

The pursuit of speed – the 1st Wing's early racers

The 1st Pursuit Group's accomplishments during World War I are well known, as are the names Rickenbacker, Luke, Lufbery and Campbell. However, for the next 22 years, between the wars, the unit's efforts were focused on testing aircraft and tactics to exploit the full potential of aerial warfare.

The general public was infatuated with the airplane and these new aerial warriors, and they wanted to see them do daring feats. Enter, the air races. Some aviation enthusiasts say that from 1920 to 1939, air racing was the most popular spectator sport in the United States. By 1929 grandstands a mile in length were set up at Cleveland annually.

The second commander of the 1st Pursuit Group, Lt. Col. Harold Hartney, was one of the first to enter the 1920's racing circuit. He took second place in the first Pulitzer Trophy race flying a Thomas-Morse MB-3 at an average speed of 148 mph on Nov. 27, 1920.

Not long after the 1st PG's transfer from Ellington Field in Texas to Selfridge Field, Mich., the unit began preparations for an event that became a hallmark of the 1st Pursuit Group. The National Air Races took place at Selfridge Field from Oct. 7 – 14, 1922. Part of the program was the first running of the Mitchell Trophy Race. Brig. Gen. Billy Mitchell donated the John L. Mitchell Trophy to the Air Service in memory of his brother, who was lost in action during World War I while serving with the 1st.

Aiming to simulate the development of better pursuit aircraft, the races held from 1922 to 1930 and again from 1934 to 1936, became the proving ground for new pursuit designs.

The eligibility criteria for the Mitchell Race became restrictive after the first run. A pilot had to be a regular army officer, a member of the 1st Pursuit Group who had served at Selfridge for at least a year and had accumulated at least 1,000 flying hours. Finally, a qualified entrant could only fly in one Mitchell Trophy Race.

Lt. Donald Stace of the 27th Pursuit Squadron, forerunner of today's 27th Fightin' Eagles, won the first Mitchell Race. He made four circuits of the 20-mile course in this Thomas-Morse MB-3 at an average speed of 148.1 mph.

Promoting good public relations in the Department of Defense is not a new concept. During the '20s the group participated in exercises, demonstrations and maneuvers, events the War Department used as combined training and public relations exercises. The group flew fast, nimble pursuit planes that attracted the attention of earth-bound taxpayers wherever they appeared.

Lt. Cyrus Bettis won the John L. Mitchell Trophy for 1924 in Dayton, Ohio. Bettis went on to achieve faster fame. On Oct. 12, 1925 he flew an R3 C-1, Curtiss V, at Mitchell Field, N.Y. and set new world speed records of 249.342 mph for 100 kilometers, and 248.975 mph for 200 kilometers over a closed circuit, winning the Pulitzer cup.

However, a few days later, Lt. Jimmy Doolittle, flying another Curtiss racer fitted as a seaplane, bested his record while competing for the Schneider Cup.

The 1924 races were held at Wilbur Wright Field, now the site of Patterson Field at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base. Show officials recall that there was much apprehension because the show was being held on a government installation and caution was being preached so loudly they feared the races would be a dud. There was one mishap to an Army pilot, but it was one of the most spectacular crashes in aircraft history.

Capt. Burt Skeel of Selfridge Field boasted he intended to win the Pulitzer Trophy, the fastest of the 1924 races – or else. He and the other Army contestants dived their planes for a fast start in the 200-kilometer (124.27-mile) event.

Captain Skeel started his dive at about 8,000 feet. At 2,000 feet the wings peeled off and the plane collapsed. He was not wearing a parachute.

An estimated 50,000 persons saw Skeel's Curtiss plane fly apart in the air as he started to pull out of his dive. Lt. Harry Mills of Wilbur Wright Field went on to capture the trophy and \$5,000 prize money with a speed of 216.72 mph, considerably under the speed of Lt. Al J. Williams, who had flown the event at 243.68 miles an hour a year earlier at St. Louis.

Although thousands saw Skeel's plane go down, it was as though the earth had swallowed him and his plane. About 40 men locked arms and searched the crash area to no avail.

Then late at night, debris was found in an area of nearby churned earth. Searchers began digging. They found plane parts four feet down. Because of quicksand, they had to shore up and pump out the hole. Finally at 10 feet, Skeel's body was found.

By 1936, military participation in air races was all but fading away. The 1st PG hosted the 12th running of the Mitchell Trophy race at Selfridge Field on Oct. 17. An estimated 40,000 visitors were entertained by the 17 events held that day. Lt. John Sterling won the Mitchell Trophy, for completing the five-lap, 100-mile race at an average speed of 217 mph.

Civilian air racing continues to be popular today, with annual events in Texas, Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, Washington, Oregon, Nevada, Florida, California, Mexico and Canada.