

Historical markers dedicated in Hampton

Accomplishments at Langley Field and NASA Research Facility recognized

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Along roadways throughout the Commonwealth, historical markers inform visitors about significant events, people and locations. Through the efforts of the Virginia Aeronautical Historical Society, two new historical markers now grace downtown Hampton. They commemorate the long and significant contributions made by people at Langley Field and NASA Langley Research Facility.

The two markers stand across the street from the Virginia Air and Space Center, near the Hampton Carousel at the south intersection of King Street and Settlers' Landing Road.

Hampton Mayor Ross Kearney II spoke of the city's efforts to bring the flying field to the Peninsula at Saturday's dedication. He told how the U.S. Army purchased 1,600 acres from a trio of local businessmen, Harry Holt, Nelson Groom and H.R. Booker in December 1916.

They knew of the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics intent to acquire a suitable piece of property to be used by jointly by NACA, the Army and the Navy. The choices were winnowed down to two locations. If it wasn't for the planning and persuasion of the businessmen, Langley Field could have called Aberdeen, Md. "home."

Roy Bridges, director of NASA Langley Research Center, a retired Air Force major general, fighter pilot and astronaut spoke of the past successes in research and what the

future could hold, such as a hybrid air and space vehicle “that might transit the globe in 90 minutes.”

The Chief of Staff of the Air Force, General John P. Jumper, spoke of previous Airmen’s historic accomplishments at Langley Field, but he also offered a glimpse of what it was like growing up as an Air Force Brat.

Akin to a rite of passage for juveniles living on the base in the 1960s, there were two mischievous pranks that were then the standard. Stealing the Tactical Air Command commander’s quarters name plate and riding the rotating beacon on top the water tower. So besides flying everything from a C-7 to the F/A-22, it’s now known General Jumper accomplished both feats. “General Sweeney’s name plate is somewhere . . .”

Besides the well-known notables in attendance at the center were individuals who saw Air Force history first hand. Retired General John Michael Loh was stationed here from 1991 to 1995, served as the last TAC commander and the first Air Combat Command commander also attended the dedication.

Ann Hamilton Tunner of Ware Neck in Gloucester County was on hand as well. She is the widow of the father of modern air transport and airlift, General William Tunner. During World War II she a WASP ferry pilot flying P-51 Mustangs, P-47 Thunderbolts, P-39 Aircobras, P-63 Kingcobras, transports such as the C-47s and B-25 and B-17 bombers.

Master Sgt. Bernard Solonina of Poquoson retired from the Air Force in 1957 – when E-7 was the top enlisted grade. He was in the General Headquarters Air Force in

the late 1930s and flew as a flight mechanic on General Frank Andrews' Douglas C-32 executive transport.

Retired Colonel Bill Casterline was a private in GHQ Air Force at Langley in the late 1930s and became a Flying Cadet in 1940. He went on to serve in Panama as a fighter pilot in the Caribbean Air Force, where he again served under General Andrews, who had been sent there by Roosevelt to build the defenses of the vulnerable Southern Flank. Colonel Casterline also served as a base commander in Strategic Air Command, retiring from the service in the 1960s.

The United States Air Force Heritage Brass Quintet and Master Sgt. Eldon Sully, guitarist, performed at the dedication. Upon the unveiling of the markers, a four-ship formation of two F/A-22s and two F-15Cs from the 27th Fighter Squadron flew over the center.