

Guide to the

Gerstner Field Records

1917-1986

13.89 linear feet

Collection Number 053

CITATION: The Gerstner Field Collection, Collection No. 053, Box number, Folder number, Archives and Special Collections Department, Frazar Memorial Library, McNeese State University.

Archives and Special Collections Department
Frazar Memorial Library
McNeese State University

Historical Sketch

Gerstner Field was a large World War I fighter pilot training camp that once stood near Holmwood about 15 miles southeast of Lake Charles. It was named for Lt. Fredrick J. Gerstner, the 18th aviator to give his life in the service of his country. He died on December 21, 1914. Gerstner Field was in operation from 1917 through 1920. During its time of operation and in the years immediately following, Gerstner Field was widely recognized for its contributions to both the state and to the nation. It graduated 499 pilots in its one year of service during the war, which ranked it seventh among the 30 aviation fields in the country. Many of the cadets that graduated from Gerstner Field went on to fly over the battlefields of the Western Front. It was the first military airfield in Louisiana. The field was over one mile long and consisted of 110 buildings, 24 of which were hangars designed to house six airplanes each. In 1918, it was the home base of over 2000 military persons. The use of airplanes as air ambulances and radio-controlled tactical flying techniques were developed at Gerstner Field. John Purroy Mitchel, a former mayor of New York City, fell to his death from an open cockpit Thomas-Morse SB-4 and Major Maxwell Kirby, a former commander of the field, was later credited with shooting down the last enemy plane destroyed in the war.

Scope and Content Note

This collection contains correspondence, newspaper clippings, photographs, records from the National Archives, transcripts of oral histories and other materials concerning Gerstner Field, the aviation training field located south of Lake Charles from 1917-20. Note: Some digital images are available at: <http://ereserves.mcneese.edu/depts/archive/gerstnerphotos.htm> .

Container List

Box	Folder	Description
1	1	Transcripts from Lake Charles American Press, June 18, 1917 to July 16, 1918, concerning efforts to secure the air field at Lake Charles and a photocopy of a list of criteria for aviation camps taken from the microfilm from Maxwell AFB Historical Center (located between folders 6 and 7)
	2	Newspaper articles concerning the air field, 1917-1919
	3	Newspaper and magazine articles concerning the air field, 1964-1986
	4	Information on Lt. Frederick J. Gerstner, flyer for whom the field was named, including his complete service record
	5	Information on John Flanders, Lake Charles man stationed at Gerstner
	6	Newspaper articles, correspondence, photographs relating to death of Major John Purroy Mitchel. Microfilm from Maxwell AFB Historical Center with some information on Mitchel's death - photocopy of the film where Mitchel is mentioned (located in the microfilm cabinet of the Archives Office)
	7	Newspaper clipping on Maj. Maxwell Kirby
	8	Newspaper clipping on Col. William C. Ocker
	9	James McCabe's scrapbook (photocopy) relating to Gerstner Field
	10	List of commanding officers and Louisiana men stationed at Gerstner

Box	Folder	Description
1	11	Farewell Flying Frolic of Flying School Detachment at Gerstner Field, program of luncheon and dance held at Gerstner Field, contains list of officers and enlisted men, no date given
	12	Photographs from James McCabe's scrapbook - Medical Dept. Staff, Liberty Loan Day in Lake Charles, 1967 reunion of Gerstner men, photography plane, crashed plane, 1918 hurricane damage, Gerstner camp scenes; also Gerstner aerial views, 1918-1919; aerial views, 1970's-1980's; pilots and scenes from the camp; 1947 reunion photo; unidentified Gerstner man standing in front of tent (personnel lived in tents after 1918 hurricane)
2	1	Articles about Gerstner being sold, 1918-1921
	2	JUG newsletter concerning reunion, 1979
	3	Thunderbolt Reunion, 1980
	4	Essington, PA Reunion, 1974 and 1982
	5	Essington, PA Reunion, 1983
	6	Essington, PA Reunion, 1984
	7	Essington, PA Reunion, 1985
	8	Essington, PA Reunion, 1986. Information on the Philadelphia Seaplane Base (formerly the Lazaretto) which is on the site of Essington Field
	9	Correspondence collected by Bud Deaton including letters from Joseph Milgram, Mr. and Mrs. E. R. Bradford, Mrs. Ira Longanecker, Jr., Jimmy H. Doolittle, Mrs. Joseph Partridge, photographs of James McCabe, Rudolph Krause, and original hangar from Gerstner
	10	Correspondence collected by Nola Mae Ross including letters and information from Pauline Helbling, Mrs. Edith Roy, John Flanders, Zoe Lassman
	11	Newspaper clippings on efforts to rename part of Hwy. 14 to Gerstner Memorial Drive (efforts on the part of Southwest Louisiana Historical Association on renaming the highway)
	12	Application for Gerstner Field to be placed on National Register of Historic Places
	13	"Property of Gerstner Field" from National Archives with a list of buildings and their locations, also shows landing area
	14	Photographs from Roy P. Smith: 1. Roy P. Smith and his brother W.C. Smith, WWI 2. C. H. L. Gibson and James McCabe at reunion, April 1961 3. Florien Levy and wife at reunion, April 1961 4. Man from Mr. Smith's detachment named Reid 5. Another man from Mr. Smith's detachment - name unknown 6. Rupert F. Cisco 7. Lake Charles Court House
	15	Roy P. Smith correspondence (letters on the Field are basically transcripts of tapes) and misc. items
	16	Newspaper articles concerning Will Couch, civilian flying instructor at Gerstner Field
	17	Correspondence and other information relating to Joseph Milgram, including a telegram written during the hurricane of 1918 that nearly destroyed Gerstner Field

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2	18	Photocopy of book <i>American Aviators in the Great War, 1914-1918</i> published by the Glasebrook Foundation in 1984, contains brief military histories of WWI aviators including many who were stationed at Gerstner Field
	19	Transcriptions of oral histories of Gerstner veterans, Roy P. Smith, Joseph B. Milgram, E. R. Bradford, James McCabe; tape of a Gerstner reunion, interview with Mrs. Ozite Primeaux who lived near the Field during the War.
	20	Articles on camp libraries and ALA's book drives during World War I from <i>Texas Libraries</i> and other journals
	21	Material from the American Library Association Archives relating to Camp Beauregard and Gerstner Aviation Field- includes information on the Mexican Border Traveling Libraries and Harriet C. Long
	22	Photocopy of <i>The Measure of America's World War Aeronautical Effort</i> by Edgar S. Gorrell - contains statistics on training schools, airplanes, engines
3	1	Photocopy of <i>The Hawks that Guided the Guns</i> by Lawrence L. Smart, a First World War aviator
	2	Photocopies of material from Fritz Krause Wilson, whose father Herman C. Krause, was stationed at Gerstner Field – includes photocopy of <i>The Flying Book: The Aviation World's Who's Who</i> , newspaper clippings, reunion announcements
	3	Related articles on First World War aviation including excerpts from books that mention Gerstner Field: 1. <i>Doolittle: A Biography</i> by Lowell Thomas and Edward Jablonski 2. <i>Lightning in the Sky: The Story of Jimmy Doolittle</i> by Carl Mann 3. <i>The Amazing Mr. Doolittle: A Biography of Lt. Gen. James H. Doolittle</i> by Quentin Reynolds 4. <i>Order of Battle of the U.S. Land Forces in the World War (1917-1919)</i> 5. <i>Encyclopedia of Forts, Posts, Names Camps, and Other Military Installations in Louisiana, 1700-1981</i> by Powell A. Casey Also excerpts from books about World War I training camps: 1. <i>The Handbook of Texas</i> 2. <i>This Flying Game</i> by H.H. Arnold and Ira C. Eaker 3. <i>Pioneer in the U.S. Air Corps</i> by George H. Beverly 4. <i>Wooden Crates and Gallant Pilots</i> by Stuart E. Elliot 5. <i>Kelly Field in the Great World War</i> by Harry D. Kroll
	4	Bibliography of Gerstner articles from the Lake Charles American Press compiled by Robert C. Benoit
	5	Construction photos and construction information; correspondence concerning hurricane of 1918; correspondence concerning nationality of cadets' parents
	6	Correspondence concerning reconstruction of post after 1918 hurricane; drainage; roads; reports of hurricane damage; supply lists including some airplanes and motors; disbursement of funds
	7	Correspondence concerning Mason and Hanger Construction Co.; American Construction Co.; Prairie Farm Lands Co.; LA Railway and Navigation Co.; Lake Charles Railway, Light and Waterworks; other information concerning damage claims against the government

Box	Folder	Description
4	1	Personnel reports; accident reports; claims against the government; some information on bonds
	2	John P. Mitchel reporting for duty; accident reports; personnel reports
	3	Accident reports; information on moving troops to Gerstner from Essington; instructions; appointment procedures for aviators; complaints about Gerstner Field made by Walter Wynne
	4	Correspondence concerning Lake Charles Association of Commerce; mechanics, carpenters, chauffeurs, others; assignments; pursuit school; aero squadrons named
	5	Information on civilian employees; strikes and labor troubles; Mason and Hanger and American Construction Co.
	6	Commissary reports; information on guards; discipline; flying field rules; special orders
	7	Report on Field made by Colonel Lee; heroic action report; special orders; accidents
	8	Request for information on Field from local person
	9	Information on accidents; demobilization; inspection reports; reports on flying instructors school; radio department and engineering department
5	1	Information on primary instruction school versus pursuit school status for Gerstner; reports on flying hours, night flying, bombing; cross-country flights; accidents
	2	Reports on the Field; construction; information on photography, radio telephones, gas training; claims made against the government; hurricane damage; demobilization; transfers from Brooks, Ellington, and Essington Fields
	3	Information on tactical formation flying; flying instruction and aerial navigation; recruiting; pursuit course lectures and schedules; mechanics training; opening of the Field
	4	Information on local purchases; inventory of motor transportation; bombing equipment
	5	Supply requests
	6	Information on uniforms, helmets; supplies and equipment; demobilization
	7	Information on wrecked planes/parts and salvaging wrecks; motor transportation; reports on doctors, nurses, supplies sent to Gerstner after hurricane
	8	Inventory of motor transportation; gunnery equipment; report on airplanes; airplane ambulances; clothing and equipment for men
	9	Information on gunnery equipment; construction; buildings and grounds; Lake Charles Railway, Light and Waterworks; landing fields and demobilization
	10	Telegrams concerning hurricane damage; inspection reports; demobilization; Lake Charles Chamber of Commerce correspondence; report on buildings and grounds
	11	Historical data concerning construction; fencing and exterior lighting; Chamber of Commerce lease; sewage and drainage
	12	Various construction jobs
	13	Sewage and water supply; flu quarantine; demobilization and efforts to retain Field; fire precautions

Box	Folder	Description
6	1	<p>Photographs from the National Archives. Note: Some digital images are available at: http://ereserves.mcneese.edu/depts/archive/gerstnerphotos.htm .</p> <p>#16600 Formation flying, 5000 ft., Aug. 3, 1918</p> <p>#16601 Formation flying</p> <p>#16602 Aerial view of Gerstner, 5000 ft., Aug. 3, 1918</p> <p>#16603 Formation flying</p> <p>#16604 Formation flying, 5000 ft., Aug. 3, 1918</p> <p>#16605 Formation flying, 5000 ft., Aug. 3, 1918</p> <p>#16606 Formation flying, 5000 ft., Aug. 3, 1918</p> <p>#18473 Hangars 17-21, aerial view, no date</p> <p>#18474 Second unit looking east, aerial view</p> <p>#18475 Second unit, hangar 17, shows train</p> <p>#18476 First unit hangar</p> <p>#18477 Portion of second unit, shows water tower and train</p> <p>#18478 Hangars, shows tents</p> <p>#18479 Four aeros in the air, hangars 17,18,19</p> <p>#18480 Gerstner at 4000 ft.</p> <p>#18481 Gerstner at 3000 ft.</p> <p>#18482 Gerstner at 1000 ft.</p> <p>#18483 Lake Charles from air, shows courthouse, city hall, lakefront. Original in the National Archives marked "received September 5, 1918."</p> <p>#18485 Several airplanes in flight, hangars 18,19,20</p> <p>#18486 Lake Charles from 5000 ft.</p> <p>#18488 Gerstner vicinity at 4000 ft., June 28, 1918</p> <p>#18489 Lake Charles at 3000 ft., shows courthouse</p> <p>#18490 Gerstner at 2000 ft., hangars 1,2,3,4</p> <p>#18492 Lake Charles at 5000 ft.</p> <p>#18493 Gerstner at 3000 ft. (the photo was labeled this at National Archives, photo actually looks like aerial view of lakefront with sawmills in operation)</p> <p>#19208 Airplane ambulance</p> <p>#19209 Airplane ambulance #31447 Hospital stretcher (shows how stretcher looked in airplane ambulance), Nov. 1, 1918</p> <p>#31448, #31449, and #31450 Hospital stretcher (shows how stretcher looked in airplane ambulance), Nov. 1, 1918</p> <p>#56314 View showing headquarters and hangars 7-8-9-10, 2200 ft., Aug. 7, 1918, hurricane damage</p> <p>#56315 and #56316 Aerial view, hurricane damage</p> <p>#56317 Gerstner Field after hurricane of August 6, 1918, looking south by east, Aug. 7, 1918, 600 ft.</p> <p>#56318, #56319, and #56320 hurricane damage</p>

Box	Folder	Description
6	2	<p>Photographs made from photos in Herman C. Krause's albums</p> <p>2-A Reunion photo with some identification of men</p> <p>2-B Herman C. Krause</p> <p>2-C Herman C. Krause</p> <p>2-D Herman C. Krause</p> <p>2-E Roy French</p> <p>2-F Roy French</p> <p>2-G Roy French</p> <p>2-H Roy French and Herman C. Krause</p>
	3	<p>Photographs made from photos in Herman C. Krause's album (cont.)</p> <p>3-A Airplanes and crashes</p> <p>3-B Airplanes and crashes</p> <p>3-C Aerial views and scenes from the Field</p> <p>3-D Scenes from around Lake Charles</p> <p>3-E Other soldiers and aviators</p> <p>3-F Other soldiers and aviators</p> <p>3-G Other soldiers and aviators</p> <p>3-H Other miscellaneous photos including mess hall and barracks</p>
	4	<p>Photographs from scrapbook found in former Reiser home - Reiser family pictures and young men stationed at Gerstner Field - includes photos of the Handley-Page airplane</p>
	5	<p>Photos from Imperial Calcasieu Museum</p> <p>A. Curtiss JN-4 "Jennies"</p> <p>B. Armistice Day Parade on Ryan St.</p> <p>C. Detail of photo of Gerstner men</p> <p>D. Christmas Day 1918 menu</p> <p>E. Barracks - outside view</p> <p>F. Soldier in front of officers tent</p> <p>G. Y.M.C.A. Building</p>
	6	<p>Photocopies of photographs from Bill Gabbert Collection (#005) showing hurricane damage and interior of barracks</p>
	7	<p>Photographs copied from originals at the Essington Field (copied and donated by Robert Benoit)</p> <p>A. Lt. Sam Paul, instructor at Gerstner Field</p> <p>B. Troops lined up at Gerstner Field</p> <p>C. Grading the landing field at Gerstner</p> <p>D. and E. Gerstner Field - machine shop</p> <p>F. Gerstner Field - aerial view</p> <p>G. Essington, PA - Lazaretto in background</p> <p>H. Lazaretto at Philadelphia Seaplane Base 1991</p> <p>I. Frank Mills in plane at Essington</p> <p>J. Curtiss sea plane in Delaware River at Essington</p> <p>K. Troops preparing to leave Essington for Gerstner Field</p> <p>L. Curtiss flying boat, Delaware River at Essington</p>

Box	Folder	Description
6	8	<p>Photographs from Robert Benoit (continued)</p> <p>A. Glenn Curtiss, inventor of Curtiss plane, and Frank Mills, civilian instructor at Gerstner Field</p> <p>B. Kelly Field, Texas</p> <p>C. Planes over Kelly Field</p> <p>D. Planes over Kelly Field</p> <p>E. Planes in the air - no further identification</p> <p>F. Planes in the air - no further identification</p> <p>G. Men standing in front of plane - no identification</p> <p>H. Frank Reynolds and C. W. Sprague</p> <p>I. Unidentified pilots</p> <p>J. Unidentified men around partially constructed plane</p>
	9	<p>Information from the ceremony dedicating an historical marker at Gerstner Field - placed by the Southwest Louisiana Historical Association and dedicated September 22, 1991</p>
	10	<p>Photographs (donated by G. W. Ford)</p> <p>A. Training flight, 1918</p> <p>B. Aeroplane, 1918</p> <p>C. Aeroplane, 1918</p> <p>D. Aerosquadron, 1918</p> <p>E. Pilots and soldiers from Gerstner Field with some of the young women of Lake Charles, 1918</p> <p>F. Pilots and soldiers from Gerstner Field with some of the young women of Lake Charles, 1918</p>
	11	<p>Photographs (from Maude Reid's scrapbook Book 6, page 142) Gerstner band on courthouse steps following Armistice Day parade November 11, 1918</p>
	12	<p>Photographs from an album belonging to Clements Helbling who had been stationed at the field, includes air ships, barracks (exterior and interior), hangars, mess hall and dining room, headquarters, guard house and solitary cell, detention camp, Y.M.C.A., wash day, several unidentified soldiers and civilians</p>

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7	1	<p>Photographs of the Handley-Page airplane, several photographs of crashes at the Field, various photographs of pilots and their planes</p> <p>Oversize photographs of Samuel Paul, flight instructor at Gerstner; Major General H.H. (Hap) Arnold; plaque to Col. William C. Ocker; Lt. Col. L. E. Goodier, early commander at Gerstner; 1947 reunion at Gerstner</p> <p>Drainage blueprints of Gerstner Field by F. Shutts & Sons, 1918</p> <p>Part of strut from plane from which Major John Mitchel fell (strut was labeled this - no verification provided)</p> <p>Part of propeller from plane at Gerstner Field</p> <p>Negatives and contact sheets from Herman Krause scrapbooks</p> <p>Property map from National Archives showing buildings and their locations (located in tube outside box)</p>
8	1	<p>Photocopies of articles from the <i>Lake Charles American Press</i> concerning Gerstner Field - these articles are bound in four volumes: 1917, 1918 Part 1, 1918 Part 2, and 1919-1950 (donated for the Gerstner Field Collection by Robert Benoit)</p>