

# THE CONGRESS OF GHOSTS

The Davis-Monthan Airfield,  
Tucson, Arizona, 1919-1940

by

G.W. Hyatt, Ph.D.

FOREWORD by  
C. Burton Cosgrove, III, Esq.

AFTERWORD by  
Lt. Col. USAF (RET) Alan Thomas

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## FOREWORD

by  
Judge Burt Cosgrove, III

**A**merican poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote,

*“Lives of great men all remind us  
We can make our lives sublime,  
And, departing, leave behind us  
Footsteps in the sands of time.”*

This thought has been expressed in many ways, but rarely is the imprint of “*footsteps in the sands of time*” seen so literally as in the official Register of the Tucson Municipal Airfield. The footsteps, in the form of their signatures and remarks, were left by more than 4,000 pilots and visitors who passed through the old Airfield in the eleven years between 1925 and 1936. The 218 pages of that Register constitute the record of a remarkable confluence of time and place, people and machines, coming together during the pioneering years of aviation.

The fact that the Register survived, *intact*, more than three quarters of a century since the last entry was made in November, 1936 is surprising. But perhaps more amazing are the circumstances in which the old journal was rediscovered in the year 2000 by our Author. Gary W. Hyatt, a pilot and aviation historian, by chance came upon one of 50 published copies in a used book store and immediately recognized the value of his find. There were, in hand-written entries, the dates of landings, notes on the aircraft flown and the individual comments of such pioneers of flight as Amelia Earhart, Charles Lindbergh, John Miller and many, many others. Here, truly, were mighty footsteps.

Realizing what he had, Author Hyatt began to create and organize a data base from information gleaned from the journal entries. Eventually he made these thousands of historical, biographical and technical data points and patterns available on the Web at [www.dmairfield.org](http://www.dmairfield.org). Predictably, hundreds of site visitors corresponded with him with what soon became a cascade of stories about the people and events featured on his Web site. The result has been an explosion of information about this brief period in aviation history.

In my own case, a neighbor became interested in knowing more about my father, Burt Cosgrove, Jr., and looked him up on the Web. He found Author Hyatt’s Web page describing my father starting an air service in Tucson, along with a copy of a 1928 newspaper article referencing the Tucson Municipal Airfield (Davis-Monthan Airfield). There was a request by the Webmaster, our Author, for persons with knowledge of the old Airfield to contact him.

And so began my own journey through the Register. It started with a phone call to offer a little information about my father’s time at Tucson. It ended with the experience— incredible to me—of actually walking in my father’s footsteps in his years at Davis-Monthan. Through the pages of the Register and Gary’s work in assembling *The Congress of Ghosts*, I have been able to actually see what my father saw in these years and learn of people he knew who otherwise might never have been known to me.

In my first contact with Gary (meeting documented at right, as we reviewed one of my father’s photo albums), I told him that:



- Burt Cosgrove, Jr. was born in Atchison, Kansas, only a block and a half from the home where Amelia Earhart lived;
- At the age of fifteen he built an airplane out of surplus World War I parts and flew it, to the alarm of his parents, without yet having had any instruction;
- He became manager of the Davis-Monthan Airfield in 1928, at the age of twenty-three;
- He served as manager of the airfield from 1928 to 1932;
- Earhart visited him on at least two occasions while he was airport manager;
- In Tucson he worked with Charles Lindbergh both in mapping the first TWA routes and in observations leading to the discovery of ancient Indian trade routes in the American Southwest;
- In his career as a U.S. Air Force officer he flew the early experimental B-17 bomber, and by 1947 had achieved the rank of full colonel;
- He was awarded the Silver Star for organizing and leading a flotilla of ships that accomplished the evacuation of American personnel when the Philippines fell to the Japanese during World War II;
- On a lighter note, he served as technical adviser to Hollywood productions including the making of the film "I Wanted Wings," for which he accepted on behalf of Paramount Studios the Academy Award for special effects--as well as working with Howard Hughes in the making of "Hell's Angels."

While my father was not famous for being the fastest, highest or first to do anything really dramatic in aviation, he was a great amateur photographer who had an uncanny knack for being in the right place at the right time with the right camera to photograph aviation's Golden Age even before the period of the Airfield Register. For example, he happened to be in San Diego when the first non-stop coast-to-coast flight landed there in 1923; he was able to photograph the first around-the-world flight when it went through Tucson in September, 1924; and he made a series of photographs of the airship Shenandoah when it flew over Tucson in October, 1924.

Eventually, my father had more than 4,000 photos in his aviation collection. So, as it happened, Burt Cosgrove became not only a subject of Author Hyatt's studies, but also a contributor to them. When Gary came to Albuquerque to look at my father's collection he scanned approximately 500 photographs. More than 300 can be seen on his Web site today. These include many that appear in this book.

More photographs and artifacts from my father's collection will appear from time to time as biographies of the individual people and aircraft are researched, developed, written and added to the thousands already mounted on the Web site.

I am only one of the hundreds of persons, including a couple of hundred relatives of Register people, that our Author has met and talked to in his pursuit of expanding the record of the men and women whose names appeared in the old Tucson Airfield Register. My story and that of my father can be multiplied many times over. I still tell stories about him to keep his memory alive, but the coincidence of Gary's project exceeds any of my humble efforts.

*The Congress of Ghosts* recreates in vivid detail an eleven-year period in the life of an out-of-the-way airfield on the outskirts of major flight paths, and so allows us to experience in microcosm the day-to-day

makings of the Golden Age of Aviation in America. It is a rich and fascinating story--one that makes for very good reading indeed!

Judge Burt Cosgrove, III  
Albuquerque, 2010

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## PREFACE

**This book is about a book.** The subject book is, at face value, just a folio-sized, wizened, leather-bound journal: a guest Register signed by people visiting a desert airfield in southern Arizona. An image of the Register cover is at right.

But, it is much, much more. The book lay open on a desk at the Davis-Monthan Airfield at Tucson between February 6, 1925 and November 26, 1936, almost eleven years during what nominally is considered the Golden Age of Flight. Many important people, pilots and passengers, flew their significant aircraft through Tucson, recorded their presence in the Register, and moved on.

This year, 2010, is separated from 1930, the approximate mid-point of the Register's presence at Tucson, by 80 years. Only 80 years. Yet, over the past decade as I've researched the people and aircraft of the Register, I've discovered not only great gaps in knowledge about them, but also conflicting information.

Consider this thought exercise and you'll get some idea of what I mean. Subtract 80 years from 1930 and take yourself back to 1850. That year, slavery was still the way of the land. There were 31 states in the Union; Arizona didn't join until 1912. The President was Zachary Taylor, and the U.S. population was just over 23-million according to the seventh official census. The battle of the Little Big Horn was still 26 years in the future. And, if we can use that battle as an example, there are few 19<sup>th</sup> century events that have had more study and ink devoted to them. You can find treatises focused on the social, military, political and forensic aspects of that single, brief event. Go back 80 years before that and there was no "United States of America."

What is my point? Simply this. From our viewpoint in 2010, we look at activities at Tucson in 1930 with the same graininess and uncertainty that we view the events of 160 or 240 years ago. The blur of history applies more or less equally, whatever the era, irrespective of photography and the Web. Despite how well events are recorded, they are recorded by human beings who bring their own perceptions, points of view, sympathies and biases to the proceedings.

In the end, historians are given precious artifacts as raw data. Consider the Davis-Monthan Airfield Register as one of these. From that book, line by line, bit by bit, photograph by photograph, anecdote by anecdote, fact by myth, we build the bigger picture of what it was like to fly during that era.

*The Congress of Ghosts* is an historical biography of the people and machines of the Register. The people have left us many hints about their lives in the form of letters, photographs, awards and records. In some cases, these are found in the formal archives of various historical societies, or in repositories like the National Air & Space Museum. For others, they are found in dusty boxes in west Texas hangars, or in the attics of old homes, or among the treasures in old albums found in antique shops. The challenge is to





assemble the hints into a meaningful whole. Your Author has done this over the past decade for the 30 people and machines you will explore in the pages that follow.

From our perspective in 2010, the time of the Davis-Monthan Register was one of great social, economic and political challenges in the United States and the world. Besides the Great Depression there was Prohibition, women's rights and a conversion from Republican to Democratic administrations. The people of the Register, and the airplanes that brought them through Tucson, were products of the pressures and ethos of that time.

As you might expect from the era, in most cases the people were financially strapped by the Great Depression, which made interbellum military services, and their aviation branches, attractive as being some of the few "secure" jobs. In a few cases, they were at the opposite extreme: rich, entitled pilots financing their playboy (and playgirl) ways with inherited family money.

Their written records are equally variable, ranging from first-person oral histories to anecdotes and photographs handed down by relatives, to parsed, filtered and, sometimes, inaccurate newspaper and magazine accounts. The machines are equally as variable and interesting for what they did.

Indeed, the Register has stimulated many avenues of enquiry by your Author, and many others, over the past ten years. It has yielded a range of discoveries, personal introductions, connections, serendipities, publications, surprises and presentations, as well as a significantly large and constantly growing Web site known globally as *www.dmairfield.org*. The Web site, and all the related publications by your Author and others, celebrates exclusively the Register and the 3,704 landings recorded on its 218 pages.

It may be a romantic metaphor, but fundamentally the Register represents to me a *Congress of Ghosts*. When I open my copy of the Register, or sit down at my computer and activate the Web site, I see and hear the obligatory pacing and keening of pilots, and the deep rumble of their aircraft ready at idle, imprisoned now in a dusty Register. They haven't been aloft in a very long time. And they tell me they want to be released to fly again. This book, the others of the **Oldairfield.com® Books 21st Century Editions**, and the Web site, are parts of a decade-long effort to do just that.

With a little research and study, we reveal that the thousands of denizens of the 80-year old Register are not misty historical figures. They are flesh and blood people whose teeming, decade-plus splash of words and deeds make them accessibly human and highly worthy of our attention.

It becomes clear that, from the Register, stems all manner and direction of United States aeronautical development. The people and machines recorded in it helped spawn the intellectual and physical infrastructures of global aviation practices and technologies, in peace and in war, during the 20th century. It is not an overstatement to say they formed the ideas, performed the actions, and formed a base from which, in many significant ways, we enter our second century of powered flight.

History is made when experienced principles are matched with human commitment. The committed and principled successes of Register pilots with their machines resulted from solutions that ranged from cobbled-together trials to heavily-financed and fine-tuned logistical exercises. In hindsight, it is impossible to say which end of that range contributed most to their history.