Torch Club Presentation

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The Civilian Pilot Training Program

No doubt many of you can remember the pitiful state of the U.S. Military in the years before the start of World War II, back in the late 1930s and early 40s. The U.S. Army was training with broomsticks for guns and cardboard replicas of tanks. In the air they were using planes that could barely go 100 miles an hour. And many of our citizens, perhaps even a majority, would just as soon things had stayed that way. We didn't want to get involved in Europe's wars again.

One of the principal tasks of President Roosevelt's second administration was to effect a change in that attitude and to get the country prepared for a war he felt was sure to come. A small step toward that goal was a little known program devised by a man named Robert Hinkley, then chairman of the newly formed Civil Aeronautics Authority (CAA). His plan was half New Deal social welfare and half military preparedness. He envisioned a massive program to teach thousands of young Americans to fly at government expense. It would involve scores of colleges and universities and hundreds of airports large and small all over the country. It would revive a business - the air charter and taxi services - and an industry - airplane and engine construction and maintenance. At the same time, it would provide a huge reservoir of pilots trained at least in the rudiments of flying in the event of war. In addition, it would give a much needed shot in the arm to colleges and universities, where courses in aviation theory and navigation would be provided.

It was called the Civilian Pilot Training Program, or CPTP.

Well, you can imagine how such a hare-brained scheme would go over in Congress today. But the United States was a different country then. We were just barely starting to recover from the Great Depression and Hinkley's plan was no different except in scope than the dozens of other New Deal schemes aimed at restoring the economy - agencies such as the Civilian Conservation Corps, the CCC, which put thousands of destitute youths to work building parks, trails and all manner of recreational facilities, some of which can still be seen in Iowa today. Or the Works Progress Administration (WPA) which put millions of unemployed to work building roads and public buildings and even hired such artists as Grant Woods and John Steuart Curry to decorate them. There was the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA) for farmers, the Social Security Act for the elderly and many more.

All these cost in the billions of dollars - unheard of amounts for those days. All Hinkley was asking for was $10 million.

Hinkley himself was somewhat of a dreamer. He was born in Utah and was a member of the Utah Legislature. For a while, he owned a small flying service that offered charter flights, flying lessons and aircraft sales. He became active in many areas of local government and organized the Utah CCC. Through his activities in various relief organizations he became friends with Harry Hopkins, FDR's New Deal ~~Supervisor~~ Czar, who persuaded him to come to Washington. He was appointed to the CAA in 1938 and became its chairman a year later. One of his first jobs was to oversee construction of Washington's National Airport.

It was in those heady New Deal days that Hinkely's dream of a federal pilot-training program started to blossom. He got Hopkins' support and even the half-hearted endorsement of FDR, who would much rather ride a train than fly.

The big obstacle was Congress, many of whose members, Republicans and southern Democrats, had been fighting the New Deal tooth and nail.

The program's first test came in the House. Questions immediately arose concerning its impact on the pilot training programs of the Army Air Corps and the Navy Air Arm. Navy officials reacted favorably, saying any prior training in the air would help speed up its own program. But the Air Corps was at best luke-warm to the idea, seeing it more as competition than support. This negative attitude by the Army was to create problems for CPTP throughout its existence.

However, after lengthy committee hearings, the House passed the authorization act and the Senate, after many delays, followed suit. President Roosevelt signed the bill into law on June 27, 1939. Both houses agreed on an appropriation of $4 million for its first year. Hinkley estimated that was enough to train 11,000 pilots.

Students were to receive up to 50 hours in the air, sufficient to enable them to qualify for a private pilot's license. The license allowed a pilot to fly any airplane he was qualified for and to take up passengers but not for hire. The flight training would be free but students had to chip in up to $40 for books for ground school and insurance. The bill also stipulated that at least 5 per cent of the applicants must be other than college students and that no one be denied because of race. This was one of the first civil rights clauses written into any federal legislation and was done specifically at the urging of Sen. Everett Dirksen and was instrumental in opening up flight training to many black applicants. A number of them went on to form the all-black 99th Fighter Squadron in the Air Corps.

Another provision in the act prohibited the training of aliens. And applicants were not to be required to join the military upon completion.

With war already started in Europe, CPTP was in full swing at airports all over the country by 1940. Such manufacturers of small planes as Piper and Taylorcraft increased their production several fold to meet the demand. Thousands of young men - and a few women -

took their physicals, paid their dues and were given preliminary orientation flights. If they showed some aptitude and did't get too air-sick, they continued through the program to the dreaded final flight test and won their wings.

The program gained momentum in 1941 until - boom - Pearl Harbor. Suddenly, it was no longer just a pleasant, relaxed way to learn to fly. Suddenly, enlistment in the Army or Navy loomed. Suddenly, it was no longer the Civilian Pilot Training Program, derisively referred to as the leaky tent; instead, it became the War Training Service - the WTS - and its sole purpose was to train pilots for the military. Again, the Navy gave its whole-hearted support and commissioned its graduates as ensigns who then went on to the regular Navy training schools.

But the Army Air Corps was another story. General Henry (Hap) Arnold, chief of the Air Corps, was dead set against any civilian program, maintaining that only the Air Corps could provide the proper training, discipline and tradition for its pilots.Arnold didn't want a bunch of civilians who didn't even know how to salute telling his officers what to do. What little support the Air Corps gave to the program was given grudgingly and no CPTP-trained pilot was ever given a commission. Instead, graduates were required to join the Enlisted Reserve where they could serve as primary flight instructors or transport pilots.

The WTS continued on a much restricted basis through 1942 and 1943 but by the start of 1944 it was becoming clear that we were winning the war in the air and that the need for large numbers of pilots was greatly diminished. The program was quietly shut down and those of its Air Corps Enlisted Reserve pilots were simply called to active duty as ordinary airmen.

But a long-range part of Robert Hinkley's dream for the CPTP was that the program would "air-condition" the nation's youth and that we would have a nation of pilots after the war. This would set off a leap into the air age similar to what happened in the 1920s with the advent of the automobile. He talked of a "plane in every garage" and of a happy citizenry commuting to work by plane.

Well, we all know what happened to those dreams. There was a half-hearted attempt to revive CPTP after the war and all these unrealistic expectations did not help. The effort died aborning. It was a noble experiment whose time had passed. The air age was ushered in, not by a plane in every garage, but by an enormous expansion of commercial air travel, with construction of ever-larger and more elaborate airports. The development of the jet engine made possible the huge planes we have flying today. This is now our air age.

Well, so much for the dry and largely inconsequential history of CPTP. But for me, there was more to it than that, for I was one of those intrepid CPTP aviators yearning for the wild blue yonder and it was one of the most exciting, exhilirating experiences of my life.

I was a cub police reporter for the St. Joseph, Mo., Gazette at the time and newspapering then was everything it was supposed to be. I was on a first-name basis with every cop and fireman and I had the run of the town. I had a Model A roadster and gas was 25 cents a gallon. I worked nights and had most of the day free. In short, I was having a ball.

Then, in the spring of 1940 came the announcement that the government would teach you to fly for free. I jumped at the chance. It had been my dream to fly ever since I was a young boy making model airplanes. Lindbergh had been my boyhood hero and now I had a chance to emulate him. I couldn't wait to get into the air.

A friend at the Gazette and I immediately signed up and went through ground school and in May of 1940 started our flight training at St. Joe's Rosecrans Field. We flew little Aeroncas with side-by-side seating, the instructor on the left, the student in the co-pilot's seat on the right. We had only the simplest of instruments - a compass, an altimeter, turn-and-bank indicator and tachometer. And it was the simplest kind of flying - first straight and level, then gentle turns, slow climbs and descents, then pattern flying in a rectangle and learning to gauge wind drift. Finally, landings and take-offs and learning to recover from a spin.

It wasn't always easy. There were times when I was sure my instructor was determined to flunk me, when I couldn't seem to get anything right. But, finally, after 9½ hours and several good landings, my instructor got out and said, OK, she's all yours, you're on your own. Boy, what a thril that was, in a plane alone, free to do whatever I wanted. It is hard to describe the exhiliration of a first solo. Suddenly, you are master of your destiny, ruler of the sky, free like a bird. And in the background is always the certain knowledge that eventually you've got to come back down and there is the danger of landing. It just makes it that much more exciting.

That first day I made two take-offs and landings, circled around for a while and called it a day. After that, it was practice and more practice until it was tiem for cross-country. You mapped out a triangular course of 50-mile legs and flew it with your instructor. Then more practice and you flew it alone, landing at each checkpoint so the airport operator could sign you out.

Then, more practice and it was time for flight test. I passed mine after 42½ hours in the air and got my private pilot's license on Sept. 13, 1940. It was signed by Robert Hinkley himself.

Those days, even before the war, the skies over the Midwest were largely empty. Topeka was one of the stops on my cross-country trips and I remeber flying into a deserted airport and hoping I would find somebody to sign me out.

Another time I decided to fly to Kansas City just for the adventure. The municipal airport then was in a bend in the Missouri River just across from downtown. It was first airport I had flown to that had a control tower and ordinarily, you would radio ahead for landing instructions. But I had no radio and the drill in that case was to circle the field and watch the control tower. They had what was called a beam gun with which they could signal you with a red light for wait or a green light that it was OK to land.

It made quite an impression on me that I had to wait some 10 minutes while an airliner approached and landed and I then followed in his wake.

Another time, a group of us from St. Joe flew in several planes to Lamoni to dedicate the new airport there. We flew passengers most of the day, then headed back. In the meantime, a strong west wind had come up and the return trip took much longer than expected. Our little Aeronca was barely making 50 miles an hour against the wind and it became obvious that it was going to get dark before we got back. We had no lights on the plane, not even a flashlight to check the compass with. I decided our best chance finding the airport was to take a deliberately more northerly course in hopes that we would be able to recognize the Missouri and then could turn south along its course until we reached St. Joe.

That's the way it played out and the runway lights were on when we got the airport in sight. I made a rather rough night landing - my first - and was grounded for a week for flying without lights.

It was a little later in my flying career that I had my first forced landing. I was in a somewhat larger plane, an open-cockpit Fleet, practicing figure eights over a field some miles south of the airport. I was at 800 feet in a turn when the engine quit.

One item of instruction that was constantly drilled into us was what to do in the event of just such an emergency. First, you must be constantly search for a proper forced landing field; second, always be aware of the wind direction. I was prepared on both accounts. The Fleet was a very nice plane to fly, easy to handle and easy to land and I brought it down on a cleared soybean field. But it had no brakes and no way of steering it on the ground so I watched helplessly as I rolled up toward a barbed-wire fence. Luckily, the plane stopped just before we hit it and I walked to a nearby farmhouse to report my mishap.

Later that fall

After that I enroled in an advanced course in bigger, more powerful planes and learned acrobatics. Eventually, when war came and with the War Training Service, I enlisted in the Air Corps Reserve and did a lot of flying out of Wilkes-Barre and Harrisburg, Penn., learning to fly by instrument and radio. After more acrobatics instruction at Danville, Va., I went through the Army's Central Flight Instructor School at Randolph Field, Tex., and got my commercial license with instructor and instrument ratings. I taught acrobatics at Danville until early in 1944 when the Air Corps shut down the operation and I was called to active duty. I finished my World War II Army career as a special agent in the Counter-intelligence Corps attached to Eisenhower's headquarters in Frankfurt.

By that time I was married and had a daughter and my flying days were over. I went back to work for the Gazette and eventually ended up here at The Register.

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