

# Western Kentucky University

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From the Selected Works of Lynn E. Niedermeier

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## Wings Over WKU

Lynn E. Niedermeier, *Western Kentucky University*



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## Wings Over WKU

by Lynn Niedermeier

WKU's founding was less than three years away when the Wright brothers achieved their first sustained, power-driven flight at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina on December 17, 1903. One hundred years later, as the Kentucky Museum celebrates the brothers' accomplishments with its newest exhibit, "The Wright Approach: Wilbur and Orville and Their Flying Machine," we can also look back on nearly a century of aviation lore that is unique to WKU.

The earliest and perhaps most mysterious airplane ever to appear on the Hill is part of a well-known campus ghost story. According to one of many versions, around 1910 a workman was perched near a skylight being constructed over the Van Meter Auditorium stage. Looking up, he was startled by the appearance of one of these still-novel flying contraptions, lost his balance, fell and was killed. During performances, a mysterious blood-red glow is said to appear on the stage where his body lay. Like all good ghost stories, his fate tells a cautionary tale—in this case, we must conclude, of the power of progress both to amaze and disorient us.

In the 1930s, another airplane brought excitement as it swooped over the Hill and down State Street, leapfrogging buildings, dodging church steeples and finally circling the pilot's home on College Street. Thus would Victor Strahm, WKU's veteran World War I flying ace, customarily announce his arrival in town.<sup>1</sup> A 1915 graduate, Victor was the son of Franz Strahm, WKU's director of music and a German immigrant. At the outbreak of war, the elder Strahm was divided in his allegiance to his native and adopted countries. When the United States entered the conflict in April 1917, however, he rose tearfully at WKU's chapel exercises and, in his heavily accented English, declared: "I got a boy. He go."<sup>2</sup>

And go he did. Twenty-one-year-old Victor Strahm joined the U.S. Air Service in May and in July began flight instruction at Wilbur Wright Training Field in Dayton, Ohio. He made his first solo flight in August,<sup>3</sup> and by November was on his way to France.

Victor loved to fly. He climbed as high as 18,000 feet in his French-made, Salmson 2A2 aircraft, reaching speeds of 115 miles per hour and sickening an unlucky first-time passenger with his acrobatic stunts. "The flying I did at Dayton," he boasted after four months at the front, "was tame to what I can do now." Victor also relished his duels with enemy planes as he conducted long-range reconnaissance missions to photograph German trenches and troop movements. "I had a beautiful little scrap yesterday with 5 Hun Biplanes," he wrote cheerfully to his anxious parents, "and though they got over 25 holes in my plane none were fatal."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>"Tablecloth Salute," [unidentified Nashville paper], 22 October 1933; *Park City Daily News*, 16 May 1945.

<sup>2</sup> A. M. Stickles, "In Memory of Franz Joseph Strahm," [1942], University Archives, Western Kentucky University.

<sup>3</sup> "Tablecloth Salute."

<sup>4</sup> Victor Strahm to Franz and Alice Strahm, 17, 23 April; 5, 10 May; 6 July; 5 November 1918, Victor Strahm Collection, WKU Special Collections Library.

Two days before the Armistice, Captain Victor Strahm received official credit for downing his fifth enemy plane, qualifying him for the coveted title of “ace.” His exploits earned him many decorations, including the Distinguished Service Cross, the Silver Star and the Croix de Guerre, but perhaps Victor’s greatest source of pride was, as he told his parents, the skill that gave him “that perfect home feeling in the air.”<sup>5</sup>

During World War II, while Victor was again serving his country, WKU was the site of much aviation-related activity. Three months after Pearl Harbor, students in the Training School’s Industrial Arts department joined a program to construct wooden models of fifty different types of planes, both American and foreign. Made from specifications provided by the Navy, the models were sent to aviation bases and training centers around the country for use in training aircraft “spotters.”

In spring 1943, WKU became home to 400 Army Air Corps cadets seeking their pilot’s wings as members of the 321<sup>st</sup> College Training Detachment. Housed in Potter and Schneider Halls, the recruits took flight instruction in Piper Cubs and Aeroncas at the Bowling Green airport. One cadet also remembered watching more advanced training in P-39s, fighter planes which were unusual for the location of the engine behind the pilot. “They kept us very aware,” he said, “of what we wanted to work toward.” This cadet, however, was somewhat skeptical of his duty to attend classes at WKU. “For some reason,” he noted, “the army felt we could learn to fly airplanes better if we had some crash courses in math, history, English and general science.” Although he admired the dedication of the WKU faculty, the most important lesson he learned was that “airsickness could affect anyone, from former conference champion football players on down the athletic ladder.”<sup>6</sup>

By March, 1944 the *College Heights Herald* could list seventeen former WKU students killed in aviation-related training accidents or combat. In the Vietnam War, the fate of survivors was almost as grim. Colonel Kenneth Fleenor, a 1952 graduate, was piloting an F-4 Phantom jet when he was shot down over North Vietnam in 1967—ironically, 64 years to the day after the Wright brothers’ flight—and held as a prisoner of war for more than five years. After his release and return home, however, Fleenor requalified as a pilot and flew for another seven years.<sup>7</sup>

This eagerness to return to the air, notwithstanding the risk, seems common among aviators, and those from the Hill are no exception. A recent example is Colonel Terry Wilcutt, a 1974 WKU graduate and recipient of an honorary doctorate in 2000. As a Marine test pilot, he logged over 4,400 hours in 30 different aircraft before joining NASA, where he is now anticipating his fifth space shuttle mission.

Asked about the experience of space flight, Colonel Wilcutt has said: “Imagine not being limited by anything at all. That’s what it’s like.”<sup>8</sup> The many Hilltoppers who have followed the Wright brothers into the air over the past century would, no doubt, agree.

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<sup>5</sup> Victor Strahm to Franz and Alice Strahm, 17 April; 5, 11 November 1918, Victor Strahm Collection.

<sup>6</sup> Robert M. Johnston, December 2001, University Archives, Western Kentucky University.

<sup>7</sup> See the Kenneth Fleenor Collection, WKU Special Collections Library.

<sup>8</sup> (Lexington, Ky.) *Herald-Leader*, 17 June 1999.