



THE CIVILIAN PILOT TRAINING PROGRAM AT PARKS AIR COLLEGE

by Terry M. Love

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THE ARMY AIR CORPS IN 1939 WAS more fiction than fact. The U.S. air arm of the Army was ineffectual, to put it mildly. Our aircraft production was increasing but we did not have enough pilots to fly them. The

year of 1939 had the United States with 1,600 aircraft of which very few were modern combat types. The USAAC had 1,300 officers, 18,000 enlisted men and about 3,200 reservists. This was very small when compared to potential enemies like Japan who had at that time about 2.5 million under arms with a ready reserve of almost five million.

General Hap Arnold, in charge of the Army Air Corps, stated later, "The resourcefulness and energy of the American people would have had little effect against our enemies if the Army Air Corps had not begun preparations for war long before Pearl Harbor. By December 7, 1941, we were in low gear, and were shifting into second."

One of the preparations General Arnold was referring to was the CPT or Civilian Pilot Training program. In those dark days just prior to Pearl Harbor, Randolph Field could train about 500 cadets per year, and it would take many years to build another field, but there just was not enough time. The clock had run out on the Army Air Corps. General Arnold was in charge of the pilot training and his back was

against the wall. He had to have lots of trained pilots *now*.

So General Arnold went outside the Air Corps and gathered together operators of civilian flight schools. He asked them if they could train combat aviators for the Army Air Corps, train green men right off the farm, put them into cockpits and teach them to fly. The operators all said that they could. But things were not all that simple. General Arnold told them that the Air Corps could not guarantee payments, because they had no funds, but would they still do it? All answered, "Yes."

Would the operators expand their facilities? Yes, they would do that also.

From the beginning, General Arnold knew that this program was his only hope to get the pilots that he needed, and if this failed, God help us. But the pilots that General Arnold wanted came, not at 500 per year, but at the rate of 50,000 per year.

New flying schools popped up all over the country where good flying weather permitted all-year training like Arizona and Southern California. The Army began sending cadets to these flying

These two BT-9s were based at Parks Air College in the winter of 1939. The students at the college were helping prepare the aircraft for flight.

North American BT-9, 36-028, was the first production BT-9 off the North American line. It had a 400-hp Wright R-975-7 *Whirlwind* engine. It was based at Parks Air College in the late 1930s.

This PT-17 prepares to taxi out for a training flight from Parks Air College.

A student pilot climbs onto his PT-13, 36-019, at Parks Air College for his solo flight on May 28, 1940.

schools as soon as they were ready. In all, 62 civilian flight schools were established within a fairly short period of time. All of this occurred without official authorization from Washington. Training was well under way when Congress eventually authorized the CPT-AAC program. An amazing sidelight to this congressional action was the fact that even though war was right around the corner everyone in the country was aware of it except for Congress. Authorization passed by the narrow margin of just two votes. This was Public Law No. 18, and passed on April 3, 1939.

The main function of the schools was to give the new cadets their primary flight training and then pass the students on to the Army for basic and advanced phases. The immediate goal was for 2,400 pilots per year, but this objective was rapidly expanded as cadets began arriving in ever increasing numbers. In all, 200,000 primary students went through these schools from July 1, 1939, until mid-1944. And all of the skeptics said it could not be done. Never before in the history of mankind had so many men been needed to learn the highly skilled profession of military flying.

It all began in October of 1938 when General Arnold called together the operators of the nation's three most prominent civilian flying schools. They were Theopholis Lee of the Boeing School of Aeronautics, C.C. Mosely of the Curtiss-Wright Technical Institute of Glendale, California, and Oliver Parks of Parks Air College of East St. Louis, Illinois. Parks and the other operators had to beg or borrow the financing to ready their schools and open others to give primary training to the cadets. Arnold assured them that the need was critical and he recognized that they alone could do the job.





These 11 Stearman PT-13s are all prepared for flight at Parks Air College on May 28, 1940. The PT-13 was powered by a 215-hp Lycoming R-680-5 engine.

PT-13s in front of Parks Air College on May 28, 1940, as they are prepared for flight.

The hangar at Parks Air College stored various interesting types of military and civilian aircraft in this May 28, 1940 photograph.

General Arnold came with his staff to inspect Parks Air College early in January 1940, along with CAA Chairman Robert H. Hinckley. They liked what they saw. In May of 1940, 93 of the 166 candidates had completed the flying courses and left for Kelly or Randolph Fields in Texas.

On May 26, 1940, with the Nazi war machine overrunning France, and the future of England in doubt, General Arnold called Oliver Parks and the now seven other school operators of his conviction of the peril faced by the United States. He said that expansion was absolutely necessary, and told each school that he wanted it to triple its size, and he wanted each school to open another school, equal in capacity to the enlarged one. He gave them four months (until September 1940) to go at full strength. He gave them 14 days to select sites and show him detailed plans. Quite a tall order! But Oliver Parks found two excellent sites. They were at Jackson, Mississippi (300 acres), and at Sikeston, Missouri (283 acres). The Air Corps immediately approved the sites. Oliver Parks represented a capital investment





Curtis-Steinberg Airport (later named Bi-State Parks) had a great concrete flight line full of PT-17s and PT-19s on May 28, 1940.

Curtis-Steinberg Airport was very close to Parks Air College and was used by Parks for training. The flight line there held dozens of primary trainers.

This PT-19 is being examined by students at Parks Air College on May 10, 1940. This hangar is now a student lounge at Parks.



of over \$150,000 each. That was quite a large amount of money in those days.

Oliver Parks was still running a flying school at Cahokia, Illinois. This Parks Air College was very small—about 300 students—but the quality was such that it was called the "Harvard of the Air." Parks Air College prepared civilians to run peacetime airlines and now at the same time train cadets to face *Zeros* and *Messerschmitts*. Parks also signed a contract to train groups of 120 new British airmen for a period of five weeks at the Alabama Institute at Tuscaloosa. The first contingent arrived for training on June 7, 1939, and graduated in October.

The training of the new cadets progressed rapidly. Among those who had already finished their training before Pearl Harbor was Francis Gabreski, destined to be one of the leading American aces in the European theatre. Another familiar name who took his primary flying courses at Parks Air College was James H. Doolittle, Jr., son of the world-famous aviator, and great friend of Parks Air College.





This PT-17 collided with another aircraft on the ground at Parks Air College. The incident happened on May 29, 1941.



One of the more unusual visitors to Parks Air College was this Bellanca C-27A Airbus, one of 14 built for the Army Air Corps. It was powered by a 650-hp Pratt & Whitney R-1860 *Hornet* engine. In the background is a North American O-47 observation aircraft.

On April 3, 1940, Col. H.M. McClelland visited Parks Air College in his beautiful new North American AT-6.



The Parks primary training program lasted 12 weeks with new classes beginning every six weeks. But early in 1942, with the pressures of war, the program was reduced to 10 weeks with the new classes beginning every five weeks. This reduction was at the expense of ground training and not flying training.

By October 1942, the Army Air Force pilot requirement had risen to 50,000 annually. Prewar experience had shown that of all applicants only about 20 percent were able to meet the rigid physical and mental standards required and that of these, around 50 percent would graduate. Therefore, to graduate 50,000 pilots annually, 500,000 applicants would be needed to qualify 100,000 entering students. Most of the staff and instructors worked 18 hours a day.



PT-19 (40-2484) number 13 over Curtis-Steinberg Field on a training flight is on the downwind leg in preparation for a landing.

This Fairchild is just airborne on March 10, 1941, at Parks Air College.

A solo student lands at Parks Air College on May 28, 1940, in a slight crosswind.

In July of 1942, with the Germans advancing on all fronts and Rommel capturing Tobruk in North Africa, General Arnold called once again for a large expansion of the cadet program. By this time, Oliver Parks had four flying schools operating at full capacity. Parks and his staff started looking for another site to answer General Arnold's request. They found a flat field of about 640 acres near Cape Girardeau, Missouri. Parks had found his fifth flying school.

On August 1, work began there on the construction of Harris Field—named after a local hero. Because the war had caused a serious shortage of metals for construction, plenty of wood went into the four hangars, 12 barracks, recreation buildings, ground school, hospital, cafeteria, and other facilities—a total of 28 buildings. Three hundred and eight cadets arrived December 28.





This Northrop A-17A is being prepared for flight from Parks Air College in the late fall of 1940.

NC20807 was a Willard-Waco at Parks Air College on September 3, 1939—the same day that Nazi Germany invaded Poland to start World War II.

On January 15, 1941, a Douglas B-18 visited Parks Air College.



By May of 1943, 56 primary civilian pilot training schools existed, but by late 1944 contract schools were phased out when the number of Army Air Force trained pilots were deemed sufficient to win the war. The vast numbers of cadets could not have been trained so quickly without the aid of these civilian schools.

The record compiled by Parks' five schools was phenomenal. At peak operations, over 8,000 cadets a year passed through these training centers. When the last cadets completed their training in October of 1944, more than 37,000 men had entered a Parks institution to receive their primary flight instruction, and over 24,000 had gone on to become commissioned pilots. The magnitude of this number becomes even more apparent when it is realized that more than one-tenth of all aviation cadets entering the Air Corps received their primary training from Parks instructors, and they piled up a total of some 1,250,000 flying hours. Some 2,000 Air Corps mechanics were also trained. The five Parks training fields also trained 4,000



PT-19 (40-2484) over the Illinois countryside on a training flight from Parks Air College. Barely visible under the front cockpit windshield are the letters PARKS AIRPORT.

This Travel Air was used as an instrument trainer at Parks Air College, fall 1940.

British cadets, and several hundred Frenchmen.

When General Arnold talked to Oliver Parks and the other flying school operators in 1939, the Army Air Corps numbered 21,556 men. By July 1944, it had grown 100 times over and reached the amazing total of 2,385,000. The civilian training program had taught more than 100,000 Americans to fly. The accident rate for primary flight was only one for every 43,488 hours in the air. Parks was using 400 to 500 military aircraft in his schools.

Various aircraft were tried in the primary phase, but generally the Stearman PT-17, the Fairchild PT-19 and their variants were most utilized by virtue of their ease of handling and rugged construction. The Stearman PT-17 was the most numerous primary trainer with 10,345 built—4,693 of which were for the Army. This biplane was considered ideal for teaching basic flying maneuvers, acrobatics, and take-offs. The Ryan PT-19 was an easy aircraft to fly and land but its 175-hp *Ranger* engine left it somewhat underpowered. The PT-19A remedied the power situation, being powered by a 200-hp *Ranger* engine. The PT-19A was the most numerous of the PT-19 series with 3,181 built by Fairchild. The PT-19B, of which 917 were built by Fairchild, were similar to the A Model except for being equipped for blind flying training and having a blind flying hood for the front cockpit.

The participation of civilian schools like Parks Air College, in training pilots for service in the Army Air Forces, had four distinct advantages: One for the school itself; one for the cadet; one for the Army Air Forces; and one for the tax-paying public.

A cadet got his introduction to the Army Air Forces in the pleasantest possible surroundings. Civilian instructors really put out more to pull a boy through. A cadet was broken into military life easier through a contract school like Parks.



The employment of civilian instructors, mostly World War I veterans, men of 38 years of age or older, and therefore beyond the age for combat flying, saved upwards of 100,000 Army officers and enlisted men for frontline duty. Otherwise, these servicemen would have spent their wartime service instructing, feeding and housing cadets. The program would, by D-Day in Europe in June of 1944, have saved the Army and the taxpayers over \$250,000,000 a year. •

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