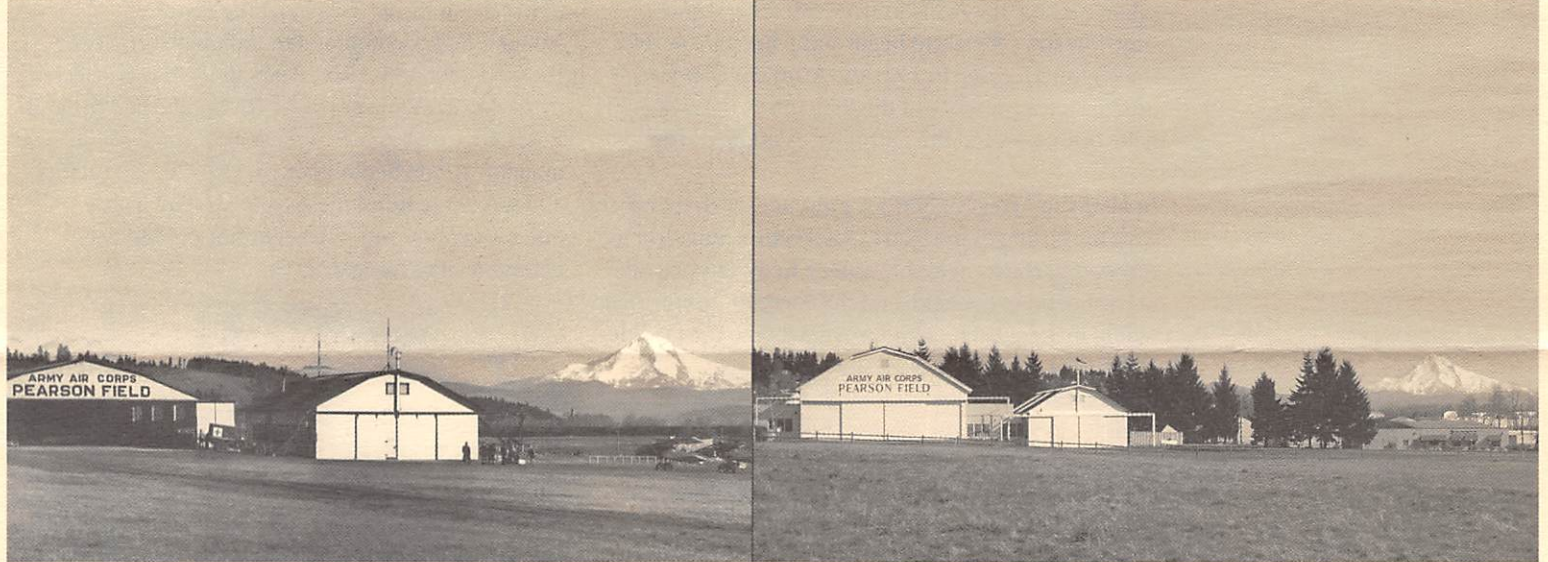




One of the Nation's Oldest Operating Airfields



Images of Pearson Field, ca. 1927 (left side) and in 2007 (right side), show how little has changed at the historic Army Air Service site. Courtesy of Pearson Air Museum.

The First Airship Comes to Vancouver

At the dawn of the twentieth century, Vancouver Barracks had developed into a bucolic and sometimes sleepy army post. In 1905, however, an event occurred that would lead to the establishment of one of the nation's landmark pioneer airfields, which survives today as one of the country's oldest operating airfields. On September 19 of that year, Lincoln Beachey took off in his Baldwin airship from the grounds of the Lewis and Clark Centennial Exposition in Portland. Upon landing on the post's polo field Beachey had not only completed the first aerial crossing of the Columbia River, he had also set a new airship endurance record.

Vancouver Barracks Enters the Aviation Age

The Vancouver Barracks fully entered the aviation age six years later when a few Vancouver aeronauts began operating their aircraft from the barracks' grounds. The first of these was a former race car driver named Silas Christofferson. Christofferson had acquired a Curtiss-type pusher aircraft. On May 29, 1911, Christofferson began to experiment and tinker with this new machine on the grounds of the barracks. The following year Christofferson made headlines with an aerial exhibition during the 1912 Portland Rose Festival. He had hoisted his Curtiss

pusher to the roof of Portland's Multnomah Hotel (now the Embassy Suites) where he then launched his plane and landed across the river at the barracks.

Later that same year Walter Edwards brought air mail to the Pacific Northwest. Using the same plane Christofferson used to fly off the hotel, Edwards prepared a mail carrying exhibition from Portland's Country Club to the Vancouver Barracks field. A temporary postal substation was set up on the golf course, and two flights, on August 10 and 11, carried 5000 letters, each postmarked "Portland Aviation Station No. 1." Once in Vancouver the letters were collected by the Post Office and delivered.



Edwards' flight was not the country's first air mail flight, that having been accomplished the year before in New York State, but it does have the distinction of being the first Post Office sanctioned interstate airmail flight.

Walter Edwards made the first Post Office sanctioned interstate Air Mail flight in 1912, flying from Portland to the Vancouver Barracks Field. Courtesy of Pearson Air Museum.

Spruce Will Win the War!

With American entry in the Great War in Europe, the usually pastoral airfield underwent a dramatic transformation. With the United States fully committed to the war effort, there was a significant demand for the materials needed to build airplanes. Spruce, which was light, flexible and straight grained, was ideal for the construction of aircraft frames, and the Pacific Northwest enjoyed an abundance of spruce trees. Labor uncertainties and strife in the woods of the northwest, however, led the government to create the Spruce Production Division within the Army Signal Corps. Colonel Brice Disque was dispatched to Vancouver to oversee the

operation. In a mere forty-eight days his soldier labor force had built the world's largest spruce cut-up mill, supplying the needs of the United States and its allies overseas. At the end of hostilities in November 1918, production was halted and the mill sold off as surplus.



During WW I, the Vancouver Barracks Field was home to the world's largest spruce mill. Signal Corps photo, courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration.

The Inter-War Years

With the end of the war a degree of tranquility returned to the field at the Vancouver Barracks, but a new phase in the airfield's history was in the offing. The war had taught the army of the importance of aircraft, and in order to keep their planes flying and pilots trained, the Army joined with federal and state forestry officials to begin aerial fire patrols over the region's forests. In 1921 the Army Air Service established a presence at the Vancouver Barracks field, one of several fire patrol bases in the northwest.

In 1923 the Army Air Service presence was expanded with the basing of the 321st Observation Squadron of reserves barracks field. Lt. Oakley Kelly was placed in command at the field, and the energetic young flier would make substantial improvements to the facilities at the field and enthusiastically support expansion in the civilian aviation sectors. With the army's facilities located at the western boundary of the field, a fledgling civilian sector, known as the Chamber of Commerce field, operated at the eastern end. By the end of the decade the City of Vancouver had assumed control of the civilian field, and continues to operate it to this day. In 1924 the Vancouver Barracks field was visited by four Douglas biplanes, the United States' entry in an attempt to be the first to fly around the world. The planes were en route from the factory in southern California to their starting point in Seattle. They would again stop on their way to a successful finish in Seattle and again on their way back to California.

The 321st Observation Squadron quickly settled in to their routine of training flights, and, under the direction of Lt. Kelly, the field saw major improvements. By 1925, however, the awkward designation Vancouver Barracks Aerodrome had fallen out of favor and a new name as sought. The Army was asked to rename the field Pearson Field in honor of Alexander Pearson, one of the army's brightest young pilots killed the previous year. Pearson was an army test pilot and held numerous flight records, including two speed records. He lost his life while preparing for the prestigious Pulitzer race in Ohio when a wing strut failed and his plane crashed.



Pearson Field was a regular stopping point for Army air maneuvers in the interwar period, such as this squadron of Boeing P-12s, ca. 1932. Courtesy of Pearson Air Museum.

Pearson Air Museum

In the late 1990s the Pearson Air Museum, with a generous grant from the M.J. Murdock Charitable Trust, opened a modern new museum facility to celebrate the rich aviation heritage of Vancouver's Pearson Field.

The museum complex comprises a large modern hangar exhibit hall and the adjacent Historic Hangar, the oldest wooden hangar still used to house aircraft. The museum displays early aircraft, detailed exhibits, and an active children's education program.

Pearson Field was officially dedicated on September 16, 1925, and to mark the occasion Lt. Kelly organized a spectacular air show. Fifty-six military aircraft from across the west converged on Pearson providing the audience of 20,000 a spectacular show of precision flying and parachute drops. Military flights continued to dominate activity at Pearson field until 1926. Pearson Field was selected by Pacific Air Transport PAT to service the Portland Post Office on the new west coast airmail route, inaugurated on September 15, 1926. The regularity and safety record of these early air mail flights quickly evolved into the beginnings of regular commercial passenger service.



Alexander Pearson, one of the Army's best pilots, was killed preparing for the prestigious 1924 Pulitzer Race. Courtesy of Pearson Air Museum.

Over the years Pearson Field witnessed a number of aviation records. During the summer of 1928 the Ford Reliability Air Tour stopped at Pearson Field, giving many local residents their first up-close look at the new, all metal, Ford tri-motor. The following year, on October 18, Pearson Field was party to another aviation milestone when a Soviet built monoplane, Land of the Soviets, touched down at Pearson Field on its Moscow to New York flight. A second Soviet plane would land at Pearson in 1937, when a Soviet Ant-25, carrying three crew members, descended on Pearson field after completing the first trans-polar flight from Moscow.

For the remainder of the 1930s the army and civilians continued to share Pearson Field, but as the decade came to a close much of the airmail and commercial traffic had relocated to Portland's Swan Island. The Army Reserves continued to train at Pearson until the outbreak of the Second World War, when all civilian air traffic on the west coast was curtailed and the 321st was transferred to Tacoma. After the war the Army declared Pearson surplus and transferred title to the city of Vancouver. Today the field remains a bustling general aviation center servicing southwest Washington and Portland pilots.



Today, Pearson Field is home to the Pearson Air Museum, where the rich aviation heritage of the Vancouver National Historic Reserve is preserved for future generations. Courtesy of Bill Alley.