

Gerstner Field

Bright promise, but dark star

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Columnist

If ever there was a bright and shining promise that ended up under a dark star of misfortune, it was the military base built by the U.S. Army Air Service at Lake Charles to train pilots for aerial combat during the first World War.

Gerstner Field began as a triumph for a group of civic-minded citizens who had been trying for years to lure any kind of military base to Lake Charles. The group thought it had landed an infantry training base in 1917, but the Army decided Southwest Louisiana's flatlands wouldn't test trainees enough and Lake Charles was bypassed.

The Lake Charles Chamber of Commerce decided that flat land might be an asset for another kind of military base, and in 1918 it began a search for an air base for Lake Charles.

Perfect timing

The timing was perfect. The U.S. Army Air Service was totally unprepared for the First World War. It had been the first country in the world to build an airplane solely for military use. Gerstner Field was named for Lt. Frederick J. Gerstner, who fell to his death in 1908 while testing the first military airplane built for the U.S. Army.

Still, America's air power was sadly lacking. In 1914, the U.S. Army Air Service, as it was called then, contained only 1,200 men, 65 officers and 300 airplanes, and only eight of the 300 airplanes could fly. The other 292 had been grounded for repairs that might be months in coming.

Preparing for its role in World War I, the Air Service had ordered hundreds of new military airplanes, but lacked pilots to fly them. There were only three pilot-training schools in the U.S., and they were slow in turning out pilots.

The Army Air Service had just decided to build 27 new pilot-training bases when a Lake Charles delegation appeared, hat in hand, and offered to move heaven and earth to accommodate the Air Service if it built a base in Lake Charles.

The timing was perfect. The right people signed the papers, and the first of what would become an army of 4,000 construction workers began building a base that cost \$2 million in 1918 dollars about 17 miles southeast of Lake Charles, near Holmwood.

Gerstner's role

Gerstner Field's role in training military pilots was unique. Cadets first attended ground school, usually conducted at a university, where they learned the basics of flight, airplane operation and maintenance, meteorology, astronomy, discipline and officer behavior. Next, at primary flight schools like Gerstner Field, a cadet received flying training. The third stage, advanced training, at that time was held in Europe because America lacked the needed airplanes and instructors. Gerstner was different because it not only offered flying courses, it offered advanced flying and gunnery courses heretofore reserved for Europe. Gerstner Field itself was a trailblazer

The hard luck at Gerstner Field began before it opened. Soldiers began arriving before construction workers finished building the base. To avoid soldiers getting caught up in the beehive of workers, the Air Service brought in tents for the early arrivals.

Until the base was finished, the early arrivals spent sleepless nights hunched over homemade sludge-pot fires and fighting off swarms of mosquitoes. During the day, they squatted in their tents, glumly looking out at the construction workers who were finishing the base.

Impressive

The construction workers did an impressive job. The base had 24 airplane hangars, 12 barracks for enlisted men, 12 barracks that held officers' quarters, 12 mess halls, four large warehouses, workshops, offices and indoor and outdoor recreation facilities.

Gerstner Field, however, continued to live under a dark star. Problems plagued it. Prevailing southwest winds carried sand from someplace searchers were never able to locate. The sand ruined some airplane engines and disabled others. It got into food served in both mess halls, and, with sand blowing in and mosquitoes swarming, nights were almost unbearable for the 1,000 enlisted men living in tents.

A continuous lack of spare parts prevented many repairs to airplanes. As many as two thirds of the airplanes were grounded most of the time.

The population also jumped. The field was designed to hold 2,000 men. It soon had 3,000, with the extra 1,000 enlisted men living in tents.

During 1918, there were two extreme low points at Gerstner Field.

The first came when it was heard that on Feb. 5, 1918, a German submarine sank the *Tuscania*, a British troopship, off the coast of Ireland. The ship was traveling in a convoy, and 91 percent of its passengers were rescued. However, 166 American servicemen drowned in the attack, becoming the first Americans to be killed while shipping to World War I. The second low point on 1918 came when a tropical storm formed in the Caribbean, moved north and became a hurricane in the Gulf of Mexico, and reached land on the Cameron Parish coastline in Southwest Louisiana. Killer storm

The storm was a killer. In the Goosport area of Lake Charles, sawmill fires broke out during the hurricane, so bright that DeQuincy residents who went outside after the storm saw a glow in the southern sky above the horizon.

In Westlake, only a few downtown buildings remained standing after the storm passed. In Sulphur, the downtown business district was almost wiped out. The Union Sulphur Mines had \$3 million in losses.

At Gerstner Field, the storm killed three American soldiers and injured eight. It caused \$1 million in damages. Every one of nearly 300 buildings at the field had to be inspected and repaired.

Of the 24 hangars at the field, seven were totally destroyed, 11 were heavily damaged, and six suffered light damages. Ninety-six airplanes were destroyed. All over the base, roofs were blown off of small buildings and sheds.

The only building to survive the hurricane at the Big Lake gunnery school was the mess hall, which became a temporary hospital to treat injuries suffered by residents of lower Calcasieu and Cameron parishes.

The pilots of Gerstner Field had to deal with hurricanes, mysterious sand storms, 100-degree summer heat, rainy spells that left the field a sea of mud and made airplane landings hazardous, the nightly swarms of mosquitoes whenever someone stepped outside at night or had to try to sleep in a tent, respiratory illnesses that enlisted men swore were caused by exposure to the appalling sewerage problems in what the rest of the base called "tent city," the homesickness, loneliness and an airfield so crowded that it seemed impossible to get even a few minutes of privacy. Despite those obstacles, the pilots managed to make valuable contributions to the U.S. Army Air Service.

The contributions

· Col. C.C. Culver at Gerstner perfected wireless telephones that enabled pilots of airplanes in flight to talk to each other or talk to a base on the ground.

· The flight ambulance was invented at Gerstner. When a plane was an hour overdue, officers feared a crash. Someone thought of loading ambulance first-aid supplies on a rescue plane. Following a flight plan filed by the missing plane, the crash site was found, a landing was successful and the injured pilot received first aid from the ambulance supplies, splints for a broken arm and pain-killers that enabled him to endure the flight back to the airfield.

· The Gerstner Field gunnery school was the first to use floating targets to develop machine gun skills in pilots of fighter airplanes.

On Nov. 11, 1918, World War I ended with an armistice after 9 million soldiers were killed and 20 million wounded. With World War I over, there was no need for Gerstner Field. It died quietly, without fanfare.

The land once occupied by the airfield is now privately owned. A photograph shows a peaceful pastoral scene in which it would be almost impossible to even imagine the thunder of the engines of early airplanes or the shouts of the young pilots who flew them.

All said, Gerstner Field was an important event in Southwest Louisiana history that was so brief it didn't have a chance to distinguish itself before it disappeared.

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Special to the American Press
Gerstner Field in 1918.



Maude Reid wrote the caption for this photograph taken Nov. 11, 1918: "Band from Gerstner Field on the Court House steps after the parade when the whole town joined in celebrating the signing of the armistice." With World War I over, there was no need for Gerstner Field. It died quietly, without fanfare.

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