

Historical Article

FALCON

by: David A. Walker

Where a Hollywood contact helped win a war.

AOPA - April 1984

It was just a square mile of desert, and what it was called depended on who was doing the calling. To the officials who had to struggle with the intricacies of Lend-Lease, it was Number Four British Flying Training School, USA. To Jack Connely and Leland Hayward, it was an investment. To the people of Mesa, Arizona, it was a source of income, of diversion and of culture shock. And to the civilians who had to make it work, it was a job. But to the more than 2,000 Royal Air Force pilots who sweated through more than 300,000 hours between 1941 and 1945 in learning to fly from its parallel runways, it was simply Falcon.

To them, of course, Falcon was the most important pair of runways in the world, site of the eternal drama of the making of a pilot. But because Falcon came into being in a uniquely American way, because it continues to defy the fate of many World War II military airfields by stubbornly resisting being plowed under to make way for yet another Levittown or shopping mall, its extraordinary story makes it import beyond the misty edges of nostalgia.

Falcon Field owes its existence most directly to the vision of General Henry H. (Hap) Arnold. Despite the isolationist mood of the United States in the late 1930s, it was obvious to many military leaders, including Hap Arnold, that the United States soon would be embroiled in a major way; in addition to operating outdated equipment, the Air Corps could train only 500 pilots a year at its sole flying school at Randolph Field, San Antonio, Texas.

Acting on his own initiative, Arnold sent telegrams to eight private flying school operators (W.F. Long, Max Balfore, Oliver parks, Hal Darr, T. Claude Ryan, Allan Hancock, C.C. Moseley and E.J. Sias) instructing them to meet with him in Washington, D.C., to discuss the creation of civilian contract military training schools. According to Arnold's plan, the operators of the schools would supply the instructors, mechanics, office staff, avgas, barracks and food. The Air Corps would supply the aircraft, the cadets and would pay the operators on a contractual basis-if Congress was agreeable. A goal of 2,400 pilots a year was established.

Since Arnold was acting without congressional authorization for these schools, no immediate government money was available to the private operators to start up their training facilities. But anticipating that Congress would approve contract school funding, these men hocked their homes or borrowed money from relatives in order to finance their schools.

Congress eventually did authorize the contract schools by a two-vote margin. The program quickly grew, and the 2,400 pilots a year increased to 12,000 then 30,000 pilots. In 1945, 110,000 airmen were trained by contract schools.

This contract money and the prospect of winning foreign training contracts prompted businessman John (Jack) Connelly and Leland Hayward, a prominent Hollywood producer and director to form Southwest Airways and become involved in military pilot training, which eventually included the operation of Falcon Field.

In the late 1930s, Connelly was an aircraft salesman, and Hayward was trying to buy an airplane. The two met at a restaurant to discuss the purchase over dinner. Although Hayward did not buy the airplane, the two men decided to establish a business partnership and start a flying school to take advantage of government contract money. Both men long had been involved in aviation: Connelly was a Civil Aviation Authority West Coast district inspector, and Hayward was an active pilot who started flying in the U.S. Navy in World War I. Hayward also was on the board of directors of Transcontinental and Western Airlines (TWA).

The financial backing necessary to get Southwest Airways off the ground came from Hollywood. Connelly, president and chief executive of Southwest, and Hayward, director of all Southwest Airways' operations, turned to the people Hayward knew best and who could best afford to invest in such a project. Soon such names as Jimmy Stewart, Cary Grant, Henry Fonda, Hoagy Carmichael, Ginger Rogers, Daryl F. Zanuck and Mervyn Le Roy were listed among Southwest's stockholders. John Swope, husband of film star Dorothy McGuire, became secretary and treasurer of Southwest.

With financial backing assured, Southwest Airways opened Thunderbird I in March 1941. It was opened as a primary field, training both U.S. and Chinese cadets. By the end of the war, Southwest Airways, based in Phoenix, was the largest Contract Company in the nation. It trained more than 17,000 pilots from 29 countries, all of whom were trained under contract either to the U.S. Government or, as in the case of Falcon Field, to the British.

Connelly had envisioned calling all of the company's fields Thunderbird (Thunderbird II became operational in June 1942); but when Southwest received the British contracts, Connelly discovered that the British objected. They informed Connelly that the Falcon had been the English noble bird of prey since the days of the Norman Conquest. "That (thunderbird) may be your bird, but this is our field, and our bird is the falcon," the British said.

In June 1941, the first Royal Air Force recruits began their flight training. Falcon wasn't ready yet so the first classes were taught at Thunderbird. By September 15, Falcon was ready, and on September 27 at 6 a.m., a Boeing PT-17 "Kaydet" lifted off, making Falcon an operational military training facility.

James Mitchell a flight instructor at Falcon, describes training at the field this way: "We had 40 Stearmans and 75 AT-6 Texans. We used the British syllabus to train the cadets. Each instructor had four cadets, and each cadet would fly one hour per day. The program was different from ours: There was less stress on precision maneuvers. These young men were expected to solo in 4.75 hours; then we gave them some cross-country and aerobatics. They got 10 hours hood and Link time. We used to place a canvas hood over their cockpit. It could get awful hot in there. Usually the hood time was used to teach recovery from unusual attitudes.

"We instructors put in a five-hour work day usually. If we were to fly at night, we wouldn't fly during the day. We wore tan uniforms with Falcon insignia and were paid in the neighborhood of \$400 per month, Not bad pay," he said.

Falcon was a mile square. We had two parallel runways, each 3,500 feet long, which suited us just fine," Mitchell added.

The British cadets at Falcon received their entire quota of flight training from primary to presentation of wings at just one field - all in 29 weeks. "After graduation, those slated for fighters would go to Biggin Hill (England) for fighter school. The bomber boys would go to Canada for their multi-engine training," said Joe Wischler, who was chief of maintenance at Falcon.

By November 1942, the U.S. Government had instituted a policy of integrating training between itself and Britain, American cadets began training at Falcon on a limited basis in what was announced simply as, "one more way in which our two nations are cooperating for the benefit of both in winning the war." The Falcon staff claimed it actually was because British navigation training was better, more suited to European flying than American training.

The training program at Falcon was the same length of time as the American program, but the American cadets who trained there were taught under the British syllabus. Instead of three stages-primary, basic and advanced- the British program diversified very quickly after solo to include instrument, formation, night and night navigation flying. All this while in the primary trainer, the Stearman, with virtually no chandelles, lazy 8s, pylon 8s or other maneuvers that the United States considered necessary.

The joint training continued until June 1944 when policy on consolidating bases was changed again. Falcon once again became exclusively a British base.

Good weather made the Arizona desert the ideal location to train cadets, and Falcon prided itself on a record of 400 days of uninterrupted flight instruction with fewer than 10 days in more than four years lost to inclement weather. Although the weather may have been nearly perfect, the maintenance staff operated in conditions that were far from perfect. According to maintenance chief Wischler, "We used to cannibalize aircraft whenever we could. You realize, at that time it was illegal to take parts like that. It wasn't

until late in the war that somebody got around to legalizing what we had been doing out of necessity for years. Parts were always a problem.

"We did some fantastic things, though, For one thing, we did our job for one third the cost that the government estimated. Another-we were below the expected fatality rate. The government guys would come out and shake their heads; they couldn't understand how we could do it. We accomplished all that realizing that only the crew foreman was certified, and at one time, 60 percent of our mechanics were women," Wischler said.

The maintenance staff at Falcon exceeded 90 people, and, "We had a staff of 18 gardeners, just taking care of the grounds," he added.

Eight instructors and 24 cadets lost their lives in accidents at Falcon, but considering everything, this is a remarkably small number, claims Wischler. One reason could have been the airplanes, he said. "The Stearman was a marvelous machine. The center section gave you tremendous protection. We had several occasions when two Stearmans landed on top of each other, and no one was hurt."

In 1942, Falcon was featured in a 20th Century Fox production appropriately mistitled Thunderbird. The film starred Gene Tierney with Preston Foster, Johnny Sutton and Jack Holt.

Many of the cadets, not only from Falcon but also from the two Thunderbird training schools, were used as extras in the film. The shooting schedule also called for a large portion of the film to be shot on location at Falcon Field. The studio was indebted to those at Falcon, but payment for services was out of the question. As a compromise, the studio built a much needed swimming pool.