

Do you see what I see?

A few cracked bricks hold a story about Langley's past

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For years it was a barracks. Later it became Headquarters, 1st Tactical Fighter Wing. And now the stately three-story brick building at the intersection of Sweeney Avenue and Dodd Boulevard is the home of the Aerospace Command and Control, Intelligence Surveillance Reconnaissance Center.

But stand on the corner of Andrews Street and Dodd Boulevard and look at the closest corner of the building, about mid-way up. Do you see what I see? What could have caused those bricks to be cracked like that?

From 1933 to 1936 Lieutenant, and then Capt. Beirne Lay Jr. was stationed here at Langley Field, as the base was known at that time. In 1937 his autobiographical book, "I wanted wings" was published and in 1941 it was turned into a movie, starring Veronica Lake with the famous blonde peek-a-boo hairstyle, Ray Milland, Brian Donlevy and William Holden.

In the book Lay wrote of getting his required flying time by going on cross-country flights from Langley – but also managing to have a good time by swimming at nearby Buckroe Beach, dancing at the Chamberlin Hotel roof garden and taking the ferry to Norfolk and then driving to Virginia Beach.

But the perils of open cockpit flying in frail fabric-covered aircraft were ever present.

Fortunately, the pilots were issued parachutes.

According to a Daily Press article from 1988, written by renowned local historical writer Parke Rouse, Lay made his first parachute jump – on a frigid January day in 1934. His Keystone Bomber's engine failed over the Back River, but he was quickly plucked from the water by a Langley rescue boat. He recounts in his book that “I acquired not so much as a sore throat.”

In the 1977 edition of “Langley Field, the Early Years” is a photograph of a military policeman guarding the wreckage of a 2nd Bomb Group Keystone Bomber. A close study of the image shows the old fire station in the background, now the home of the Base Honor Guard, at the intersection of Sweeney Boulevard and Andrews Street. It also shows the front of the barracks that is now the home of the AC2ISRC. The aircraft is akin to kindling, and the caption says it narrowly missed the barracks.

But did it? According to Brig. Gen. Robin Olds, former 71st Fighter Squadron Commander and triple ace, the aircraft did indeed clip the building and cart wheeled across the lawn of the barracks. Olds visited Langley as part of the 434th Fighter Squadron’s reunion in 1999, and recalled the crash because he lived on the base as a child when his father, Lt. Col. Robert Olds (who retired as a Major General) was the commander of the 2nd BG. He confirmed the pilot of the bomber was none other than Lay. “They went out to get him pretty quickly,” said Olds.

Lay went on to fly many more missions, to include commanding the 8th Air Force's 487th BG as its commander in Europe. He was shot down on his 11th mission but evaded capture. He earned the Distinguished Flying Cross and the Air Medal for his actions against the enemy.

After the war Lay returned to Hollywood but stayed active in the Air Corps and Air Force Reserve. It was there that he wrote his most famous screenplay, "Twelve O'clock High," as well as "Above and Beyond," "Strategic Air Command," and "The Gallant Hours."

Many future pilots were inspired by Lay's original book, and went on to get their own wings. Keep that in mind the next time you glance up at those cracked bricks.