

Base thoroughfare named for prominent flyer

Townsend Foster Dodd made significant contributions to early military aviation

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Langley Air Force Base is a pretty military installation. A walk or drive down mile-long Dodd Boulevard is all it takes to remind anyone of that fact. In the spring the magnolia trees' large white blooms contrast nicely with the stately homes and buildings in the Heavier-than-Air section of the base.

But who was Dodd, and why is the boulevard and Dodd Hall named after him?

Townsend Foster Dodd was a military aviation pioneer whose life was tragically cut short.

He was born in 1886 in Anna, Illinois and went onto attend the University of Illinois, graduating in 1907 at the age of 21 with a Bachelor of Science Degree and Electrical Engineering Degree. Dodd is prominently mentioned on the University's roster of Alumni website, as a Gold Star Illini – one who gave his life while serving in uniform.

Dodd started his military career here on the Peninsula, in the Coast Artillery Corps at Fort Monroe in the fall of 1909 as a 2nd Lieutenant.

He transferred to the Aviation Section of the Army's Signal Corps in 1912, and in February, 1913, he established a non-stop duration of flight record in a Burgess H Model aircraft, flying a total of 244 miles in four hours and 18 minutes.

In 1914 then Capt. Dodd shared the Mackay Trophy with Lt. S.W. Fitzgerald for winning the reconnaissance competition. But peace-time training and record-setting would only

last so long. War was declared in Europe, and trouble was brewing along America's border.

On March 9, 1916, Francisco "Pancho" Villa, Mexican revolutionary outlaw, crossed the border and raided Columbus N. M., killing 17 Americans. The Army's cavalry chased the bandits across the border.

The next day, Brig. Gen. John "Blackjack" Pershing was directed to organize a border protection unit. The fledgling 1st Aero Squadron was ordered to Columbus to assist with observation, reconnaissance and photographic support of Pershing's punitive expedition. Capt. Dodd was among the 11 pilots and 82 enlisted people who went to Columbus, along with eight Curtis JN-3 aircraft.

On March 15, 1916, Dodd secured another place in the history books. He and an observer, Capt. Benjamin Foulois, made the first tactical reconnaissance flight over hostile territory, flying 20 miles inside Mexican territory.

The American intervention among Mexicans was unpopular. The airmen of the 1st Aero Squadron felt the anger of the populace on more than one occasion. On April 8, Mexicans fired at Dodd as he and an observer flew over Chihuahua. But it could be worse. Fellow aviator, Lt. Carlton G. Chapman made a forced landing that same day at Santa Rosalia, where he was captured by Mexicans. He was eventually released, but not before looters stole field glasses, goggles and ammunition from his plane.

By December the 1st AS returned to Columbus with Dodd in charge of the unit. It was the first U.S. tactical air unit put into the field, but they had a rough time – the aircraft were in poor condition, were not designed for the high altitudes of the Mexican desert nor the long distances required. Supplies and parts were a challenge to procure, but Dodd,

Foulois and the other members of the 1st AS had accepted the challenge and did the best they could.

Dodd was selected by Gen. Pershing as Aviation Officer of the American Expeditionary Force to Europe in 1917 and was appointed Lieutenant Colonel in the Signal Corps. He was superseded in that job by Colonel William Mitchell who outranked him. Dodd served as Chief of Materiel and Assistant Chief of Supply, Air Service, then as G-2, Air Service, First Army. He was promoted to Colonel August 14, 1918.

Shortly after arriving at Langley Field in July, 1919 as the fifth commander of Langley Field, Dodd was selected to represent the installation at the First Transcontinental Reliability and Endurance Test. While preparing for the event, he was killed on Oct. 5, 1919 when his DH-4 crashed near Bustleton, Pennsylvania.

On May 10, 1928, near Fort Sam Houston, Texas, a military airfield was designated Dodd Field in War Department General Order Number 5, in honor of Col. Dodd. The field was used to train Air Corps bombardiers in the 1930s and as a prisoner of war camp during World War II.

During his all-too-short military career, Dodd flew and associated with many fellow aviators who are now recognized as pioneers in military aviation, and like them, his legacy is secure.