being done by the men themselves. They worked tirelessly to complete the leveling of the field and building of hangars in preparation for the delivery of their first aircraft.³⁶ Status as a National Guard unit immediately showed its advantages as the unit began to make improvements to its new facilities. Just one example of this is a requisition for a tractor to aid the unit in leveling its new landing field. Through the efforts of the Adjutant General, the unit was able to secure a ten ton tractor from Camp Jackson, South Carolina.³⁷ With such efforts complete, the newly activated 135th Observation Squadron took delivery of five Curtiss JN-H4 and three Curtiss JN-6HG1 “Jenny” aircraft on June 21, 1922.³⁸ They named their new field Roberts Field after Lieutenant Arthur Meredith Roberts, a Birmingham native that was killed in France during the war.³⁹

With all of the work of gaining federal recognition and construction on Roberts Field complete, the unit immediately began training for their new mission as a U.S. Army Observation Squadron. Weekend drills for the unit included training on the customs and courtesies of the U.S. Army as well as calisthenics and the performance of different sections general duties.⁴⁰ The state of Alabama tried to get the new unit to perform a number of different missions for the state but was denied by the Militia Bureau. These missions included spraying cotton crops with herbicides to control the boll-weevil, making aerial photographs to obtain crop statistics and aerial photographs in support of the state’s Highway Department. All three of these missions were considered either commercial or deemed to be the responsibility of other state departments.⁴¹ For an unknown reason, the Militia Bureau did allow the new unit to photograph the city of

Birmingham to aid the city in creating a map. According to Lt. Irving St. John, the process of photographing the city was a slow one due to the smog that covered the city.⁴² One mission that the unit performed early in its history, and still performs today, is that of public relations flights and attendance at air shows. An example of this comes in a letter from Colonel Moon to Captain William Robertson of the 135th ordering him to fly a plane to Bellamy, Alabama in an effort to promote the still young technology of aviation.⁴³ Yet another example of this came when the unit attended the Pulitzer Air Races in St. Louis, Missouri in October of 1923.⁴⁴

The 135th continued to grow throughout the early 20th century. On May 1, 1923, the squadron was redesignated the 114th Observation Squadron followed by a second redesignation on January 16, 1924 when the squadron became the 106 Observation Squadron.⁴⁵ The unit faced a sad day on January 16, 1936 when “Jimmie” Meissner, the father of the Alabama Air National Guard died from pneumonia. The city held a memorial service including a flyover by the planes of the unit he had founded. Additionally, his old friend and brother in arms Eddie Rickenbacker returned to Birmingham to be an honorary pall-bearer for his old wingman. The Major was reported to have been buried with full military honors in Arlington National Cemetery in Arlington, Virginia.⁴⁶ Shortly after Meissner’s death, the 800th Observation Squadron was consolidated with the 106th giving the young Air National Guard unit an official World War One heritage to go along with the service that so many of its pilots had seen early in their career.⁴⁷

The unit left its facilities at Roberts Field in 1938 and moved to the Birmingham Municipal Airport where it remains today.⁴⁸ On November 25, 1940, the 106th Observation Squadron was ordered to active service and began participating in training maneuvers.⁴⁹ The squadron was still on active duty when the Second World War began on December 7, 1941 and approximately a week after the attacks, the squadron was ordered to Miami, Florida to begin

performing anti-submarine patrols over the Atlantic Ocean. This mission continued until the 1st of September, 1942 when the squadron began training for a new mission as a bomb squadron.⁵⁰ The squadron's name changed to reflect this new mission on April 2, 1943 when the unit became known as the 106th Reconnaissance Squadron (Bombardment).⁵¹ The newly named squadron finally got its chance to take the fight to the enemy and avenge the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor when on October 15, 1943 the squadron departed its home at Chatham Field in Savannah, Georgia and flew to the tiny island of Guadalcanal where it arrived on November 15.⁵² It took its B-25 Mitchell bombers to the Philippines where they flew missions with the 42nd Bombardment Group under Colonel "Light Horse" Harry Wilson.⁵³

Later, on April 19, 1961, pilots from the renamed 106th Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron flew B-26 bombers in air support missions for the ill-fated Bay of Pigs Invasion of Cuba.⁵⁴ The unit continued to grow and change through the years changing aircraft numerous times in its history. In 1994, the unit took delivery of nine KC-135R refueling aircraft and was re-designated the 106th Air Refueling Squadron of the 117th Air Refueling Wing, a mission that it continues to this day. A support unit that served its country in the First World War combined with a hero of the same war and overcame obstacles everywhere from government bureaucracies and negative public opinion to the hands of time and major world conflicts to become the unit it is today whose motto Major Meissner would be proud to know is accurate: "World Class, Worldwide."



Eastman Meissner Rickenbacker Chambers Taylor

Endnotes

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- ³ *Ibid.*, 17.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 19.
- ⁵ Lester D. Gardner, ed., *Who's Who in American Aeronautics 2nd Edition 1925* (Floyd Clymer Publications, 1925), 48; War Department Militia Bureau Form No. 108 "Officer's Personal History and Medical Record". Department of Archives and Manuscripts, Birmingham Public Library, Birmingham, Alabama.
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- ⁷ War Department Militia Bureau Form No. 108 "Officer's Personal History and Medical Record". Department of Archives and Manuscripts, Birmingham Public Library, Birmingham, Alabama.
- ⁸ Plaque of James Armand Meissner. Alabama Aviation Hall of Fame located at the Southern Museum of Flight, Birmingham, Alabama.
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- ¹⁰ Plaque of James Armand Meissner. Alabama Aviation Hall of Fame located at the Southern Museum of Flight, Birmingham, Alabama.
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