



AEROSPACE HISTORY PROGRAM NEARS CRUISING ALTITUDE

In the publish-or-perish world of academe, there's little danger that a group of Auburn University historians will go down in flames.

They're the dream team of flight history, the chroniclers of man's urge to soar into the heavens, the bards of yesteryear's attempts to get off the ground. Just don't suggest that the work of AU's five aerospace scholars—who comprise the largest group of such historians working together outside Washington, D.C.'s Smithsonian Institution—is, well, arcane.

"Esoteric? We like to think of it as decidedly mainstream," says naval aviation expert and history department Chair William Trimble.

He and his colleagues represent a unique subset of the department's technology division. Separately and together, they have written three books in the past year and been pivotal in attracting graduate students and grants. These prolific professors study the origin and development of the aerospace field and are responsible for establishing the only upper-level graduate curriculum in aviation history nationally.

Last summer, Trimble wrote *Attack from the Sea: A History of the U.S. Navy's Seaplane Striking Force*. Soon after, James Hansen, a leading authority on the history of space exploration, turned up on CBS News' "60 Minutes" and was quoted in *The New Yorker* and other newspapers and magazines across the country when *First Man*, his biography of astronaut Neil Armstrong, hit bookstores. A couple of months later, W. David Lewis's *Eddie Rickenbacker: An American Hero in the 20th Century*, a biography of the World War I fighter ace and Eastern Airlines owner, was published to laudatory reviews.

Two other faculty members associated with the program, Stephen L. McFarland and Robert J. Jakeman, also have books on shelves, and retired professor Wesley Phillips Newton is still going strong as well.

A number of the program's alumni work among the coterie of 50 or so top scholars in the aerospace history field, including Bert Frandsen, '74 and '01, assistant professor of joint warfare studies at the U.S. Air Command and Staff College at Maxwell Air Force Base in Montgomery. Jeremy R. Kinney '98 and '03, curates the aeronautics division of the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum.

"Aviation is, in many ways, a transformational technology of the 20th century" that deserves the attention of serious historians, Trimble says.

According to Lewis, AU might even be considered a logical location for studying aviation history because of its proximity to several important landmarks: Redstone Arsenal in Huntsville, the birthplace of the U.S. space program; the headquarters of Delta Air Lines and one of the nation's busiest airports in Atlanta; the nucleus of naval aviation at Pensacola, Fla.; and the U.S. Air Force's higher-education facility for top officers in Montgomery. Not insignificantly, the Wright brothers, seven years after their historic Kitty Hawk flight, opened their first flight school in March 1910 on a site that is now part of the Montgomery base.

Ironically, AU's aerospace history program started almost by accident. In the 1970s, Newton was teaching an undergraduate course in aviation history when he and Lewis co-wrote a history of Delta Air Lines that sold nearly 50,000 copies—about 40,000 of which Delta bought for its employees.

According to Dean Breest, a former Delta public relations executive who now works for Northwest Airlines, the Lewis and Newton tome "was one of the most scholarly researched books on a major airline up to that point in time. It was well regarded in aviation circles nationally and internationally, and was a clear indication of the high quality of work that was taking place at Auburn."

And the rest, as they say, is history.

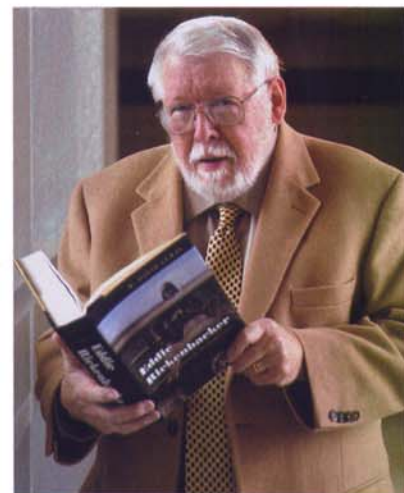


Trimble



Photography by Jeff Etheridge

Hansen



Lewis

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