

Wilbur Wright Field and the 1924 International Air Races

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Paths to the Present
FLASHBACK

In Rheims, France, six years after the Wright Brothers' first flight, the world's first air meet took place where prizes were awarded for various events such as highest altitude reached, longest flight, most passengers carried, and the fastest one, two, and three laps over a set 10-kilometer course. At this first air race in August 1909, Glenn Curtiss collected two of the biggest prizes: the James Gordon Bennett Trophy for the quickest two laps and the Prix e la Vitesse for the quickest three laps. With this \$5,000 in prize money, he bought out his partner in the Herrington-Curtiss Company of Hammondsport, New York, to create his own company – the Curtiss Company. The outbreak of World War I grounded air races for a short time, but new trophy races appeared in 1919 with the National Air Races formed in 1920 and the prized

Pulitzer Trophy Race that same year. The following year saw the establishment of the National Air Meet, which in 1924 became known as the International Air Races.¹

In October 1924, the National Aeronautic Association (NAA) hosted the International Air Races at Wilbur Wright Field and the Fairfield Air Intermediate Depot (FAID) in Dayton, Ohio,² Frederick Beck Patterson, an aviation enthusiast and president of Dayton's National Cash Register Company, served as president that year. The event encompassed twelve major races with various trophies, such as the prestigious Pulitzer Trophy, and prize money totaled some \$80,000 in US Government Liberty Bonds. The air races also included various exhibits and aerial exhibitions. Billed as an "international" event with foreign competitors and just days prior to the start of the events, foreign contestants cancelled prior to the start of the races due to "alleged beliefs" that they could not match American aircraft; however, the races still attracted



Parade at McCook Field publicizing the races.



Official program from the 1924 International Air Races held at Wilbur Wright Field.

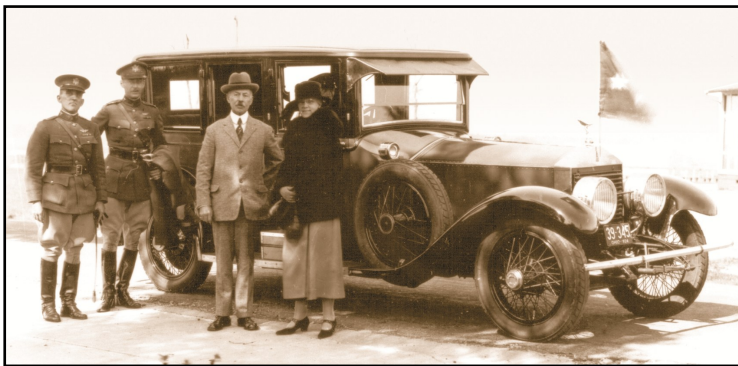
more than 100,000 spectators and 174 entries, up from 66 the year prior. Pilots from across the nation took part, including those from Wilbur Wright and McCook fields with

Major General Mason M. Patrick, Chief of the Air Service, who selected twenty-three skilled officers to fly in the various trophy races – Lieutenants Eugene H. Barksdale, Wendell H. Brookley, James H. Doolittle and Captain Burt Skeel among those selected.³

Weeks prior, Fairfield Air Intermediate Depot and Wilbur Wright Field personnel put final touches on 130 aircraft that they would fly during the air races and made preparations to receive scores of distinguished visitors. Crews erected a huge grandstand over a mile in length at Wilbur Wright Field, converted the Officers' Club into a dining hall, and drained the swimming pool converting that now large hole into a sunken garden. Major Augustine Warner Robins⁴, Wilbur Wright Field and FAID commander, worked closely with race organizers and sponsors, assisted by his personal assistants Captain Elmer Adler⁵ and Lieutenant C.E. Thomas along with Major George H. Brett⁶, housing and entertainment. Other notable officers who contributed their talents towards the races were Major J.H. Rudolph, flying operations; Major Hugh Knerr⁷,



Lieutenant James Doolittle (left), famed McCook Field test pilot, his wife Josephine, and Major General Mason Patrick at the Races.



Major Augustine Robins and Lieutenant Charles Thomas welcome Chief of the Air Service Major General Mason Patrick and his Sister, Miss Patrick, to the races.

of flaunting colors which bordered the room represented every nation in the world, conveying the international appeal.... At the farther end of the ballroom was the American crest, and in the center was erected...the emblem of the major general of the United States Army.” Placed at each end of the room were two commissioned paintings, one depicting a group of Curtiss pursuit planes in battle formation and the other the “epoch-making flight” of Lieutenant Russell Maughan¹⁰ completion of the first flight across the continental U.S. during daylight hours earlier in the year.¹¹

ferrying airplanes and aerial photography aircraft; Captain Edward Laughlin, operations officer; Captain F.F. Christine, photographic officer; Captain J.B. Powers, surgeon; Lieutenant Samuel G. Eaton Jr, communications officer; Lieutenant Leon E. Sharon, publicity; and Lieutenant Harold A. Barton⁸, baggage.⁹

On Thursday evening October 2, the gymnasium became the site for the gala where Walter Moore of the Air Service Information Division described the evening for the *Air Service News Letter*: “Long lines



General Patrick, Brigadier General Billy Mitchell, and Frederick Patterson meet briefly at the Races.

Excitement for the events rose greatly throughout

Dayton with all public schools closing on Friday and all city and county offices closed through the weekend. Factories, including the National Cash Register Company (NCR), Dayton Engineering Laboratories Company (Delco), and General Motors Corporation stopped operations to allow workers to attend weekend events. On Friday evening, Frederick Patterson proudly officiated the banquet while toastmaster Charles Kettering, head of General Motors Research Corporation, and Frederick Rike, president of the Rike-Kumler Company, served as the honorary vice-chairman of race officials.¹²



Spectators fill part of the stands at Wilbur Wright Field.

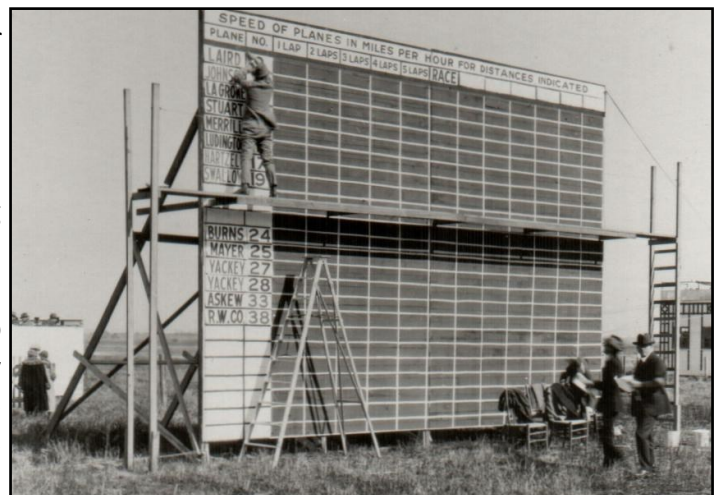


Timers Stand set up for the races.

While the National Aeronautic Association endorsed the International Air Races, its rules and regulations came from the Federation Aeronautique Internationale. The official timers, Odia A. Porter and Chester H. Ricker, used a certified electric timing apparatus of which there was only one of its kind in the world. This device, controlled by a ship chronometer, recording the time that each plane crossed the start and finish line by printing the time on a strip of paper, in hours, minutes, seconds and hundredths of a second. The state-of-the-art course incorporated a continuous telephone line that linked the circuit turning pylons to the Timer's Stand. As such, the judges, stationed at each of these turns had

constant communication with the telephone operator on the Timer's Stand and reported immediately each time a plane turned a pylon. At the end of each lap, the timers posted the contestants' speed in miles per hour for the distance he had covered (one lap, two laps, etc.) on the score boards.¹³

Even before the first piston fired for an air race, the sponsors attempted to build excitement by allowing everyone to participate in the first event. The Dayton Chapter of the National Aeronautic Association created the "On to Dayton Race," with hopes to stimulate interest among civilian fliers who they encouraged to fly to the races. Awards went to participants on accomplishments with regards to distance traveled, speed, number of passengers carried, and horsepower of engine. They directed contestants to leave their airfields after 20 September



The official scoreboard with scorer updating with racers for Event No. 2, the National Cash Register Trophy race.

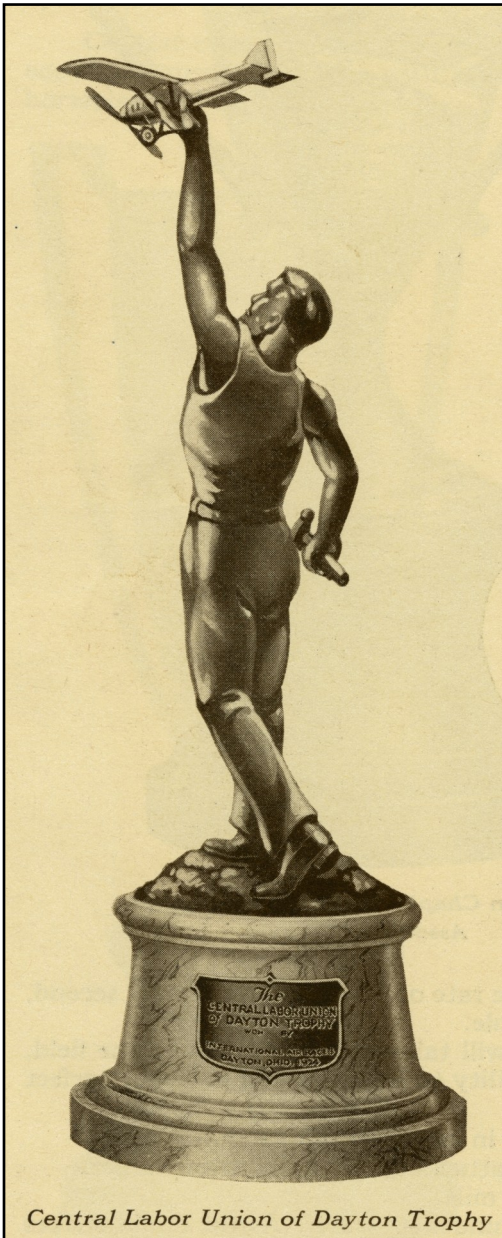
and arrive at the races on or before 1 October. This event attracted 51 civilian entries from New York, Illinois, Texas, Kansas, Michigan, and a dozen other states as well as Canada. Newspapers later reported, "brightly painted airplanes of all makes creating a wondrous spectacle" with a total of only 22 finishing. Charles "Casey" Jones, manager of Curtiss Exhibition Company of New York, took the event with his Curtiss *Oriole* (Model 17, Experiment 519, Design L-72) with a total of 239 points awarded having flown from Rantoul, Illinois with two passengers; Jones won the previous year's On-to-St. Louis Race in the



Charles "Casey" Jones stands by his Curtiss Oriole, winner of the "On-to-Dayton" and "Central Labor Union" trophies.

same aircraft. Second place went to Charles Holman flying a Thomas-Morse SC-4 1,020 miles from Minot, North Dakota.¹⁴

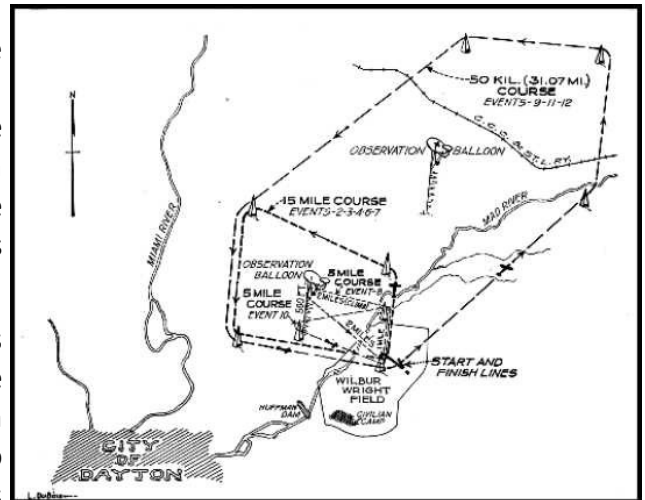
During the first day of the races, a total of three trophy events took place with \$10,000 US Government Liberty Bonds at stake. The first event pitted eleven civilian racers who had two-place aircraft outfitted with a 510-cubic-inch or less piston displacement (90 to 100 hp) engine, that could carry the crew over a distance of 90 miles or six laps of a 15-mile course. Walter Lees of the Johnson Aeroplane Supply & Flying Service of Dayton flying a Hartzell F.C.-I took the National Cash Register Company Trophy just over two minutes ahead of the Laird Commercial entry flown by Perry Hutton. The second event, the Central Labor Union of Dayton Trophy Race was a civilian free-for-all race for light aircraft of two, three or four passenger capacity with engines of 800-cubic-inch piston displacement (roughly 200 hp) or less with contestants having to carrying one passenger over a distance of 120 miles or eight laps of a 15-mile course. Contestants included Wilfred A. Yackey¹⁵, Basil Lee Rowe, Walter H. Beech, and Casey Jones along with three who did not start and four who failed to finish. Jones won the trophy using only eleven gallons of gasoline with an elapsed time of 57:34.73 minutes, finishing ten minutes ahead of the second place finisher J.G. Ray who also flew a Curtiss *Oriole*. This was the first time in the history of the races that a labor organization donated a trophy and was an indicator of the increasing appreciation of the trade unions to the value of commercial aviation. The final event of the day, the Liberty Engine Builders Trophy Race, was open to both civilian and military, consisted of Observation-type aircraft (two seaters) with a total wing area of more than 360-square-feet and an air speed that exceeded 90 mph. General Patrick personally selected nine primary and three alternates to fly DeHavilland DH-4 observation aircraft powered by a 12-cylinder, 400-horsepower Liberty engine with



Central Labor Union of Dayton Trophy

Lieutenant Carl A. Cover, in charge of the Maintenance Section at the Fairfield Air Depot as one of the primaries; however, Lieutenant Donald G. Duke from the Office of the Chief of the Air Service took home the trophy, credited with an average speed of 130.34 mph over the 180 mile distance. Lieutenant Cover finished third, five minutes behind Duke.¹⁶

Spectators on the second day witnessed four trophy events open to civilians. The first, the Mulvihill Model Trophy Race developed to stimulate interest with the younger generation in the design and construction of model airplanes and to increase the knowledge of aviation, sought aircraft models not to exceed 40-inches in wing span, employ rubber strands for power, and timed for how long they stayed aloft. Robert Jaros took the trophy with his winning model, staying aloft for just over ten minutes – a full seven minutes longer than the second place finisher and six minutes longer than the previous year's winner. The second event was the Aviation Town and Country Club of Detroit that highlighted light commercial airplanes with the basis upon both speed and efficiency. Aircraft had to have a seating capacity of two or more passengers, reach a speed of 80 mph or more, and a piston displacement not to exceed 800-cubic-inches (roughly 200 hp). Contestants traveled a distance of 120 miles or eight laps over a 15-mile course with



the barnstormer Basil L. Rowe of New York taking the trophy flying an S.V.A. three seater with an average speed of 111.45 mph. Casey Jones led most of the race, when in the seventh lap and increasing his speed up to 122.5 mph, was forced to land with engine issues. The third event of the day was the Dayton Chamber of Commerce Trophy Race for large capacity aircraft capable of carrying payloads of 2,000 pounds or more and able to attain airspeeds exceeding 85 mph. Six Martin MB-2 twin-engine bombers and one Curtiss-built Martin NBS-1 bomber entered the race with Captain George C. Kenney¹⁷ of McCook Field participating. The aircraft that entered this event were of great interest as they were expected to “easily carry a ton or more of mail, express matter or passengers, and carry and discharge with extreme accuracy the largest bombs or torpedoes or a ton of deadly gas.” Contestants traveled a distance of 150 miles or ten laps over a 15-mile course. Lieutenant Devereux M. Myers from Phillips Field, Aberdeen, Maryland, won the contest with an average speed of 109.85 mph and Lieutenant Woolsey from Brooks Field finishing second. The final event of the day was the Dayton Daily News Trophy Race arranged to stimulate interest in light commercial airplanes with the contestants carrying a payload of 150 pounds and an engine displacement not to exceed 80-cubic-inches (20 hp); aircraft engines were generally the size of motorcycle engines, developing anywhere from five to twenty horsepower. Aircraft were tested during this race on their climbing ability as they would fly a triangular five-mile course, rounding the first pylon at an altitude of sixty-feet, climb to 500-feet to round an

anchored balloon at the end of a two-mile stretch, and then descend to sixty-feet for the next pylon. If a contestant was unable to make the straight climb could circle to gain altitude before round the balloon. Contestants traveled a distance of twenty-five miles or five laps over a five-mile course. Most of the entries were self-made with only two entrants finishing the race out of eight. J.M. Johnson of Johnson Airplane & Supply Company of Dayton took the trophy with McCook Field plane designer Etienne Dormoy finishing second.¹⁸

Spectators observed various displays during the event with one highlight being the display of the 1903 Flyer from Kitty Hawk and the 1911 Model B removed from storage by the FAID Supply Department and flown by McCook Field's

famous test pilot, Lieutenant John A. Macready. Macready thrilled spectators by circling Wilbur Wright Field at an altitude of 1,000-feet for fifteen minutes at roughly a speed of 45 mph. Another highlight was the release of the Verville-Sperry M-1 Messenger, the 862-pound biplane hung from a trapeze below the Army non-rigid dirigible TC-5. Viewers on the second day witnessed Macready setting two new world records, first ascending to 17,000-feet to set a new altitude record with a passenger and carrying 3,306.9 lbs. in a supercharged N.B.S.-1 and then going on to establish two new world duration records carrying 2,204.62 pounds and 3,306.93 pounds of useful loads. On the final day, viewers witnessed Lieutenant H.R. Harris and Mechanic Douglas Culver take up the six-engined Barling Bomber and establish three new world records – duration for carrying useful load of 4,409.24 and both duration and altitude for carrying useful load of 8,818.48.¹⁹

The final day began with the event called Aerial Gymkhana²⁰ with military pilots from various fields across the



The Verville-Sperry M-1 Messenger, one was dropped on the second day from the Army non-rigid dirigible TC-5.



The Army non-rigid dirigible TC-5.

country competing in "spectacular feats." These pilots selected certain "feats" in which they were the most proficient in and while performing these "exploits," an explanation of the maneuvers would be given through loud speakers to spectators. The second event of the day was a dual event for speed and efficiency for light aircraft with the Dayton Engineers' Club Trophy awarded to the efficiency winner and the Dayton Bicycle Club Trophy awarded for the speed test winner. Contestants traveled along a distance of fifty miles or ten laps over a five-mile course. Harvey Mummert took home both trophies in his Mummert Sport equipped with a Harley-Davidson motorcycle

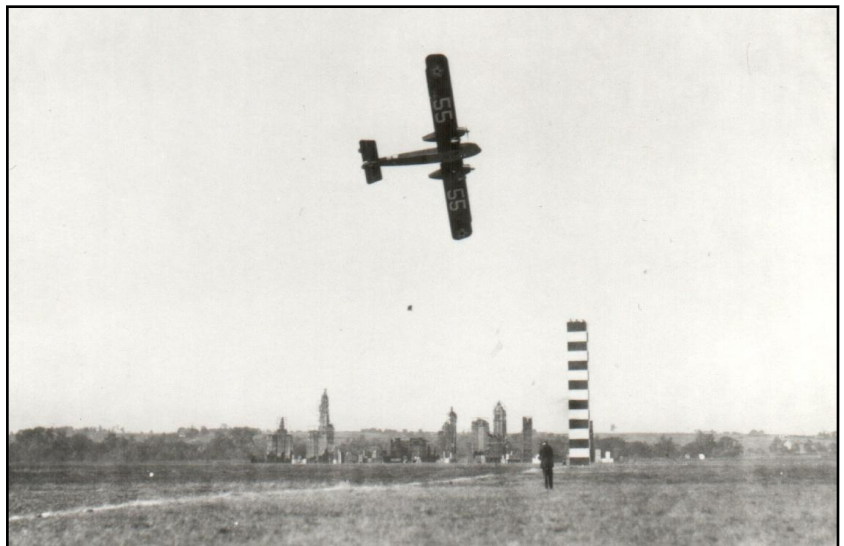


The Douglas World Fliers flew into Wright Field on the second day after completing the first Around-the-World flight a month earlier.

engine and an hour behind Mummert's time was second place winner J.M. Johnson. The third event of the day was strictly for Army Air Service pilots and planes of the First Pursuit Group, the John L. Mitchell Trophy Race.²¹ All contestants flew a standard pursuit plane with a flying start and flew in the same manner as the Pulitzer High Speed Trophy Race with participants flying a Curtiss PW-8 biplane equipped with a 460-horsepower Curtiss D-12 high-compression engine, the plane completing the course in the shortest elapsed time was declared the winner. Major Carl Spatz, commanding officer at Selfridge Field, picked pilots from his command to compete with

Lieutenant Cyrus Bettis winning the three-lap, 200-kilometer race with a speed of 175.41 mph and an elapsed time of 42 minutes and 30.44 seconds. In second place was Lieutenant Donald F. Stace with a speed of 173.67 mph and an elapsed time of 42 minutes and 55.93 seconds.²²

The final event of the International Races was for the prized Pulitzer Speed Trophy, open to both civilian and military contestants. The trophy went to the one that maintained the top speed over a 200 kilometer (124.27 mile) course.²³ Foreign entries had been anticipated and announced but they failed to arrive in Dayton as mentioned earlier, thus only leaving four entries. Also, neither the Army nor the Navy



Aeromarine NBS-1 flying past a pylon on the race course. In the background can be seen a mock-up of New York City, used as a bombing demonstration on the third day.



Lieutenant Pearson in front of the Navy Curtiss R-8 racer.

had undertaken any new aircraft construction projects, so the Navy did not submit an entry; however, the Army did purchase, for a dollar, one of the Navy's Curtiss planes that had won the year prior. General Patrick chose Captain Burt E. Skeel, who had won the John L. Mitchell Trophy the year before in a Thomas-Morse MB-3A, and Lieutenant Wendell H. Brookley, from McCook Field, to fly the Army-type Curtiss R-8 racers with Lieutenant Alexander Pearson, Jr., McCook Field, selected to fly the Navy version of the Curtiss racer. Lieutenant H.H. Mills, also of McCook Field, served as an alternate. Unfortunately, Lieutenant

Endnotes

1. Aeronautical Systems Center History Office [hereafter cited as ASC/HO], *Home Field Advantage: A Century of Partnership Between Wright-Patterson Air Force Base and Dayton, Ohio, in the Pursuit of Aeronautical Excellence*, (Wright-Patterson AFB, 2004), 96-97.
2. The next five years the races would be held in various venues, including Long Island, New York; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Spokane, Washington; and Los Angeles. Cleveland, Ohio, hosted the races every year between 1929 and 1939, except in 1930 (Chicago) and 1933 and 1936 (both in Los Angeles).
3. ASC/HO, *Splendid Vision, Unswerving Purpose: Developing Air Power for the United States Air Force during the First Century of Powered Flight*, (Wright-Patterson AFB, 2002), 43; ASC/HO, *Home Field Advantage*, 95; Winton L. Miller, *International Air Races: A Brochure on Aviation and the City of Dayton and Official Souvenir Program*, (International Air Race Program Committee, 1924), 29; A.M. Jacobs, Information Division, Air Service, "The 1924 International Air Races," *Air Service News Letter*, Vol. VIII No. 18 (20 October 1924), 1-3
4. Robins rose to the rank of General and is often credited as the Father of Logistics. Robins served under General John Pershing during the Punitive Expedition into Mexico in 1916 and in 1919 was assigned to Wright Field where he spent the next twenty years developing combat logistics. Warner-Robins Air Logistics Center was named in honor of General Robins.
5. Adler began his career in the National Guard but accepted a temporary assignment to the Air Service in July 1918. In August 1921 he arrived at FAID and served in various offices. In 1925, he transferred to the Philippine Islands to assume command of the Air Depot. With the outbreak of World War II, Alder found himself the Chief of Staff of what would become Air Service Command at Patterson Field; however, by the end of the year he would find himself in North Africa. Returning to the states in 1943, he would remain in Dayton moving from Patterson Field to Wright Field finishing his career as a major general and Chief of Management Control with Army Transport Command.
6. Brett served as Brigadier General Billy Mitchell's senior materiel officer in France during World War I. Rising to Lieutenant General during World War II, Brett rose to Deputy Supreme Commander, Southwest Pacific Area and Commander of Allied Air Forces, SWPA. He flew the B-17D, "The Swoose," as his personal transport during World War II, which today is the oldest, intact, surviving B-17 *Flying Fortress* and currently in storage at the National Museum of the United States Air Force. During the 1924 International Races, he was the officer in charge of the field service station at FAID.
7. Knerr served as Commander of Army Air Forces Air Technical Service Command at Wright Field from June 1945 to February 1946. In June 1948, he became the US Air Force's first inspector general. During the 1924 International Races, he was the Commander of the 88 Observation Squadron.
8. Barton began his military career as an enlisted Marine prior to World War I. Was discharged and then, upon World War I, was admitted to the first officers training camp at Fort Benjamin Harrison and would later find himself in the Aviation Section and training in France, graduating as the first class of the American gunnery school at St. Johns De Monte. After World War I, he held various assignments and upon outbreak of World War II would find himself with the invasion force on the West Coast of North Africa, assuming command of the Air Service Command there and by 1944 in Naples. In August 1944 he returned to the states assumed command of the Fairfield Air Technical Service Command and a year later became the command general of San Bernardino Air Technical Service Command.
9. ASC/HO, *Home Field Advantage*, 95, 98; Jacobs, *1924 International Air Races*, 1-3; Walter M. Moore, Information Division, "Impressions of the International Air Races," *Air Service News Letter*, Vol. VIII No. 19 (31 October 1924), 8-9.
10. Maughan served with the 139th Aero Squadron in France during World War I flying a Spad XIII, credited with four aerial victories and awarded the Distinguish Service Cross. After the war, he was assigned to the Engineering Division at McCook Field as a test pilot. Maughan was no stranger to the International Air Races having won the prized Pulitzer Trophy in 1922 in a Curtiss R-6 racer as well as setting a new international records in the process for eight circuits, four and one; however, an official with the Federation Aeronautique Internationale was not present to officially recognize the achievement.
11. ASC/HO, *Home Field Advantage*, 98; Moore, *Impressions*, 8-9.
12. ASC/HO, *Home Field Advantage*, 99; National Aeronautical Association (NAA) Review, No. 2 (*Special Dayton Air Race Edition*), 18 September 1924, 1.
13. Miller, *International Air Races*, 31.
14. Miller, *International Air Races*, 33; ASC/HO, *Home Field Advantage*, 99; Elizabeth Borja, "The 1924 Central Labor Union Trophy Race," Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum, 5 September 2016, Date Accessed 22 April 2019, <https://airandspace.si.edu/stories/editorial/1924-central-labor-union-trophy-race>; *Aircraft Year Book, 1925*, Aeronautical Chamber of Commerce of America, (New York, 1925), 189-90, 299-302; Jacobs, *1924 International Air Races*, 3-4.
15. Yackey owned Yackey Aircraft Company who fielded a few aircraft in the 1924 races. Known professionally as W.A. Yackey, Yackey was a veteran of World War I having flown both for the Italian and the US air forces. Between March 1921 and October 1922, Yackey flew for the US Air Mail Service. He then went on to become a stunt pilot and air racer. Yackey perished

in an aviation accident in October 1927 following testing in his 1927 National Air Races aircraft prior to its transfer to its new owner.

16. Miller, *International Air Races*, 33-35; ASC/HO, *Splendid Vision*, 43. ASC/HO, *Home Field Advantage*, 99; Borja, *Central Labor Union Trophy Race*; *Aircraft Year Book, 1925*, 190, 299-302; Information Division, "Wilbur Wright Field, Fairfield Ohio, March 21," *Air Service News Letter*, Vol. VIII No. 7 (12 April 1924), 19; Jacobs, *1924 International Air Races*, 4-8.
17. Kenney served with the 91st Aero Squadron on the Western Front during World War I, awarded the Silver Star and the Distinguished Service Cross for actions against German fighters. He attended and became an instructor at the Air Corps Tactical School during the Interwar Period. With the outbreak of World War II, Kenney was the Assistant Military Attaché for Air in France. By July 1942, he assumed command of Allied Air Forces and Fifth Air Force in the Southwest Pacific Area and in June 1944 appointed commander of Far East Air Forces (FEAF). In April 1946, Kenney became the first commander of Strategic Air Command, retiring in September 1951 as commander of Air University.
18. Miller, *International Air Races*, 37-40; ASC/HO, *Splendid Vision*, 43; ASC/HO, *Home Field Advantage*, 99; *Aircraft Year Book, 1925*, 190-1, 302.
19. Arthur G. Renstrom, *Wilbur & Orville Wright: A Chronology Commemorating the Hundredth Anniversary of the Birth of Orville Wright, August 19, 1871* (Washington, 1975), 78; *History of Fairfield Air Depot, 1917-1943*, 42-43; ASC/HO, *Home Field Advantage*, 99; *Aircraft Year Book, 1925*, 192, 299-302; Jacobs, *The 1924 International Air Races*, 5-6, 8-9.
20. According to Merriam-Webster, the word *gymkhana* originated in 19th-century India to describe a ball-playing area similar to a racquetball court. The first *gymkhanas* were displays of athletics and equestrian skill, and then into the 20th century designed to show off car handling skills were contestants raced over tight, twisting courses marked with cones or pylons.
21. The John L. Mitchell Trophy was offered by Brigadier General William Mitchell, Assistant Chief of the Army Air Service, in memory of his aviator brother killed during World War I. It was an event open for Army Air Service pilots and planes of the First Pursuit Group.
22. ASC/HO, *Home Field Advantage*, 100; Information Division, Air Service, "Pilots Designated for International Air Races," *Air Service News Letters*, No. 14 Vol. VIII (31 July 1924), 14; *Aircraft Year Book, 1925*, 190-91, 299-302; Jacobs, *The 1924 International Air Races*, 10.
23. Dayton's course was four laps of 50 kilometers.
24. Miller, *International Air Races*, 29, 41-45; ASC/HO, *Home Field Advantage*, 97, 100; ASC/HO, *Splendid Vision*, 43; *Aircraft Year Book, 1925*, 192, 301; Jacobs, *The 1924 International Air Races*, 10.



Lt Russell Manghan, famous for his dawn-to-dusk transcontinental flight and pictured here shortly after said flight discussing it with Secretary of War John Weeks and General Mason Patrick at the War Department, flew into the Races on the third day to a cheering crowd.



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