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TRAINING ARMY PILOTS IN LAKELAND AND AVON PARK DURING WORLD WAR II: A PHOTO ESSAY

By Waneta Sage-Gagne

In 1938, while most of Europe engaged in efforts to mobilize and strengthen their armed forces against the imposing Axis threat, the United States stood outnumbered by almost three to one in air force equipment and manpower. General Henry (“Hap”) Arnold, Chief of the Army Air Forces (AAF) at that time, realized the critical need for expansion of American air power and the urgency of the task. Unfortunately, traditional means could not produce trained pilots in the numbers and in the time that would make a significant difference. All AAF training was done in San Antonio, Texas, at Randolph Field which could only produce about 500 pilots a year. Since building another Army installation would take too long, General Arnold devised a plan using existing private schools and enlisting the help of civilians.¹

Pilot training schools or flying schools were scattered all across America, and many were operated by veteran pilots from World War I or young aviation businessmen. In most cases these schools had good track records for successfully training pilots with a core group of instructors on staff. The plan to use them to train Army pilots made good sense, but Arnold failed to persuade Congress to provide funding for this joint venture when he first proposed it in January 1939. Nevertheless, Arnold pushed ahead.

By April 1939 Arnold had invited eight operators of flying schools to Washington and outlined his plan to them. In brief the Army would provide the cadets, the planes and the curriculum; Army personnel would be stationed at each school, including a commanding officer for discipline and oversight of the program. All flight and ground school instruction would be given by civilian instructors previously trained by the Army. Additionally, the civilian schools would provide plane maintenance, fuel, living quarters, office space, hospital and medical services.² Since the plan had not been funded by Congress, Arnold asked these school operators to cooperate with the understanding that the entire financial risk would be theirs if the plan did not eventually win Congressional approval. All eight of the operators agreed to proceed without funding, and the Civilian Army Air Force Pilot Training Program began.³ By the end of 1939, Congress authorized funding for the venture, and the operators began negotiating contracts.

E.J. Sias was one of the original flying school operators that General Arnold had invited to Washington. Sias owned the Lincoln Airplane and Flying School in Lincoln, Nebraska, which began training cadets in 1939. Unfortunately, many problems arose not only with the management of the school and the flight instructors but also with the Nebraska weather which was completely unsuitable for such a training operation. The government recommended that Sias move the school, preferably to one of the southern states which had a more desirable climate. Of the many sites inspected in the southeastern United States, officials selected the city of Lakeland, Florida, “because of its excellent airport facilities, schools, recreational facilities, water and light
plants, but mainly because of its climatic advantages.” Sias negotiated with the Lakeland City Commission in May 1940, and the transfer of operations from Lincoln began in August of that year. By September 18, 1940, the first class to train in Lakeland had begun, and the school changed its name to the Lakeland School of Aeronautics.

In the process of relocating Sias sold the Lakeland school in July 1940 to two experienced aviation businessmen, Hal Darr and Albert I. Lodwick. Darr, owner and operator of the Chicago School of Aeronautics, later sold his half of the Lakeland School and opened two more training schools on his own in Georgia. Lodwick, one of America’s most prestigious businessmen in aviation, was senior vice president and director of the Aviation Manufacturing Company, and he had recently resigned as president of the Stinson Aircraft Company and assistant to the president of the Curtiss-Wright Company. One of his best known aviation accomplishments was his management of Howard Hughes’ recordbreaking trip around the world in 1938. In 1941 he bought Darr’s half of the Lakeland School and moved to Lakeland permanently. After one year of success, Lodwick changed the name of the school to the Lodwick School of Aeronautics.

The Lakeland school was situated on the site of the former municipal airport, on the banks of Lake Parker. The initial contract with the city included the only building on that site, a steel hanger, which the city was to move at a later date to another site for the school. When students first arrived in 1940, they were temporarily housed in the Thelma Hotel, and the administrative offices were also in downtown Lakeland in the basement of the New Florida Hotel. A new barracks was completed in December 1940, and a second barracks and administration building were added by December 1941.

The normal course of study at these primary training schools lasted ten weeks and included classes in meteorology, mathematics, map reading, theory of flight, aircraft and engine construction as well as training for flight in link trainers and actual flying time. After the first five weeks the next group of cadets would arrive which meant every five weeks there was turnover. By 1941 the British also realized that they could not produce enough trained pilots as quickly as needed. In that same year under an agreement between the British and the AAF, a select group of primary training schools in America was designated to assist in training. The Lakeland school began training Royal Air Force cadets that year and by 1943 had graduated more than 1,200 of them.

At the same time that Lodwick was making a success of the Lakeland school, he negotiated to open and operate a second school in Avon Park, Florida, approximately forty miles southeast of Lakeland. Lodwick signed a contract with the city of Avon Park in July 1941, and the first cadets arrived in October. The new school, named Lodwick Aviation Military Academy, was located in the former Highlands Hotel, which became a barracks. The former Highland Lakes Country Club and Casino, on the banks of Lake Lillian in Hardee County, served as ground school. The municipal airport of Avon Park was used by the training school, and more fields were added at Lodwick’s expense over the years to accommodate their high usage. Between September 1941 and February 1942, Lodwick also constructed two steel hangers. The training fields and hangars were located two miles from the barracks, and a shuttle carried the cadets back and forth.
These two civilian schools in central Florida proved remarkably successful. The Lakeland facility was operational from September 1940 through August 1945. It became the first primary school established in the Eastern Flying Training Command, and it was the last one to close. It graduated forty-nine classes, containing a total of 8,825 pilots, of whom 1,327 were British. The Avon Park school ran from October 1941 through June 1944, and it graduated more than 2,800 cadets. The success of the schools can be measured not only by the number of graduates but also by the remarkable cooperation between civilians and the armed services. The financial impact on the surrounding communities of each school was also great, as each installation hired hundreds of laborers for construction, maintenance and administration. Clearly the business acumen of a man like Albert Lodwick had more to do with the successful operation of these schools than anything else. His ability to manage these operations, while remaining actively involved in many aspects of the aviation industry elsewhere, was the greatest tribute to his expertise.

For five years Albert Lodwick brought the war home to two small communities in Florida. Thousands of strangers from all over America and other nations came to these towns and called them home for a short time. Their presence constituted for many local residents their only contact with the war effort, and for most, having these schools in their hometown was a real source of pride and a way of participating in a truly patriotic endeavor.

The photographs that follow were all taken at the two Lodwick schools between 1941 and 1945. Most were taken by staff photographers retained by Lodwick for publicity purposes or by Army personnel who were assigned to document the history of the schools. This photo collection (P.G. #700) and corresponding textual materials (R.G. #2700) are part of the special collections of the Lakeland Public Library.
Albert Irvin Lodwick (1904-1961), one of the most successful aviation businessmen during the 1930s and 1940s, purchased and successfully ran the Lodwick School of Aeronautics in Lakeland and the Lodwick Aviation Military Academy in Avon Park, which served as primary training schools for the United States Army Air Force during World War II.
Several Stearman primary training planes (P.T. 13s) parked in front of one of the original hangars of the Lakeland School of Aeronautics in 1941.

One of the two original barracks under construction at the Lodwick School of Aeronautics. The school employed hundreds of civilians when in operation and ongoing construction also provided many jobs for the community.
A 1942 aerial view of the Lodwick School of Aeronautics in Lakeland shortly after completion of the original two barracks (two long buildings lower right). The former Municipal Airport’s hangar (top left) was later moved to stand alongside the newly built barracks that are in the foreground.

The standard pieces of equipment that a young cadet would receive upon entering a flying school were a Gosport flying helmet, Air Corps regulation goggles, an Aberdeen (cover-all type) flying suit and a leather jacket (not shown). This cadet is also wearing his parachute.
A cadet working with a simulator control panel. The ground school instruction during the ten-week training program required proficiency in all technical aspects of primary type aircraft.

These cadets at the Lakeland School of Aeronautics display their rope climbing abilities, a part of the rigid physical training that accompanied flight training.
The Link Training Department at the Lodwick School of Aeronautics contained twelve link trainer units for the students. Each unit simulated flight including radio usage as well as all aspects of the plane’s equipment.

A barracks of the Lodwick School of Aeronautics on the shores of Lake Parker. The choice of Lakeland as a site for the flight training school was based on climate, since flying was possible during some part of the day for an average of three hundred and sixty days a year.
In 1941 the Lodwick School of Aeronautics in Lakeland was only one of a handful of civilian training schools in the United States providing primary flight training for Royal Air Force cadets. Here in front of one one of the barracks at the Lakeland school, a few of the cadets clown for the camera.

In 1941, English cadets were introduced to baseball and hot dogs at a party staged at the city park by members of the Lakeland Jaycees to help the new students get acquainted with the community.
The view from the front porch of the barracks at Lodwick Aviation Military Academy, which was located in the former Highlands Hotel, overlooking Lake Lillian in Avon Park. This training school was opened in 1941.

The lobby of the former Highlands Hotel served as a recreation area. The hotel had 120 rooms with lake views and capacity for 234 cadets.
The mess hall at Lodwick Aviation Military Academy in Avon Park also served as a gathering place for such functions as graduations.

Sandwiched between two lakes, the former Highlands Hotel housed the barracks of the Lodwick Aviation Military Academy in Avon Park. The beautifully landscaped grounds bordered Lake Lillian which cadets used for swimming and other recreational activities.
These civilian employees who worked in the mess hall at the Lodwick School of Aeronautics were some of the hundreds of people who found employment at the schools.

Both pilot training schools remained involved with the local communities. On special occasions cadets, in full uniform, paraded through Lakeland and Avon Park. This picture was taken on the corner of Tennessee Avenue and East Main Street in Lakeland.
This view of a young cadet reflects the sense of patriotism that permeated the pilot training schools.

During the war employers commonly posted the names of employees who went into military. At the pilot training school this boosted moral and helped create better relations between civilians and Army personnel.

2 *History of 60th Flying Training Detachment, A. A. F. Contract Pilot School (Primary), Lodwick School of Aeronautics, Inc., Lakeland, Florida (1940-1944)*, 43.


4 *History of 60th Flying Training Detachment*, 5.

5 Ibid., Appendix III.

6 *History of the 2160th A. A. F. Base Unit (Contract Pilot School, Primary), Lakeland, Florida, (1 February-30 June, 1944)*, 12.

7 *61st Flight Training Detachment Army Air Force Contract Pilot School (Primary), Lodwick Aviation Military Academy, Avon Park, Florida (1941-1943)*, Appendix I.

8 *History of the 2160th A. A. F. Base Unit*, Appendix IVa.