

Paton Field Centennial Moment—March

1927-1933: Robbins and Renner

Stow Field management stabilized with the arrival of Hugh Robbins and the establishment of Robbins Flying Service in 1927. Frankie Renner, first his student and then employee, would bring distinction to Stow Field for her accomplishments as an aviator and role model for women.

Robbins

Robbins, although only twenty-four, had seven years of experience as a barnstormer and commercial pilot when he took over Stow Field. Although opposed to “spectacular flying,” he offered the public parachute drops and wing walking, and of course airplane rides. This exposure to flying also fueled public interest in learning to fly and taking flight instruction.

Early in Robbins’ tenure, Stow Field became a stop for the Akron area’s first airline service, connecting Cleveland to Louisville. Robbins flew in the inaugural flight on May 19, 1927. In good weather, the flight took nearly ten hours, half the time of the fastest train. However, the venture proved to be unprofitable and ended months later.



Greeting the area’s first airline service. Hugh Robbins in the white flight suit. Courtesy of the *Akron Beacon Journal*

The next year, Robbins expanded to Akron, establishing Aviation College to provide practical aeronautics instruction. Enrollment soon reached two hundred students. But hard times were ahead. In March 1929, a fire at Stow Field destroyed the hangar and eight airplanes. Competition from the new airports in Akron and nearby Darrowville drew away business. Finally, the Depression drove Robbins Flying Service into receivership in June 1932, ending a fruitful period for the airfield and its longest-lasting operation until Kent State University ownership.

Renner

Office worker Frankie Renner used an inheritance to take flying lessons at Stow Field. Impressed with her ability as a pilot and background as a stenographer, Robbins hired her as secretary/treasurer. In time she was also instructing students and helping with the sale of Waco airplanes. When she became the first woman in Akron to get a private pilot license, she was one of only four women licensed in Ohio. She soon qualified for her commercial and transport licenses.

In 1931, Renner joined in the quest to break the women's altitude record of 27,418 feet. On March 13, flying a specially-modified Waco biplane, outfitted with oxygen, and dressed for extreme cold, Renner climbed for over three hours and then began her descent when her fuel was spent. When the plane's barograph was officially evaluated, the finding was that a height of only 24,990 feet had been recorded. Although her attempt failed, Renner earned considerable respect for her courage and ability.

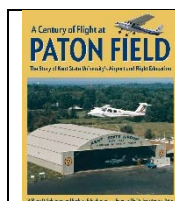


Frankie Renner with Waco airplane used in altitude attempt
Courtesy of the International Women's Air & Space Museum, Cleveland, Ohio

Renner and eleven other area aviatrixes gained notoriety in spring 1932 by forming the "Squadron of Death" to interest women in flying and dispel superstition. When Robbins Flying Service failed that summer, Renner took on the role of airfield manager for the new operator. Fire struck again in August 1933, making this the second Stow Field hangar fire she experienced. This one ended the business, as well as Renner's aviation career. She had demonstrated that women need not be limited by commonly held expectations for them. She would be the first of several aviatrixes who learned to fly at this field and earn distinction for their accomplishments.

DID YOU KNOW?

Paton Field has had four generations of hangars: Ohio Flying School (1920, destroyed by fire in 1929), Robbins (1929, destroyed by fire in 1933), auxiliary field (1937; dilapidated/replaced in 1945,) Van Devere hangars (1945 cement block, 1946 Quonset-style).



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