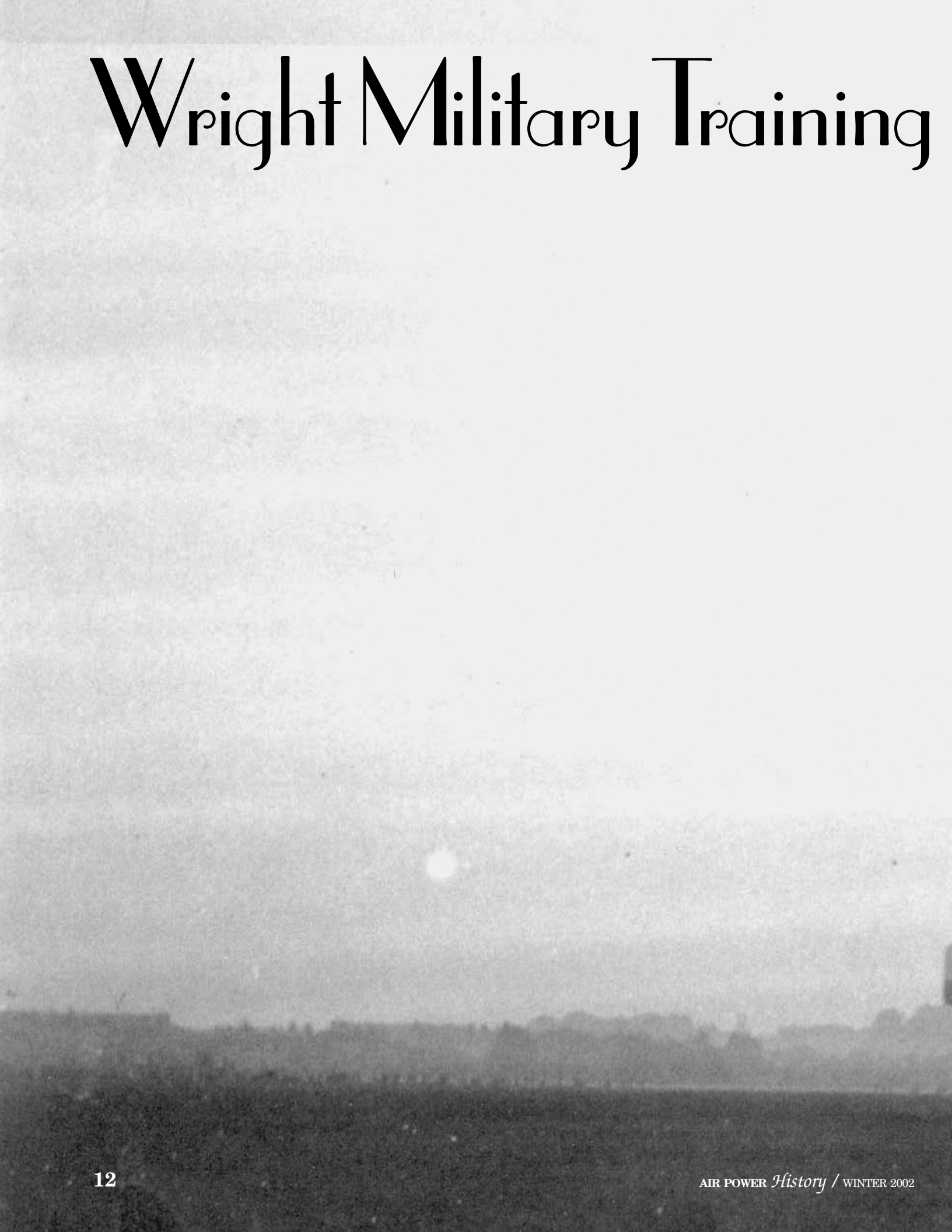
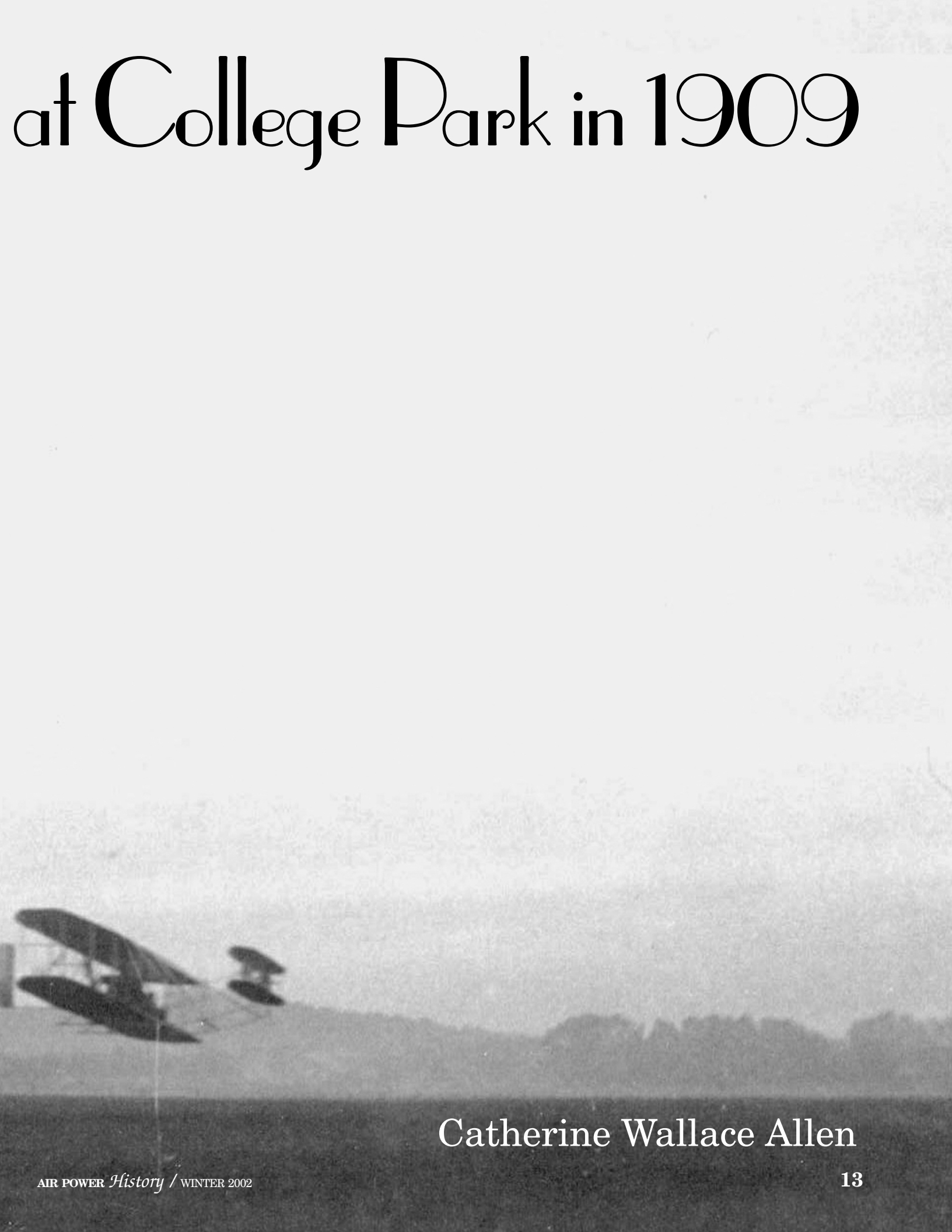
Wright Military Training



at College Park in 1909



Catherine Wallace Allen

(Overleaf) Numerous times during flight training at College Park, Lts. Lahm or Humphreys or Wilbur Wright would continue flying until well past sunset. *(Courtesy Wright State University Special Collections.)*

(Below) Wilbur Wright in shirt sleeves with his two new students, Lts. Frederic Humphreys and Frank Lahrn, surveying the field at College Park prior to flight training. *(US Air Force Collection, National Archives (RG342)*

Nestled among a growing industrial area and residential community in the heart of College Park, Maryland is a small airport of 40 acres. Looking no different than any other small airport of its size, the "College Park Airport" has a wonderful story to tell of the growing years of early aviation. Few would suspect that this beautiful field with about 100 modern aircraft was once witness to the triumphs and tragedies surrounding the birth of military aviation and those amazing pilots who captivated the nation's attention in the first decade of the twentieth century.

In the summer of 1909, the country could not seem to get enough of the two brothers who had done what no one had believed could be done. The brothers, Wilbur and Orville Wright, had flown! And though this marvelous feat had occurred nearly six years previously, the Wrights were pleased that after much hard work to gain recognition for their achievement, their success was now splashed across the headlines of almost every major newspaper here and abroad.

After the Wrights met the last specification of the government's contract at Fort Myer, Virginia, the military accepted its first aeroplane into the inventory of the U.S. Army on August 2, 1909.

There remained one final condition of the Wright brothers' military contract and that was the training of two military officers to fly the machine. On August 6, the Acting Chief Corps Signal Officer of the Army, informed the American Aeronaut, that it was probable that a field other than that of Fort Myer would be selected for this instruction, although a field had not yet been secured. This news was evidently a relief to the Post Commander of Fort Myer because he felt the flights and the crowds disrupted daily life on the drill field.[1]

Lt. Frank Lahm of the Cavalry, had been detailed to the Aeronautical Board—formed to oversee the Wrights' acceptance trials—and assisted Orville Wright at Fort Myer during the military trials. Lahm was a noted balloonist and winner of the first Gordon Bennett Balloon Race and trophy (1906). Lahm had received much of the credit for the establishment of the Aeronautical Division, since many felt that it was developed "as a result of the pride and interest aroused when he won the Gordon Bennett Balloon race against the much more experienced aeronauts of Europe."[2]

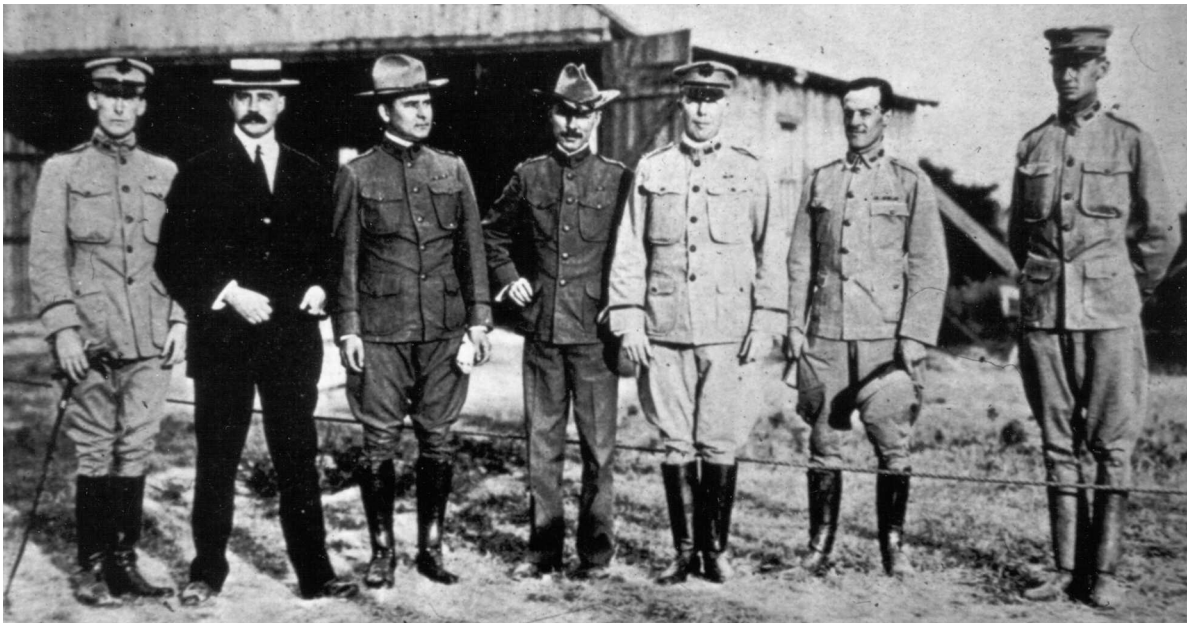
Lahm had made many free balloon ascents around the Washington, D.C. area in an effort to locate a more suitable airfield for the training. The site that had most caught his eye during these trips was a large, very flat open field in the town of College Park, Maryland, adjacent to the Maryland Agricultural College—now the University of Maryland.

Bounded on one side by the B & O Railroad tracks, the field was near to the electric rail line, and adjacent to a thriving town that would be important for providing lodging and supplies for the officers.

Lahm had been selected as one of the two pilots to receive training by Wilbur Wright, the other was Lt. Frederic Humphreys. Humphreys was also a member of the Aeronautical Board. Both men accompanied Wilbur Wright to inspect the field and they deemed it suitable for flying.

On August 25, 1909, the Army Quartermaster signed a renewable lease for 160 acres of property with one of the fields owners, Mr. Edward A. New-

Catherine Allen has been involved in aviation history since 1980 when, as a historian for the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission's Department of Parks and Recreation, she was asked to create a museum for College Park Airport. With her master's degree in museum studies from The George Washington University, Ms. Allen assembled a wonderful collection of aviation artifacts, memorabilia, and photos that quickly outgrew their original site. When the museum opened in 1998, in a new 27,000 square feet facility, Ms. Allen was named its director. She has served as a mentor to numerous other aviation and history museums and is a frequent speaker on early aviation and the Wright brothers. She is currently working on a book on the history of College Park aviation.



The Aeronautical Board was formed to oversee the Wright Trial and Contract that took place at both Fort Myer and College Park Airfield in 1908 and 1909. *(US Air Force Collection, National Archives (RG342)*

THIS BEAUTIFUL FIELD ... WAS ONCE WITNESS TO ... THE BIRTH OF MILITARY AVIATION

man, for $200 a month. A well and pump were installed in the middle of the field, some trees were removed, and the construction of a building to shelter the aeroplane was approved. By September 18, Major George Squier of the Signal Corps wrote that with the shed nearly complete, the aeroplane, Aeronautical Detachment, and officers to receive instruction in operating the machine would likely go to College Park the following week.[3]

ON OCTOBER 6, THE ARMY'S MILITARY AEROPLANE HAD ALREADY BEEN BROUGHT OVER TO THE NEW FIELD

While awaiting improvements to the airfield, and with Orville off to Europe with sister Katharine, Wilbur made news in New York with another Wright plane. As part of the Hudson-Fulton celebration at the end of September, he made headlines in that populous city with awe-inspiring flights down the Hudson River and around the Statue of Liberty. The tremendous "crowds that lined the Jersey shores of the river, as well as those watching from the assembled battleships over which he flew, gave him a tremendous ovation for his flights."[4] It is doubtful that anyone was left in the country who did not know who the Wrights were after those attention-getting flights.

SOME IN THIS DETACHMENT OF ENLISTED MEN HAD PARTICIPATED IN THE TRIALS AT FORT MYER

Although the Chief Signal Corps Officer had chosen two pilots for instruction at College Park that autumn, Lt. Humphreys was not originally one of the two. Lt. Benjamin Foulois, also a member of the Aeronautical Board, had originally been selected for instruction with Lt. Lahm. It may be remembered that Foulois, keenly interested in the Wrights' flights, had accompanied Orville on several flights while at Fort Myer in both 1908 and 1909 and most recently participated in the final speed test around Shuter's Hill in Alexandria, Virginia, prior to the acceptance of the plane. Foulois was desperate to be one of the Army's first pilots, so it was a shock for him to get word that he was to be sent to Nancy, France, for the International Congress of Aeronautics at the beginning of September. Some have speculated that Foulois' last minute replacement was actually a reprimand for the outspoken opinions and recommendations he had earlier made about the future of military aeronautics, as well as his opinion on the usefulness (or lack thereof) of dirigibles.[5] Foulois' statements were in direct opposition to the prevailing opinions of the Signal Corps. Foulois quickly became enlightened about these facts when it became apparent that his trip was a waste of time since it did not provide his superiors or himself with any information that they did not already know.

By the time that Wilbur returned to College Park, on October 6, the Army's Military aeroplane had already been brought over to the new field on an Army wagon, and was stored in the newly built shed. Ten enlisted men—one corporal and nine privates—were assigned to the training field, to assist Wilbur Wright and his two students. Corporal Herbert Marcus was in charge of the detachment, which included Privates B. T. Hyde, E. O. Eldred, Bert Brown, Roy J. Hart, Eulle P. Gomerlinger, K. L. Kintzel, Bruce Pierce, F. O. Clarke, and Stephen J. Idzorek.

Some in this detachment of enlisted men had participated in the trials at Fort Myer, and some were members of the old balloon squad at that field. Now that the government owned the aeroplane (and it was not the property of the Wrights, as it was at Fort Myer), the enlisted men at College Park had much more responsibility for the aircraft than they did before. They looked after the tower, arranged the starting track with deference to the wind, operated the weight, moved the aeroplane, made a preliminary inspection, tested the working parts, and started the motor. They were also responsible for procuring all the materials needed to make repairs. They were diligent in their work and took a real interest and pride in helping out with this ground-breaking aeronautical work.[6]

When Wilbur was not flying, the enlisted men spent their time practicing telegraphy, which was required of every Signal Corpsman. It was especially important for them "because of the impor-

As two men spin the propellers, Wilbur in typical dress of coat and hat, checks out the engine. *(US Air Force Collection, National Archives (RG342)*

tant work in wireless and other telegraphy which the U. S. Army officers proposed to carry on by means of the airships." The *Washington Evening Star* further went on to say that in order to qualify the men for this work, short telegraph lines had been constructed at the College Park Airfield, with sending and receiving stations at opposite ends of the building and at almost any hour of the day, members of the detachment could be found at the keys of these stations.[7]

The enlisted detachment stayed in the shed, which was twice as big as the shed at Fort Myer. They slept in the rear of the building behind the aeroplane. Behind the shed was a double-wide tent that served as both a kitchen and mess hall. A cook, William Abolin, was hired for them; and a large stove was ordered from Fort Myer.[8]

WILBUR ESTIMATED THAT HE HAD ATTAINED A SPEED OF 55.82 MILES PER HOUR … AND AFTERWARDS PREDICTED THAT HE WOULD SEE AEROPLANES EASILY ATTAINING SPEEDS OF 65-75 MILES PER HOUR

Once the training began, Wright and the two lieutenants stayed at private homes across the railroad tracks in the town of College Park. The two officers stayed in the Eversfield home, with Wilbur next door at E. S. Fletchers, with all of them taking their meals at Mrs. Eversfield's.[9]

The first order of business, once everyone was settled, was to reassemble the biplane that had come from Fort Myer, which Wilbur did in the presence of his students on October 7. They were there as early as seven in the morning adjusting the engine, unpacking crates, and putting together the forward and rear sections of the aeroplane. Just after five in the evening, Wilbur asked Lt. Lahm if he wanted his first lesson in cranking the engine. Lahm, was given this honor because he was in charge of the military detachment at the field. After about eight attempts, the engine sputtered to life to the delight of all those who witnessed it. As it was near to 6 o'clock, Wilbur decided to leave further instruction until the following day.

As Wilbur and the others were packing up, he remarked to the newsmen (who were always standing by ready to record every comment and facial expression of the famous aviator), that he would have loved to take the aeroplane out for a flight. "This is an ideal day for flying", he said. "I would give $100 a day if I could have this kind of weather for flying. He also remarked on the superiority of the College Park field over that of Fort Myer saying that the other was a little dangerous."[10]

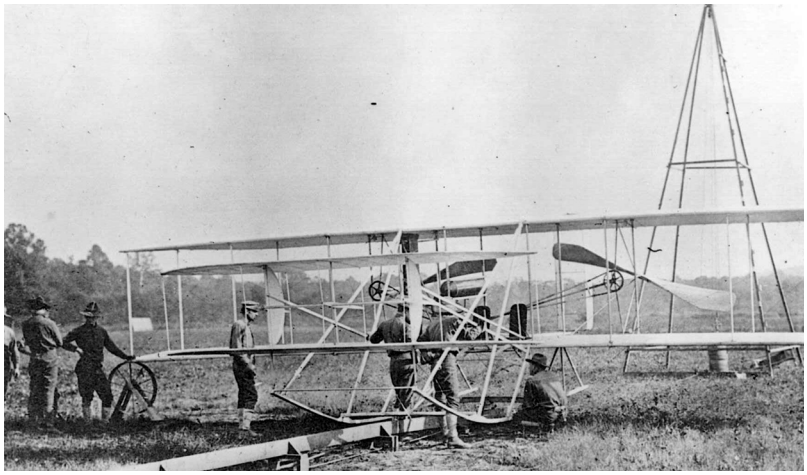
There was a great deal of excitement in the air on October 8, with crowds of people arriving throughout the day in carriages and automobiles. Brig. Gen. James Allen, Chief of the Signal Corps and Major Squier arrived for the first time to inspect the airfield and were greatly pleased with the improvements that had been made. They spent a great deal of time talking about the possibility of holding the 1910 International Air Meet at College Park, a topic that had dominated the news for the past few months. However, it had recently come to the attention of the Baltimore & Washington Aero Clubs—who were making this recommendation—that much to their disappointment College Park was a dry town. If this was to stand in the way of the movement they might have to get the state legislature to "wet it down" for the occasion![11]

After a break for dinner about midday, Wilbur announced to the small crowd who had been waiting around, that there would likely be some flying that afternoon. Sure enough, with ideal conditions continuing, Wilbur took off down the starting rail about 3:30 that afternoon, circled the field for a few minutes and landed. When he was satisfied that the machine was performing up to expectations, he invited Lt. Lahm to join him, and they flew to an altitude of approximately 150 feet, returning after only about a five minute flight. He landed the aeroplane close to the monorail track and then Wilbur took up Lt. Humphreys for a flight of similar duration. And it was with these simple activities, as the papers reported that the College Park Aviation School was opened.

The following day, on October 9, "before many folks in the Capitol [sic] had finished eating breakfast...Wilbur Wright, the imperturbable, had broken one world's record for a heavier-than-air flying machine."[12] With both of his student pilots holding stop watches at either end of a closed-circuit one-kilometer course, Wilbur took off around the College Park field, almost slamming the grass with his quick, low turns. In doing so, however, Wright "broke the world's record for speed in an aeroplane over a 500 meter course, including a turn beyond the course, his time being 58 and 3/5 seconds, or 20 seconds less than that made by Leon Delagrange over a similar course in France."[13]

Making headlines all over the country, witnesses hailed the feat as "a supreme test of navigational ability." Wilbur estimated that he had attained a speed of 55.82 miles per hour in the Army plane and afterwards predicted that he would see aeroplanes easily attaining speeds of 65-75 miles per hour. "This prediction was received with much interest, for the Wright's have not been much given to forecasts."[14]

Earlier in the day, Wright had decided to try another experiment—attempting to take off without the use of the catapult. However, while doing so, he forgot to release the trolley on which the aeroplane rode as it went down the track. After laughing at himself he decided to postpone this effort until after his attempt at the previously mentioned speed record. Once this was accomplished, he was ready to make a second attempt at lifting off without using the starting derrick.



The Wright Military Flyer set up on the launching track. An enlisted man holds one of the two wheels that were placed under the bottom wing to help roll the aero to the track and catapult. *(US Air Force Collection, National Archives (RG342)*

Wilbur easily rose off the rail and flew gracefully across the field, much to the delight and amazement of those who had come to witness these events.

Among these visitors, were the Chinese Prime Minister, Wu Ting Fang and his wife. The minister had arrived at the field in an automobile along with his bodyguard around midday, to witness two of the flights. The Associated Press in many reports of the day related that the Chinese diplomat was extremely curious:

displaying amazement as the internal combustion engine was explained to him and inquiring particularly as to where the fire was. He asked Lt. Humphreys whether he could fly to New York, and ventured the opinion that the machine did not fly high enough, and that it made too much noise for utility in war. At the conclusion of the flights he warmly congratulated Mr. Wright. "When you get it finally perfected, bring it to China," said Mr. Wu.[15]

UP UNTIL OCTOBER 25, WILBUR MADE A TOTAL OF FORTY-SIX FLIGHTS AND ONLY FOURTEEN OF THEM WERE FLIGHTS HE MADE ALONE

IT WAS HARD TO RIVAL THE EXCITEMENT OF TRAINING …EVERYTHING WAS NEW… AND THERE WERE THREE REPORTERS ASSIGNED TO THE AIRFIELD EACH DAY

Quickly sensing his own lack of diplomacy, the prime minister made a point of complimenting Wright on his and his student's fine flights, as well as commenting to the media on the future commercial and military uses of the machine. As usual, Wilbur took it all in stride. He seemed to be delighted at the accomplishments of the day, and how well his two demonstrations had succeeded.

It was experiments like these that occupied Wilbur's time when the he took flights without his students. Up until October 25, Wilbur made a total of forty-six flights and only fourteen of them were flights he made alone. He was constantly evaluating and modifying how he flew the machine and these trials were always taken on flights without any passengers for safety reasons. October 9 and October 11 were the only full days he allowed himself to pilot the machine on every flight, alone.

The students and Wilbur flew nearly every day, except in the case of inclement weather or wind. They also never flew on Sunday, a day of rest when the Wright Brothers always refused to fly in deference to their father, who was a minister.[16] Most of the instruction was done in the very early morning hours, starting typically before 7:00 am, and later in the afternoon when the winds were more favorable. Flights were typically of short duration, with Wilbur allowing his students to take over during the calmer portions of the flight.

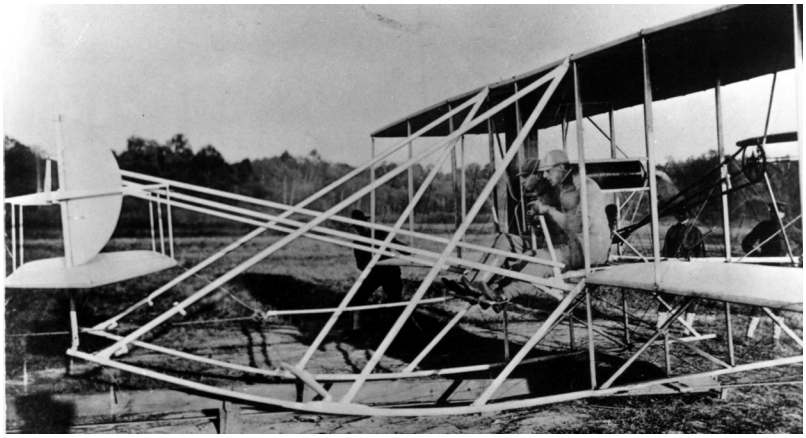
Wilbur also included many "imaginary" flights as part of his training. Sitting in the aeroplane with one of his pupils next to him, he created scenarios for his student to follow. "We are going along now at a fast clip and want to turn to the left," he exclaimed, "and then he pushes forward a lever and yanks the boxlike rudder into a new position...then one of his pupil takes charge of the levers and in imaginary flight, maneuvers the machine up and down, in circles and sharp curves." [17]

Wilbur was quite pleased with the progress of the students so far, and in particular with Lt. Humphreys. Wilbur related that Humphreys was one of the most proficient pupils that he had taught. Wilbur attributed this to the fact that Lt. Humphreys was "a very daring automobile driver and was accustomed to handling a gasoline engine and steering wheel so that his chaperoning an aeroplane through the unobstructed air is not such a trick, seeing that he is used to dodging all sorts of wheeled vehicles on bad Maryland roads."[18]

Lt. Humphreys, for his part, was equally candid about his interest and enthusiasm for flying. After flying unaided through most of a training flight on October 19, he expressed his joy in being able to handle the machine on his own by exclaiming that "it was far better sport to ride in an aeroplane than to take a trip in a balloon or do anything else that was considered exciting."[19]

Certainly, it was hard to rival the excitement of training at the government's new training field. Everything was new, so everything was news, and there were three reporters assigned to the airfield each day to make sure that nothing got past them. Take the events of October 19, that made headlines across the country. After Wilbur had flown with Humphreys that morning for over ten minutes, he was going to make another short flight with Lt. Lahm before breakfast. About four to five minutes into the flight, the engine completely stopped, while Lahm was at the controls. Exhibiting great calm, Wilbur maneuvered the plane down to the field and glided gracefully to a stop. Once on the ground, Lahm told reporters that he could have brought the machine down, but that Wilbur was not taking any chances. Since they had not yet eaten, the typically nonplussed Wilbur had the privates return the plane to the shed as he and the officers walked over to Mrs. Eversfield's for a quick meal.

Upon returning, Wilbur speculated that the magneto had given out and that it would be only a small matter to put it into working condition again. He spent several hours examining the plane and its motor for problems, but he could not determine the problem. Suddenly, with many onlookers and reporters quietly standing by, Wilbur climbed onto the seat of the plane, opened the top on the gas tank and said laughing, "The joke is on me, boys," he said upon discovering there was no fuel in the tank. "The bird won't fly without gasoline."[20]



Wilbur Wright giving Lt. Humphreys instructions while still on the ground. *(US Air Force Collection, National Archives (RG342)*

This was not only an indication of both how seriously the Wrights took their work for the government, but how exaggerated were the stereotypes of the "humorless" Wilbur. Many mistook their quiet determination and perseverance in accomplishing their task as a character flaw or saw them as impersonal and unfriendly. However, the Wrights were doing a job, they were not there to entertain people. They also did not believe their machine should be used recklessly and were very clear about how important, and what a privilege, it was to fly.

CROWDS WERE A CONSTANT PROBLEM AT THE COLLEGE PARK AIRFIELD AS THEY WERE AT FORT MYER

In fact, after calling himself on his mistake with the empty gas tank, Wilbur was asked about the recent reports from Paris that Count de Lambert had flown over the Eiffel Tower in a Wright machine. Wilbur was quick to say that he did not approve of the flight "because there was always the possibility of someone being killed or injured." He said that it was bad enough for the man in the aeroplane to risk his life without endangering the lives of others. He considered such exhibitions useless.[21]

The flights of the following day further served to support Wilbur's comments. In the longest flight of the training, Wilbur had allowed Lt. Lahm to operate the machine for over one-half hour. As they were about to land, with Lahm at the controls, two spectators bounded across the line of flight "narrowly escaping death," as the *Washington Evening Star* reported. Wilbur's shouted warnings were unheeded, and he grabbed the controls and swung the machine sharply to the side. The paper further reported that "in avoiding a catastrophe, Wilbur displayed great skill as an operator. As an orator he distinguished himself for the forceful language in calling down the offending spectators."[22]

WILBUR ... TOOK OFF INTO THE NIGHT SOARING UP TO 150 FEET WHEN HE SUDDENLY SHUT OFF THE ENGINE

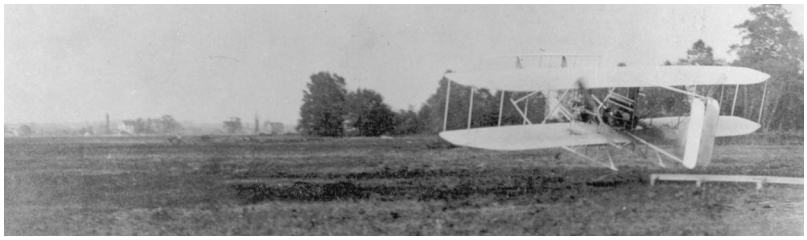
Crowds were a constant problem at the College Park Airfield as they were at Fort Myer, though the remoteness of this aerodrome seemed to initially hold the promise of fewer visitors. There was a strict rule at the airfield against crossing the field while the aeroplane was in the air, and the enlisted men and even the young officer/students found themselves constantly trying to keep the crowds in line.

It was particularly crowded on the 23d when Lt. Benjamin Foulois was finally given an opportunity to get instruction from Wilbur Wright. Foulois had returned from Europe and reported to College Park on October 20th. Although it was not in his contract, Wilbur agreed to give Foulois some initial flight instruction. Lieutenant Humphreys would take over his training after that. After short flights with his other students, Wright took Foulois up for his first flight which lasted about thirteen minutes. Due to his familiarity with the machine, from his Fort Myer flights, Wilbur allowed him to handle the control levers of the machine throughout much of the flight. With the wind springing up soon after, flights were suspended so that the aviators could get ready to attend a luncheon reception given on their behalf at the Maryland Agricultural College. Attending the reception were the luncheons hosts, the president and board of trustees of the college, as well as members of the joint committee of the Washington and Baltimore Aero Clubs, and others who were lobbying for the 1910 International Aeronautical Meet. Afterwards, Thomas Walsh, president of the Washington Aero Club and others accompanied Wilbur back to the airfield to assess for themselves its suitability for the meet and determined it to be ideal.

Two days later, Wilbur made one of his most daring flights when he took off into the night soaring up to 150 feet when he suddenly shut off the engine. As the propellers ceased to spin the crowd below gasped in concern. Everyone watched in awed silence as the skillful Wilbur Wright glided the machine to the ground where the crowd erupted in loud applause. Wilbur explained that such feats were useful to prove that if a similar situation, though unplanned, should occur to the engine with the plane in mid-air, then its pilot would be skilled in getting it safely back to earth.

Wright was not the only one to gain the attention of the country with spectacular feats while at College Park Airfield. On October 26, both Lieutenants Humphreys and Lahm were ready to solo, and the reporters were in attendance! Humphreys was given the first chance to take the plane up. Although Lahm was in command of the school, Humphreys was given the opportunity to solo because it was his turn to fly. "The mere fact that it was his turn was sufficient reason for his being given about the highest honor that his teacher could bestow. Humphreys took to the air at 8:15 in the morning. With perfect control and grace he maneuvered the aeroplane around the field and while making a landing, hurdled over a tree stump, eliciting commendations from Wright and the early morning crowd. Wilbur complimented the new pilot by saying, "I suppose I ought to congratulate you, but it is such a matter of course. You handled the machine very well."[23] Lahm soon followed, staying in the air for about twelve minutes and again handling the machine exceptionally well, with a perfect landing. Both aviators made rather low altitude flights, being no higher than thirty feet, at the request of their instructor who had asked that they stay close to the ground.

Later in the day, each pilot again took to the sky in the presence of hundreds of spectators, who had come to see the government's new military aviators.[24] Lahm made a particularly newsworthy



The Military Flyer as it arises from the monorail at the College Park Airfield, *(US Air Force Collection, National Archives (RG342)*

flight when he took to the rapidly darkening sky , circling for forty minutes in almost total darkness. Spectators at the field could not see the aeroplane, they only knew of its presence by the sound of its engine. Upon landing, Wright asked Lahm, "if he had a good appetite, to which Lahm replied that he came down only because it was suppertime."[25] It was also during this flight that Lahm challenged an express train to a race, keeping up with it the entire way across the airfield. This was a demonstration that Wilbur had done many times before him and always seemed to delight the crowd—this time being no exception!

WILBUR... WAS TO TAKE UP MRS. RALPH VAN DEMAN

Reporters, anxious to elicit further comments from Wilbur on their accomplishments, complained that it was "very difficult to get him to say anything about the progress of his pupils, but he admitted that Lt. Humphreys was handling the machine alone rather sooner than anybody else that he had taught"[26] including Lt. Calderara of Italy, who had formerly held that distinction.

Now that the contract with the military had been fulfilled, Wilbur no doubt gave a sigh of relief and turned his attention toward other things. First among them was to take up Mrs. Ralph Van Deman, a friend of Katharine Wright, who had made numerous requests for Wilbur to take her on a flight.

WILBUR WOULD NOT CONSENT TO THE FLIGHT WITHOUT FIRST GAINING PERMISSION FROM HER HUSBAND, CAPT. VAN DEMAN

Times being what they were, Wilbur would not consent to the flight without first gaining permission from her husband, Capt. Van Deman of the 21st Infantry. A daily visitor to the fields at both Fort Myer and College Park, Mrs. Van Deman stepped up to the plane with little or no trouble. Once seated, she had her long skirts tied for her and they flew down the monorail track with relatively calm winds blowing on the field.

The plane failed to rise. Nine of the enlisted men pulled the aeroplane back down the track with Mrs. Van Deman still seated, so as not to impose upon her. On the second start the mechanical bird soared into the air reaching a high altitude before returning to earth after about only four minutes. Mrs. Van Deman immediately jumped down to a sea of applause. "Oh dear me, it was simply grand," she said to Mr. Wright. "Now I understand why birds sing when they can fly through the air," said Mrs. Van Deman. "It is simply ideal. There was no reason for fear," said Mrs. Van Deman, "with such a skillful navigator as Wilbur Wright at the helm. I had no thought of fear. I did not even think of how long I was up, except that I knew the time was too short."[27]

Capt. Van Deman remarked to reporters of the Washington Evening Star (October 27, 1909) that he was very glad Wilbur had taken her up because this now ensured peace in his family! As can well be imagined, this flight made headlines across the country, with Mrs. Van Deman's words—so characteristic of the era—splashed across the front page of every paper. This flight, on October 26, made her the first woman passenger to fly in the United States.

The following day was a busy day at the airfield. At about 4:00 o'clock in the afternoon, Wilbur offered to take up Capt. Charles Chandler of the Signal Corps. Chandler, a noted balloonist like some of the other officers, was also a member of the Aeronautical Board formed to oversee the Wright trials. (Chandler would later go on to serve as Commanding Officer of the military's first Army Aviation School to be based at College Park in 1911.)

The last flight of this noteworthy day was made by new pilots Lieutenants Humphreys and Lahm —together for their first flight. After flying about 36 minutes while the aeroplane was about ten feet from the ground, one of the guy wires broke from where it was held, and Lt. Humphreys immediately shut off the engine and glided to earth safely, just as he had practiced numerous times before under the instruction of Wilbur Wright.

The need for this type of training was made evident, yet again, three days later when as Humphreys and Foulois were flying, the motor suddenly stopped in mid-flight. This was caused by a gear tooth on the engine magneto breaking off. As reported by the paper:

the flight...came near ending disastrously. Had not Lt. Humphreys, who was at the helm, controlled the biplane with such splendid skill when the motor suddenly came to a stop in midair, the aviator might have had a serious accident.[28]

Wilbur had said on many occasions that training of this sort was mandatory for the safe operation of the aeroplane, and his predictions were proven to be true over and over again.

It took Wilbur only one-half hour to temporarily repair the machine for the flights of the afternoon, which went on until well after 5:00 o'clock with Humphreys again flying with Foulois and allowing the fledgling pilot to operate the machine.

Humphreys was a splendid aviator but news had reached the field the previous day that as an officer of the Army Corps of Engineers, Humphreys' temporary detail to the Signal Corps for the purpose of aeronautical training, had come to an end. There was a great feeling of regret among those at the school on his imminent departure. Wright had already expressed his opinion that Humphreys was one of his best pupils, "and already his ability as an aviator ranks him among the best in the country."[29]

In fact, Lt. Lahm was also only temporarily assigned to the aeronautical unit, being detailed from the Cavalry. The so-called "Manchu Law"

which required all line officers to return to duty with troops in their original branch of the Army after detached service of four years was the reason for these actions.[30] However, both pilots continued to fly and break records until the weather would no longer permit flights, or until their orders detailed them to a new location.

LAHM HAD BEEN RELIEVED FROM DETAIL TO THE SIGNAL CORPS AND ASSIGNED TO THE 7TH CAVALRY …

The officers were not the only ones to leave the College Park Airfield. Wilbur expected to be leaving any day now that his contract with the government was completed. Wilbur felt that he had done all that he set out to do at the College Park field. His students had mastered the handling of the biplane and he was quite confident in their abilities.

On November 2, he confided to several of the reporters that he was considering leaving the airfield that day, however, for some reason he delayed his departure. Though the day was windy, he made two flights, each lasting about two minutes. His last flight with Lt. Lahm was to be the last time he would ever fly in public and one of the last flights he made as a pilot.[31]

The following day, he thought he would take up Lt. George G. Sweet, but it was not to be. Sweet was the naval representative on the Aeronautical Board and had been present during the trials at Fort Myer. After two attempts to take off with Wilbur did not work, Wright gave over the piloting duties to Lt. Lahm. "Lt. Sweet was 17 pounds in excess of any other passenger that had been taken up here"[32] so it was assumed that his weight may have had some relevance to the flight, or lack thereof.

Lahm successfully got off the ground with Sweet for an eight- minute flight. This was Lahm's first opportunity to carry a passenger (who was not a pilot) and allowed Lt. Sweet to become the first naval officer to fly in an aeroplane.

On November 3, Lieutenants Humphreys and Foulois were in the air for over sixty-one minutes, nearly breaking the world's record for carrying a passenger that had been established by Wilbur Wright at Fort Myer. Unfortunately, when Lt. Lahm emerged from the shed and waved to his friend, the young aviator landed thinking Wilbur wanted him to quit. All expressed regret that they had not been more cognizant that a record was so close to being broken.

Following these notable flights Wilbur finally departed the College Park field for New York, to welcome his brother on his return trip from Europe. Newspapers reported that he would likely not return and that his departure showed how completely his students had mastered the handling of the biplane.

On November 5 events came to a close at the airfield, when Lahm and Humphreys were flying together. After making a low turn, the left side of the aeroplane dipped down just enough to touch the ground. In doing so, the plane was forced to cartwheel over, damaging both the right wing of the military flyer and its right skid. Fortunately, neither of its pilots was hurt.

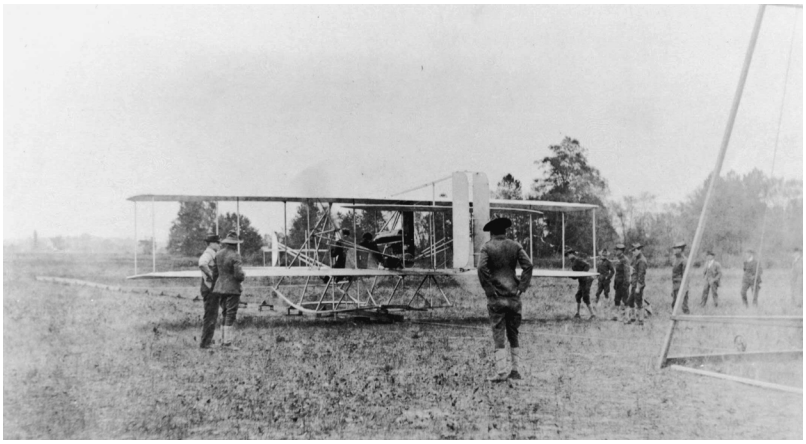
Since Wilbur was no longer present at the field, he was not able to assess the damage or make repairs. In addition, the cloth covering the wing had been badly torn, and as this fabric had to be ordered from the Wright factory in Dayton, Ohio, activities came to a standstill at College Park.

Within two weeks, Lahm had been relieved from detail to the Signal Corps and assigned to the 7th Cavalry at Ft. Riley, Kansas. Humphreys returned to the Washington Barracks, and it was said that he was so upset at this turn of events that he resigned his commission.

Mrs. Ralph Van Deman was a frequent visitor at Ft. Myer and College Park before Wilbur agreed to take her up for a short flight on October 26, 1909. ***(Photo courtesy Wright State University Special Collections.)***

When this nation was called to war in 1917, Humphreys responded and served for several months as an officer of the Aviation Section of the Signal Corps. Of course, it was necessary for him to learn the new type of airplane control that had been adopted years after his first qualifications.[33]

The detachment of enlisted men were first sent to Fort Myer. Later, five of those men were put on temporary duty with Lt. Benjamin Foulois at Sandy Hook, New Jersey, in connection with the proposed tests of firing on captive balloons that was taking place there.[34] On November 20, the Wright plane was removed from College Park to Fort Myer, where it was stored temporarily in the balloon shed.



Wilbur and one of his students readying themselves for a flight as the unit of enlisted men look on. *(Photo courtesy Wright State University Special Collections.)*

In January the plane was put on exhibition at the Electrical Trade Exposition in Chicago and was then shipped to Fort Sam Houston, where Lt. Foulois and nine enlisted men from the aeronautical detachment were ordered there as well and such was the composition of the aeronautical detachment at the close of 1909. Since Foulois was originally with the Signal Corps, he remained as the lone pilot left of the three whom Wilbur had trained. Lieutenants Lahm and Humphreys both had approximately three hours and seven minutes and three hours and four minutes, respectively, in training before soloing. Although Foulois had nearly the same amount of time in the Wright aeroplane (three hours and two minutes) at College Park, he never had an opportunity to solo.

While this was the end of an exciting year of groundbreaking events at the now well-known College Park Airfield, it was only the beginning of the significant role this field would play in aviation history. The military immediately received requests to use the field for flying experiments and activities from numerous would be aviators and civilian aviation companies. Most of these requests were granted as the "lease was to expire in February and it was not probable that it would be renewed."[35] Yet, unbeknownst to the military at the time, they would join these other inventors, aviation enthusiasts, and aviation pioneers in making this airfield the "Field of Firsts."

Returning in 1911, the Signal Corps would inaugurate the nation's first Army Aviation School. Many firsts, significant aviation events and activities would follow. A "Who's Who" of notable aviators and pilots would grace this beautiful airfield throughout its long history, which has operated continuously from 1909 through to the present day. Oh, the stories this airfield could tell! Who knew when it all began, that this airfield just outside of College Park, Maryland, would end up being so vital to the origins of military aviation and the growing years of aviation. ■

HUMPHREYS RETURNED TO THE WASHINGTON BARRACKS, AND ... WAS SO UPSET ... THAT HE RESIGNED HIS COMMISSION

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