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Wings Over Western: WKU and Aviation

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Western Kentucky University's founding was less than three years away when Wilbur and Orville Wright achieved their first sustained, power-driven flight at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina on December 17, 1903. One hundred years after that historic date, we can look back on nearly a century of aviation lore at Western.

The earliest and perhaps most mysterious airplane to appear on the Hill is part of a well-known campus ghost story. According to one of many versions, around 1910 a workman was perched near a skylight being constructed over the Van Meter Auditorium stage. Looking up, he was startled by the appearance of one of these still-novel "flying machines," lost his balance, fell and was killed. Since then, during music or theatrical performances in the auditorium, a mysterious blood-red glow is said to appear on the stage where the dead workman's body lay. Like all good ghost stories, his fate tells a cautionary tale—in this case, that technological progress has the power both to delight and destroy.

In the 1930s, another airplane brought great excitement as it swooped over the Hill and down State Street, leapfrogging buildings, dodging church steeples and finally circling the pilot's family home on College Street. Thus would Victor Strahm, Western's veteran World War I flying ace, customarily announce his arrival in town.

A 1915 graduate, Victor was the son of Franz Strahm, Western's director of music and a German immigrant. At the outbreak of war, the elder Strahm was divided in his allegiance to his native and adopted countries, but when the United States entered the conflict in April 1917, he tearfully rose at Western's chapel exercises and declared, in his heavily accented English, "I got a boy. He go."

And go he did. Twenty-one-year-old Victor Strahm joined the U.S. Air Service in May and in July began flight instruction at Wilbur Wright Training Field in Dayton, Ohio. He made his first solo flight in August, and by November 1917 was on his way to France.

Victor loved to fly. He climbed as high as 18,000 feet in his French-made, Salmson 2A2 aircraft, reaching speeds of 115 miles per hour and sickening an unlucky first-time passenger with his acrobatic stunts. "The flying I did at Dayton," he boasted after four months at the front, "was tame to what I can do now."

Victor also relished his duels with enemy planes as he conducted long-range reconnaissance missions to photograph German trenches and troop movements. "I had a beautiful little scrap yesterday with 5 Hun Biplanes," he wrote cheerfully to his anxious parents, "and though they got over 25 holes in my plane none were fatal."

Two days before the Armistice, Captain Victor Strahm received official credit for downing his fifth enemy plane, qualifying him for the coveted designation of "ace." His exploits earned him many decorations, including the Distinguished Service Cross, the Silver Star and the Croix de Guerre, but perhaps Victor's greatest source of pride was, as he told his parents, the skill that gave him "that perfect home feeling in the air."

During World War II, while Victor was again serving his country, Western was the site of much aviation-related activity. Three months after Pearl Harbor, students in the Training School's Industrial Arts department joined a program to construct wooden models of 50 different types of planes, both American and foreign. Made from specifications provided by the Navy, the models were sent to aviation bases and training centers around the country for use in training aircraft spotters.

In spring 1943, Western became home to four hundred Army Air Corps cadets seeking their pilot's wings as members of the 321st College Training Detachment. Housed in Potter and Schneider Halls, the recruits took flight instruction in Piper Cubs and Aeroncas at the Bowling Green airport. One cadet also remembered watching more advanced training in P-39s, fighter planes which were unusual for the location of the engine behind the pilot. "They kept us very aware," he said, "of what we wanted to work toward."

The same cadet, however, was somewhat skeptical of his duty to attend classes at Western. "For some reason," he noted, "the army felt we could learn to fly airplanes better if we had some crash courses in math, history, English and general science." Although he admired the dedication of Western's faculty, the most important lesson he learned was that "airsickness could affect anyone, from former conference champion football players on down the athletic ladder."

In an era when the marvel of flight is not limited by the earth's atmosphere, another Western alumnus now has a front row seat. Colonel Terry Wilcutt, a 1974 graduate and the recipient of an honorary doctorate, completed his fourth space shuttle mission in September 2000.

Over the past century, many Hilltoppers have followed the Wright brothers into the air, in both war and peace. As aviation passes its one-hundredth anniversary, we also celebrate those alumni who have literally soared to new heights.

Sources:

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