

COMMUNITY

Air Force landed happily with Col. Springs and protege

In August 1957, Maj. William Coleman, a Rock Hill native and a 1935 Winthrop Training School graduate, was back in the area to carry out an unusual Air Force assignment.

It was his task to locate anything related to early aviation that could be placed on display at the Air Force Museum in Dayton, Ohio. It was a fruitful trip for Coleman.

One of the first people Coleman sought out was Bob Bryant of Rock Hill. Coleman had two very good reasons to go to Bryant. One was Bryant's own outstanding aviation record, the other reason was that Bryant knew everybody connected to aviation in the area and would enthusiastically aid Coleman in his search.

Louise Pettus



NEARBY HISTORY

In various interviews over the years, Bryant said his love affair with the sky began when he was 2 years old and he saw Halley's Comet. In 1913, he saw his first airplane on the Winthrop College campus when a pilot in a small open plane was the star attraction of the first York County fair.

In 1918, Bryant was a spectator at a Liberty Bond drive in Columbia where seven Jennies flew over while soldiers from Fort Jackson marched. One of the Jennies stalled and crashed at a spot on Assembly Street near the state Capitol. Even though he saw two pilots killed, Bryant decided that day that he would learn to fly.

Bryant's older brother ran a motion picture house in Rock Hill. Whenever a new movie came in for showing on a Monday, there was a standing order to deliver it to Col. Elliott Springs in Fort Mill for a Sunday night showing. Springs was a genuine World War I ace who had been decorated by four

governments.

Springs had his own projector and always sent a car for the film and returned it after the showing. One night he didn't have a car to spare and phoned to ask if someone could bring the film to Fort Mill. Bob Bryant had read everything he could get his hands on that was written by or about Springs. He jumped at the chance to see his hero.

That night, Springs told Bryant he would teach him how to fly. Springs had three airplanes and said he would start training Bryant in a Waco. Bryant's first lesson was simple. Using a broomstick, Springs showed Bryant how to maneuver an airplane. Springs did all of his own mechanical work and showed Bryant how to repair engines. Bryant taught Springs how to ride a motorcycle.

Fifteen years after Springs taught Bryant to fly, Bryant set the first of two world records for the longest nonstop flight. In 1936, the

distance was 700 miles; in 1938 Bryant flew 1,050 miles nonstop. He later said, "I set the records to show Colonel Springs that I could. He had a great influence on my life."

Bryant flew some of the first mail routes. In World War II, he flew antisubmarine missions. One of the items he gave Coleman for the museum was a World War II German pilot's summer uniform.

Bryant took Coleman over to Springs Park in Lancaster County. The recreation center for Springs employees had opened at the end of World War II. In a rustic setting on the backwaters of the Catawba River, Springs had gathered a fascinating collection of toys for kids of all ages.

There were three miniature railroad locomotives to carry passengers around a war-surplus amphibious vehicle called a "Duck," two B-24 bombers, an A-20 attack

plane, a T-6 training plane and the prize, the only P-63 King Cobra fighter plane known to be in the United States.

The King Cobra was a tracer and fighter bomber that had been built for the Russians. The airplane had a 1,200 horsepower Allison engine located behind the pilot. Thousands of the airplanes had been delivered during World War II to Russia through Alaska.

Springs generously donated the King Cobra to the Air Force museum, along with the original manuscripts of four books that he had written on the exploits of aviators in World War I: "War Birds and Lady Birds," "Contact," "Above the Black-Blue Sky" and "Nocturne Militaire."

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