

VISITORS TO PARKS AIR COLLEGE

By Terry Love



In Parks Air College's hangar, where students learned "hands on" aircraft maintenance skills on three Lockheed 18 Lodestar airliners. They belonged to Mid-Continent Airlines. The date on the photograph is March 5, 1942. (All photos from the Parks College collection via the author)

Following his service in the U.S. Marine Corps during WWI, Oliver Lafayette "Lafe" Parks began taking flying lessons from a pilot at Robertson Aircraft Corporation. He received his first pilots rating in January 1926. The certificate, No. 6373, was signed by Orville Wright. Six months later, Parks earned his transport rating. He then bought two planes - a Standard and an Eagle Rock. Parks enjoyed taking visitors for rides over the St. Louis area. Sometimes he earned \$300 a day on these flights. The Standard that Parks flew was less than reliable, and he encountered several incidents that brought him to the realization that his flight training had been too short, too fast, and too narrow.

In May 1927, Charles Lindbergh's historic flight over the Atlantic Ocean to Paris got people thinking about aviation in general and aviation careers in particular. Parks was among them, since he loved to fly.

But aviation at that time was more daredevil than serious business. Most civilians engaged in aviation were "barnstormers" that were usually flying veterans from the war, who flew around the country displaying their skills and giving rides. Most people considered a career in aviation to be a risky venture. Nonetheless, on August 1, 1927, Parks opened up his air college in a rented hangar at Lambert Field, near St. Louis, Missouri. He still had two airplanes - his old Standard and a

Laird Swallow. Harvey Glass became his first student pilot. He gave a free ride to the young man and his girl friend in his Swallow, but it crashed.

In the spring of 1928, Parks bought some acreage in Cahokia, Illinois - just the other side of the river from St. Louis. He had found his school site. He added charter services, educational courses, and sightseeing flights.

Only two years after its opening, Parks Air College made history when it became the nation's first federally approved flying school. Parks has Certificate Number 1. With this distinction in hand, Parks weathered the Great Depression and even continued to expand his Air College that was now offering college credits and degrees.

As the premier aviation school in the country, Parks attracted lots of aviation-related visitors during the Depression of the 1930s and early 1940s. Virtually every famous pilot (Jimmy Doolittle, Roscoe Turner, Amelia Earhart, etc.) during this era made Parks Air College a stopover on their trip, or their destination. Therefore, a lot of interesting flight equipment came along with them. Some of their visits were captured on film.

As far as I know, very few, if any, of the photographs of visitors to Parks have ever been published before.



The grass airfield next to Parks Air College was host to a huge variety of visiting aircraft – both civilian and military. It was a great cross-country stop. Here in the late 1930s, a Bellanca C-27A Airbus (one of only 14 built for the U.S. Army Air Corps) is parked next to a North American O-47 observation aircraft.



It was not unusual for large flights of aircraft to stop by. These Douglas O-38Es visited Parks Air College and are now getting ready for takeoff in the late 1930s.





ABOVE: Another Mid-Continent Airlines Lockheed 18 Lodestar visiting Parks Air College on March 5, 1942. It appears to be about ready for rollout. Mid-Continent Airlines merged into Braniff Airways in 1952. They were headquartered in Kansas City. Previously they were named Hanford Airways. At the time of this photograph, Mid-Continent Airlines operated St. Louis to Des Moines, and then points north and south.

UPPER MIDDLE: On a cold, miserable day, at least two North American BT-9s visited Parks Air College. The pilots are shown here in their heavy leather flying suits. A Parks student assists with the pilot's parachute on the front of the wing.



LOWER MIDDLE: A Parks Air College student is learning what powers a Lockheed 18 Lodestar. The visiting Mid-Continent Airlines Lockheed was undergoing a "heavy" check at the time this photo was taken on March 5, 1942, just before all of the airline's aircraft were taken over by the military.



BELOW: North American BT-9, s/n 36-28, is taxiing out to the airfield at Parks Air College for takeoff in the late 1930s. These were very colorful aircraft with yellow wings and tails, red, white and blue rudders, and a blue fuselage. This BT-9 was the first production ship off of the North American line.





ABOVE: A bare-metal Northrop A-17A visited Parks Air College in the fall of 1940. Seen here running up its engine in front of a Parks Air College hangar.

MIDDLE LEFT: Northrop A-17A pilot of the aircraft above poses for a photograph next to his aircraft.

MIDDLE RIGHT: Col. Harold M. McClelland, later Major General, poses in front of his North American AT-6, s/n 40-722. McClelland later became Deputy Commander of MATS – Military Air Transport Service.

LOWER MIDDLE: North American AT-6, s/n 40-0722, prepares for takeoff on April 3, 1940. In the background are various basic training aircraft that were involved in the Parks Air College CPTP.

BELOW: Col. H.M. McClelland visited Parks Air College in his new North American AT-6.





ABOVE: This Fairchild 24 is just airborne after visiting Parks Air College on March 10, 1941.

UPPER MIDDLE: A really rare visitor to Parks Air College is this Fokker F-32. It is unknown why it was there, but it sure drew a crowd of people.



LOWER MIDDLE: NC20907 was a Waco YPF-7 at Parks Air College on September 3, 1939, – the two days after Nazi Germany invaded Poland to start WWII.



BELOW: On June 1, 1940, this Howard DGA-15P visited Parks Air College. The crew is in their seats and about ready to go. A small Parks Air College trainer can be seen in the background. The significance of the star and crescent on the tail of the Parks aircraft is unknown.





ABOVE: In the fall of 1940, this Douglas B-23 rests in front of the Parks Air College hangar. Only 38 B-23s were built.



LEFT: In October 1945, this B-17G-60-BO, s/n 42-102829, stopped by Parks Air College on its way to Altus, Okla., where it would be written off and scrapped. The B-17 has no guns or Norden bomb sight on board. By comparison for size, the Ercoupe sets under the wing of the Fortress. The Ercoupe 415 still exists (unlike the B-17) and is owned by Louis Falgoust of Provo, Utah.



BOTTOM LEFT: Although this looks like a North American AT-6, it is not one! It is actually a North American P-64. It was one of six built for the Thai Air Force, but taken over by the U.S. Army Air Corps. Next to the sergeant's face is a tube where the machine gun barrel went. It was 1941 when this P-64 visited Parks Air College.

About the Author

This is Terry's eighth article for the *AAHS Journal* over the years. Terry retired from Northwest Airlines after about 35 years of service. Aviation historian Terry Love has loved aviation since age three when he had his first flight in a Republic SeaBee. He flew with the U.S. Army in Vietnam for two tours in Bell UH-1 Hueys, deHavilland U-6A Beavers and deHavilland U-1A Otters. Terry earned his B.S. degree in Aeronautics from Parks College in April 1971 with honors. Terry worked for North Central Airlines which became Republic Airlines and then merged into Northwest Airlines. He earned his Master's Degree (MBA) in 1976 from the University of Detroit. He has written 16 books now – all on aviation, airplanes, or history, and numerous magazine articles. His first published article with *AAHS Journal* was the Winter 1977 issue.



ABOVE: The only markings seen on this Douglas B-18 Bolo are the rudder markings of red, white and blue. Some Parks Air College buildings are barely visible in the background. The date of the photograph is January 15, 1941.

UPPER MIDDLE: Parks Air College students are seen here checking out visiting Douglas O-38As from the 110th Observation Squadron across the Mississippi River in St. Louis, Missouri. The O-38 was operated by the 110th Observation Squadron from 1933 until 1938. **BELOW:** This Northrop A-17A, in full military markings, visited Parks Air College in the fall of 1940. The pilot of the A-17 appears to be near the prop blades explaining the aircraft to some students.



LOWER MIDDLE: This Travel Air was used as an instrument trainer at Parks Air College in the fall of 1940.

BELOW: One of the hangars at Parks Air College is shown here on May 28, 1940. Parks Air College handled all sorts of military and civilian aircraft. Parks was also in the Civilian Pilot Training Program of the U.S. Army Air Corps. (See AAHS Journal, Summer 1994, for the full story of the CPTP.) This is one reason why the hangar contains so many PT-13s.

