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# Called to Duty: Bowling Green's forgotten contribution to World War II aviation

By AMY DISPARTE Special to the Daily News  
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Flight training and ground school instruction is given to Aviation student at Bowling Green Airport by the Owensboro Aviation Corporation. The airport is located near Bowling Green, Ohio.  
Courtesy of WKU Archives

In 1939, the U.S. Army had a small Air Corps of 2,000 planes and about 21,000 men, but it wasn't enough to face the growing threat of a global war.

The Chief of the Army Air Corps, General Henry H. Arnold, needed help to expand the Air Corps quickly, produce the world's finest military aircraft and train pilots to fly them. Arnold worked closely with civilian research and development, private industry and the academic world to accomplish this monumental task. By the end of the war, "Hap" Arnold had grown the Army Air Force to 79,000 planes and 2.3 million personnel. He turned it into the world's finest fighting force.

There was one little problem. In 1943, the Army Air Force couldn't train aviation cadets fast enough. There was a backlog of nearly 100,000 men on inactive enlisted reserve status, who had completed basic training, chomping at the bit to become Army Air cadets. To keep those young men from losing morale and interest while waiting to enter the Army's Aviation Cadet Training Program, Gen.

Arnold secured the help of 153 colleges and universities across the country. From March 1943 until June of 1944, the College Training Program (CTP) lent a helping hand. It offered basic academic and aviation training to future Army pilots, navigators and bombardiers while local airports offered basic flight instruction under the auspices of the Civil Aeronautics Administration (CAA).

Western Kentucky State Teachers College was chosen by the Army to participate in the CTP. Unfortunately, the CAA did not think that the Bowling Green-Warren County Airport was ready to meet the needs of the recruits. They said a hangar, classroom space and administrative offices were needed. Western President Paul Garrett was not about to let this stop the program he had lobbied so hard to secure.

He contacted Walter Hoagland of Owensboro Aviation Company, a former Bowling Green resident, and Hoagland leased privileges from the airport to build a hangar and office building. He spent nearly \$30,000 of his own money to accommodate the training needs of the 321st College Training Detachment at Western in return for rights to use the airport for the next 12 years.

According to Lynn E. Niedemeier in her paper “Wings Over Western: WKU and Aviation,” Western became home to the 321st College Training Detachment in the Spring of 1943. Four hundred men were housed in Potter and West (Schneider) Halls. They took their academic courses in Cherry Hall under Western professors and 10 hours of flight training at the Bowling Green-Warren County Airport in Piper Cubs and Aeroncas with CAA Flight Instructors.

Robert Johnston, a member of the 321st CTD at Western in 1943, wrote about the campus life of the 321st. Legendary coach Ed Diddle was their physical education instructor. Johnston says, “ ... in spite of carrying a few pounds more than normal, he jogged the hills along with the cadets

every inch of the way. All in all, the administration and teachers were absolutely great in the way they handled this new experience for them.” Western women must have also been happy to see these aviation recruits on campus. Johnston offers an interesting statistic, “ ... there were no male students (at Western) except for 4F, ... divinity, ... and the basketball team ... .”

Local historian Ray Buckberry lived on Kentucky Street about a half block from the Western campus in those days. He remembers the 321st falling into formation on Saturday mornings in the parking lot between Van Meter Auditorium and Potter Hall before being released for the weekend. He also remembers watching the troops march down Kentucky and other neighborhood streets, singing old military marching songs as loudly as they could. Buckberry still remembers many of the funny verses:

“The biscuits in the Army they say are mighty fine

One rolled off the table and killed a friend of mine.”

and ...

“The coffee in the Army they say is mighty fine

Good for cuts and bruises and tastes like turpentine.”

Buckberry says he, along with all the other young boys of the neighborhood, would cheer loudly for the men as they marched past. “They were our guys,” Buckberry remembers.

In addition to the CTP, approximately 50 men of the 11th Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron were deployed to Bowling Green to conduct military transition training at the airport in July of 1943. This training was a final two-month opportunity to familiarize new pilots with the equipment they were to fly in combat. Aircraft, including three P-39 Airacobras, were based here. Johnston says “they kept us very aware of what we wanted to work toward.” Local women, volunteering for the Red Cross, pitched in as well. They ran a canteen at the airport to feed hungry soldiers.

On July 1, 1944, at the conclusion of the CTP, Western Kentucky State Teachers College was presented with a Certificate of Service Award by the Army Air Force Training Command for its contributions to our nation’s defense. Over 1,200 future aviators had entered the CTP at Western.

The 11th Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron remained at the Bowling Green-Warren County Airport until March of 1944 and created a touching broadside thank you to the people of Bowling Green for their support.

Bowling Green had played an important role in World War II aviation.

*– Amy Disparte is a docent at the Aviation Heritage Park on Three Springs Road. There, you can see the iconic Piper J-3 Cub similar to the one the 321st used for training. By war’s end, 80 percent of all U.S. military pilots had*

*received their initial flight training in Piper Cubs because they were easy to fly, simple to maintain and cheap to operate.*