

RECOLLECTIONS OF THE BUNKER HILL SCHOOL OF AERONAUTICS

During the late 1940s a new operation was started at Freeman Field. It was located in the old maintenance hanger (now the Big Blue warehouse), and was called the Bunker Hill School of Aeronautics. It was to be a G I Bill school for aircraft mechanics. The school was in two locations - at the former Navel Air Station at Bunker Hill (deactivated at the time and a city airport, now Grissom Air Force Base) and at Freeman Field.

The owners had obtained millions of dollars worth of aircraft and equipment from the government for a few thousand dollars and it was to be used for training purposes. The hanger at Freeman had hundreds of aircraft mechanics tool chests with tools, cut away engines of all types, engine stands, test equipment, everything to train mechanics with. They had also received a lot of surplus aircraft. At Bunker Hill Airport were the heavy aircraft - C-46s, C-47s, B-17s, B-24s, B-25s and a variety of other multi-engine aircraft. The single engine aircraft were brought to Freeman Field and consisted of PT-19s, PT-26s, AT-6s, a P-51B, a P-40T (two seat trainer), a P-43 Lancer, a P-38, Several P-63 Kingcobras and a rare Douglas DC-2. All the aircraft were flown into Freeman Field and most of the fighters were tied down on the ramp in the area of the present day Jay C parking lot.

Yours truly was present at the field when several of the aircraft were flown in, and remember one in particular, the P-43 Lancer. One of the owners brought it in one cold day from Bunker Hill, the flight just taking minutes for the 120 mile trip, and his comment on landing was "if the wings were a foot shorter and the prop a foot longer, the plane would rotate instead of the prop". He had been a Bell Aircraft test pilot during WWII, testing P-39s and P-63s, which was probably why so many P-63s at Freeman.

One of the P-63s had been converted for racing and had been raced in the Thompson Trophy Race in 1948 by Howard, but had to drop out because someone had stuffed the air intake full of shop rags. This particular P-63 was one of the last models built and did not look like the other P-63s, as it had a different shaped tail fin and rudder. It was rare, as was the Republic P-43. In fact, today there are no known P-43s in existence, not even in a museum. Where did the P-43 at Freeman go? To a local junk yard. It sat on the ramp for a while after the school went out of business, was then hauled over behind the barn at the old house on Walnut Street, and finally cut up for junk. Today, with P-51s going for up to half a million dollars or more, this aircraft would be priceless.

Where did the other aircraft at Freeman go? Therein lays some interesting stories. One PT-19 was purchased by Trans-Air, Inc. and was used on the G I Bill flight training program at Freeman. The PT-26, minus its wings, sat on the ramp for a year or so, and then was scrapped out, with Ranger engine going into a local race car. The P-40T was purchased by the operator of the then Veteran's Airport at Bloomington. The DC-2 was purchased by a delegation from the Republic of China and flown out. Most of the P-63s (5 or 6 of them) were, one at a time, picked up by a pilot I only remember as Tinker, and flown to Florida. I imagine to be sold into Central America. The P-38 is a story in itself.

The P-38, like the one P-63, had been converted for racing, but I don't know if it was ever raced. It seemed to have a problem with the right engine turbocharger cutting out at certain speeds, causing a loss of power. Several mechanics (some of which I believe were from the Allison plant in Indianapolis) worked on the engine and ran high speed taxi tests up and down the runways. The aircraft was sold to someone in the country of Bolivia, because an official of the Bolivian CAA came to Freeman and flew it out. This gentleman departed Freeman for a non-stop flight to National Airport in Washington D.C. While in the pattern at National, the P-38 rammed an airliner, and the crash killed all 55 people

on board. The Bolivian rode the P-38 into the Potomac River and survived the crash. I still have a beat up copy of the Indianapolis Star with the headlines of this event. (Copy attached) It is dated November 2, 1949, and as near I can tell from the picture on the front page, they are looking for survivors in the Potomac. This was the largest loss of life in an airline crash up to that date.

This crash immediately brought an outcry as to what was a Bolivian national doing flying a surplus fighter plane in the United States. Where did it come from and why? A Congressional Hearing and investigation was the result and reached the operation at Freeman Field.

Several indictments were handed down and the Bunker Hill School of Aeronautics was no more. The rest of the equipment was removed, and except for the couple of scrapped aircraft mentioned before, nothing remained at Freeman Field to indicate the school ever existed. No mechanics ever trained at the school. None were ever signed up.

So ended another chapter in the colorful history of Freeman Field.

By Al Seibert