Press Release

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Fort Drum Public Affairs

Around and About Fort Drum: Wheeler-Sack Army Airfield

FORT DRUM, N.Y. (May 26, 2022) -- The name given to Fort Drum’s airfield honors two Army aviators who died during a training flight on July 6, 1927, at Pine Camp (now Fort Drum).

But years before Soldiers were flying over this part of the North Country, the first ground troops arrived to the Pine Plains area from Buffalo on foot and wagon to conduct summer training in 1908.

The War Department had purchased 10,000 acres north of the Black River to create a temporary encampment for National Guard training. The inaugural event was deemed successful, and Pine Plains became a seasonal camp for large-scale Army maneuvers.

A few years later, the War Department introduced military aviation into the Signal Corps, for the purpose of defending overseas assets and to guard U.S. coastal defenses. However, when war against Germany was declared in 1914, the Aviation Section was still ill-prepared to be a lethal operational force in America’s military arsenal.

In 1918, the War Department cited that two airmen lost their lives in training for every one killed in battle.

As the post-war Army aviation training program was standardized, a grassy patch of land was carved out at Pine Camp for flight operations. According to a Camp Drum Sentinel article, the airfield was little more than underbrush when the first plane touched down in 1925. By 1930, the path was much safer when a macadam strip was paved east-west and north-south to accommodate an increased volume of flights.

But it was in the summer of 1927, when Capt. Curtis Wheeler and Lt. Carl John Sack suffered a fatal accident at the Pine Camp airfield.

Wheeler, 36, and Sack, 25, both with 102nd Observation Squad, 27th Division Air Corps, flew from Staten Island, New York, in a formation of eight planes to participate in a two-week training exercise.

The aviation unit was there to support N.Y. National Guard infantry troops training in various maneuvers. According to reports, Sack had control of the biplane, a Curtiss JN-4 (Jenny), during the Wednesday morning flight, while Wheeler made observations of the infantry movements below.

The plane was flying low while dropping messages to the various battalions below during the defensive regimental exercise. The last message sent from the plane, at 10:32 a.m., read “Second battalion, headquarters, 105th Infantry – outposts easily seen.”

Suddenly the plane seemed to hang in the air, according to witnesses, and then dived from about 200 feet to the earth at 10:45 a.m. According to eyewitnesses, the aircraft just missed a squad of infantrymen, northwest of the sandy “Hogsback” sector of the reservation before it crashed. The motor of the plane was buried about two feet in the sand, with the fuselage and tail crumbled up against the smashed wings.

A Medical Corps officer riding in a plane nearby immediately landed near the crash site. He rushed to the aid of the two men lying prone, and he saw there was nothing he could do. Wheeler died in his arms. Sack was placed in an ambulance and rushed to a Watertown hospital where he died from his injuries.

According to the division commander, this was the first fatal accident in the squadron since it was established in 1920. The Pine Camp commander said the cause of the crash was unknown, but that the plane was in good condition when it took off from the reservation landing field that morning. The Curtiss JN-4 was built in 1918 and remodeled in 1925.

Fellow aviators said that both Wheeler and Sack were experienced fliers with credible records, and that only plane trouble could have caused the crash. One pilot said that it was ideal flying weather, except that it was a little “bumpy.”

A court of inquiry was ordered to investigate the circumstances surrounding the deaths of the airmen. Its findings were not disclosed at the time, but it was indicated that the crash was not the result of anyone’s fault or neglect. The chief of Army Aviation said that the planes were subjected to rigid inspection and had been practically rebuilt in all cases to where they were better than when first delivered to the War Department.

A funeral service was held at Pine Camp for the fallen aviators on July 7, 1927, with 3,500 Soldiers from the New York National Guard in attendance. Planes circles high above the coffins while military rites were conducted.

The memorial in their honor described them as “Two very gallant gentlemen, two gentlemen unafraid … who in leaving us have bequeathed a memory of splendid comradeship, of high ideals, of accomplishment and service which will serve as an inspiration to many others.”

Wheeler, who graduated from Yale University in 1912, worked in literary circles in New York for several years and was associate editor of the New York Herald Tribune’s Sunday magazine. After moving to Chicago, he entered military service with the Illinois National Guard. He was assigned to C Battery, 1st Illinois Field Artillery and deployed to the Texas-Mexican border before World War I.

Wheeler participated in field artillery training with Fifth Army at the French Artillery School, and transferred to the Air Service in 1917. He deployed to Europe after the U.S. entered World War I, and served in the Army Air Corps in France. Wheeler was awarded the Croix de Guerre with nine palms for shooting down three German planes. Other honors included the Insignia of the Order of Leopold of Belgium and the Distinguished Service Cross.

After the war, Wheeler returned to New York City and worked at a newspaper while serving as director of the local Boys Club. He published a book, “Letters from an American Soldier to his Father,” in 1918.

Wheeler was among the first pilots to establish the N.Y. National Guard’s 27th Air Service in 1922. The unit began begin regular operations from Miller Field, Staten Island, where they were assigned a large flying field, a concrete and steel hangar and a number of airplanes and aviation accessories. New York became one of a few states to have a full aviation unit ready for immediate service, according to Aviation Magazine (Nov. 20, 1922).

Sack graduated from Columbia University and entered the Army National Guard after completing a course in electrical engineering at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1923. He was employed as an electrical engineer and steel expert with Gibbs & Hill in New York City. Sack frequently flew to Baltimore to spend weekends with his parents.

He was two weeks away from marriage when he died.

The War Department approved the naming of the aviation field at Pine Camp as Wheeler-Sack Field in May 1928. On July 13, 1928, Maj. George A. Vaughn, 27th Division commander, unveiled two bronze plaques during a dedication ceremony for Wheeler-Sack Field.

The airfield saw short periods of active use and long periods of disuse until 1940 when the threat of another world war brought about major reconstruction and developments at Pine Camp. Three major runways were completed in 1942. Wheeler-Sack Field served as operations center for one of the largest combined airborne-armor peacetime maneuvers in 1948.

By the mid-1950s, the airfield handled an average of 45 landings per day, and provided a training center for helicopter, L-19 and L-20 pilots. It also served as an air base for visiting dignitaries who visited Camp Drum to observe summer training.

Wheeler-Sack Army Airfield was given a major upgrade in 1985 when Fort Drum was designated as the new home for the 10th Mountain Division, and nearly every facet of the airfield was modernized to support a rapid deployment force.

For more information about Wheeler-Sack Army Airfield, visit https://home.army.mil/drum/index.php/about/Garrison/DPTMS/aviation-division.

(Information for this article was compiled from multiple news sources covering the accident, the post newspaper and archived research from the Fort Drum Cultural Resources Program and the 10th Mountain Division and Fort Drum Museum.)

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Photo Caption: Fort Drum’s Wheeler-Sack Army Airfield is named in honor of two Army aviators who died during a training exercise at Pine Camp in 1927. (Graphic by Mike Strasser, Fort Drum Garrison Public Affairs)

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