
Early Black Flyers of Western Pennsylvania, 1906-1945

by George Edward Barbour

THE year — 1906; the date — Tuesday, July 3, and throughout the Pittsburgh area, residents and officials prepared for what was to be the most grand, glorious, and exciting Fourth of July in the city's history. Earlier, Mayor George W. Guthrie had been pessimistic, but now he officially touted the festivities, urging not only city residents but those of outlying areas to attend. The coordinator of the event, J. W. Clark, Director of Public Works, never doubted. He knew the program would be great; his goal was to make it the greatest. All the traditional features were in place. What he needed was the new, the nontraditional, and what could better point to America's great future than a flying machine piloted by a daring young man?¹

One aeronautical hero, Lincoln Beachey, already was in Pittsburgh. He was at nearby Luna Park after seven successful airship flights at Ingersoll's Scranton Luna Park. Beachey, however, was without an airship; he planned to build one at the park for a series of flights later that summer. Clark did want an airship, but on the eve of the Fourth, he announced two balloon ascensions. Both aeronauts would be women who would rise several hundred feet and then parachute to earth. All that was needed was favorable weather, since forecasts predicted the contrary.²

Despite brief morning showers, thousands were on hand for the official opening — "America" played by the Pittsburgh Holcomb's Band. After a prayer and speeches, the skies started to clear, but a hitch developed in another key area of the day's program. The giant balloon was at Schenley Oval, but there was no balloonist. The two

This article is respectfully dedicated to the memory of the Challenger crew, including Dr. Ronald E. McNair, the second black astronaut in space.

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1 Pittsburgh Press, July 1, 1906; Pittsburgh Post-Gazette-Times, July 3, 1906.

2 Pittsburgh Post-Gazette-Times, Pittsburgh Press, July 3, 1906.

women aeronauts were absent, as was their substitute, a man later identified as a well-known actor who apparently lost his nerve after volunteering to ride the balloon for travel fare to New York City.³

Nevertheless, as stirring notes from the band ended the opening program, the sky was blue, and the promoter had a daredevil — a black aeronaut. The balloonist was announced as Ajax Montmorency, but only an hour earlier he had been a laborer named Jackson.⁴ It is unknown why he volunteered, but soon he was in the air with thousands of eyes focused on him as he dangled from the giant hot-air balloon.

The first flight was to five hundred feet from which Montmorency “gracefully dropped to earth with the parachute.” Originally, only two ascensions were scheduled, but more were made. Montmorency’s second flight was at one o’clock, and descent was made from two hundred feet. A three o’clock flight was cancelled when the balloon malfunctioned, but “at about 4 o’clock the dramatic climax was reached,” reported the *Pittsburgh Post*.

This time the balloon slowly ascended with its black passenger clinging to a horizontal bar. . . . Thousands of upturned faces followed the course of the balloon and watched expectantly for the parachute to drop. But the balloon only soared higher. Interest turned to surprise and then surprise turned to fright as the whole top heavy outfit soared and soared and soared. . . . The last many watching eyes saw was something that looked about the size of an apple with a tiny object dangling from it. Many believed the balloonist’s trip would end fatally, and all manner of calculations were made on the probable result. . . .

Some hours later, outfit and aeronaut landed safely at Nine Mile Run.⁵

The estimated seventy thousand people at the celebration apparently had never witnessed such excitement. The *Pittsburgh Press* and *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette-Times* described the flight as “sensational.” The *Gazette-Times* headlined, “Amateur Aeronaut Is Lost In Clouds . . . Unable to Release Parachute, He Sails from Schenley Park and Lands in Creek.” The report read, “Sensational aerial navigation by an amateur negro aeronaut was an exciting event in Schenley Park yesterday afternoon with spectators horror-stricken as they saw the speck representing the balloon drift slowly towards Homestead.”⁶

Montmorency/Jackson’s exciting balloon ride placed a black aeronaut in the limelight for the first time. Although it was pure showman-

3 *Pittsburgh Press*, July 5, 1906.

4 *Ibid.*

5 *Pittsburgh Post*, July 5, 1906.

6 *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette-Times*, July 5, 1906.

ship rather than commitment to flight, his performance anticipated later aerial achievements by blacks.

From Montmorency's flight in 1906 until World War II, no other Western Pennsylvania black who took to the air received comparable coverage and headlines in daily newspapers. Generally, blacks were headlined only when they committed major crimes against whites; their other activities were not cited in the Afro-American notes which the dailies carried twice weekly or in black periodicals. However, black men *were* in the air, and the novelty of poor black men in a field dominated by comparatively well-to-do whites was enough to provide occasional features.

One of these featured black flyers was Charles Wesley Peters of Pittsburgh's Hill District, who in 1911 was identified as "the only colored aviator in the world." A story in the September 26, 1911, Pittsburgh *Dispatch* was headed: "Negro Aviator To Fly . . . Pittsburgher will Entertain Colored Fair in Georgia."

One of the features of the Colored Fair, which will be held in November, will be the presence of the only colored aviator in the world. President R. R. Wright of the Fair Association announced tonight that a contract had been signed with Wesley Peters of Pittsburgh, Pa., a negro, to give exhibitions in an aeroplane each day while the fair is in progress.

Negroes all over the State are interested in the announcement. Peters will be as much a hero among the negroes during fair week as Johnson was after his fight with Jeffries. This is the first time the negroes of Georgia have ever attempted a fair of Statewide significance.⁷

Charles Wesley Peters was the first black to pilot a heavier-than-air craft and the first black designer and builder of an airplane. He was born in Virginia in 1889, the second son of John and Jemima Peters who migrated to North Carolina and then to Pittsburgh when Charles was about four years old.⁸

At the turn of the century, young Peters, like Wilbur and Orville Wright, was fascinated by newspaper and magazine stories of early aeronauts and their aeronautical achievements. He admired the successes of pioneers like Samuel Pierpont Langley of Pittsburgh's Allegheny Observatory, the Frenchman Louis Blériot, the first to pilot an airplane across the English channel, and Otto Lilienthal, a German engineer whose glider flights inspired other experimenters. By the time of the Wright brothers' famous flight in 1903, Peters, an apparent fourteen-year-old genius, had conducted many experiments with box

⁷ Pittsburgh *Dispatch*, Sept. 26, 1911.

⁸ Thirteenth Census of the United States, 1910, ed. 312: 135.

kites, gliders, and other winged devices which he built in his spare time.⁹

A French flight enthusiast, Louis Pierre Mouillard, once wrote, "If there be a domineering tyrant thought, it is the conception that the problem of flight may be solved by man. When once this idea has invaded the brain, it possesses it exclusively."¹⁰ This observation characterized Peters, who, after working fourteen hours at an auto body repair shop, would go to his workplace and cut and stretch canvas for many more hours. He persisted despite humiliations. Many in his neighborhood viewed him as insane. He continued until 1906, when he thought he had what he had dreamed and worked for — a man-carrying glider. With continued help from his wife and two friends, he transported the contraption to the Herron Hill reservoir for a launching. All went well as Peters glided the airship one hundred yards down the steep hillside for a safe landing.

The new and exciting world of flight was now open to Peters. In between subsequent flights, he even allowed those who had ridiculed him earlier to share in his triumph, charging admission so that curiosity seekers could see his flying machine resting in its glory in a vacant lot. He began work toward a real airplane — a craft with a motor that would be capable of sustained flight. His blueprint called for an air-cooled automobile engine which he stripped and reconditioned. The plane had a 40-foot wing span. He made ten twelve-minute flights and, as with his earlier glider, displayed it for a fee. Peters' first plane was destroyed by fire.¹¹ However, he built another which he used for the Georgia exhibition. It is unclear whether it actually flew. According to the December 16, 1911, *Savannah Tribune*, the "Fifth Annual Georgia State Negro Fair was a big success in Macon . . ." and "C. Wesley Peters, the negro aviator, held out for a cash advance about \$3000 more than originally contracted. . . ." It added that the colored balloonist F. H. Bradford "failed to show."¹²

As novelties, airplanes and aeronauts caught the imagination of thousands. In the Western Pennsylvania area, record numbers attended airshows where the nation's most daring pilots excited them with their exploits. Magazines and newspapers reported on intrepid young flyers like Western Pennsylvanian Calbraith P. Rodgers who on No-

⁹ *Pittsburgh Courier*, Feb. 21, 1941.

¹⁰ Valerie Moolman, et al., *The Epic of Flight: The Road to Kitty Hawk* (Alexandria, Va., 1980), 111.

¹¹ *Pittsburgh Courier*, Feb. 21, 1941.

¹² *Savannah [Ga.] Tribune*, Dec. 16, 1911.

vember 6, 1911, completed the first transcontinental flight of a heavier-than-air craft. Rodgers' success was an exciting story of many narrow escapes. The route began at Middletown, N.Y., included numerous stops such as one in Meadville, and ended in Los Angeles after Rodgers flew through a mountain pass with cliffs on both sides. About two months after this flight, Rodgers was killed when his plane crashed in the Pacific. His heroics were not forgotten, and Pittsburgh's first airport near Aspinwall was named in his honor.¹³

Like other fads, airshow excitement began to wane just before World War I as reports from Europe demonstrated the belligerent nations' war aviation preparations. When war erupted, the air experiments continued on the battlefield. The fatality rate among flyers was very high, but despite the low survival rate, recruits came in huge numbers.¹⁴

There were no Western Pennsylvania blacks among them because the fledgling air corps barred black flyers. In fact, the only known black flyer during World War I was Eugene Bullard. Bullard, originally of Georgia, hating discrimination and segregation, left the United States and went to France before the war started. He joined the French Foreign Legion and, when the call went out, volunteered and was sworn into France's flying corps, the Lafayette Escadrille. He was known as the "Black Swallow of Death," who flew with a monkey as a companion. After the war, Bullard stayed in France until returning to the United States in the 1950s.¹⁵

As white World War I air veterans returned to Western Pennsylvania, a number were able to buy planes similar to those they flew in the service. Curtiss JN-1 Jennies and other aircraft were soon zooming over local cow pastures, racetracks, and fairgrounds with passengers who, for a dollar or two, could experience a once-in-a-lifetime thrill.¹⁶ Men, women, and children of various races prayed for some way to get into the skies. Among the blacks who were able to turn their dreams to fly into realities were James Lincoln Holt ("Jimmie") Peck of Stoops Ferry, near Sewickley, and Charles Vincent ("Chubby") Proctor of Hollidaysburg, near Altoona.

13 William F. Trimble, *High Frontier: A History of Aeronautics in Pennsylvania* (Pittsburgh, 1982), 67; Suri Fleisher and Arlen Keylin, *Flight as Reported by the New York Times* (New York, 1947), 8, 9.

14 James J. Hudson, *Hostile Skies: A Combat History of the American Air Service in World War I* (Syracuse, N.Y., 1968), 3-10, 26, 35, 96, 97, 113-15, 299.

15 P. J. Carisella and James W. Ryan, *The Black Swallow of Death* (Boston, 1972).

16 Trimble, *High Frontier*, 116, 118-20.

A member of a socially prominent Western Pennsylvania family, Peck had been mesmerized by the World War I Jennies taking off and landing on a little grass strip near the railroad tracks and the Ohio River at Leetsdale. Although he practically lived at the field, Peck did not make his first flight there. That came on a similar field in Fremont, Ohio, while he was visiting a cousin; it forever convinced him that he was going to be an aviator. Peck's visits to the Leetsdale airfield ended when his family moved to Pittsburgh but his dream of flying did not. It persisted during his attendance at Westinghouse and Peabody high schools, where he was a better-than-average student and trap drummer; it was with him when his parents insisted in 1930 that he enter the University of Pittsburgh. The dream finally overwhelmed him, and at the end of his sophomore year, he enrolled in the Curtiss-Wright Flying School operated by H. R. ("Hal") Bazley at Bettis Field in West Mifflin.

Peck's instructors soon recognized him as one of the school's outstanding students. One day, Bazley called him into his office. He complimented Peck on his superb airmanship and told him that he was ready to pass the flying test and get his license. However, the federal flight examiner at Bettis would not pass him because he thought blacks should not be allowed to fly. He would flunk Peck regardless of his skills. As a friend, Bazley suggested Peck transfer to a school in Cleveland, the Cleveland Institute of Aeronautics, where he was sure Peck would be judged solely on his flying ability. Peck agreed, and Bazley arranged the transfer. Within a short time, Peck was flying out of Cleveland with a pilot's certificate. Ambitious for a future in flying, Peck decided to join the U.S. Army Air Corps, only to be turned down because of race. He attempted to enlist in the U.S. Naval Air Service and was refused again.

These denials and a portion of Peck's subsequent life have resulted in a historical controversy. Unable to fly for the military, Peck took a job as a drummer with Alphonso Trent's Victor Recording Orchestra and toured the country from 1931 to 1935. During that time, he flew occasionally and continued to study. In 1936, he returned to aviation, doing substantial research. He began to write and had his first article published in *Aero Digest* early in 1937. In August of that year, he reportedly sailed for Spain with thirty other Americans who had enlisted to fight for the Spanish government during that country's civil war. Peck said that as a lieutenant pursuit pilot, he flew and fought for four months and, in the process, shot down five enemy planes and was given half credit for another, thus becoming an ace. After the war, the

American Aces Society recognized Peck and hung his picture in its hall of honor in San Diego.

Allen Herr, in an article in the fall 1978 issue of the *American Aviation Historical Society Journal*, quoted Spanish Civil War flyer "Chang" Selles that "James Peck's service as a fighter pilot in Spain was utterly impossible." In an earlier article, Herr had said that stories written by and about Peck are fraught with errors and cannot be corroborated by any known Spanish or American source on aviation in the Spanish Civil War.¹⁷ Peck has calmly reasserted his claim.

There can be no corroborative evidence of Peck's flying service in Spain: his side lost the war and its records. However, there is ample documentation of his later life and accomplishments. In the late 1930s and early 1940s, he established himself as an authority in the field of aviation journalism, writing numerous articles for technical and popular magazines. His first full-length book, *Armies With Wings*, published in 1940, was heralded throughout the flying community. The *Boston Transcript* said Peck had written "one of the better books on wartime flying," and added, "If you want to know what an air force is and how it fights, here is a book to tell you." Peck's second book, *So You're Going to Fly*, was published in 1941. Among his many magazine articles were those in *Harper's*, *Look*, and *Popular Science Monthly*. After World War II, Peck was hired by TRW's space engineering team for whom he worked until his retirement in Los Angeles.¹⁸

Like Peck, Charles Vincent ("Chubby") Proctor was hooked on flying by the post-World War I flying craze. His early hero was a war veteran named Wilbur Stultz who later piloted Amelia Earhart. Proctor was born September 6, 1906, in Hollidaysburg, and at the age of fourteen was so obsessed with flying that he sent to New York for an instruction book on building a glider. At that time, auto racing rivaled Proctor's dream of flying. He stood stricken in a nearby garage watching Stultz, his brother-in-law, and a neighbor build and test race cars. The men respected Proctor's desire to learn, and one day Stultz allowed the boy to follow him to a pasture on the edge of town where he saw one of those airplanes he had long dreamed of — a World War

17 *Current Biography* 3 (Aug. 2, 1942): 40-42; telephone interview of James Lincoln Holt Peck by George Barbour, Jan. 13, 1984; Allen Herr, "American Pilots in the Spanish Civil War—Addendum," *American Aviation Historical Society Journal* 23 (Fall 1978): 235; Allen Herr, "American Pilots in the Spanish Civil War," *American Aviation Historical Society Journal* 22 (Fall 1977).

18 *Current Biography* 3; Peck interview, Jan. 13, 1984.

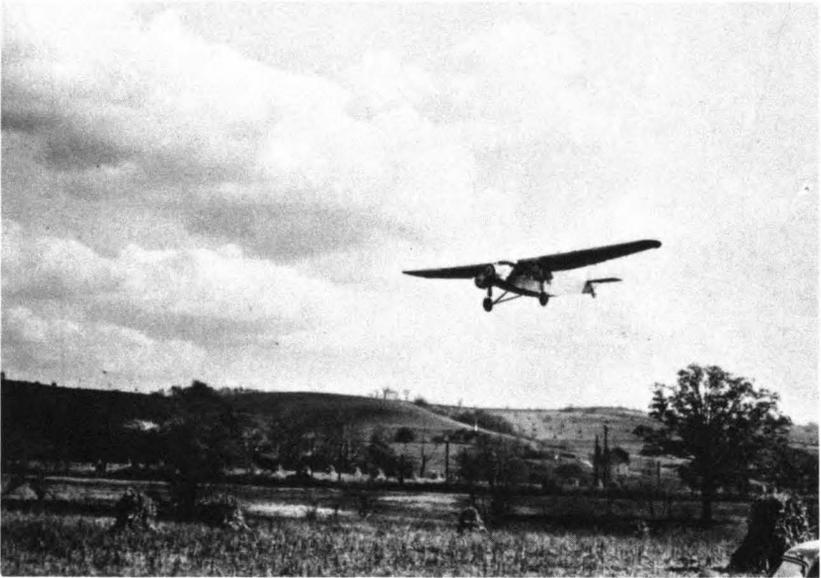
I Jenny. An Altoona businessman had bought the plane to “hop” passengers — take them on sightseeing trips for a fee. Needing an experienced pilot, he had hired Stultz.

Business was usually good, but one slow day, Stultz turned to young Proctor and asked if he wanted to fly. Proctor was stunned by the prospect of flying at last, but soon was in the front seat of the biplane rumbling down the field and into the air. Not only did Stultz give the teenager a ride but also his first flying lesson. Proctor knew that with the help of his idol, some day he would be able to solo himself. Stultz, however, was lured to Long Island. An American firm had begun to import German Fokker trimotored transports and needed a test pilot. One of their customers was Amelia Earhart, who hired Stultz as her pilot. Stultz flew her plane across the Atlantic in 1928. He was later killed in a crash on Long Island and his body was returned to his hometown. Proctor recalled that Earhart flew to the local airstrip, attended the funeral, and then later flew a salute to her former teacher, friend, and pilot.¹⁹

Although serious about flying, Proctor was unable to pursue it actively until 1935 when, as a barber in Canonsburg, he was able to scrape up enough money and time to take lessons at Butler-Graham Airport under Carl Litzenberger and Ken Beech. He followed with more lessons at New Alexandria from black flying instructor George Allen, and at Mayer Field in Bridgeville, where he soloed under Robert Foley.

Proctor wanted more time in the air but faced the major obstacle for black flyers — money. There were other roadblocks for blacks at that time, especially racial discrimination, but this was apparently minimal at flying fields in Western Pennsylvania. The only requirements seemed to be the desire to fly, normal coordination, and the means to pay for flying lessons. Because of the cost, Proctor and other black pilots hoped to turn to military flying. Like Peck, he was shocked to learn that the United States government had no provisions for training black aviators. Many federal officials believed that blacks could not fly and should not have the opportunity to try. When World War II broke out, Proctor found himself too old to join the Tuskegee Experiment, the country’s program for an all-black fighter squadron, and of the wrong race to become an army artillery spotter pilot. He did serve in the war, but not as a pilot. After the war, he and Raymond Jackson of Sharon (who owned his own airplane) flew a number of

¹⁹ Interview of Charles Vincent Proctor by George Barbour, Cleveland, Ohio, Apr. 28, 1984.



Ford Tri-Motor preparing to land at Meadowlands Field near Washington, Pennsylvania, 1938 (Courtesy Charles Proctor)



"Chubby" Proctor and Ford Tri-Motor, Meadowlands Field (Courtesy Charles Proctor)



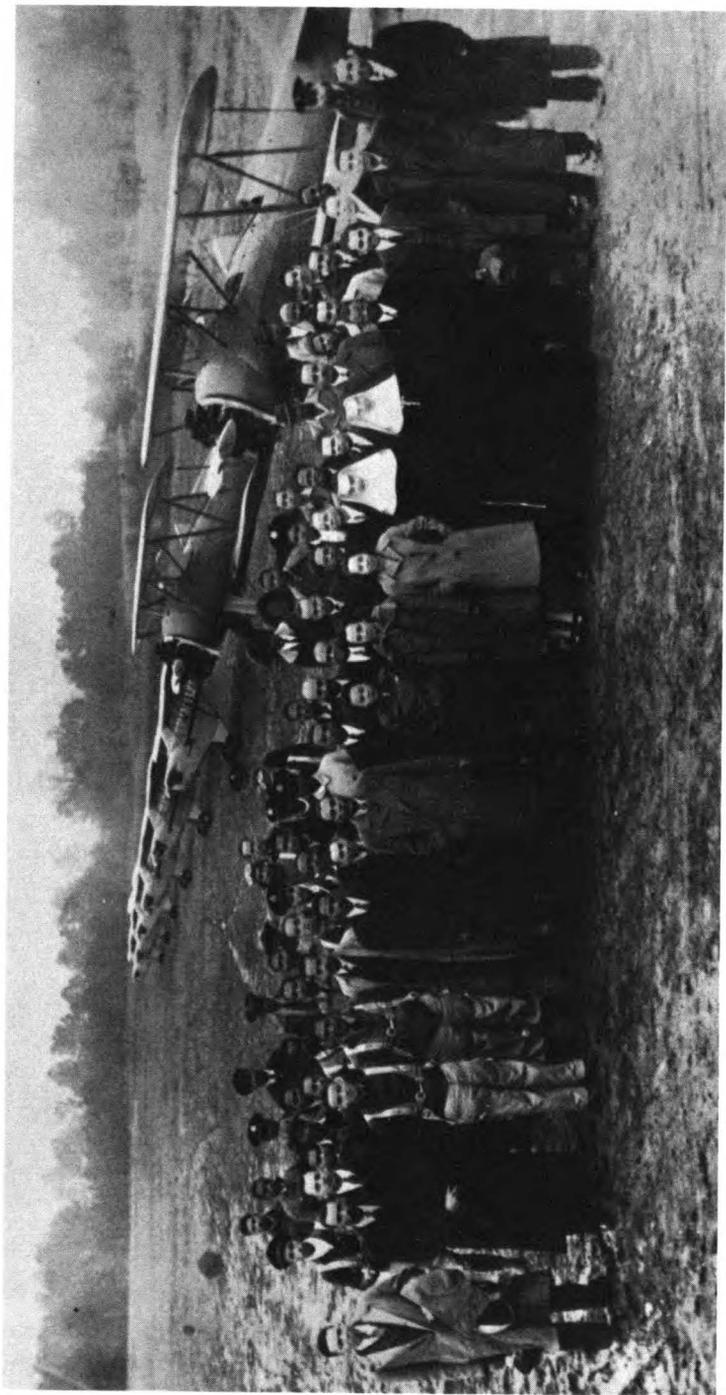
Charles Vincent ("Chubby") Proctor and his Kinner-Bird biplane, New Alexandria Airport, 1930s (Courtesy Charles Proctor)



Raymond Jackson and "Chubby" Proctor with Jackson's Piper Super Cub (Courtesy Charles Proctor)



George Allen with a training plane, Tuskegee Army Air Base
(Courtesy George Allen)



Staff of the Civilian Pilot Training Program, Tuskegee, Alabama. Two biwinged Stearmans and six Piper J-3s are in the background. George Allen is fourth from the left, front row. (Courtesy George Allen)



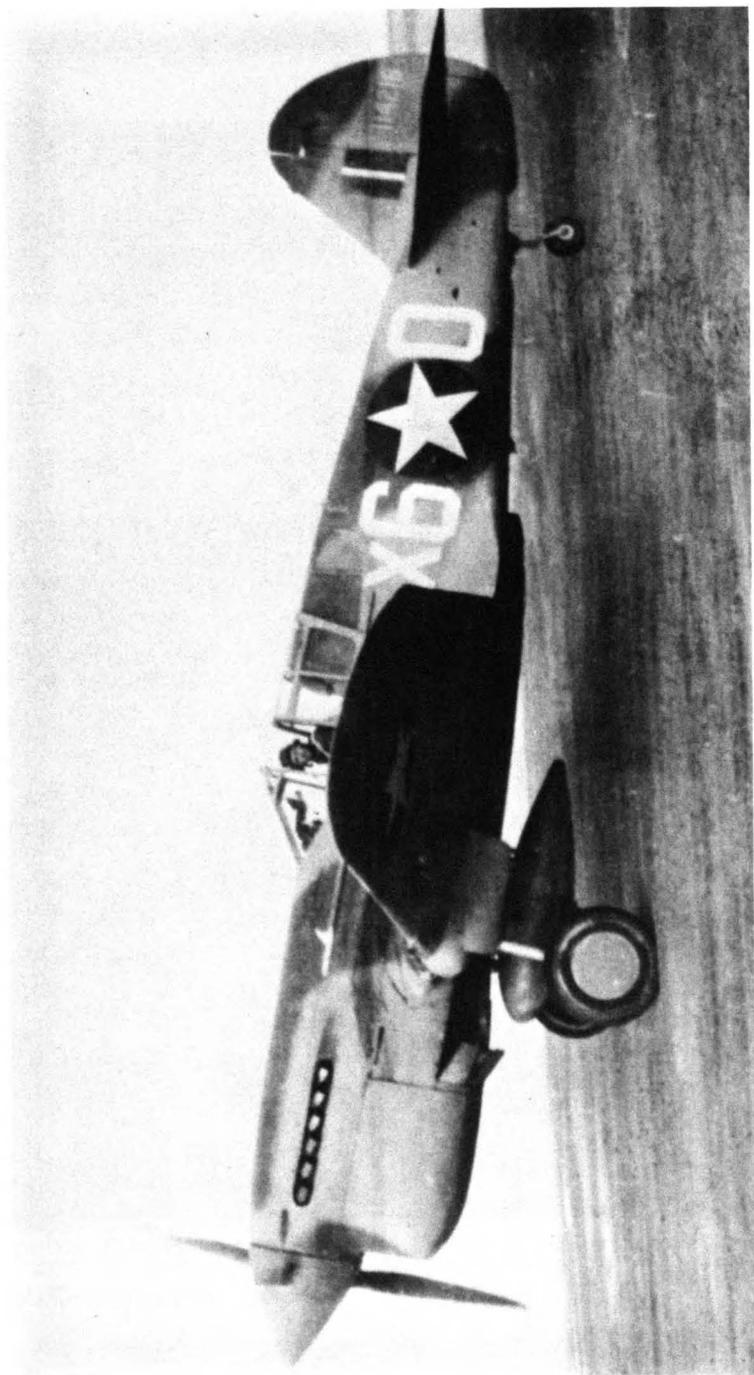
Lawrence ("Larry") Anderson, Latrobe Airport, 1939 — one of the few teenaged licensed pilots in the area (Courtesy Lawrence Anderson)



"Larry" Anderson and a Douglas AT-6, Tuskegee Army Air Base, Alabama (Courtesy Lawrence Anderson)



Lt. James T. Wiley, Italy, 1944 — 99th Pursuit Squadron (Courtesy James T. Wiley)



Lt. James T. Wiley in Curtiss P-40-N pursuit plane, Italy, 1944 (Courtesy George Barbour)

cross-country trips into the northeast, Canada, and the midwest.²⁰

Abram P. Jackson was another early black flyer. As steward of the Aviation Country Club of Erie, he was taught to fly by prominent Erie area flyer Gerald ("Jerry") Richardson. Richardson said that Jackson got his private pilot's license in either 1936 or 1937, flying a Waco-F from the old Fairview Airport off Route 20, west of Erie. Just before the war, Jackson moved to Chicago where he received his instructor's license and later went to Tuskegee, Alabama, as a ground instructor.²¹

Also in the air was Joseph D. Ellison of Beltzhoover. Fascinated with flying, Ellison went to Mayer Field in 1926 for his first lesson in a Curtiss Jenny. After his fourth lesson, he felt he would progress faster if he owned his own plane, and with a miser's frugality, he saved \$1,200 — enough to buy a Woodson Express 2-A he had seen advertised in a mechanical magazine. However, the Woodson was too fast and advanced for him. Ellison later said he should have bought one of the Jennies at Mayer instead of the Express. Unable to fly it, he leased it back to its original owner. The arrangement became unsatisfactory, so Ellison took it off the line, stripped it, and sent it to his Beltzhoover home where he stored it until selling it to Miller Aircraft at Bettis Field.²²

Mayer Field was also home for another black flyer, Charles Asa Ross of Bridgeville, who, like Ellison and Proctor, did not accumulate a tremendous number of flying hours but was conspicuous as a black flyer. Ross, like Proctor, was a student of Robert Foley. In fact, in 1936, he was the first black to solo at Mayer. With an aspiring white pilot, Ross co-owned a Piper Cub and flew until 1941 when his family began to expand and his money ran low. During his days at Mayer Field, Ross met a number of early flyers including Jake Lytle, Bill and Bob Foley, Bill Welch, and George Allen.²³

Lytle, the Foleys, and Welch taught at Mayer Field while Allen was instructing at Latrobe Airport. This handsome, curly-haired, young black was already a legend. Allen was inspired by Charles A. Lindbergh's 1927 New York-to-Paris flight. Shortly after the *Spirit of St. Louis* touched down at Paris' Le Bourget Aerodrome, he was on the road leading south and west of Tyrone to the other side of the moun-

20 Proctor interview, Apr. 28, 1984; Fleisher and Keylin, *New York Times*; *New York Times*, July 2, 3, 5, 1929.

21 Telephone interview of Jerry Richardson by George Barbour, May 14, 1985.

22 Interview of Joseph D. Ellison by George Barbour, Pittsburgh, May 19, 1984.

23 Interview of Charles Asa Ross by George Barbour, Bridgeville, Pa., Nov. 12, 1983.

tains. He had heard of an airport at Latrobe that was buzzing with activity and welcoming future flyers. He found lodging and worked at odd jobs. His talent as a musician helped him earn money, and soon he was taking lessons at the Carroll School of Aviation from one of the area's most respected pilots, Lloyd Santmyer. Santmyer not only taught many early flyers but also made studies which laid the foundation for the modern instrument flying system.

After soloing, Allen wanted a plane of his own. He sold his car and paid three hundred dollars for an Eagle Rock. The plane needed work, so Allen, with two ambitious aviation mechanics, secured the use of an abandoned garage and spent a winter rebuilding the craft. When spring arrived, the Eagle Rock was trucked to Latrobe Airport where it was certified by the Civil Aeronautics Authority. Allen recalled that "my good friend, Lloyd Santmyer, prepared me for my rating," adding that he was not making much money but somehow was able to play drums five or six days a week with dance bands, as well as work in Latrobe for Pittsburgh financier J. H. Rogers, to earn flying money. Flying over four hundred hours in the Eagle Rock, Allen got his private license, limited commercial, commercial, and instructor ratings. He had, however, worn out the airplane and sold it for one hundred dollars less than his original share.

Allen's reputation as an excellent all-around flyer and instructor led to jobs throughout Western Pennsylvania. He met Frank Carlson in Pittsburgh, and soon he was hired by Carlson to fly cargo and hop passengers from the New Alexandria strip along William Penn Highway. At Latrobe, Allen worked for C. B. ("Charlie") Carroll, who, after flying Fokkers for Pan-American Airways, returned home to operate the airport. Allen, happy in his work, hopped passengers, flew cargo, worked in the shop and in general maintenance, and instructed at Latrobe.

Allen met many of the day's swashbuckling pilots, among them Hal Johnson, an expert with Ford Tri-motors. The day Johnson brought his lumbering transport to Latrobe, he landed it after looping and spinning the giant flying machine in performances that would have severely tested the tolerances of smaller aircraft. Upon landing, he invited C. B. Carroll and Allen to fly with him. After a briefing, Johnson turned over the controls to Allen who was amazed that the Tri-motor was easier to handle and more responsive than other aircraft he had flown. Allen later flew with Ray Loomis, another great Ford Tri-motor pilot.²⁴

²⁴ Interview of George Allen by George Barbour, Toledo, Ohio, Apr. 14, 1984.

As World War II approached, Allen received offers to serve as instructor in a new government program to make certain the United States had a reservoir of military pilots in the event of war. The program was called the Civilian Pilot Training Program (CPTP). The government contracted with civilian organizations, mainly colleges, to set up and direct comprehensive flying courses at which selected students not only would earn a private pilot's license but be ready to enter the various services.

Faced with mounting pressure from the *Pittsburgh Courier*, the NAACP, and other minority publications and organizations, Washington decided that CPTP also would be the vehicle opening aviation to blacks.²⁵ As a result, CPTPs were organized at six black schools: Howard University, Washington, D.C.; Hampton Institute, Virginia; Tuskegee Institute, Alabama; Delaware State College, Dover, Delaware; North Carolina A&T, Greensboro, North Carolina; and West Virginia State College, Institute, West Virginia. In addition, blacks were welcomed in many other schools throughout the country. Two Negro noncollegiate units were formed in the Chicago area, one of which was the Coffey School of Aeronautics at Harlem Airport, Oak Lawn, Illinois, operated by Miss Willa Brown and named for her husband, Cornelius Coffey.²⁶ The other Chicago area CPTP unit was the airstrip which the all-black Challenger's Air Pilots' Association built in Robbins, Illinois.²⁷

Allen received offers to instruct from West Virginia State College, Tuskegee Institute, and The Casey Jones School of Aeronautics, a white school in Chicago. On the advice of friends, he decided on Tuskegee, and as a result eventually became a key instructor in the government's Army Air Corps program that established the pioneer all-black flying outfit — the 99th Pursuit Squadron. As the allies turned the tide of the war in 1944, the war department realized it had enough, if not too many, Army Air Corps pilots and began cutting plans and programs. Allen was among those sent home. The C. B. Carroll School of Aeronautics signed him on as chief pilot with four instructors under him. Among the many students he had were Alan M. Scaife, brother-in-law of Richard Mellon Scaife, and Fred Rogers of public TV's "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood."²⁸

²⁵ *Pittsburgh Courier*, Sept. 21, Oct. 26, Dec. 7, 1940.

²⁶ Patricia Strickland, *The Putt-Putt Air Force: The Story of the Civilian Pilot Training Program and War Training Service, 1939-44* (Washington, D.C., 1970), 39.

²⁷ Von Hardesty and Dominick Pisano, *Black Wings: The American Black in Aviation* (Washington, D.C., 1983), 21, 22.

²⁸ Allen interview, Apr. 14, 1984.

Besides Allen and Abram Jackson of Erie, local flyers in the "Tuskegee Experiment," as the creation of the black fighter squadron was called, included Lawrence E. Anderson, Jr., of Greensburg. In the 1930s, while George Allen was one of the exceptional flyers at Latrobe, Larry Anderson was enjoying similar respect at Greensburg Airport because of his flying ability, nerve, professionalism, and engaging personality. He lived within five miles of the airport at Starboard Light, the estate of the late World War I Navy Commander Charles McKenna Lynch, Sr., where Anderson's father was family chauffeur. Living so close to the airport, young Anderson experienced the excitement in those early days of flying. For example, more than twenty-five thousand people turned out on September 20, 1929, for dedication services for the new field officially known as Pittsburgh-Greensburg Airport. Three naval fighters performed daring maneuvers, twenty-five other planes formed a civilian air armada, and one of the youngest flyers in the country, Lou Stricker, barnstormed as the thousands clapped, cheered, and shouted.²⁹

In subsequent years, young Anderson saw the mail planes arriving on schedule and avidly read news stories about World War I flyers and pioneers such as Wylie Post, Roscoe Turner, and Major Al Williams — many of whom flew into Pittsburgh-Greensburg. At the age of twelve, he was a fixture at the airport and at the age of fourteen was flying, with the twin goals of not only becoming an accomplished pilot but also a designer and builder of aircraft. There was no doubt in his mind that he could and would succeed at both. As a student pilot, Anderson soloed after five-and-one-half hours of instruction under Norman O'Brien, airport owner-manager. "We were flying one day. He suddenly told me to land the airplane and when I did, he got out and told me it was all mine. That was the greatest day of my life," Anderson recalled. The date also marked the beginning of trouble in school for Anderson as his teachers could not convince him that there were other subjects that had to be mastered besides flying.

At Pittsburgh-Greensburg, Anderson earned his private, commercial, and instructor's licenses so that when war broke out in Europe, he had many hours of flying to support his ratings. He knew he was more than ready for the U.S. Army Air Corps and attempted to enlist. A "ridiculous" sequence of events followed. Despite a top physical rating as a civilian commercially-licensed pilot, Anderson was told that he had failed the air corps physical because of low blood pressure; he was

²⁹ *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, Sept. 21, 1929.

advised to return to the Pittsburgh recruitment center in thirty days to try again. Before doing so, Anderson was examined four times by a Civil Aeronautics Administration medical examiner and passed with no difficulty. Returning to the recruitment center, he could hardly believe it when he was told he had again failed the physical. A few days later, he questioned his sanity when a letter arrived from the War Department requesting his service as an instructor in the Tuskegee program. He wondered why his medical condition was good enough for this particular program and not for the Air Corps Cadet program. Anderson's flying friends — O'Brien, Lou Haugh, and Santmyer — advised him to take the job in Alabama.

Anderson went to Tuskegee thinking he had a golden opportunity to get in on the ground floor of the pioneer pilot training program and, in the process, realize his long-time goal of becoming a military fighter pilot. Despite having done his best, when the program ended in December 1945, Anderson was still a ground instructor with an astronomical number of flying hours — but no military pilot's wings. During the four years he was at Tuskegee, he gave ground instructions to an estimated five thousand cadets. Of these, some twelve hundred received wings, many achieving the status of military fighter pilot. Nevertheless, he derived great satisfaction in later life from statements by Tuskegee pilots that his expertise enabled those black flyers not only to survive, but to lead distinguished civilian careers.

After Tuskegee, Anderson was denied a career with the commercial airlines. Then he and Charlie Foxx, another Tuskegee airman, opened a flying school in the Norfolk area. It did well shortly after the war under GI Bill funding, but soon foundered. Anderson then took on aerial crop-dusting along the eastern seaboard. Later he decided to leave flying altogether and took a civil service job in the Norfolk Naval Yard as a mechanic, where he advanced to an operations analyst in production engineering.³⁰

The CPTP did open the doors to flying for many area blacks. Among local people who began flying through CPTP were Jas. T. Wiley, Wm. Thompson, Marshall Fields, and Wm. Henry Edwards of Pittsburgh, and Mary L. Parker of Erie. Wiley, after earning a B.S. in physics from the University of Pittsburgh in 1940, enrolled at Carnegie Tech to secure a master's degree. At Tech, he learned of the CPTP, applied, and began flying at Butler-Graham where he earned a private pilot's license. Then he earned commercial and instructor rat-

³⁰ Interview of Lawrence Anderson by George Barbour, Norfolk, Va., June 5, 1984.

ings at Peterson Field in Altoona. From that school, he was transferred to Tuskegee.³¹

Overseas, Wiley became an outstanding fighter pilot, and his exploits helped bring a new image to the 99th Pursuit Squadron. Faced with opposition in the government, the 99th arrived overseas in the spring of 1943 as truly "The Lonely Eagles," because no other Air Corps unit wanted them. As a result, the outfit, under Col. Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., and including Wiley and others, was denied combat assignments and was placed in training status in the wind and sand near Casablanca. Morale was low. Finally, the squadron was allowed to participate in the Sicilian campaign, and the pilots performed well, with Wiley earning an air medal with an oak leaf cluster. The bad press continued even though all-white bomber crews lavishly praised the fighter-escort performances of the black flyers. Without positive news stories, the pilots of the 99th were seen as less than real air warriors. On January 27, 1944, however, Wiley, leading one flight, and Clarence Jamison of Cleveland, leading another, put an end to the 99th's stigma.

At that time, the furious battle for Italy was beginning at the beachhead at Anzio. The Twelfth Air Force was assigned to isolate the battle area to prevent enemy forces from bringing up reinforcements and supplies. Meanwhile, the order for the 99th was to support ground troops by dive bombing and strafing railyards, troop concentrations, highways, bridges, posts, and supply centers.³² With five other pilots under his command, Flight Leader Jamison spotted a group of enemy fighters over Anzio and decided "This was new image time. . . . We were going to win big that day or all die in trying."³³

Jamison's flight group, outnumbered two-to-one, broke formation and in less than four minutes downed five enemy aircraft. Shortly afterwards, Flight Leader Wiley brought his men in and they destroyed three additional enemy planes in dogfights, bringing the 99th a total of eight kills. The day's action brought recognition and ended the negative press. After Anzio, the pioneer black airmen went on to destroy 111 planes in the air, 150 on the ground, sink sixteen barges and boats, and destroy fifty-seven locomotives as well as two oil and ammunition dumps. In addition, the Tuskegee men accomplished

31 *Pittsburgh Courier*, Nov. 27, 1943.

32 Robert A. Rose, *The Lonely Eagles: The Story of America's Black Air Force in World War II* (Los Angeles, 1976).

33 Comments to Black Wings Symposium, Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania, Jan. 21, 1984.

what no other army fighter pilots had: on June 25, 1944, one of the 99th's flights, led by Captain Joseph Elsberry, sank a German destroyer in Trieste harbor. The ship threw up a terrific barrage as the P-47 flight of five went in. One hit was made on the ship, and then another which struck the magazine and sank the ship. Wing cameras recorded the action.³⁴

As the "black knights of the air" returned home for furloughs and reassignment, many received outstanding welcomes. So it was for Wiley, when in June 1944, over fifty thousand Pittsburghers turned out to salute the twenty-five-year-old captain. Mayor Cornelius D. Scully gratefully gave Wiley the key to the city for his war effort — 101 missions with the 99th.³⁵ Wylie is now in retirement after distinguished careers in the U.S. Air Force as a lieutenant colonel and in Boeing Aircraft as a ranking engineer.³⁶

Another local flyer whose opportunities came through CPTP was William O. Thompson, now a retired U.S. Air Force lieutenant colonel. Thompson, in the CPTP at Hampton Institute, Virginia, was the second black to solo an airplane at the Newport News airport used by the school. Thompson wanted to become a fighter pilot and when blacks were finally accepted in the army air corps, was sent to Chanute Field, Illinois, for technical training. Upon completion, he was promoted to first lieutenant and sent to Tuskegee for flight instruction, but within a short time, he was placed as an armaments instructor. When the 99th went overseas, Thompson was chief armaments officer.

The CPTP at West Virginia State College at Institute near Charleston was one of the most ambitious programs and produced a large number of black pilots. Among area program participants were Marshall Fields, William Edwards (the son of a prominent local doctor), and Mary Parker. Fields, a 1937 graduate of Westinghouse High School and student CPTP squadron leader, soloed on February 21, 1940. He provided extra excitement for friends and relatives in May 1941, when he and his copilot, Rose Rolls, flew into Allegheny County Airport on a cross-country flight to build up flying hours. Fields was later transferred to Tuskegee. Edwards received his private pilot's license in 1941 at West Virginia State and then enrolled in the aeronautics school at Carnegie Tech. There he transferred to an in-

34 Rose, *Lonely Eagles*, 65, 69, 156.

35 *Pittsburgh Courier*, July 1, 1944; *Pittsburgh Press*, June 22, 1944; *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, June 22, 1944.

36 Telephone interview of James T. Wylie, Jr., by George Barbour, Nov. 29, 1985.

structor's course, served as aide to Commander Goff of the 315th, and eventually was sent to Tuskegee to complete a four-month flight instructor's course. Parker soloed in 1941 from the Kanawha River in a seaplane, a first for a black woman pilot.³⁷

Pittsburgher Art Barnes was another lover of seaplanes. After classes at Allegheny High School in 1934, he headed for the seaplane base at the foot of the Sixth Street Bridge on the north side of the Allegheny River. His job was to refuel the five seaplanes owned by Wallace and Ralph Hite (of drugstore fame). The brothers gave lessons to young Barnes, and before long, he was using the river as a runway. His take-off pattern was over the West End Bridge; or he made a sharp veer to the right if enough altitude had not been gained to fly over it. During a recent interview, Barnes, still flying his own airplane — a land-based craft — talked of many happy times and old friends. His conversation highlighted the fairness and camaraderie at the local airfields which black flyers found in sharp contrast to the biased and bigoted areas adjacent to the airports.³⁸ Their experiences also etched into the minds of these pioneers the severely discriminatory attitude of the federal government in the 1920s and 1930s. Federal examiners like the one Jimmie Peck confronted at old Bettis Field, the military officials who decided that no blacks could fly in the navy, and those who determined that only a handful of blacks could fly in the segregated Tuskegee Experiment evidenced deepseated governmental opposition to equality for blacks.

Most local pioneer black flyers who experienced this discrimination during the early days displayed little bitterness. They were happy to have been there when flying was dangerous, glamorous, enjoyable, satisfying, and challenging. There are exceptions, of course, and one is Larry Anderson. He recalled the day when he was a senior in high school, possessor of a pilot's license and dreaming of being not only one of the best pilots in aviation but also an airplane designer. He did not reach either goal. In a 1984 interview, he said he was indeed happy for his past joys and for black progress in aviation. But he added, "Everytime I see a commercial or military jet or space shot in the air or on TV, I think that I should be in the left seat but a ridiculous attitude kept me out of it."³⁹

³⁷ Pittsburgh *Courier*, Feb. 3, Mar. 2, 1940, May 10, 1941, May 30, 1942; *Opportunity, Journal of Negro Life* (July 1941): 19; Pittsburgh *Courier*, Oct. 28, 1939.

³⁸ Interview of Art Barnes by George Barbour, Pittsburgh, Mar. 20, 1984.

³⁹ Anderson interview, June 5, 1984.

Anderson's wistful, slightly bitter reaction to missed opportunities may best summarize the ambiguous place of blacks in aviation through World War II. Many found in flying the realization of breaking the bonds of everyday life. Yet even in the air, they found limits prescribed by official discrimination and lingering racism. Nevertheless, they did strive to conquer the skies and take their rightful places in one of humankind's greatest achievements. ■