

Origins of the Peruvian Air Force

PERLA BACA

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Peru looked towards Europe. In particular, Lima was observing Paris, the French capital, at that time center of the world's nascent aeronautical technology. There were large air events in Paris where the first flights were demonstrated using aircraft heavier than air and propelled by their own engines.

In Paris, Santos Dumont, Louis Bleriot, Gabriel Voisin, and other pioneering giants of worldwide aeronautics competed outdoing each other's inventions. Peruvians Jorge Chavez, the Peruvian pilot born in France and heroic symbol, and Juan Bielovucic were there as well, competing and winning contests in the nascent aviation field.

Meanwhile, in Lima, our capital enjoyed cinematography, street lighting, and local telephone service; it had the cutting-edge technology of that era. Lima was a city of about 100,000 inhabitants, of which 25 percent were descendants of European immigrants (mostly Italians and English) and Americans. The first gasoline car arrived in Lima in 1904, the electric tram began to be built in 1903, and in the skies, on 15 January 1911, Juan Bielovucic flew the first plane in Peru. The latter occurred during the first government of President Augusto B. Leguía.

Military Aviation Debuts

The death of Jorge Chávez in 1910 in Europe sparked an enthusiasm for aviation in Perú. Bigger than life pilots like Carlos Tenaud and Lieutenant Juan O'Connor, appeared on the scene, and the Pro-Aviation League was created, whose president and promoter was General Pedro Muñiz.

On 2 December 1915, an airplane appeared for the first time in the maneuvers of the garrison of Lima, around Chilca, a town located south of the capital. Its pilot was now-Captain O'Connor, after obtaining his pilot's license in France. The flight was carried out without incident.

After this, army lieutenants Enrique Ruíz Eldredge and Guillermo Protzel and marine lieutenants Roberto Velazco and Ismael Montoya traveled to the aviation school at El Palomar, near Buenos Aires, Argentina. Lieutenant Ruíz Eldredge, who was an infantry officer and recipient of the *Espada de Honor* (Sword of Honor) upon his promotion, lost his life in an aviation accident 2 March 1918, becoming the first casualty of military aviation in Peru. Meanwhile, his companion Protzel, concluded studies in Buenos Aires and received, as a gift from the Peruvian colony in that city, a Farman airplane, which he named for his deceased comrade-in-arms, Enrique Ruíz.



Foreground, from left to right Ensign Ismael Montoya, Commander Paul du Beaudiez, Major Louis Coudouret, and Lieutenant Guillermo Protzal during the test of the Coudron aircraft acquired during the government of President Pardo.

Peruvian Aviators in World War I

Peruvians also attended the call of the First World War, or the Great War, as it was called. One of them was José García Calderón, a writer, engineer, and aviator. He enlisted in the allied ranks, and his courage and work earned him three citations in the Order of the Day and the Cross of Honor for heroic actions in support of France, a country for which he died in 1918 when the enemy shot down his observation balloon.

Juan Bielovucic was another brave pilot who fought alongside French aviators, together with Luis Segalá. Juan Leguía (son of President Augusto B. Leguía) and Enrique Revett were at the service of the Royal British Aviation Corps.

Army Military Aviation Service Created

In 1919, the feasibility of developing an air force in Peru, capable of meeting its military and commercial needs, was expected. As for the military aspect, the mission of the air force was, as it is today, for national defense. Thus, the Military Aviation Service was created on 28 January 1919 by a supreme decree signed by the president of the republic, José Pardo. Likewise, the head of state requested the French government to send a military aviation mission to organize the first Military Aviation School in Peru.

Coinciding with the French mission's arrival, Walter Pack, an American pilot, arrived as a representative of the Curtiss airplane factory together with Arthur Lee, an English pilot, as a representative of the Handley Page factory. They were looking for their firms to establish commercial air services on the coast. Juan Leguía Swayne, a Peruvian pilot who served and received his license in England, also arrived at the same time. They all had different objectives but the same ideal: to promote and develop aviation in Peru.

At the time, the situation was as follows: The newly formed Military Aviation School had its aerodrome in Maranga under the responsibility of the French aviation mission. The navy, on 9 December 1919 of that same year, created its Hydro-Aviation unit to study the conditions in Ancón Bay, a precursor to establishing a hydroplane school. In the city of Bellavista, in Callao, the aerodrome of the Civil Aviation School was established. Throughout Peru, districts, departments, and provinces made collections to buy airplanes in their eagerness to take advantage of aviation to benefit their localities. Activities in the national aeronautics field were intense. In the military sector, both nationals and foreigners consolidated the advancement of this technology as a new weapon for defense and progress of Peru.

The French Aviation Mission stayed two years in Lima. When they left, Major J. Sisson, an English pilot, remained as the director of the Military Aviation School; and W. Bradley, an American pilot, remained as a flight instructor, together with Peruvian pilots O'Connor and Protzel.

January 1921, Military Aviation Expands

In January 1921, the General Directorate of Aeronautics, in charge of military aviation and setting doctrine, was established. Its first director was the Frigate Captain Juan Leguía (son of President Leguía), then head of the Ancón School of Hydro-Aviation, which had just been created the previous year.

Commander J O'Connor was appointed as the director of the Military Aviation School and Major Recavarren as the deputy director. It is at that time that the military school moved from Maranga to Las Palmas, near Barranco, where the Territorial Air Region II is located today.

On 23 July 1922, the Military Aviation School was inaugurated with the name of Jorge Chávez. In this school, the principles and doctrine derived from both French and North American military air organizations were merged. It had 20 aircraft of various types and made flights from Lima to Pisco–Cusco–Puno and direct flights Lima–Arequipa–Lima. Its first pilots were Ensign Alejandro Velasco Astete and Majors Baltazar Montoya, Carlos Gilardi, and Carlos Alvarillo. On 11 April 1926, Major Protzel and his copilot, Ensign Podestá, died in a plane crash.

The Hydro-Aviation Unit of the Navy

On 9 December 1919, the Navy's Hydro-Aviation Service was created, and on January 26, 1920, the Ancón School of Hydro-Aviation became a branch of the navy. In 1920 the first sea planes arrived in Peru, brought by the Peruvian Corporation on behalf of the Handley Page factory, which sent mechanics and pilots to arm them in Ancón. The machines were baptized with the names Huanay and Patillo, and their first demonstration was made on February 8, 1920. The Huanay had as a passenger President Leguía, and the Patillo had as a passenger Mrs. Cooper, the first woman who took to the air in Peru in a "flying boat."

This school had two recognized stages. The first covers 1920–23 and the other 1924–29. In 1924, the Navy's Hydro-Aviation Service contracted, through the US government, corvette Captain Harold B. Grow, member of the US naval mission established in Peru to reorganize and re-establish the service. He assumed the direction of the Ancón School at the beginning of 1924, where he found two hangars with seven worn-out "flying boats". He implemented a total reorganization of the school together with a reconstruction effort, all with a reduced budget but with unwavering faith. All the officers and junior staff worked side by side with him at the lead.

Grow requested three officers from the Ministry of the Navy, which sent him three midshipmen, Leonardo Alvariño Herr, Carlos A. de la Jara, and Luis Sologuren, plus additional noncommissioned officers, which increased the school from the initial 50 to over 150 personnel. Grow was also able to order three instructional aircraft from Boeing in the United States, with 200 horse power (HP) Wright engines, which arrived with 2nd Lt L. Moore as their instructor.

Between 1926 and 1927 this school studied and implemented a network of communications and air commerce from the coast to the remote regions of the Amazon. In October 1926, Grow and Lieutenant Alvariño crossed the jungle region comprising San Ramón, Masisea, Contamana, and Iquitos. On September 20 of that year, the Eastern Air Service was established, which mapped the Amazon basin and offered passenger and mail service while also providing a defensive capability in the Amazonian territory.

On May 20, 1929: Creation of the Peruvian Aviation Corps

Peru's constitution of 1920 indicated that the armed forces were only made up of the army and the navy. Thus, faced with the growing advance of world military aviation, on May 20, 1929, the government created a third armed institute: the Peruvian Aviation Corps (CAP), under Supreme Decree no. 17. It subsequently changed its name in 1936 to Peru Aeronautical Corps, and again in 1950 to its current designation, as the Fuerza Aérea del Perú (Peruvian Air Force, FAP).

The cofounders of this new weapon of war in Peru were the army and navy. The commander received the title of inspector general of aeronautics; Grow, the American naval pilot who had been head of the Ancón Hydro-Aviation School, was the first appointed to this position. Officers and noncommissioned officers of both institutions who were assigned to their respective aviation units could voluntarily return to their alma mater or otherwise transfer to the newly constituted institute.

The personnel that voluntarily formed this new institution—pilots and mechanics of the Army and the Navy—worked as they always had done, with total devotion, love of Peru, and great professionalism. These values have been transmitted to future generations, for which they deserve all our gratitude and respect, for being the forgers of the Peruvian Air Force. □

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