

Rush County's Aviation History, Part II

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This is the 12th article in a series of writings to commemorate the Rush County Bicentennial in 2022. My last article was about Milton Wright, the father of Wilbur and Orville Wright. Milton was born and raised in Rush County.

There is much more to write concerning Rush County's aviation history. There are several individuals and events that have shaped that legacy:

Howell brothers – Morris and Harry constructed a sod airstrip near Rushville in 1928. The airport was one mile south of town on U.S. 52. The Howell brothers operated their airport until shortly after WWII (1946). They then leased the airport and restaurant to Dick Thatcher and Lewis Ewbank, and later it was sold to Raymond Walker. The airport facilities burned in February of 1963.

Tat Lower – Tat owned an airport at Richmond before moving back to Rushville during the Great Depression. He based his operation at the Howell Brothers' Airport. He sold the brothers their first airplane, a WACOX 5 biplane with an open cockpit. Lower became the chief mechanic and serviced the planes from Rushville. He was a transport pilot and also flew the mail. During WWII he taught at the Roscoe Turner Training School.

Gene Rummel – Gene operated the Rushville Airport for several years. He conducted flying lessons, charter flights, air freight, and service and maintenance. Gene was a radio engineer for the Indiana State Police and was the engineer for WRCR FM in Rushville. When the Rushville Airport closed, he and the J.E. Dean family had an airport south of Rushville on State Road 3 called the D and R Airpark. Gene's wife Nellena and their son Jack also attained their pilot licenses.

Major August "Gus" Maross – Gus was a native of Steger, Illinois. He served as a pilot during both WWI and WWII. During WWII Gus was Chief of Operations at the troop carrier command base at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, and he flew B47 transports during the war. He had formerly operated an airport near Chicago. He had been an auto racer, auto racer mechanic, barnstormer for five years, air mail flyer, movie flyer, and test pilot. He married Maribel Readle in 1948, and they lived north of Arlington. He and Maribel are buried at Arlington East Hill Cemetery.

Richland or Milroy Airport – The Milroy Airport was located two miles south and one mile east of Richland. It was used by the U.S. Mail Service as an emergency landing field halfway between Cincinnati and Indianapolis. An 80 foot tower light sat on a 40 foot long cement arrow pointing northwest. There was a line of arrows 20 miles apart from Cincinnati to Indianapolis. The Milroy site was used as a training center for ground control operators during WWII. Webb and Frank Moore built an early glider used at the airport. Webb started the Glider Club at Purdue.



Colonel Joseph F. Cotton – Joe was a graduate of Manilla H.S. and married Rema (Cissy) Nelson of Arlington. During WWII his B17 was shot down over Greece, and he spent four months avoiding German capture before being rescued and returned to the U.S. in 1944. He participated in the first tests of the XB-70 Valkyrie at Edwards Air Force Base and flew 62 total flights (19 as pilot and 43 as copilot). The highlight of his XB-70 testing was flying the XB-70A No.2 at Mach 3.08 (approximately 2,340 mph) at an altitude of 72,800 feet on April 12, 1966. The XB-70A is on display at the Wright Patterson Air Force Museum at Dayton, Ohio.

Joe retired from the Air Force in 1968 and spent the next 13 years as a test pilot for United Airlines. He logged 16,000 air hours in 80 different military and civilian aircraft. The bridge on State Road 3 south of Rushville is named in his honor.

Colonel Warren E. “Doc” Buhler – Doc obtained his DVM from Ohio State in 1949. He moved to Rushville where he owned and operated the Buhler Veterinary Hospital from 1950-1980. He had enlisted in the Army as an aviation cadet in October of 1942, and became a B-26 instructor pilot. Doc was assigned to the 394th Bomb Group as a Flight Commander in December of 1943. He flew 65 combat missions over Europe in the B-26 including the Normandy Invasion. His leather flight jacket is on display at the Wright Patterson Museum.

In May 1968, Colonel Buhler was recalled with the 930th Airlift Group. He arrived in Vietnam and assumed the duties of Chief of Veterinary Services. Doc served as Rush County Commissioner from 1988-2000. He was a Sagamore Of The Wabash, and passed away on August 20, 2007, at the age of 86.

Randy Turk – Randy was a New Salem H.S. graduate. He was a fighter pilot and had a 20 year career in the Air Force. His second career was in education where he was a math teacher, coach and principal. For 15 years he was a graduate school professor at Wichita State University. He wrote the book Mo, Me, and America.

George William (Bill) Pearsey – Bill was a Rushville native. After attending Rushville H.S., Bill entered the Army Air Corps in 1943. He was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for his service in India Burma, Central Burma, and China during WWII.

J.R. Brown – Graduated from Rushville in 1938 and Purdue University in 1942 with a degree in Ag. Education. He played football for the Boilermakers and lettered twice. During WWII J.R. was a pilot for the U.S. Marine Air Corps. He flew with a dive bomber squadron in

the Pacific Theater. After WWII J.R. was a well respected member of the Rush County farming community.

Lloyd L. “Swede” Wogsland – Swede flew support aircraft in the South Pacific after WWII. He retired from the Air Force after 20 years. He then flew corporate jets. Swede flew for Hillenbrand from their airstrip at Batesville (now the Batesville Airport).

United States Auto Club Plane Crash – On April 23, 1978, a plane carrying USAC officials left Trenton, New Jersey bound for Indianapolis. It crashed near Arlington. All nine on board died. The loss impacted American racing for decades. Among those lost were Ray Marquette, USAC Public Relations Vice President and former Indianapolis Star Sports Writer, and Frank DelRoy, USAC Technical Director. DelRoy was the last riding mechanic to sit on the Indianapolis 500 pole riding with Bill Cummings in 1937. Some remains of the nine officials are buried at Arlington East Hill Cemetery.

Ron Overleese – Ron was a Rushville Consolidated H.S. (RCHS) graduate. He died in a flying accident in Tippecanoe County in late December, 1983. Ron was a Purdue University senior majoring in aviation technology. He was trying to gain enough hours for his commercial and instrument license when the one-engine Cessna crashed.

Jeff Houser – Originally from Connersville, Jeff came to teach and coach at RCHS. in 1975. Jeff flew helicopters for the U.S. Army during the Vietnam War. His “chopper” was shot down over Cambodia on March 10, 1971, and after four days in the jungle he reached friendly lines. His observer died in the crash, and his door gunner was MIA. Jeff was a helicopter pilot for the Army National Guard for 24 years, and he also flew commercially for Channel 6 TV. He was presented the Sagamore Of The Wabash Award.

Major Malcolm Keith Beckner – Malcolm was from Arlington. He attended Indiana University and enlisted during the Vietnam War years on April 30, 1968. He served as a flight instructor at Laredo, Texas, and Montgomery, Alabama. He was flying an F4-E fighter jet along with Captain John William Thomas when their plane crashed on May 1, 1980, in Canada. Malcolm is buried at Arlington East Hill Cemetery.

The Degelow brothers – Both brothers are RCHS graduates. Dan flew Huey and Blackhawk helicopters. He was promoted to Brigadier General in the Indiana Army National Guard. John was a Marine pilot and flew cargo helicopters. He attained the rank of Lieutenant Colonel in the Indiana Army National Guard.

Greg Rennekamp – Flew helicopters for the U.S. Navy.

There have been numerous other Rush County residents that were/are involved in flying. Compiling a complete list isn't possible. But here are some of the more current pilots from Rush County. Most of them are RCHS graduates:

Chad Herdrich – Flies for United Airlines. He also owns an airport in Houston, Texas.

Craig Smith – Lives in Rushville and flies out of Chicago for Southwest Airlines. Craig flew C130s during the conflicts with Afghanistan and Iraq.

Dan Miller – Lives in Cleveland, Ohio, and flies 777s for United Airlines.

Greg Brendly – Lives in Brazil, Indiana, and flies for Southwest Airlines.

Bob Wilkinson – A Rushville native. Bob flies for Mountain Air Cargo (a subsidiary of Federal Express).

Brian McMinn – Flies for Delta Airlines out of Cincinnati, Ohio.

Zachary Lovett – Zach is from Rush County, and he flies for Republic Airlines out of Indianapolis.

Tom Pea – Lives in Indianapolis. He flew KC-135 jet tankers and retired as a Lieutenant Colonel. He now flies for Delta out of Atlanta, Georgia.

There is no longer an airport in Rushville! But there have been several private airstrips. Steve Comer is a former Indiana State Police (ISP) Officer. He flew fixed wing planes for ISP for three years. He has his own airstrip near New Salem. Brian McMinn has his own airstrip near New Salem, and so does Jim Small near Carthage. Others to remember are the Webster family near Homer, and Jerry Stevens north of Arlington.

This article could not have been written without the help of Steve Mahan, Monty McMahan, Craig Smith, Bob Wilkinson, Fred Lee, Ron Cameron, Steve Comer, Jeff Houser, Dan Harris, Bill Beckner, Jerry Winkler, Jim Lovett, Mary Jane Wogsland, Heather Meckes, Nellena Rummel, and Clara Walker-Becker. Written sources included Rush County Sesquicentennial History, The Collected Works of Jim Scott, Air and Space Smithsonian, September, 1999, The Chicago Tribune, October 1943, and Lafayette Journal and Courier, December 21, 1983.