

Flyer lured others to get wings

Book carried the message

LANGLEY — Not many Peninsula residents remember Beirne Lay Jr., but at Langley Field he's recalled as a flyer in the 1930s and author of the popular autobiography, "I Wanted Wings," published in 1937.

Lay's exciting book became a movie, and lured many young Americans into the Army Air Corps in World War II. After the war, the retired Col. Lay moved to Hollywood where he was a script writer for years. He died in Los Angeles in 1982 at the age of 72.

While at Langley between 1933 and 1936, as a captain, he married Ludwell Lee, a Hampton woman with Hollywood aspirations of her own. She died several years ago, leaving two daughters in Los Angeles.

Lay first came to Langley in June 1933, after graduating as a second lieutenant at Randolph Field, Tex. In his book he writes of swimming at Buckroe Beach, dancing on Saturday nights at the Chamberlin Hotel roof garden, and of getting in his required flying time on cross-country jaunts from Langley.

"This was a good life," Lay recalled. "The long year of student discipline was relaxed. We had personal freedom ... and we were still getting used to being saluted by the enlistment men, and 'sirred.'"

Describing Langley routine, he wrote:

"After 1 o'clock we were through for the day, unless assigned to a night flying mission. We were free to lie on the sand at Buckroe or Fort Monroe, or, if we were ambitious, to take the Norfolk ferry and drive to Virginia Beach, where we could shuffle to the tea dance orchestra at the Cavalier Beach Club after a swim."

The young bachelor enjoyed weekend travels in his sports coupe, "driving with

the windshield down and a girl's hair rippling in the breeze at our side," he writes. But he preferred taking a Langley plane Friday at noon to fly "anywhere he wanted to, within a radius of 500 miles, spend the weekend impressing our friends with our newly acquired wings, and return by sundown Sunday."

The airman always hoped for bad weather on Sunday so he could justify a delayed return to Langley. Eventually, he was entrusted by the Air Corps with a plane to fly to the West Coast.

While Lay served at Langley in 1933, the Air Corps was assigned by Congress to fly airmail across the United States. "Congress didn't like the private operations any more. They were going to make mailmen out of us," Lay writes. He was assigned to fly the Chicago-Nashville night run. After a few months the experiment was ended because of the unsuitability of Air Corps planes. Many Air Corps flyers died in the experiment.

Lay made his first parachute jump one January day when his bomber engine malfunctioned over Langley Field. He landed in Back River but was quickly picked up by a Langley rescue boat. "I acquired not so much as a sore throat as a souvenir of the cold bath," Lay wrote.

At the end of his reserve duty at Langley, Lay tried his hand at writing and succeeded in getting articles in Harper's, Esquire, Sportsman Pilot and Today magazines. After writing his flying experiences, "I Wanted Wings," and seeing them published he was recalled to active duty by the Air Corps as World War II approached. He spent another three years at Langley, part of it with the headquarters squadron of the General Headquarters of the



Photo courtesy Mrs. Brown Morton

Beirne Lay poses in flying apparel typical of early 1940s.

Parke Rouse

Air Corps.

Lay was living with his parents in Charlottesville in 1933 when he volunteered for the Air Corps. Born in Berkeley Springs, W. Va., he had graduated from St. Paul's School in New Hampshire and from Yale, where he rowed with the 150-pound crew and boxed on the school team.

Lay had a fine career as a flyer in World War II, earning the Distinguished Flying Cross and an Air Medal. At the start of the war he flew a bomber in Europe, getting shot down in France on his 11th mission while serving as bomber group commander of the 487th. Avoiding capture by the Germans, he continued to serve in other combat flying units and as head of information for the 15th Air Force.

After the war, Lay went back to Hollywood to write screenplays, turning out "Twelve O'Clock High," "Above and Beyond," "Strategic Air Command," "Towards the Unknown" and "The Gallant Hours."

Many young Americans were influenced by Lay's books and movies to want to fly. Recalls Martin Gracey, an aviation enthusiast at Langley Field's NASA, "When I first started training pilots in Pennsylvania in 1940, my concept of military pilot training was derived from 'I Wanted Wings' and other flying movies of the '30s.'"

Beirne Lay retired from the Air Force in California in 1963 and after 30 years of active and reserve duty. In retirement he was presented with the Air Force Commendation Medal and Airpower Trophy for his service to flight.

At his death The Los Angeles Times recalled that Lay had been lured to fly after seeing Richard Arlen in the movie "Wings" in 1933, while at Yale. "That picture set the course of my life," Lay said. "I had to be an Army pilot."

Elderly Peninsulars recall Lay as one of many colorful Langley flyers who achieved fame in World War II. The Air Force never had a better spokesman.

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