Chapter Five, Lt. Luis Noriega Medrano
and Randolph Field, Texas

The total number of times pilot Noriega crossed from Mexico into the United States is not known, as some were military flights, the following dates have been taken from the records of the United States Border Crossings. His first flight took place on 14 July 1928, [military not recorded] when the President of Mexico, ordered him to fly the Mexican flag to Washington, D. C. to cover the casket of Captain Emilio Carranza. In April 1929, U. S. Border Crossing manifest records he crossed into the United States at San Antonio, Texas, for a visit, listed as an Aviator for the Mexican Government.
On 7 November 1931, he entered the U. S. at El Paso, Texas, and destination is listed as Mexican Game and Fishing Commission in San Diego, Calif. Another data card records he was in New York City, New York, from 17 November 1931 until 7 January 1932. This is recorded again as an aviator of the government of Mexico. On 20 August 1932, he again enters the U. S. at port of arrival El Paso, Texas, and he is in transit for ten days. He is listed as a Government employee, and his friend is the ex-President of Mexico, Elias Calles, who is now the Mexican Minister of Industry and Commerce. The bottom of this card reveals he had been examined at Laredo, Texas, on 17 November 1931, on his last trip to New York City. I believe he spent ten days at Randolph Field, Texas, being enrolled as a Foreign student in the “WEST POINT OF THE AIR.”

[Below] 1931, Post Card showing main entrance at Randolph Field, Texas.
The U. S. Army Air Service was created during the First World War by President Woodrow Wilson, soon after the United States entered the war in April 1917. In 1920, the air arm became a combatant branch of the U. S. Army, and for the next six years a turbulent history developed between airpower and old Army officer ideas of traditional fighting on the ground. Just watch the movie on the court-martial of Billy Mitchell, or read a number of excellent books on his trial, and you will understand the struggles [Army, Navy, Air Force] that took place. The Air Corps Act [44 Stat. 780] became law on 2 July 1926, which changed the name to the U. S. Army Air Corps, which many historians agree, gave the new military Aviation Corps a striking arm in the Army. The Act also created two new Brigadier General positions in the Army, one established for all future flying training, officer in charge became Brig. Gen. Frank P. Lahm, known as the “Father of Randolph Field.” This officer realized he needed a new designed airfield for the training requirements of the growing Air Corps. The U. S. War Department accepted
a 2,300-acre site in August 1928, and Randolph field was formally dedicated on 20 June 1930. The naming of the site would be selected by a committee of Air Corp officers, including Capt. William M. Randolph. While taking off from Gorman Field, Texas, on a return flight to Kelly Field, Capt. Randolph crashed and was killed. The new training field was named for Captain Randolph, and his widow Mrs. Cornelia Read Randolph, raised the first flag over the airfield.

Free domain image from Milton Blackstone collection 1932, San Diego Air and Space Museum.

On 1 October 1931, the U. S. Air Corps Training Center moved its headquarters to Randolph Field, and the first class of 210 cadets began primary pilot training on 2 November 1931. This became the primary and
basic pilot training for the U. S. Air Corps, with more advanced pilot training completed at Kelly Field, Texas, south west of Randolph Field.
LIFE'S COVER: The boy with wings on this week's cover is Harold Wilson of Los Angeles, who was a flying cadet at Randolph Field (see pp. 45–53) when this picture was taken. Now, having completed his course, he will graduate from Kelly Field on Feb. 1, be commissioned a second lieutenant in the Reserve Corps, assigned to duty in bombardment division. Wilson is 24, went to West Point but was "washed out" there after two years for flunking French. He has wanted to be a flier ever since he was a tot and watched planes soar over his young head.
FIRST FLIGHT

RANDOLPH IS NO. 1 FLYING SCHOOL

Randolph Field is 3½ square miles of flat, fenced-in Texas land. From San Antonio, 17 miles to the west, a broad road leads to the field, divides into two concrete lanes at the outer gate, and proceeds directly up to the Administration Building in front of which the flying cadets of Randolph parade (see previous page). At the end of the road is a tight little Army city of 3,500 people, of big landing fields, of tile-roofed barracks and checker-roofed hangars (see below).

On the flatness of Randolph Field and in the air above it, young Americans are learning to fly. Their wings are the taut fabric wings of training planes. Their purpose is to master the tense, exciting skill of flying airplanes for the U. S. Army Air Corps. Because the U. S. is arming to meet an armed world, the Army needs all the fledglings that Randolph Field can hatch. At present there are 2,250 Army pilots for 1,350 first-line combat planes. But within two years, under the proposed rearming plan, the Army will have 3,300 first-line combat planes and will need 4,660 officer-pilots. They will all be graduates of Randolph Field.

Randolph Field is the Army’s only primary pilot training school. The Army boasts that no flying school in the world is better. On its plant and equipment, the Army has spent more than $16,000,000. On each flying cadet who completes his training course, the Army spends $13,000. Three times every year—in March, July, October—a new class of flying cadets enters Randolph. Until 1937, the largest class ever admitted numbered 220. Under the proposed new program, new classes will average 450 entrants.

It is not difficult to find candidates for Randolph Field. The Army gives the best possible air training, pays its students $75 a month, supplies board and lodging, makes it virtually certain that a good air transport job will be waiting for good graduates. But more than this, the aviator is now firmly established as the great idol of America’s youth. A Rockefeller survey shows statistically that the aviator has replaced the cowboy and the policeman as young America’s No. 1 hero. The American Institute of Public Opinion survey, getting reaction to Roosevelt’s plan to train 20,000 civilian pilots, found that three out of four Americans under 30 want to learn how to fly.

To enter Randolph, a candidate must be over 20 and under 27 years old. He should have at least two years of college education, engineering training preferred. He must be unmarried and physically near-perfect. He makes his first application at the nearest Army Air Corps station. If he passes a stiff physical examination, as only one out of four do, he is sent at the Government’s expense to Randolph Field, given further tests and enlisted for three years. After eight months at Randolph as a flying cadet, he is advanced to nearby Kelly Field.

Of a class of 450 cadets who will enter Randolph, 225 will be “washed out” or dismissed before completing the course. After four more months at Kelly, about 220 graduates will get their “wings” and a commission as second lieutenant in the Reserve Corps. Virtually all of them will then serve two years in the Air Corps as reserve officers on active duty. Some may serve up to five years. At the end of their time, they will be discharged with a bonus of $500. Under the new Army plan, 300 a year will be given regular commissions, kept permanently in the Air Corps. Most of those who are not will go out into commercial air transport which gets 55% of its pilots from the Army, most of the rest from the Navy’s training school at Pensacola, Fla.

This is the new Army air program, proposed on Jan. 18 to the House Committee on Military Affairs. The Army has in the past shifted most officers into the Reserve Corps. Now it wants to keep more of them on active flying duty. It also plans to use selected civilian flying schools to give students the early primary training they now get at Randolph. It will pick the most likely students from these civilian schools, send them onto Randolph for basic primary training. This will increase the actual number of graduates which Randolph can turn out.

All of this means that more and more boys who—like those on these pages—sprout or test their wings at Randolph, will use them flying for the Army.
The dodos, newly come to Randolph Field and serious almost to the point of grimness, line up for their first infantry drill. Their costume consists of khaki coveralls and flight caps. Nattier slate-blue uniforms are given out later.

**DODO TO UPPERCLASSMAN**

**RANDOLPH FIELD DODOS**

Graduates of Randolph Field look back on their eight months’ stay there as an exceedingly pleasant time. They get $75 a month, live in comfortable rooms, eat excellent food. (The food at Kelly Field, even better, is renowned throughout the Army.) The discipline is strict but not too severe. The hazing, though curious, is fairly gentle. For the first four months, during “primary” training, the flying cadet is called a “dodo” (a bird that can walk but not fly). When he moves up to “basic” training, he becomes an upperclassman and can haze the new crop of dodos.

Social life at Randolph is like that of any Army post. Flying cadets do not visit officers or officers’ families without invitation. They do not mingle with West Pointers—about 10% of each class are West Point graduates—who are already officers and therefore socially superior. Since the cadets themselves will soon become officers, they do not mingle with the enlisted men. Cadets in good standing are granted weekend furloughs from Saturday noon to Sunday evening. They go into San Antonio and date up the local girls who, after they have run through two or three classes of cadets, are impolitely known as “cadet widows.”
Air Corps Training Center, Randolph Field, Texas, was designed along the same lines as the West Point Military Academy, and in turn, the Air Corps school was termed “The West Point of the Air.”
It was organized to receive a new class of “Primary Stage” cadets every four months, and then the class moves over to “Basic Stage” training, followed by four months of Advanced Flying School at Kelly Field, where they will graduate as pilots. One left side of Randolph Field is used for Primary Stage training and the right side for Basic Stage training.

The Newsletter “THE TEE” published at the West Point of the Air beginning in 1931.
The Tee Newsletter contains good information, including the number of pilots trained from September 1922 to October 1932. The three schools trained 46
Foreign Student Cadets during that period of time, and almost half, [20] were trained at Randolph Field, Texas.

San Diego Air and Space Museum Archive, from Milton Blackstone collection, 1933-39, showing ten Foreign “Dodo Birds” in training at Randolph Field, Texas. [date is unknown] With the opening of Randolph field, 2 November 1931, the United States receives various applications from foreign possessions, and these pilots are frequently included in the student officer classification. Regardless of their former pilot training in their native country, all are trained alike - all live, eat, and train in accordance with the same rules and regulations of the U. S. Air Corps.
From 15 October 1931, until 1 March 1935, a total of 2,022 “Dodo Birds” reported to Randolph Field, for Air Corps Primary Pilot Training, and 20 were foreign pilot students, ten are shown above. These foreign pilots must fully speak and write English, and pass all the requirements of the American pilots before they can begin training. During the above time period, the twenty foreign pilots came from the following countries – Mexico 7, China 3, Brazil 2, Philippines 2, Turkey 2, and one each from Cuba, Columbia, Guatemala, and even Germany. I’m sure the German pilot was more of a spy, gathering information on American pre-war pilot training for Hitler.

Until 1 March 1935, Mexico became the leader in sending their pilots to train at Randolph Field, Texas, and one of the seven who received his wings in Texas was Lt. Luis Noriega Medrano, of the Mexican Air Force. He began training as a Dodo Bird in the class of 12 October 1933, and throughout his life, he held his training in Texas, and the United States in the highest regard.
This story appeared in the July 1933 issue of “Air Corps Newsletter” and records the names of Foreign Latin Senior Officers, who came to visit Randolph Field in late July, including Mexico.
Each month the U. S. Office of the Chief of the Air Corps, War Department, Washington, D.C., publishes a News Letter, recording all the activities, promotions, and names of students admitted for training in the Air Corps. The September 1933, issue No. 9, records the names of the next new class who will begin training at Randolph Field, Texas, on 12 October 1933. The total is recorded as 159 Americans, but in fact this class contained two Mexican pilots, Lt. Luis Noriega and fellow pilot Lt. Daniel Maldonado, bringing the grand total to 161 students. Possibly for security reasons, the two Mexican pilot names were not included in the American list total which appeared in the Air Corps News Letter, September 1933.

Then the U. S. Air Corps in Washington decides to make cutbacks, [thanks to the 1930’s depression] and the News Letter is cancelled for the next fourteen months. Not published again until 1 January 1935.
Lt. Luis Noriega and Lt. Daniel Maldonado of the Mexican Air Force begin training at Randolph Field, Texas, on 12 October 1933, and will graduated one year later, mid-October 1934. With no publication of the news Letter for the class of October 1933, and their names being omitted, by the U. S. Air Corps, ‘their’ past has been lost until now. This is the list of the class which appeared in the September 1933 issue of Air Corps News Letter, the second last issue published. One American civilian name should be added to the list – Oscar K. Lawing, from Little Rock, Ark.
The new class to start training at the Air Corps Primary Flying School at Randolph Field, Texas, on October 1st, consists of 153 cadets. In addition to the 84 newly commissioned Second Lieutenants who were graduated from the United States Military Academy, West Point, on June 29th, last, and who were commissioned in the previous issue of the News Letter, comprise 78 others who will receive training under the status of Flying Cadets, among these latter being 16 Enlisted Men of the Air Corps Regular Army. 6 enlisted men from other branches of the Army and 51 cadets from the Primary School.

Students training under the status of Flying Cadet, who successfully complete the course, are given the rating of "Airplane Pilot" and are commissioned Second Lieutenants in the Air Reserve. Therefore, these newly commissioned men were assigned to extended active duty with Air Corps tactical squadrons at the time of their commission. Due to the curtailment in War Department appropriations, it is not certain at this time whether they will be assigned the privilege of this active duty under their status as Reserve Officers.

The new students are due to undergo a year of intensive flying training—eight months at the Primary School, Randolph Field, and four months at the Advanced School, Kelly Field, Tex. The course at the Primary School is divided into the Primary and Basic Stages, each of four months' duration. When a student reaches the Basic Stage, it is generally an indication that he shows the inherent ability to fly, and the chances are good that he will pass through the Basic Stage successfully as well as the advanced course at Kelly Field. Statistics compiled by the Air Corps show that the percentage of students failing to make the grade after reaching the Basic Stage is very small.

In the Basic course, students no longer fly the primary training plane, but the basic type employed. The major part of their training is in this airplane and it is more delicate, and when a student becomes proficient in handling it, he generally has no difficulty in mastering the controls of the advanced service type plane which are in use at the Advanced Flying School as well as by the Air Corps in general.

The personnel of the new Flying Cadet class are enumerated below:

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<tr>
<th>Enlisted Men - Air Corps</th>
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<tr>
<td>C. G. Cooper, Jr.</td>
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<td>John L. McFee</td>
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<td>Ethelbert L. McFee</td>
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<td>Elwood B. McFee</td>
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<th>Enlisted Men - Other Branches</th>
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<tr>
<td>Frederick W. Saltz</td>
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<td>James E. Saltz</td>
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<td>Charles E. Saltz</td>
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"THE WEST POINT OF THE AIR"

Randolph Field, Texas, has been the scene of much activity for the past ten months. The filming of "The West Point of the Air," Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer's Epic of the Air, without interruption of flying training, is an achievement of which the Air Corps can be justly proud. If this picture meets its expectations, it will be one upholding the high traditions of the Air Corps. It will be a medium through which the country will become more Air Corps conscious. With such actors as Wallace Beery, Maureen O'Sullivan, Lewis Stone, Robert Young, Jimmie Gleason, Jack Pennick, Henry Wadsworth, Robert Taylor, Frank Conroy, Russell Hardie and Robert Livingston, augmented by officers and ladies of Randolph Field, it should be a box-office attraction. All the personnel and each activity of the Field played their part in the production of this picture. Richard Rosson, the diminutive but dynamic personality, was the Director. Shots were taken of almost every activity on the field, from the tower of the Administration Building to the basement of the Ground School Building. At the Officers' Club mid-summer bathing scenes were taken in the chilly November atmosphere. Ladies in bathing suits did their shivering best to appear quite as if they were basking in the heat of a tropical sun.

For several weeks the field had the aspect of a thriving movie colony, with the bustling movie company keeping the audience of autograph seekers and hero worshippers scrambling from place to place with their sudden migration from one set-up to another.

On February 1st, the last of the company "wrapped it up with all shots in the bag" and slipped away, leaving Randolph Field strangely quiet after weeks and months of abnormal activity. The picture is still to be reviewed and approved by the Army Board. Major Hamza, designated the War Department representative, must make final approval. The Movie Board, consisting of Captains J.K. Godon, Arthur A. Lastubrook and A.J. Strickland, expect to make their final recommendation in the near future. Some rumor had it that M.G.M. is well pleased with their production.
On 1 April 1934, MGM began shooting the film “The West Point of the Air” and spent ten months at Randolph Field. The film is a normal Hollywood special, two guys after one lady, fights, wrong doing, and the heroes win in the end. It was rated “Good” and made $262,000 profit for MGM, which in 1935 was not bad. It also captured the aircraft and buildings during the same time frame Lt. Noriega was in his final training, [April to October] and he could even be flying an aircraft in the movie. It’s worth watching once, as it preserves the past in 1934.

Randolph Field, Texas, ID image in late September 1933.
This photo contains no information on the back, however it is the beginning of training for Lt. Noriega [left] and his new American Flying Instructor on the right. The date is possibly late October or early November 1933, the trainer aircraft is a Curtiss 0-1E, dual control used for Primary Flying Training. After four hours training instruction, the students were expected to solo in this large American aircraft, and this could be his solo flight. U. S. Air Corps #46, #47, #52, and #53 School Squadrons were employed at Randolph Field for primary aircraft training until 1939, then civilian schools took over primary training.
Milton Blackstone collection from San Diego Air and Space Museum, 7 August 1933, Hangar Inspection of 52nd School Squadron aircraft, Randolph Field, Texas. It is possible Lt. Noriega trained and flew many of these Curtiss 0-E1 aircraft. [Below is flight line in 1939 Life magazine]
After four months [October, November, December 1933, and January 1934] at Primary Stage, the students and Lt. Noriega graduate to Basic Stage, where less than half will graduate four months later. In the class of October 1933, 161 students began Primary Stage, and 76 will graduate at Kelly Field, Texas, in October 1934. Graduation 44 Officers, 30 Flying Cadets, and two Mexican Air Force Pilots.
A basic stage training accident captured by Milton Blackstone on 6 February 1934, pilot is 2\textsuperscript{nd} Lt. W. H. McArthur. The training aircraft was a Consolidated PT-3 used until 1939. While accidents were many, only 31 student pilots were eliminated in the basic stage training from July 1931 to 23 January 1933, including five killed in flying accidents.
At this point the students realized that there still remained eight more months of intense training, even more strenuous and trying than the preceding period. In the next four months, they will spend one-hundred and fifty hours or more in the air, and are expected to have a working understanding of their aircraft, and be able to make judgements in flying and make the necessary corrections in an emergency. The student is now expected to know that any violation of air discipline, is not only dangerous and unnecessary, it is likely to give him the wrong outlook on the type of flying which is best for him and the training school.

Lt. Noriega stands beside a Curtiss P-1B Hawk trainer on 22 January 1934, Randolph Field, Texas. [Final weeks of his Primary Stage training]
This is the only image with identification on the back. Lt. Noriega has completed fifteen weeks in Primary Stage and will now move on to Basic Stage. After eight months, he will proceed to Advanced Flying School at Kelly Field, Texas, and the last four months of training. Flying time at Kelly Field will average 175 hours. This is where they will receive their “Silver Wings” and graduate as qualified U. S. Air Corps Airplane Pilot. [Official title in 1934]
Internet free domain post card image taken in 1937 at Kelly Field, Texas.
This is the only image taken during training at Kelly Field, Texas, the last four months at Advanced Flying School, June to September 1934. While the image is not clear, it contains a lot of useful information for modellers. The aircraft is a Boeing P-12B trainer, and the technical data block is painted in light or most likely orange coloured letters, same as the training number “16.”
This is a Boeing P-12 data block and most were in black lettering, including the pilot baggage door. This data block lettering was removed from U. S. aircraft in 1935, and only appeared in Air Corps service manuals from this date forward.
U. S. Air Corps Advanced Training School at Kelly field, Texas, had five training squadrons in 1934. The 40th Attack Squadron, 41st Observation Squadron, 39th School Squadron, 42nd Bombardment Squadron and the 43rd School Squadron, and each had a squadron insignia. The Hornet emblem painted on the pilot baggage door identifies this Boeing P-12B aircraft flew with the 43rd School Squadron.

The 43rd Aero Squadron was formed 13 June 1917, at Camp Kelly, [Kelly Field] Texas, arriving at South Carlton, England, on 16 March 1918. They flew at St. Maixent, France, 25 Oct. 1918, Issoudun, France, 1 Nov. 1918, and Bordeaux, France, 6 Jan. 1918 to March 1919. Demobilized at New York on 17 April 1919. Reformed at Kelly Field, Texas, on 7 July 1922, re-designated 43rd School Squadron on 25 January 1923. On 22 May 1924, their first and only insignia was approved and appeared on most training aircraft.

A posed Hornet [Vespa Maculata] rampant guardant on a scalloped ovate field of ultramarine blue, bordered with golden orange.

That is the official description from the USAF Historical Division and Insignia Archives. The first hand-painted Hornet insignia appeared in photo images in April 1926, and later in 1930 the design was changed to a simpler image in a stencil format.
The second insignia used in 1934, and flown by Mexican Pilot Lt. Noriega.
GRADUATION

Milton Blackstone collection from San Diego Air and Space Museum Archives.
After twelve long months of training, the day of graduation has arrived for the class of October 1933. They will now proudly wear their “Wings” and receive a graduation certificate, U. S. Air Corps Airplane Pilot. This is followed by a formal dance in the large Reception Hall, music supplied by a San Antonio aggregation of musicians. Then it is time to say goodbye and return to Mexico for Lt. Noriega and fellow pilot Lt. Daniel Maldonado of the Mexican Air Force.

Presentation of twelve foreign Wings certificates at Randolph field, possible October 1934. Daughter Gloria Rasmussen believes the officer on the far end, [face partly blocked] is in fact her father Lt. Noriega. Photo from Milton Blackstone collection, but no date is recorded.
The Silver Wings and official U. S. title – “Airplane Pilot.”
A proud Lt. Luis Noriega Medrano wears his United States Air Corp Airplane Pilot Wings, one of only seven Mexican pilots to graduate from Randolph Field, Texas, the *West Point of the Air*, up to October 1934.
In November 1934, Lt. Noriega returned home to Mexico City, and later married Gloria Romero Quintana. He proudly wears his Mexican Air Force dress blues uniform and his U. S. Air Corps Wings.
The U. S. Air Corps News Letter begins new publication on 1 January 1935, and the April issue contains some very important information concerning the two Mexican pilots and their class.
This confirms that the Randolph Field student class beginning 12 October 1933, contained Mexican Pilots Lt. Noriega and Lt. Maldonado. In 1935, the Mexican Air Force had no official known flag, and it appears the presentation flag was the official President of Mexico Government flag which was different from the public Mexican flag.
The history of the Mexican flag goes back 600 years, involving ancient gods, the Aztec Empire and the Catholic Church. It makes for interesting reading, however it can also be very confusing as the flag colours, coat of arms with eagle perched on a cactus with a snake, and the meaning for each kept changing. The original design adopted in 1821, had green for independence, white for Roman Catholic religion and red for union. The coat of arms had the eagle facing to the right with snake in its beak, and this did not always appear on the flag colours. Mexico first used aircraft in combat in April 1913, and became official on 5 February 1915. The first insignia appeared soon after in the shape of a shield with three national colours and no coat of arms eagle. In 1915, the first official insignia appeared in a triangular form with national colours, which is still used today. It is possible an unofficial flag was used, but I can’t find evidence to support that idea. The coat of arms eagle and flag continued to change over the passing years and at one time four eagles appeared on the Mexican flag. In 1935, the Mexican flag eagle faced to the left and the law allowed two variants to be flown in Mexico. The President of Mexico and all Federal bodies, including the Air Force flew a silk flag with a coat of arms in silver and the eagle appearing in gold thread. I believe this is the ‘official’ Government flag that was presented to the commanding Officer at Kelly Field, Texas, in April 1935. This original flag and carved trophy box should survive today in Kelly Field Archives.
In 1968, the present Mexican flag was approved and the colours today stand for green [hope], white [unity], and red [blood of Mexican heroes].

The adopted Mexican Flag and coat of arms in 1913, the year the first aircraft was used in combat at Mexico City. The first Mexican Air force insignia was recorded as a shield with the three national colours, appearing until 1915.
On return to Mexico City in fall of 1934, Lt. Noriega was promoted to Captain and later became the Mexican test pilot who flew the above Canadian designed and built aircraft, [designed and constructed] by Elsie Gregory MacGill, and known as “The Maple Leaf of Mexico” –

To be continued with Chapter Six.