



# Smithsonian

*National Air and Space Museum*

## Frank Purdy Lahm Collection

James J. Kohan

1991



National Air and Space Museum Archives  
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Chantilly, VA 20151  
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<https://airandspace.si.edu/archives>

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## Collection Overview

<b>Repository:</b>	National Air and Space Museum Archives
<b>Title:</b>	Frank Purdy Lahm Collection
<b>Date:</b>	1906-1965 (bulk 1912-1930)
<b>Identifier:</b>	NASM.1986.0044
<b>Creator:</b>	Lahm, Frank Purdy, 1877-1963
<b>Extent:</b>	1.04 Linear feet 1.09 Cubic feet (1 records center box; 1 flatbox)
<b>Language:</b>	English .
<b>Summary:</b>	Major General Frank Purdy Lahm (1877-1963) was the first balloon pilot, the first airship pilot, and the first airplane pilot in the US Army. Like his father, Frank Samuel Lahm, his early interest was in ballooning, and in 1906 he won the James Gordon Bennett International Balloon Race. In 1909 Lahm and Lt. Frederick E. Humphreys were trained by Orville and Wilbur Wright to fly the first plane the US Army purchased from the Wrights. In 1912 he was made commanding officer of the US Army Flying School in the Philippines, and during World War I he was commander of the Second Army Air Service. Following the war Lahm founded the Air Corps Training Center at Randolph Field, a source of great pride to him, but was reassigned in 1931 as air attaché and later military attaché to France and Belgium. When Lahm retired from the military in 1941 he had distinguished himself as recipient of the Distinguished Service Medal and the French Legion of Honor. This collection consists of photographs and news clippings detailing Lahm's military career and his personal life.

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## Administrative Information

### Acquisition Information

Lawrence Lahm, gift, 1986, 1986-0044, Not NASM.

### Processing Information

Arranged and described by James J. Kohan, 1991.

Encoded by Amanda Buel, 2014.

### Preferred Citation

Frank Purdy Lahm Collection, Acc. 1986-0044, National Air and Space Museum, Smithsonian Institution.

### Restrictions

No restrictions on access

## Conditions Governing Use

Material is subject to Smithsonian Terms of Use. Should you wish to use NASM material in any medium, please submit an Application for Permission to Reproduce NASM Material, available at [Permissions Requests](#).

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## Biographical Note

Frank Purdy Lahm was born on 17 November 1877 in Mansfield, Ohio, the son of balloonist Frank S. Lahm and Adelaide Purdy Lahm. Following his mother's death in 1880, Frank's father moved to Paris to pursue his ballooning interests, leaving his son in the care of a widowed aunt. Between 1880 and 1901, Lahm attended a number of schools and military institutes, finally graduating in 1901 with a Bachelor of Military Science degree from the United States Military Academy, West Point. After graduation, Lahm was assigned to the cavalry branch and immediately departed to the Philippines for duty with the Sixth Cavalry. He served there until 1903, when, much to his dismay, he was reassigned to West Point to teach French. In the summer of 1904, Lahm went to visit his father in Paris on leave. While there, Lahm made his first ascent in a balloon. One year later Lahm was awarded Fédération Aéronautique Internationale (F.A.I.) Balloon Certificate #4. In 1906 Lahm represented the United States in the first Gordon Bennett International Balloon Race, which Lahm and his aide, Major Henry Hersey, won after out distancing their nearest opponents by fifty miles. Lahm was then transferred to the Aeronautical Section of the Army Signal Corps. Lahm was ordered to investigate aeronautical activities in Britain and Germany, where he spent much of 1907. In February of 1908, Lahm drafted a report on military aviation and presented it to Theodore Roosevelt, who then approved a sum of \$25,000 for military aeronautics. Having received F.A.I. Airship Pilot Certificate #2, Lahm was deemed the best candidate to direct trial flights leading to the possible purchase of military aircraft.

With his prior aviation experience, Lahm was put in charge of organizing the 1908 trials of the Wright brothers' aircraft at Fort Myer, Virginia. While at Fort Myer, Lahm was the first passenger in a heavier-than-air craft, flying eight days prior to the accident in which Lt. Thomas Selfridge became the first Army flight casualty. After the accident, Lahm and the other directors were re-assigned to their original branches, with Lahm returning to the cavalry. Trial flights of the Wright Military Flyer resumed in 1909. On 9 September, Lahm and Orville Wright set the world endurance flying record with a flight of six minutes. During October, Wilbur Wright taught Lahm and Lt. Frederick Humphries to fly at College Park, Maryland, and Lahm received F.A.I. Airplane Pilot Certificate #2 on 26 October, soloing three minutes after Humphries.

Following the successful trial flights, Lahm returned to the cavalry branch and remained in relative anonymity until July 1911, when he won the National Balloon Race in St. Louis, Missouri, and placed second in the International Balloon Race, held at the same time. On 18 October, 1911, Lahm married Gertrude Jenner. In 1912, Lahm was transferred to the Philippine Islands, where he established and commanded the U.S. Army Flying School at Fort McKinley. Lahm remained in the Pacific until 1914, when he was again reassigned to the cavalry and served on the Mexican border. After his tour with the cavalry, Lahm was promoted to the rank of captain in April of 1916 and served as the secretary of the U.S. Army Flying School, Rockwell Field, San Diego, California. He remained here until 1917, when he was put in command of the U.S. Army Balloon School, Omaha, Nebraska, and promoted to the temporary rank of colonel. Later in that same year, Lahm was ordered overseas to observe British and French use of balloons in combat. Originally intending to return home, Lahm was then put in command of the American Expeditionary Force (A.E.F.) lighter-than-air service. He also acted as Commander of the Second Army Air Service, A.E.F. In 1918, due to the wartime necessity for officers, Lahm was promoted to the permanent rank of colonel and continued his service with the Second Army Air Service.

In 1919 and 1920 Lahm attended the Army War College, followed by assignment to the War Department General Staff in Washington, D.C. until 1924. From 1924 to 1926 Lahm acted as Air Officer for the Ninth Corps Area, and in 1926, Lahm was instrumental in planning and organizing the Air Corps Training Center, which was to soon become Randolph Field, San Antonio, Texas. His duties at Randolph Field kept him in Texas until 1930, when Lahm was temporarily promoted to the rank of brigadier general and assigned

as the Assistant Chief of the Air Corps. In 1930, Lahm returned to the position of Air Officer, Ninth Corps Area. In 1931, Lahm's wife died. Following his duty as Air Officer, Lahm reverted to his permanent rank and was assigned as the Air Attaché to France, Belgium, and Spain. In 1933, Lahm picked up the additional responsibility of being Military Attaché to France and Belgium, remaining in both of these posts until 1935. He then served as Air Officer for the Second Corps Area until 1940, when he became the Chief of Aviation, First Army, at Governors Island, New York. In 1941, Lahm was promoted to the permanent rank of brigadier general and assigned as the Commanding General at the Gulf Coast Training Center, Randolph Field, Texas. While here he received an honorary promotion to the rank of major general from President Franklin Roosevelt. Having reached mandatory retirement age, Lahm retired on 30 November, 1941 with the rank of brigadier general.

Following retirement, Lahm moved back to his hometown of Mansfield, Ohio. His interest in aviation continued, and within two years he and Charles de Forest Chandler co-authored *How Our Army Grew Wings*, on aeronautical activities in the U.S. Army prior to 1914. Lahm also became interested in civic activities during this time, becoming involved with the Boy Scouts, various local historical societies, and with stimulating local interest in international events. He helped establish International Affairs Committees in Cleveland and Mansfield, Ohio. Lahm also spoke on the lecture circuit, relating his personal experiences and providing support for the advancement of military aviation. On 4 April, 1948, Lahm married Grace Wolfe Kenson.

On 3 July, 1963 Lahm suffered a stroke and was hospitalized in Sandusky, Ohio. On 7 July 1963 he passed away at the age of eighty-five. His body was cremated and the ashes were spread into the air from a plane flying over Randolph Field, Texas.

In addition to being a member and past President of the Early Birds of Aviation, Inc., Lahm was also a member of the Washington, D.C. Army and Navy Club, the National Aeronautical Association, the American Legion, the Aéro-Club de France, and an Honorary Member of the Aero Club of America. Besides his many balloon competition victories, his awards include the Distinguished Service Medal (U.S.A.), the Commander of Legion of Honor (France), and the Ordre d'Avis (Portugal).

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## Scope and Contents

The Frank Purdy Lahm Collection (Acc. 1986-0044), located in the National Air and Space Museum Archives Division, is made up of approximately 1 cubic foot of newsclippings and other materials relating to his personal life and aviation-oriented career. The collection was donated by Lahm's children, Colonel Lawrence Lahm and Mrs. R.E. McMahon on September 12, 1985. The collection was formally received by NASM Archives Division in January of 1986.

The collection consists primarily of newsclippings relating Lahm's aviation-oriented military career. Also included are personal items such as correspondence, photographs, and published materials. Materials in this collection date between 1906 and 1963, with the bulk dates being between circa 1912 and 1930, when Lahm's military career appears busiest. The materials were divided into 3 Series:

- 1) The personal life of Frank Purdy Lahm: this includes newsclippings, personal correspondence, speeches and presentations, awards and honors both won by and established in the name of Lahm, and newsclippings in which Lahm speaks about other aviation happenings.
- 2) Materials relating to Lahm's Military Career: this series includes Lahm's ballooning experiences and reports to his superiors, his establishing of the U.S. Army Flying School at Fort McKinley in the Philippine Islands and his establishing of the U.S. Army Air Training Corps, Randolph Field, TX. Also included in this series is a copy of a pamphlet entitled *Training the Airplane Pilot*, which Lahm wrote for Great Britain while he was Military and Air Attaché to France and Belgium.
- 3) Clippings relating to aviation figures: this series contains newsclippings collected by Lahm for other aviation figures he apparently knew. While the bulk of these relate to Henry Arnold and the Wright Brothers, there is also a folder entitled "Clippings on other Aviation Figures."

As the bulk of this collection is made up of newsclippings, arrangement was made difficult by the fact that items relating to the same incident were spread out over a period of years. As such, a chronological arrangement of materials on the folder level was impossible. Arrangement on the folder level has been done by subject, with either chronological or alphabetical arrangement for items within the folder.

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## Arrangement

The collection is divided into 3 Series:

1) The personal life of Frank Purdy Lahm: this includes newsclippings, personal correspondence, speeches and presentations, awards and honors both won by and established in the name of Lahm, and newsclippings in which Lahm speaks about other aviation happenings.

2) Materials relating to Lahm's Military Career: this series includes Lahm's ballooning experiences and reports to his superiors, his establishing of the U.S. Army Flying School at Fort McKinley in the Philippine Islands and his establishing of the U.S. Army Air Training Corps, Randolph Field, TX. Also included in this series is a copy of a pamphlet entitled Training the Airplane Pilot, which Lahm wrote for Great Britain while he was Military and Air Attaché to France and Belgium.

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- Series 1: Personal Life
- Series 2: Military Career
- Series 3: Other Aviation Figures

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## General

### Frank Purdy Lahm Timeline

1877	Frank Purdy Lahm born on 17 November, Mansfield, Ohio, the son of Frank S. Lahm and Adelaide Purdy Lahm.
1880	Adelaide Purdy Lahm died and Frank S. Lahm moves to France, leaving their son in the care of a widowed aunt.
1901	Graduated with a B.S., U.S. Military Academy, West Point. Commissioned as a 2nd lieutenant in the U.S. Army.
1901-1905	Served with the Sixth Cavalry in the Philippine Islands and then reassigned as instructor in French at the U.S. Military Academy.
1904	Lahm makes his first ascent as passenger in a balloon.
1905	Awarded Fédération Aéronautique Internationale (F.A.I) Balloon Pilot Certificate #4 after soloing 15 July while visiting his father in France.
1906	Winner (with Henry Hersey) of the first Gordon Bennett International Balloon Race, 30 September to 1 October.
1907	Investigator of military aeronautics production facilities and bases in London, England, and Berlin, Germany.

1908 Awarded F.A.I. Airship Pilot Certificate #2, August, after flying the Signal Corps Dirigible #1.

1908-1909 In charge of the Wright Brothers test flights at Fort Myer, Virginia. First passenger in a heavier-than-air craft, flying eight days prior to the Wright-Selfridge accident.

1909 Learned to fly at College Park, Maryland, with Wilbur Wright. Later awarded F.A.I. Airplane Pilot Certificate #2, 26 October.  
Established endurance flying record with Orville Wright, 9 September.

1911 Married Gertrude Jenner, 18 October.  
Winner of National Balloon Race, St. Louis, Missouri, July.

1912-1913 Organized and acted as commanding officer, U.S. Army Flying School, Fort William McKinley, Philippine Islands.

1913 Appointed "Military Aviator" by the War Department, and "Expert Aviator #15" by the Aero Club of America, July.

1914-1916 Service on the Mexican border with the U.S. Cavalry.

1916 Promoted to the rank of captain and designated a "Jr. Military Aviator," April.

1916-1917 Assigned as secretary of the U.S. Army Flying School, Rockwell Field, North Island, San Diego, California.

1917 Temporarily promoted to rank of Lt. colonel and assigned as commanding officer of the U.S. Army Balloon School, Omaha, Nebraska. Later served as an observer with British and French air units on the Western Front.

1917-1918 Organized and commanded the American Expeditionary Force (A.E.F.) lighter-than-air service. Also served as commander, Second Army Air Service, A.E.F.

1918 Temporarily promoted to rank of colonel, U.S. Army.

1919-1920 Attended the Army War College.

1920-1924 Assigned to the War Department General Staff, Washington, D.C.

1924-1926 Served as Air Officer for the Ninth Corps Area.

1926 Established the Air Corps Training Center, San Antonio, Texas, 1 September.

1926-1930 Promoted to the temporary rank of brigadier general, 17 July, and assigned as the Assistant Chief of the Air Corps.

1930 Returned to duty as Air Officer, Ninth Corps Area.

1931 Death of Gertrude Jenner Lahm, October.

1931-1935 Reverted to rank of colonel and assigned as Air Attaché to France, Belgium, and Spain.

1932-1935 Assigned as Military Attaché to France and Belgium.

1935-1940 Acted as Air Officer for the Second Corps Area.

1940-1941 Served as Chief of Aviation First Army, Governors Island, NY.

- 1941 Promoted to brigadier general and assigned as Commanding General, Gulf Coast Training Center, Randolph Field, TX.  
Honorary promotion to rank of major general by Franklin Roosevelt, September.  
Frank Purdy Lahm retires with the permanent rank of Brigadier General, 30 November.
- 1943 Co-authored *How Our Army Grew Wings* with Charles De Forrest Chandler. Published by Ronald Press.
- 1948 Married Grace Wolfe Kenson, 4 April.
- 1949-1950 Served as President of the Early Birds of Aviation, Inc. organization.
- 1956 Lahm and his wife are seriously injured in car accident, Mansfield, Ohio.
- 1963 Frank Purdy Lahm died following a cerebral hemorrhage, Sandusky, Ohio, 7 July. Lahm was cremated and his remains were scattered over Randolph Air Force Base, Texas.

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## Names and Subject Terms

This collection is indexed in the online catalog of the Smithsonian Institution under the following terms:

### Subjects:

- Aeronautics
- Aeronautics, Military
- Airships
- Periodicals
- Works of art

### Types of Materials:

- Correspondence
- Diaries
- Manuscripts
- Photographs
- Posters
- Publications

### Names:

- International Balloon Race
- Lahm, Frank Purdy, 1877-1963
- United States. Army
- United States. Army. Air Corps. Training Center. Randolph Field. Texas
- United States. Army. Army Air School -- Phillipines
- United States. Army. Second Army Air Service



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## Container Listing

### Series 1: Personal Life

Scope and Contents: Series 1 is composed of materials relating to Frank Purdy Lahm's personal life. It includes photographs, newsclippings, correspondence, and miscellaneous memorabilia. As much of the material is miscellaneous, it is organized into general subject categories.

Box 1, Folder 1	General biographical clippings ad obituaries of Frank Purdy Lahm, undated
Box 1, Folder 2	Photographs -- official, undated
Box 1, Folder 3	Photographs -- retirement life, undated
Box 1, Folder 4-5	Photographs -- personal, undated
Box 1, Folder 6	Clippings on the 25th anniversary of the Wrights' 1st glider flight, May 3, 1928
Box 1, Folder 7	Clippings on Lahm's activities after retirement, undated
Box 1, Folder 8	Clippings on the Lahm Air Safety Award (1962) and the Frank P. Lahm Award (1965), 1962, 1965
Box 1, Folder 9	Clippings on the Governor's Island Tercentary, June 13, 1937
Box 1, Folder 10	Materials on the Early Birds of Aviation, Inc., undated
Box 1, Folder 11	Miscellaneous awards and commendations to Frank P. Lahm, undated
Box 1, Folder 12	Miscellaneous correspondence on Early Bird matters, undated
Box 1, Folder 13	Miscellaneous Personal Correspondence Of Frank P. Lahm, undated
Box 1, Folder 14	Miscellaneous Programs And Minutes For Organizations And Events, undated

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## Series 2: Military Career

Scope and Contents: This series consists of materials relating to Lahm's military career. The majority of the material is clippings and photographs relating to his personal experiences with ballooning and his creation of the U.S. Army Air Corps Flight Training programs. Materials in this series were arranged chronologically.

Box 1, Folder 15	Materials relating to ballooning and Lahm's ballooning report of 13 February 1908, undated
Box 1, Folder 16	Clippings on the Fort Myer record flight of 9 September 1908, undated
Box 1, Folder 17	Materials on the Signal Corps Aviation School, Fort McKinley, Philippine Islands, 1911-1914
Box 1, Folder 18	Materials on the Army Air Training Corps, Randolph Field, Texas, undated
Box 1, Folder 19	Clippings on Lahm's position as military attaché to France, 1931-1935
Box 1, Folder 20	Copy of Training the Airplane Pilot, by Lahm, May, 1933

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## Series 3: Other Aviation Figures

Scope and Contents: This series consists of clippings relating to other aviation figures that Lahm collected over the years. The majority of clippings relate to Henry H. Arnold and the Wright Brothers, and as such they have their own folder.

Box 1, Folder 21	Clippings on Gen. Henry H. Arnold, undated
Box 1, Folder 22	Clippings on Orville Wright and Wilbur Wright, undated
Box 1, Folder 23	Clippings on other aviation figures arranged alphabetically, undated
Box 1, Folder 24	Article from "U.S. Air Service" magazine, February 1932, with biographies of early air pioneers, 1932

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