



Wings Over Erie

Introduction

From the earliest days, humans have dreamed of flying and have attempted to achieve it. Inventors of the 15th century through the 19th century flew using artificial wings, gliders, airships (such as blimps) and hot air balloons. The invention of the airplane at the turn of the 20th century was a fundamental turning point in history. It redefined the way wars are fought; revolutionized travel and commerce; and fueled the process of technological change. Flight is one of humankind's most significant accomplishments.

Several Erie County natives have made important contributions to the history of aeronautics, and although the list is extensive, we have chosen to examine three of Erie's unsung heroes of aviation: Earle Sandt, Phil Cochran and John Boyd. So...sit back, fasten your seatbelt and get ready to explore the history of aviation in Erie County!

Earle Sandt: First American International Pilot

Lewis Earle Sandt is known regionally as a suburb aviator and an aeronautics pioneer, but he did not begin his life with an interest in aviation. He was born May 18, 1888 in Brookville, PA, and moved to Erie in 1908 with his brother Walter. The two brothers purchased a storage garage at 609-613 French Street, where they repaired automobiles and motorcycles. Sandt developed an interest in the mechanics of aviation through his work on automobile and motorcycle engines, and his interest in flying led him to attend a flight-training course in Hammondsport, NY in September 1911.

After a difficult start, Sandt's flying career truly "took off." Once receiving six weeks of training from Glenn Curtiss, an aviation pioneer known for having produced and sold the first private aircraft in the United States and instructing Blanche Stuart Scott – the first American female pilot, Sandt purchased his first airplane from the Curtiss factory for \$4,500. His first public flight in Erie occurred the day before Thanksgiving in 1911, when he successfully traveled 45 feet along the Erie lakefront before crashing. This was just the first in a series of public flying demonstrations. In the years following this initial disastrous public flight (1911 – 1912), Sandt flew many public exhibitions in Erie, including his historic flight across Lake Erie.

Hailed by the press as the first American to land an airplane in a foreign country, Earle Sandt is best known for making the first flight across Lake Erie on February 20, 1912. Sandt made arrangements to fly 36 miles across the lake to Long Point, Ontario in the winter of 1911/1912. At 2:30 in the afternoon his plane took off from the frozen bay at the foot of State Street. Sandt's plane ran out of fuel during his return trip to Erie even though he carried onboard two full motorcycle gas tanks, and was forced to make an emergency landing on the ice five miles out from North East, PA. Sandt walked to shore safely, however, when he returned to where his plane was left, he discovered it had slipped under the ice and sank to the bottom of Lake Erie. Newspapers around the world praised Sandt for his amazing feat, and the citizens of Erie gave him a grand celebration – he was paraded up and down State Street with a large brass band.

Although best known for his flight across Lake Erie, Sandt had several other great achievements. Sandt experienced another first just four months later on June 15th, when he became the first person to fly over the city of Pittsburgh. In August 1912 Sandt became the first person to fly airmail in the state of Ohio.

Sandt performed publicly and continued to perfect his aviation skills until his life ended suddenly in 1913. Sandt died June 22, 1913 from lockjaw, or Tetanus. He developed lockjaw after breaking his leg in a plane crash at the Grove City, PA “June Festival.” The world can only speculate what Sandt could have accomplished if he had lived a full life.

An Erie Son

Colonel John Richard Boyd is known as being an upstanding member and formidable pilot of the United States Air Force, a pioneer military theorist who forever changed aerial warfare and an aeronautical engineer. Born in Erie, PA on January 23, 1927, Boyd demonstrated his desire to fly and a deep affection for aircraft at an early age. In the fifth grade, Boyd was given the opportunity to fly with a family friend, which confirmed his lifelong calling. From that day forth, he counted the days to his high school graduation – the day he could enlist in the air corps.

Boyd’s military career, a successful career marked by engineering accomplishments and never-before-used military strategies, began with his service during World War II and ended during the mid 1970s. Following graduation, he enlisted in the air corps for the duration of the war plus an additional six months. Discharged on January 7, 1947, Boyd returned to Erie. In 1954 Boyd became known as “40 Second Boyd,” a title earned because of his ability to defeat any pilot in simulated air-to-air combat in less than forty seconds. He penned the Aerial Attack Manual in 1954 as well, which offered new ideas for aerial warfare. The manual taught that flying was a precise science that could be applied to all combat scenarios for all pilots. Previous to the manual it was believed flying was an art form unique to each pilot. Boyd’s greatest accomplishments, however, include his work with the F-15 and the F-16. He revolutionized their design and construction. In 1974, Boyd was assigned to the Development Planning Project and, for the first time in U.S. Air Force history, guidelines were set for matching planning needs with an available budget. Col. Boyd retired from the Air Force a well-decorated and well-known military legend on August 31, 1975.

While Col. Boyd made significant advancements in aerial warfare during active service, he contributed to the modernization of ground combat following his retirement. The Observation Orientation Decision Action theory designed by Boyd serves as a blueprint for how modern wars are planned and standardized decision-making. He continued to consult with the military until his death in 1997. He was (and is) mourned by a proud hometown and a grateful military.

Look For It! A Memorial for a World War II Hero

On Sunday, November 11, 2001 a Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission marker was placed at the corner of State Street and Glenwood Park Avenue in memory of Erie native and WWII flying ace Colonel Phil Cochran (1910 – 1079). The memorial marker reads, “Cochran distinguished himself as a daring pilot commanding P-40 fighter planes in N. Africa and as the colorful leader of the 1st Air Commandos during the invasion of Burma. He became a colonel at the age of 33 and earned such honors as the Distinguished Service Medal and British Distinguished Service Order. The Erie native inspired cartoon characters Flip Corkin in *Terry & the Pirates* and Gen. Philerie in *Steve Canyon*.”

An Unusual Spectacle

In the summer of 1906 Floyd Owens made the first flight over Erie County. Owens exhibited his oval-shaped dirigible, a lighter-than-air aircraft that could be steered and propelled through the air, at Four Mile Creek Park. (Lawrence Park Golf Club occupies the site of Four Mile Creek Park today.) The airship was powered by a small one-cylinder gas engine.

As word of the approaching airship spread throughout the City of Erie, daily life came to a standstill, and curious residents rushed to the park to get a better view of Owens' flying machine. Telescopes, field glasses and even opera glasses were used to sneak a peek at the unusual device. Owens' flight remained the talk-of-the-town for several days.

Aviation Trivia

- ▶ The first airplane flew over Corry on September 28, 1911. Corry residents were permitted to leave work and school to witness the historic event.

- ▶ Frank Lucy operated the Corry Airport for many years. When Niel Armstrong was fourteen years old, Lucy gave him flying instruction.

- ▶ An airplane landing strip was located along Peach Street on the land now occupied by the Millcreek Mall. The landing strip and surrounding farmlands were leveled during the 1970s when construction of the mall began.

Erie International Airport – Tom Ridge Field

Erie International Airport – Tom Ridge Field has grown tremendously since its humble beginning as a simple landing strip. The Erie International Airport can trace its roots to Griswold Landing Field, a modest complex located at the intersection of West 12th Street and Asbury Road in Millcreek Township, which was constructed in 1925. The Erie Municipal Airport Authority formed in 1951 to help Erie accommodate increased demand for flight services. During the 1950s federal money and a local bond issue was used to fund airport improvements and expansion. The airport's redesign included a new control tower and a modern passenger terminal. Commercial air service began in 1953 when Allegheny and Capital Airlines offered regular flight schedules. A U.S. Customs Service building was added in 1968 – the same year the airport was designated an "international" airport. After substantial renovation, the airport was renamed Tom Ridge Field in 2000. Today, four carriers (Continental Connection, Delta/Comair, Northwest and US Airways) provide regional customers air service, and the Erie Municipal Airport Authority plans to continue a runway expansion project during the next few years.