there was a different age, that these [old] planes were really out of the picture.

So that’s just about my experiences at Bettis. Some people say, “Well, why didn’t you learn to fly?” Well, I had friends who spent probably $1,500, which was a lot of money. I was working for 75 cents an hour, and all they could say was, well, “I flew an airplane.” But I realize that I lived through a wonderful era and had a lot of wonderful experiences and a lot of wonderful memories.

**Some A-B-Cs of Local Aviation**

by Brian Butko, *Editorial Assistant*  
and Paul Roberts, *Editor*

**THE AIRPORT**

Elmer Best, in the memoir just finished, and Kenneth Scholter, in the upcoming interview, recall Pittsburgh-McKeesport Airport, later called Bettis Field, as the main stage for the area’s early aviation antics and advances. As both men note, its location in West Mifflin was preceded by years of airplanes landing across the street in a farm field. Two local men inspired by these early flyers’ feats were David Barr Peat and William “Zip” Richmond. In 1924, Richmond bought a Curtiss biplane, and it was flown in for him by Romer Weyant. Richmond and Peat began a small exhibition and sightseeing service with Weyant as pilot at the future airport site. In 1925, Peat joined with Clifford Ball, a Hudson-Essex car dealer from McKeesport, to purchase the 40-acre tract.

When the Air Mail Act of 1925 (sponsored by local Representative M. Clyde Kelly) turned airmail over from the government to private contractors, among the first to receive a contract was Ball. His Pittsburgh to Cleveland run began in April 1927. The next year, passengers could ride along for $20, though they often sat atop mail sacks. Ball’s transport business was good enough that in 1929 he sold the field to a subsidiary of Curtiss Aviation, which was soon merged into the huge Curtiss-Wright Corp. Local aviation needs, however, soon outgrew Bettis, and in 1931 the Allegheny County Airport opened one mile to the west, relegating Bettis to second-hand status.

In 1948, Westinghouse Electric bought the Bettis site and converted it into an atomic laboratory. Among its accomplishments were the building of reactors for the first nuclear-powered submarine (*U.S.S. Nautilus*), the first nuclear-powered aircraft carrier (*U.S.S. Enterprise*), and the first commercial nuclear power plant for generating electricity at Shippingport, Pa. Westinghouse currently employs about 2,500 at their “Bettis Laboratory.” Westinghouse kept and adapted the old runways, terminal, and two hangars, but a close look at the old hangars reveals cement-relief images of airplane propellers.

**BETTIS, THE MAN IT’S NAMED FOR**

Bettis Field was named for Lt. Cyrus Bettis of the U.S. Army Air Corps, who won the Pulitzer Trophy in 1925 with a world record flying speed of 249.342 miles per hour. He participated in the opening ceremonies for Pittsburgh-McKeesport Airport in June 1925.

On August 12, 1926, Bettis was leading a formation of three Army airplanes from Philadelphia to Michigan when they encountered fog near Bellefonte, Pa. Bettis hit a treetop and crashed in the mountains. After regaining consciousness, Bettis stayed with his plane as he could hear search planes overhead, but they failed to find him in the dense woods. He was too weak and injured to signal — he had a broken leg, a fractured nose, two fractures of the jaw, plus cuts and bruises.

Bettis began crawling towards the sound of automobiles but did not reach the road that day. The next morning it began raining and Bettis cupped a part of his outfit to collect water to drink. He finally made it the two and a half miles to the road, where he was rescued. He seemed to be recovering when complications set in and he died September 1, 1926. West Mifflin’s airport was renamed Bettis Airport two months later.

**CURTISS-WRIGHT, AND THE SCHOOL IT SPAWNE**

One of a chain of Curtiss-Wright Corp. sales, service, and flight in-
struction facilities was started at Bettis Field in 1927. August Becker was the manager and two years later he bought the facility, broadened its scope to include aviation mechanics, and renamed it Pittsburgh Institute of Aeronautics. Over the next decade, the school opened branches in Buffalo, Boston, Baltimore, and Philadelphia to sell and administer the school’s correspondence courses.

In 1940, when enrollment reached 400, the school was approved by the Civil Aeronautics Authority. At that time it moved its basic training facilities and offices to Seventh Avenue and Duquesne Way in downtown Pittsburgh. A variety of courses was offered, including Aeronautical Engineering, Airline Reservations, Aviation Secretary, Drafting and Design, and Instrument Repair.

In 1948, Westinghouse Electric bought the Bettis site, forcing PIA to move its advanced courses to Allegheny County Airport. All operations were eventually moved to the county airport, and classes were trimmed to just aircraft mechanic and instrument courses. The school also became a nonprofit corporation, chartered by the state.

Since then, the aviation industry has seen mostly good times, and PIA along with it. There are now over 1,000 students at PIA in a complex covering 200,000 square feet. Degrees are offered in aviation mechanics and avionics, which include attaining federal licenses. The avionics section now offers a federal-approved repair station, where airplane owners are encouraged to bring their work. The recent economic downturn, though, has made PIA consider broadening its degree choices once again.

THE SKY’S NO LIMIT
The thousands of aviation professionals graduated from PIA during more than 60 years of operation are part of a regional aviation history that is especially rich in the Pittsburgh area. A Pittsburgh man named Samuel F. Langley, with an airplane contraption he built, came within a few horsepower of flying before the Wright brothers.

The connections between aviation and Pittsburgh’s growth in the twentieth century are numerous. Propellers were produced in Homestead during the 1920s. Airplanes were manufactured on the North Side by 1930. An offshoot of well-known Piper Aircraft built small airplanes briefly in Butler in the 1930s and then at a factory in eastern Ohio for many years. Pittsburgh steel and specialty metals — and the millions of strong backs and minds that made it possible — were used in the aviation industry in countless ways.

As the two articles here demonstrate, flying captured the imagination of a whole generation — from backyard schemers like Langley to large corporations. Alcoa, with its strong corporate presence in Pittsburgh, pioneered almost all of the important advances in lightweight aluminum alloys fundamental to the transportation revolution of jet and space aircraft. Pittsburgh-based Rockwell International was part of this revolution, as were many other of the city’s Fortune 500 firms. USAir, the country’s largest airline, was born in Pittsburgh.

We focused here on the most colorful, anecdotal aspects of a past that literally flew by, but this should not cause anyone to take lightly the airplane’s arrival at Bettis Field.

FOR FURTHER READING...
• William F. Trimble, High Frontier: A History of Aeronautics in Pennsylvania