



Airplanes of the 1st Pursuit Group-1919-1939

By ROBERT L. CAVANAGH

This and the following two pages briefly illustrate the talk given by Robert L. Cavanagh at the recent Dearborn symposium, the 4th Annual Central States Aero Historians Meeting.

Mr. Cavanagh's paper entitled "Airplanes and Markings of the First Pursuit Group", covered in detail the many types of aircraft and the myriad markings used by the 1st Pursuit Group from 1919 to 1939. Research help came from Fred C. Dickey, Jr and Maj Thomas H. Ellis, USAF (Ret).

Bob Cavanagh has been notable in previous issues of the JOURNAL for two major articles--"Curtiss 'Hawks' in the Army" (Vol 6, Nos 2 & 4) and "Boeing PW-9s in the U. S. Army" (Vol 7, Nos 2 & 4). In addition, he served as Regional Vice-President of the A.A.H.S. in the Central States area and was a prime mover in the 1st, 2nd and 3rd Central States Aero Historians Meetings. A full article on the 1st Pursuit Group will appear in a later JOURNAL.

Selfridge Field, now Selfridge Air Force Base, will celebrate its 50th Anniversary on July 8th this year. It has been the home of the 1st PG from July 1922 to December 1941 and the home of 1st Fighter Group/Fighter Wing since August 1955. Many of the famous men of the Air Force served in the 1st during pre-WW II days and will be on hand to participate in the anniversary celebration.

Deriving from the A.E.F.'s First Pursuit Group, the 1st Pursuit Group was activated at Selfridge Field in August 1919 with the 27th, 94th, 95th and 147th Aero Squadrons. In 1921 the 147th was redesignated the 17th, in 1922 all units were redesignated Pursuit Squadrons, and in 1927 the 95th was transferred to March Field. Until 1930, the 1st was the only Pursuit Group in the U. S. It was assigned the task of pioneering cold weather operation and of rapid cross-country movement. By appearances at air shows and field dedications it became the image of U. S. air power to the public. During much of the time it was short of airplanes or pilots or both, yet the Group received and evaluated nearly every model and type of pursuit airplane procured by the Army. Its history thus parallels pursuit/fighter

plane development during both the 1920s and the 1930s.

First postwar airplanes assigned to the Group were 85 British-built S.E.5a's, 17 being operable, assigned at Kelly Field to which the 1st moved in August 1919. In 1920 Spad XIII's with geared 200 hp Hispano engines were added, and for a time there were seven Fokker D-VII's, complete with wartime German crosses. In 1921 the 1st Pursuit Group moved to Ellington Field to operate the Advanced Pursuit School, and several Orenco "D" airplanes were assigned. Pilots were reluctant to fly these even after an impressive demonstration in February 1922 by test pilot Lt Leigh Wade from McCook Field.

Other Spad XIII's with 180 hp Hispanos were sent to the Group as a step in training for the forthcoming Boeing MB-3A. It then returned to Selfridge field in June 1922. Only 21 S.E.5a's were flown back, other planes going by rail or being transferred to Kelly Field. In late 1922, 93 MB-3A's were delivered to the 1st Pursuit Group, and from then on there was a constant rotation of types, some remaining for a year or more and others staying only a short time. Two Loening PW-2A and eight Fokker PW-5 aircraft came for service test as did seven Sperry "Messengers" in late 1922.

A long association with Curtiss airplanes began in 1924 and lasted until 1934 when the Group fully reequipped with Boeing P-26A's. First came 18 PW-8s, some of which participated each year until 1927 in the Mitchell Trophy Races. P-1s and P-2s appeared in 1925 (one was converted to P-6) and left in 1928. P-1A's came in 1926 and went out in 1929, P-1B's were delivered in late 1926 as were three P-5s and four P-3A's, and 31 P-1C's came early in 1929.

The years 1928 to 1930 were the low tide for the 1st Pursuit Group. Sometimes there were three pilots to each pursuit plane, and at one point Selfridge had only 31 pursuit and 7 observation planes for the 1st Pursuit and the separate 15th Observation Squadron. Under such conditions, the 1st joyfully welcomed P-6s in November 1929. Thereafter, its squadrons received and operated Boeing P-12B's, P-12D's, Curtiss P-6E's, Berliner-Joyce YIP-16s, P-12E's, P-26A's and Consolidated P-30A/PB-2A aircraft. In the last years of the 1930s came Seversky P-35s and Curtiss P-36A's.



95th Aero Squadron S.E.5a after accident at Kelly Field No 2 during May of 1921. (Cavanagh Collection)



Last of wartime airplanes was Spad XIII with 180 hp Hispano engine—17th Squadron at Selfridge, 1922. (M. Copp)



In late 1922 the 1st Pursuit Group received post-war pursuits, Boeing MB-3A's—94th Hat-in-Ring insignia. (M. Copp)



Curtiss PW-8s lined up for 1924 Mitchell Trophy Race. Personal insignia on "57" still needs identification. (USAF)



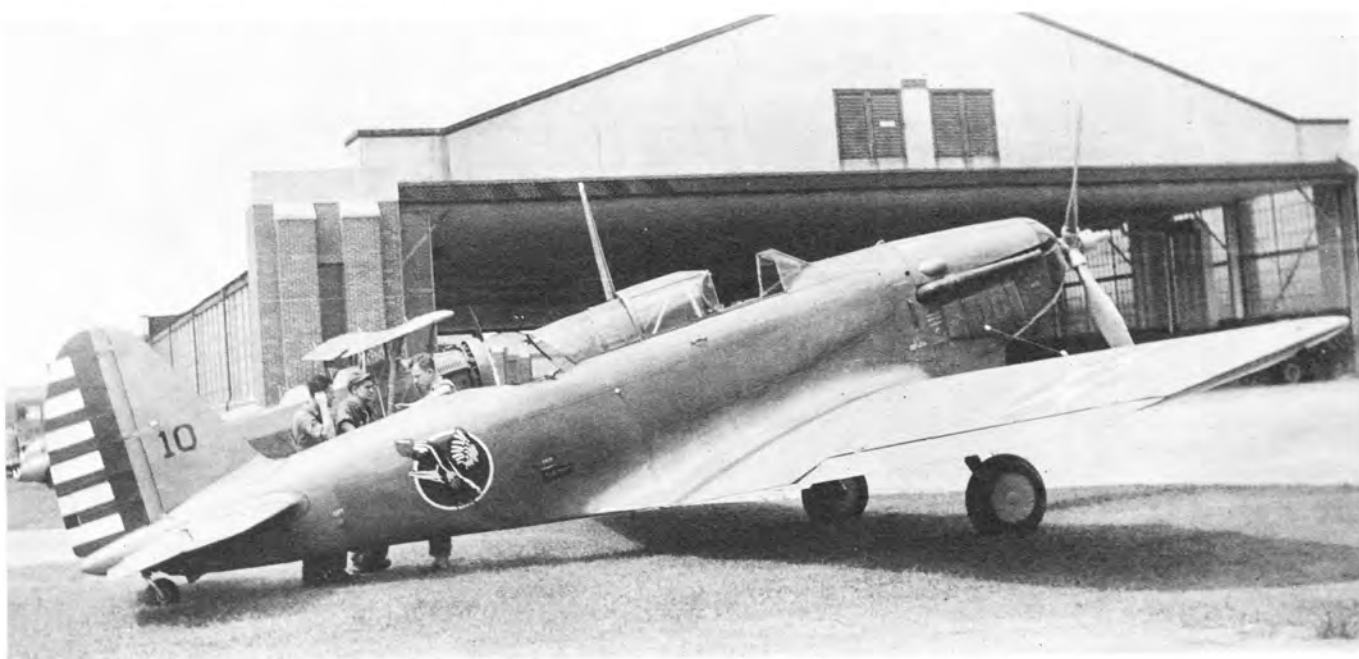
1st Group at George Washington Bi-Centennial Military Tournament, Chicago, June 1932. P-6E's and P-16s. (Cavanagh Coll)



94th Pursuit Squadron Boeing P-12D, serial 31-265, with the Indian Head insignia on the engine cowl. (Cavanagh Coll)



Berliner-Joyce YIP-16 with the 94th Squadron insignia only partially applied to the fuselage. (R. Besecker)



Consolidated PB-2A, serial 35-10, the type which equipped the 27th Pursuit Squadron in 1936-37. (P. Kline)