

This Day in History... December 1, 1941

Founding of the Civil Air Patrol

On December 1, 1941, the Civil Air Patrol (CAP), was established in Washington, DC. Unpaid volunteers formed the Civil Air Patrol, using privately owned aircraft and their own funds to support the military.

World War I pilot Gill Robb Wilson was one of the first to propose a civilian aviation organization to aid the military. After visiting Germany in 1936, he became convinced that a war was coming, and that such an organization could play an important role. Two years later, Milton Knight created the Civilian Air Reserve (CAR) in Ohio, which was soon followed by other similar civilian aviation units that trained to defend American soil.



Stamp honors civilian defense mobilization on the home front.



CAP worked with the Civil Aeronautics Administration.

In 1941, Wilson brought his proposal for the Civilian Air Defense Services (CADS) to Fiorello LaGuardia, director of the Office of Civilian Defense. The proposal was approved by the Departments of Commerce, Navy, and War, and the Civil Air Patrol officially began operating on December 1, 1941. Existing units such as CAR and CADS were soon merged into the new national organization. CAP was announced to the public on December 8 and recruitment began immediately.

It wasn't long before the CAP's services were needed. German submarines started attacking American merchant vessels on the East Coast in January 1942. With the military mobilizing to fight overseas, they couldn't spare forces to defend the coast. So, the CAP was called in to patrol the coast, reporting enemy activity and if necessary, intervening and defending against attacks. Between March 1942 and August 1943, the CAP operated 21 coastal patrol bases from Maine to the Mexican border.



LaGuardia was director of the Office of Civilian Defense who approved the creation of CAP.



Arnold supported the creation of CAP before the war and pushed for its continued service after the war.

The CAP's activities didn't go unnoticed, and on April 29, 1943, President Franklin Roosevelt transferred the service from the Office of Civilian Defense to the Department of War. Over the course of the war, CAP flew a variety of missions including anti-submarine patrol and warfare, border patrol, and delivery services. They flew an estimated 24 million miles, spotted 173 enemy U-boats, and dropped 82 bombs. In addition to coastal and border patrols, CAP conducted over 24,000 hours of search and rescue operations, transported over 1,500 tons of mail and cargo and military troops, transported blood for the Red Cross, supported war bond drives, and aided salvage collection drives. Over the course of the war, 68 CAP pilots lost their lives.

In 1946, President Harry Truman incorporated CAP as a nonprofit organization of "volunteers and declared to be of a benevolent nature, never again to be involved in direct combat activities." And on May 26, 1948, it was made the civilian auxiliary of the newly established US Air Force. In the years after World War II, CAP expanded its cadet programs as well as emergency services training and aerospace education. During the Cold War, CAP conducted search and rescue mission and its radio networks were used to respond to natural disasters. CAP also helped train the Air Force's Ground Observer Corps, tracked satellites, and monitored nuclear fallout.



CAP's first mission was the interdiction of German U-boats.



CAP was made the civilian auxiliary of the Air Force in 1948.

In 1979, CAP's role was expanded again, flying military training route surveys and in 1985, it started going on drug patrols for the police. CAP also carried tissue and organ transplants for the Red Cross and worked with the Federal Emergency Management Agency during several emergencies.

The day after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, CAP's Cessna 172 took the first high-resolution photos of the World Trade Center site. With the creation of the Department of Homeland Security, CAP received increased funding and more technologically advanced equipment. In 2014, CAP's World War II members were awarded the Congressional Gold Medal.

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