

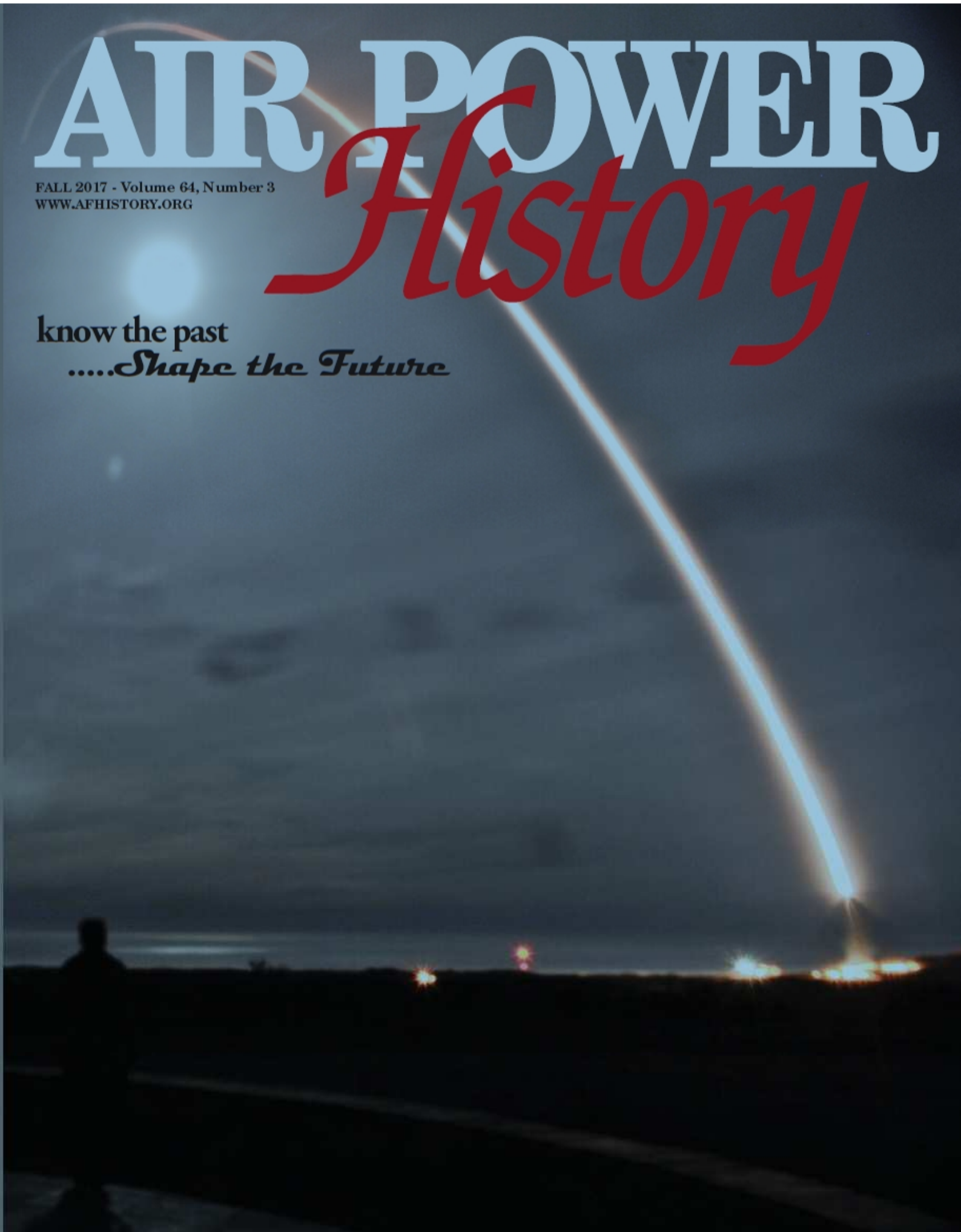
# AIR POWER

FALL 2017 - Volume 64, Number 3  
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# History

know the past

.....*Shape the Future*



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# The French Pilot Training Experience at Oscoda Army Air Field During World War II



Charles DeGaulle addresses French flight students at Selfridge Field, August 1945.

David K. Vaughan

**D**uring World War II, approximately 150 French pilots received operational flight training at Oscoda Army Air Field (OAAF), Michigan, located approximately 200 miles north of Detroit. From July 1944 through March 1945, several detachments of French pilots were stationed at OAAF, where they flew the P-47 aircraft as they practiced their flying training skills prior to returning to France to participate in aerial combat in the closing months of WWII. The pilots in each detachment were given an intensive six-weeks course in combat flying. Because this training program was a one-time event and was of relatively short duration, little is known about this unique chapter of the U. S. Army Air Force's World War II training program. The history and details of this specialized combat training program are probably better known to French military historians than to Americans. This account details the training activities and experiences of this little-known program.

The French training program at Oscoda followed closely after another unique training program which was conducted at OAAF, when the Tuskegee Airmen of the 332nd Fighter Group completed their training in 1943. The 332nd, which consisted of three fighter squadrons flown by the men known today as the Tuskegee Airmen, the first group of African-American aviators to fly in the Army Air Forces, received operational training at OAAF during nine months of 1943.<sup>1</sup> The following year, the French fliers received their operational training over a nine-month period as well, during the last six months of 1944 and the first three months of 1945. Although Selfridge Army Air Field (SAAF), near Detroit, had been the home of origin for several fighter squadrons that had been established during WWII, operational combat training for units based at Selfridge occurred at OAAF due to the fact that no usable training areas existed in the Detroit vicinity, while there were many training areas available in the Oscoda and northern Michigan area. The Army Air Field at Oscoda was traditionally been described as a "sub-base" of Selfridge Field, but it was the site of gunnery and target ranges for units assigned to Selfridge Field (and units assigned to other fields as well) since it had been established in the 1920s.

## The Army Air Field at Oscoda

The airfield at Oscoda had first been established in 1924, when the commanding officer at Selfridge Field, Major Carl Spaatz, later a key general in the air war in Europe during World War II, urged the citizens of Oscoda to join in a cooperative effort to make the field suitable for use by the Army Air Service. The local citizens enthusiastically welcomed the idea of building an airfield for the Air Service, as a devastating fire had burned through the adjoining towns of

Oscoda and Au Sable in 1911. The field was named Camp Skeel, to commemorate a well-known Selfridge Air Corps pilot, Burt Skeel, who was killed in a Dayton, Ohio, air race in the fall of 1924. The airfield at Camp Skeel was used regularly for gunnery practice during the summer and fall months in the 1920s and 1930s and was used even in the winter months so that Selfridge pilots could practice winter flying techniques.

After the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, construction efforts at Camp Skeel increased significantly. Airfield facilities were significantly improved at Camp Skeel in 1942, including three concrete runways, a taxiway, and an apron. Prior to the construction of these runways and taxiway, the landing and taxi area had consisted of grass-covered and sandy surfaces. The old buildings were torn down and more modern buildings were constructed.<sup>2</sup> In August, 1942, the field was officially renamed Oscoda Army Air Field, a name it held throughout the remainder of World War II. The mission of the field was to provide operational training, primarily tactical flight training and gunnery practice for units about to be sent to active theaters of war.

### **The mission of the field was to provide ... primarily tactical flight training and gunnery practice**

A third phase of construction started in December, 1942; in this phase a fire station and utility yard were built and hospital and maintenance facilities were added.<sup>3</sup> Instead of standard barracks buildings, a number of "hutments" were built. These sixteen by sixteen-foot square huts held four men each. These were placed among the pine trees that populated the field. One permanent hangar was constructed on the field, located at the north end of the aircraft parking area. The control tower was located at its northwest corner.<sup>4</sup> A number of huts close to the flight line were converted into administrative and training buildings, in which two link trainers, a deflection trainer, and a range estimator were placed. Other buildings included the Commissary, Base Exchange, enlisted men's club, and officers' club. Army trucks provided shuttle service to Oscoda, and later, to East Tawas.<sup>5</sup>

By the spring of 1943 the capability of the field had changed significantly from its pre-war status, and it was



Entry Gate at Oscoda Army Air Field, 1944. Credit: Ailes Francaises en Amerique du Nord, 1943-1958

fully operational and ready to receive its first training units. The first units to be assigned at Oscoda for wartime training were the 100th Fighter Squadron, the 301st Fighter Squadron, and the 302nd Fighter Squadron. These squadrons, consisting of African-American pilots trained at Tuskegee Institute, were assigned to the 332nd Fighter Group, the first members of which arrived in the middle of April, 1943. During the time that the Tuskegee airmen were in training, on July 23, 1943, operational control of the airfield passed from the Third Air Force to the First Air Force.<sup>6</sup> First Air Force was responsible for the air defense and training of the Northeast sector of the continental United States. The last of the Tuskegee airmen concluded their training at OAAF in December, 1943, prior to shipping out for combat duties in the Mediterranean and European Theaters in WWII early in 1944. For the next six months there was relatively little flying activity at OAAF until the French airmen arrived in the summer of 1944.

### **The French Flight Training Program in the United States**

When the German forces invaded and conquered France in May and June, 1940, French forces still in France or in areas under French control were obligated by the terms of the French surrender agreement to fight in support of the Nazi German government. However, the French military forces in North Africa were freed from their obligation after the successful Allied invasion known as Operation Torch, conducted from November 8-16, 1942, and Allied military commanders offered flight training to French soldiers and airmen freed from their wartime restrictions in North Africa. Even though the French government was still under the control of the Nazis, the

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Mrs. Janine Davidson translates the flight instructions given by Flight Instructor David Thomas to three French flight students at Van de Graaff Field at Tuscaloosa, Alabama, November, 1943. The French insignia is visible on the students' left arms.

American government made Lend-Lease assistance available to Free French Forces.<sup>7</sup>

The U. S. Army Air Force put a plan into effect that provided for an extensive flight training program for qualified French soldiers.<sup>8</sup> A similar training program for pilots had been conducted at Maxwell Field and Gunter Field, Alabama, from 1941 to 1943 on behalf of the Royal Air Force. This program had concluded early in 1943, and flying facilities that had been used to train British pilots were now available to train Free French pilots.<sup>9</sup>

### **Facilities that had been used to train British pilots were now available to train Free French pilots**

After their arrival in the United States, the French airmen were assigned to a variety of different training programs, determined by preliminary testing. In addition to flight training, there were training programs for navigators, bombardiers, radio operators, gunners, mechanics, and photographers. Of the approximately 5000 French participants initially in the program, over 4000 completed it. Men who were eliminated from the pilot training program were channeled into other flying roles, including navigators and bombardiers. Of the 4,209 men who completed the program, 1,339 became pilots, 81 were trained as navigators, 264 as bombardiers, 957 as gunners, 397 as radio operators, 1078 as mechanics in different specialties, and 93 as photographers.<sup>10</sup> Once the French airmen com-

pleted their training, they were assigned to combat duty in Europe.

The French aviators arrived from North Africa in sequential groups, or detachments. There were a total of 23 detachments, with an average of 130 men in each detachment. The first detachment arrived in June of 1943 and the last arrived in April of 1945, averaging about one detachment a month. Those men in the first seven detachments were able to proceed through the entire training program before the war ended; the men in the remaining sixteen detachments were still in training when the war ended. At the end of World War II, the men remaining in the United States were returned to France in February, 1946.

The initial flight training plan for the French pilots was thirty-four weeks long. It consisted of four weeks of initial testing and pre-flight training conducted at Craig Field, outside of Selma, Alabama, followed by ten weeks of primary flight training, during which trainees accumulated a total of sixty-five hours of flying time. Starting in June, 1943, this phase of flight training was conducted at Van De Graaff Field, near Tuscaloosa, Alabama. This training was initially provided by the Alabama Institute of Aeronautics (AIA). Training operations ceased at Van De Graaff Field on September 8, 1944, and primary flight training was then conducted by the Hawthorne School of Aeronautics (HSA) at Orangeburg, South Carolina.

Then followed ten weeks (eighty-five hours of flying time) of basic flight training at Gunter Field, in Montgomery, Alabama. After completing training at Gunter Field and officially being awarded their wings, the French aviators were divided into two groups: single engine pilots and multiengine pilots. Those aviators who qualified as single-engine pilots were sent to Craig Field, Alabama, where they received an additional ten weeks of training (ninety hours). Those designated as multi-engine pilots were sent to Turner Field in Albany, Georgia, where they received nine weeks (115 hours) of flight training in multi-engine aircraft. When the multi-engine pilots completed their advanced training, they were sent to Dodge City, Kansas, where they flew B-26 aircraft; later in the program, some of these pilots were sent to Frederick Field in Oklahoma for training.<sup>11</sup>

### **The French Flight Training Program at Oscoda**

Once the single-engine pilots completed their training at Craig Field, they were sent to operational training units (OTUs) for specialized training in P-47s. Early in the program, from January through June, 1944, these OTU fields included Dale Mabry Field, near Tallahassee, Florida, and Norfolk Army Air Field in Virginia. However, the airfield that received the greatest numbers of single engine students and provided most of the OTU training was Oscoda Army Air Field, which was designated as the primary P-47 training base on July 11, 1944. On July 15, thirty-four pilots from the 4th detachment of French aviators flew from Norfolk Field to Oscoda, where a training program was established that was exclusively devoted to the train-



Specially designed insignia for French flight students who trained at Oscoda. The phrase, "Ils Grandiront" means "they will fly."

ing of French pilots. From this date, all P-47 training for French pilots from detachments four through eight was conducted at OAAF. Oscoda Army Air Field, which had always been a sub-base (or auxiliary field) of Selfridge Field, was, for the first time in its existence, declared an independent airfield on July 12, three days before the first French pilots arrived.<sup>12</sup> By the time the French aviators arrived at Oscoda, they had completed approximately 240 hours of flying time and had been in the training pipeline for over thirty-four weeks, or eight months. At Oscoda, each detachment of French pilots received an additional three months of training before being released for assignment to French Air Force units. After completing their combat training, the French pilots were sent to Bolling Air Field, Washington D.C., where they received orders assigning them to flying units in the European theater.

### **French aviators continued their operational training under the instruction of Army Air Force pilots**

The first group to train at Oscoda consisted of the members of the 4th detachment of French fliers. They started training in September of 1943 as members of flying training class 44-D, proceeded through their primary flight training at Van de Graaff Field and their basic training at Gunter Field, and were awarded their wings six months later, on March 15, 1944. Those pilots selected to fly *avions de chasse*, single engine fighters, received advanced flight training in T-6 and P-40 aircraft at Craig Field, which lasted approximately three months. The members of this group then proceeded to Norfolk Field where they received indoctrination flights in the P-47 aircraft prior to their arrival in Oscoda in July of 1944.

In addition to 34 pilots, one non-flying officer, Hubert D'Irumberry de Salaberry, served as the commandant, or senior military officer, in charge of the pilots. These men were joined by a contingent of enlisted personnel from the

recently closed airfield at Blackstone Army Air Field in Virginia. These men formed the maintenance and supply sections serving the French airmen, all part of the 134th Air Base Unit. The enlisted personnel supporting the training program were American, not French, as there were no provisions for training French enlisted men. With the arrival of the French airmen and the enlisted personnel from Blackstone AAF, the number of personnel assigned to OAAF jumped from approximately 220 men on July 1, to nearly 1000 men by July 31.<sup>13</sup> Six months later, at the end of January, 1945, there were 132 officers, 759 enlisted men, and 173 civilians assigned to the field; thus, throughout the nine-month period that French aviators trained at OAAF, the total personnel strength of the field averaged just over 1000 men.

The purpose of the training program at Oscoda was Preparation for Overseas Movement, or POM:<sup>14</sup>

*The purpose of the training program was to standardize training; to train all Oscoda personnel for combat warfare; to improve the efficiency of the soldier; and to generally qualify personnel for the manifold duties that will confront them in combat.*

On August 12, 1944, one month after the first detachment of French pilots arrived, a special ceremony was held in which the French tricolor flag was raised near the barracks area of the field where the French cadets were housed. The unit history reported that relations with the local civilian population were good: "the townspeople are kindly disposed toward all military personnel [and] there are numerous invitations for house parties, dinners, hot dog roasts, and swimming and fishing parties. The USO, which maintains two well-equipped buildings in town, has done much in the way of arranging these affairs."<sup>15</sup>

At Oscoda the French aviators continued their operational training under the instruction of Army Air Force pilots as they were introduced to combat tactics and practiced formation flying, aerial combat, and gunnery. The first group completed its training on September 16, 1944. The second group of French aviators, from the 5th detachment, began training in the United States in October, 1943, completed their primary and basic training as members of flying training class 44-E, and received their wings on May 23, 1944. After completing advanced flight training at Craig Field, they proceeded directly to Oscoda, arriving in August of 1944; they completed their training by November 15, 1944. The members of the 6th detachment (class 44-F) began training early in November 1943, received their wings on June 27, 1944, and completed their training at Oscoda on December 26, 1944. The members of the 7th detachment began training late in November, 1943, started their flying program early in January, 1944 (class 44-G), received their wings on August 4, 1944, and completed training at Oscoda on March 8, 1945. The members of the 8th detachment, the last detachment to complete P-47 training at Oscoda, began their training in February of 1944, received their wings on 16 October 1944 (class 44-H), and completed their training at Oscoda on

April 12th, 1945. Of the over 150 French fliers who entered the combat training program at Oscoda, a total of 132 completed their training at Oscoda, thirty in Detachment 4, twenty-three in detachment 5, twenty-eight in Detachment 6, thirty-two in Detachment 7, and nineteen in Detachment 8.

The most significant problem associated with the training program was that few American ground or flight instructors spoke fluent, or even passable, French. The need for French-speaking flight instructors was so great that those pilots in the United States who spoke minimally acceptable French were placed in the training program, even if they had expressed a desire to fly in combat. The inability to communicate clearly in the cockpit was a serious concern, as the French pilots often did not understand exactly what the instructor pilot was asking them to do. In the early phases of the training program, in the preflight and primary flight instruction phases at the flying fields located in the southern states, French-speaking civilians were hired to serve as classroom instructors and flight line translators.<sup>16</sup>

Some American pilots assigned as flight instructors were members of the support staff at OAAF. Other instructors were stationed at Selfridge Field and were transferred to Oscoda for brief intervals. Two of these instructors were Captain Howard Askelson and Captain Arlie Blood, who were assigned to Selfridge in December, 1944. Arlie Blood had flown P-47s in the European Theater in 1943. On one mission he was shot down over France and managed to avoid capture by the German forces, eventually making his way into Spain. Undoubtedly his ability to survive in France during difficult times made him a likely candidate as an instructor for the French aviators assigned to Oscoda, even if his knowledge of the French language was incomplete. Blood brought his wife, Lucille, with him to Oscoda; they drove north in the middle of the cold northern Michigan winter and rented a log cabin, designed for summer, not winter visitors, and stayed there for three months while he provided flight instruction to the French cadets.<sup>17</sup>

His experience as a P-47 combat pilot in Europe was invaluable in guiding the pilots in gunnery practice. He described how shooting at a towed target was evaluated:<sup>18</sup>

*A six foot by thirty foot cloth banner was towed behind another aircraft with a steel cable about a thousand feet behind the airplane. One hundred rounds of fifty caliber ammo was loaded in each of two guns. The tips of the fifty caliber ammo were dipped in paint. Each aircraft was loaded with different colors. The leader usually carried red tipped ammo. After firing at the towed banner it was brought back to the field, dropped, and then the holes were counted. X number red, X number blue, etc. Sixty of the two hundred rounds had to hit the . . . banner to qualify [the pilot] as an expert gunner.*

The aircraft practicing their gunnery skills shot at the target as the tow plane towed the aerial target in a



Captain Arlie Blood diagrams a flight maneuver for French flying students at Oscoda AAF. (Credit: Arlie Blood, *Only Angels Have Wings*.)

southerly direction, parallel to the Lake Huron shoreline. A government aeronautical chart dated June 8, 1944, shows a danger area whose northern boundary begins ten miles eastward from the Lake Huron shore extending from approximately ten miles north of Harrisville south to the northern edge of the town of Oscoda.

### **[Blood's] experience as a P-47 combat pilot in Europe was invaluable in guiding the pilots in gunnery practice**

One Oscoda resident vividly described the scene as the P-47s flew their attack patterns at the targets extending behind the tow-planes as they flew south along the Lake Huron shore line:<sup>19</sup>

*It was a common war-years sight to watch the fighter planes swooping down at the white target some 900 yards behind the tow plane. Their guns blazing and drumming out the familiar machine gun sound, the sight brought the war home vividly to us. . . . The fighter planes made a giant wheel in the sky, as they bore in on the target and then, their shooting finished on this strike, swooped up quickly in a huge arc to avoid the angry guns of imaginary planes behind them.*

*Back and forth the tow plane went, month after month, turning back south off the town of Harrisville, going down the lake to the Tawassee, then swinging north again. . . . The sound of machine gun fire over the twin towns of Oscoda and Au Sable was as common as the clop, clop of the [local] farm horse pulling the quaint little box of a milk cart around the towns each day.*

In addition to the Lake Huron target area, a fifteen mile by fifteen mile danger zone was located just to the north and west of the Oscoda airfield; aircraft attacking ground targets at the west edge of the OAAF airfield



Oscoda AAF Executive Officer, Lt Col Andrew Reynolds, briefs French flight students prior to flight, summer, 1944.

would maneuver in this area. Danger areas were also located over Lake Margrethe, near Grayling, where there was an auxiliary flying field, and even over the Beaver Islands, northwest of Traverse City. In general, P-47 aircraft flown by the French pilots could be seen maneuvering in a fifty-mile radius of OAAF, from Alpena in the north to East Tawas and Tawas City to the south to Grayling in the west.

Arlie Blood related one story about how two of his students aborted one gunnery mission, claiming that their aircraft engines were showing low oil pressure. He told them to return to the field and land, and he continued the gunnery mission with his remaining student. When he returned to the field, he was asked where his missing two students were. He replied that they had said their aircraft had experienced engine problems and he assumed they had returned to the field. Soon after, he related, the Highway Patrol reported that both students had made belly landings on the highway north of Oscoda. When they were questioned, they reported that they had fought an aerial duel over the affections of the same local Oscoda girl and had shot each other down. Arlie's comment was: "What an instructor they must have had!"<sup>20</sup> Unfortunately, official aircraft accident reports do not indicate two aircraft experiencing emergency landings on the same day during the winter of 1944-1945, or at any time during the nine-month

period that the French pilots were in training at Oscoda. But the story is too good not to have some element of truth in it.

Not that there might not have been girls in Oscoda who would have appealed to the French pilots; the town was inhabited by many families with French-Canadian backgrounds, families that had been started by men from Canada who had come to Oscoda and Au Sable to work during the lumbering years from 1850 to 1910. Names such as Bissonette, Michaud, Gagnier, Lavoie, and Thebault were common.

### **Some of the French pilots brought their wives or girlfriends ... and installed them in local resort cabins**

Some of the French pilots brought their wives or girlfriends with them and installed them in local resort cabins. Jerry Wagner, whose family lived near the entrance to the airfield, reported visiting one such cabin on a warm summer's day shortly after the first group of pilots arrived in the summer of 1944. When he walked up to the door to deliver a note from the French pilot, he could see, through the screen door, the French airman's wife doing her ironing in the cabin wearing nothing above the waist. The half-



French flight students' shoulder insignia.

dressed woman came to the door to take the note, and received it without registering any concern. This surprising experience provided Wagner with a “cherished war-years memory.”<sup>21</sup>

In order to converse with the French pilots, Wagner bought a French language instructional manual. Wagner often worked with his stepfather and some other men on the west side of the base near the ground firing range, where they had a contract to remove the trees that had been cut when the firing range had been constructed. Although they always checked with the base operations office to ensure that no gunnery practice was scheduled when they went out to clear the fallen trees, they were often surprised by the French pilots flying their P-47s low overhead as they worked. Wagner was sure that the pilots intentionally looked for them, hoping to put a fright into them, which they did.

Wagner thought that the French pilots were “fearless”:

*These fearless men, so far away from their homeland and possibly already angry at losing their beloved country to Hitler, threw caution to the wind. At buzzing people and buildings, they were absolutely the most reckless and care-free pilots that ever trained at the base. . . . They flew [their P-47s] with consummate skill.*

Wagner recalled that aircraft flying low, or “buzzing,” the Oscoda beaches was a “common war years occurrence,” and that residents often saw a P-47 flying at high speed “no more than one hundred feet in the air and traveling the length of the beautiful [Lake Huron] beach from the mouth of the Au Sable River north” to the northern boundary of town.<sup>23</sup> But the residents never seriously complained, believing that it was “unpatriotic to complain about such things” while a war was being waged.

The shortage of flying instructors proficient in French resulted in a decision to assign some of the more proficient French pilots as instructors as well.<sup>24</sup>

*The American instructor was quite aware that it was his*

*inability to explain on the spot—and those spots were short in time—rather than the lack of ability of his student to fly that was the source of the problem. Because of the latent danger created by poor communication, Training Command asked and obtained from the French Headquarters in Washington the permission to keep some of the trainees for flight instructor's duty from the very beginning.*

The French flight instructors (or *moniteurs*, as they were referred to in the French language), helped French flying students to resolve communication problems. Rene Leveque, a member of the first detachment of French aviators to arrive in the United States, and one of the first French flight instructors at Gunter Field, stated that he “often took the job of saving French Cadets from being ‘washed out’ because communication failed in a certain phase of training.”<sup>25</sup> Eventually, some French pilots were assigned as instructors at every field that was used in the French pilot training program, including Oscoda Army Air Field.

At least six *moniteurs* served at Oscoda during the nine-month period when the French pilots were assigned to the base: Guy Brunet, a member of the 3rd detachment; Francois Messinger, a member of the 5th detachment; Andre Maccary, also in the 5th detachment; Jacques Noetinger, a member of the 6th detachment; Serge Lazarevitch of the 6th detachment; and Jean Kisling, a member of the 13th detachment. Two of these six *moniteurs* died in aircraft accidents while they were at Oscoda, and a third died in a non-flying accident.

### **In order to converse with the French pilots, Wagner bought a French language instructional manual**

The first fatality was Francois Messinger, who died on a training flight on September 17, 1944, two months after the training program at Oscoda began. Messinger was an element leader in a four-ship formation led by Guy Brunet. The other pilots were Jean-Louis Jacquet, Brunet's wingman, and Andre Maccary, Messinger's wingman. The mission was a high altitude formation flight, designed to familiarize the pilots with the techniques and sensations of high altitude formation flying. Prior to takeoff at Oscoda, the pilots discussed the procedures associated with their radio communications, fuel management, and oxygen equipment. After takeoff, the formation flew north and then headed east over Lake Huron, climbing for altitude. As the group passed through 8,000 feet, Brunet called for all pilots to engage their engine turbo superchargers, which would enable their engines to perform more efficiently in the thinner air of the higher altitudes. Brunet also called for oxygen checks periodically.

After levelling at 25,000 feet, Brunet turned to the left in a ten degree bank, a relatively shallow bank. All of the other aircraft followed except for Messinger's aircraft, which turned to the right on a southerly heading. It also started a gradual descent. Maccary, who was flying on



Classroom instruction, Oscoda AAF, 1944. Credit: Ailes Francaises en Amerique du Nord, 1943-1958.

Messinger's right wing, called to Messinger on the radio but received no answer. Maccary alerted Brunet that Messinger was not responding to his calls. Messinger's plane started to descend in a series of steep spirals. Maccary followed Messinger's aircraft to an altitude of 4,000 feet, when he leveled off and watched as Messinger's aircraft continued its descent until it struck the surface of Lake Huron three miles northeast of Sturgeon Point on the Lake Huron coast, four miles north of Harrisville, Michigan.<sup>26</sup>

### **There were twenty-five aircraft incidents or accidents involving French pilots**

Maccary stated that when Messinger's aircraft struck the surface of the water, he saw "a large geyser and a white spot that settled rapidly." Although the accident investigation board was unable to determine the cause of the crash, it was probably due to a lack of oxygen. Either Messinger had not attached his oxygen mask, or it was not feeding him oxygen under pressure at high altitude as it should have. A lack of oxygen at high altitude can cause hypoxia, a condition in which the brain loses consciousness, incapacitating the pilot. In August, 2012, sixty-eight years later, pieces of Messinger's P-47 washed up on the Lake Huron shore at Sarnia, Ontario, over 100 miles south of the crash site.<sup>27</sup> Sadly, Messinger's wingman, Andre Maccary, died less than two months later in a non-flying accident. He drowned while duck hunting in a marsh near Cedar Lake, located just north of the airfield, on November 10, 1944. The second *moniteur* to die in an aircraft accident was Serge Lazarevitch, who was killed when his aircraft struck the ground while maneuvering at low altitude six miles west of Harrisville, Michigan, on March 30, 1945.

Jacques Noetinger had been a *moniteur* in T-6 aircraft at Craig Field before arriving at Oscoda. He had a

long and productive flying career after the war. Even though he did not receive his training at Oscoda, Jean Kisling, a member of the 13th detachment, served as a *moniteur* in the P-47 program at Selfridge and Oscoda. After World War II ended, he became a commercial pilot for Air France, and accumulated over 26,000 hours of flying time.

Including the accidents mentioned above, there were twenty-five aircraft incidents or accidents involving French pilots during the nine months they trained at Oscoda. Of these there were four fatalities, including the two *moniteurs* mentioned above. The third fatality was Jacques Martin, who was killed when his aircraft struck the ground three miles west of Greenbush, Michigan, on December 29, 1944. The fourth fatality was Marcel Oules, who was killed in an aircraft crash six miles west of Mikado, Michigan, on March 26, 1945. Of the twenty-five incidents and accidents, four occurred while the aircraft was taxiing on the airfield, five occurred during landing, and three occurred when the aircraft struck the large cloth aerial target that was being towed over the aerial gunnery range off the Lake Huron shoreline. There were five forced landings due to mechanical failure.

Three non-fatal crash landings occurred during the nine-month training period; the first occurred on September 8, 1944, when an aircraft crashed on a local farm, owned by Edward Vaughan, located on the southern banks of the Au Sable River, two miles south of the airfield.<sup>28</sup> According to one local account, the pilot clipped the tops of several trees before his aircraft<sup>29</sup>

*belly-smashed into their field. It skidded in the black soil of their plowed field for seven or eight hundred feet then smashed into a large [oak] tree that stopped the out-of-control ride. When the grinding of metal ceased and the smoke cleared, the Vaughans had a fighter plane and a Free French flyer almost in their living room.*



French flight students at Oscoda AAF. (Credit: *Ailes Francaises en Amerique du Nord, 1943-1958.*)

As the aircraft struck the ground, one wheel broke loose from the plane and came to rest on the Vic Merkel farm, located across the Au Sable River from the Vaughan farm. The pilot, Maurice Meuret, though seriously injured, survived. The second crash occurred fifteen miles north of Traverse City and one mile west of Bellaire, Michigan, on February 2, 1945; a third occurred seven miles south of West Branch on April 12, 1945.

The most unfortunate incident associated with the French flight training program occurred on August 8, 1944, less than a month after the first group of French pilots arrived at Oscoda. A flight of three aircraft, led by Lieutenant Kenneth Wassing, an army air force instructor pilot, buzzed low over Lake Margrethe, located just southwest of the central Michigan town of Grayling. Wassing's two wingmen were French pilots Andre Erard and Antoine Fabby. One of the three aircraft flew so low the propeller of one of the three aircraft struck Mrs. Mary Meyer as she sat in a rowboat with her son, Oscar. The seventy-two year old woman and her son, from Madeira, Ohio, were vacationing in Grayling. Mrs. Meyer, who was trying to crouch low in the boat, was nearly cut in half by the propeller of one of the aircraft. Her son, who threw himself flat in the boat, was not injured.

The lead aircraft was flown by Lieutenant Wassing; Erard and Fabby were both members of the newly arrived 4th detachment of French pilots. The base commander of Oscoda Army Air Field, Colonel John Crosthwaite, convened a court martial board which found Wassing guilty of violating two articles of war, flying too low and endangering civilians. Wassing was sentenced to eighteen months at hard labor, dismissal from the service, and forfeiture of all pay and allowances. Because they were flying close formation, following the lead ship flown by Wassing, Erard and Fabby were allowed to continue in the program and graduated with the other members of their detachment in September.<sup>30</sup>

After the Allied forces successfully pushed the German army out of France and began to take control of large sections of Germany in the spring of 1945, the French flight training program experienced adjustments as the war in Europe came to a close. On March 27, 1945 a forest fire ignited six miles west of Oscoda. Strong winds assisted the fire in spreading east towards Oscoda and threatened both the airfield and the town before volunteer fire fighters were able to stop the fire from advancing. Three hundred military personnel from Oscoda Army Air Base were among the volunteers who helped to halt the fire. By the time the fire was stopped on March 28, almost 20,000 acres of grass and forest land had been burned. All aircraft at OAAF were flown from Oscoda to Selfridge Field as a precautionary measure in case the fire could not be controlled.<sup>31</sup> The fire was stopped at the western boundary of the town, where the Detroit and Mackinac Railway train station was located; several sheds and small buildings near the D&M depot were destroyed before the efforts of the firefighters, assisted by reduced winds, stopped the advance of the fire.

### **The gunnery range at Oscoda continued to be used by French pilots ... at Selfridge until August 1945**

Although the forest fire probably was not the reason, on April 11, all formal combat training at Oscoda ceased, and operational training in P-47s moved to Selfridge Field. The gunnery range at Oscoda continued to be used by French pilots in training at Selfridge until August 1945, when the war ended and all training ceased.<sup>32</sup> Although French pilots were still moving through the training pipeline, a number of factors were responsible for the decision to close the program. The major factor was end of the war in Europe on May 6, 1945; the need for French combat pilots was no longer as urgent as it had been earlier in the war. When Japan surrendered on August 14, the need for trained French combat pilots was over. General Charles De Gaulle, provisional president of France, visited Selfridge Field on August 27, and inspected the French airmen who had assembled for his visit. In February 1946, the training program was officially terminated and all French airmen in the United States returned to France.

Although many of the French airmen did not complete their training in time to fly in combat over their home country, some of the early graduates did so. At least one of the Oscoda trainees, Maurice Pochet, flew the P-47 over Germany before the war ended. Many of the trainees became pilots in the French Air Force after the war.

The airfield at Oscoda continued to be used for gunnery training by French and American pilots stationed at Selfridge Field throughout the summer of 1945, but after the departure of the French pilots, on April 12, the base again reverted to its status as a sub-base of Selfridge Field. The field was largely deserted, affording those military personnel still assigned to OAAF the opportunity to live their lives at a more leisurely pace. Jerry Wagner re-

called being a passenger in a Chrysler automobile driven by one of his friends, Neddy Gilardino, along with one of the base's military policemen, Corporal Davis, as Gilardino drove it down the military airfield's deserted runway one afternoon in late summer, trying to see if it could reach a speed of one hundred miles an hour.

Suddenly a dark shadow passed overhead, accompanied by a very loud roaring noise. They then saw a P-51 fly over them, its wheels down, so low that they could read the black stenciled letters on the bottom of the fuselage. The aircraft quickly passed them, retracted its wheels, and circled around for another attempt at landing. Gilardino drove his car off the runway and over to the base operations office, where Corporal Davis knew the pilot of the aircraft, Lt Col Ralph Jenkins, the base commander, would be parking. Corporal Davis stood at attention while Jenkins stepped down from the P-51.

As Jenkins approached, he asked Corporal Davis, "Have your friends been up in the tower, Corporal Davis?"

Corporal Davis replied, "No, sir, they haven't."

"Then by all means, show them the tower." He paused briefly, then added, "We all know they have seen the runway."

Lt Col Ralph Jenkins had been Captain Arlie Blood's P-47 squadron commander in the 510th Fighter

Squadron in Europe.<sup>33</sup>

When the combat training program for the French pilots ended, a significant chapter of the history of Army Air Force experience at Oscoda came to an end. Two special groups of pilots, the Tuskegee Airmen and the Free French airmen, had conducted their training programs at Oscoda, the only American airfield to accommodate these two unique groups of airmen for extended training programs.

The field was officially closed on December 31, 1945. However, as the Cold War intensified and international tensions rose as a result of the Korean conflict (1950-1953), the airfield at Oscoda became increasingly active as more flying units conducted training there. In 1950, the field again opened as an active installation under the command of the 10th Air Force of the Continental Air Command. In 1951, an interceptor squadron flying jet-powered F-86s was assigned to the field and the field was transferred to the Air Defense Command. The field was renamed Wurtsmith Air Force Base in 1953, in honor of a recently deceased Air Force general officer, Paul Wurtsmith, and shortly after became one of the northern tier of bases in the Strategic Air Command. It eventually was home to both B-52 and KC-135 aircraft. As world tensions decreased after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1987, the need for large numbers of global reach nuclear-capable bombers also decreased, and the base eventually closed in 1993. ■

## NOTES

1. For a full discussion of the World War II training program for the Tuskegee Airmen at Oscoda during World War II, see David K. Vaughan, "The World War II Training Experiences of the Tuskegee Airmen at Oscoda Army Air Field," *Air Power History* (Winter 2016), pp. 25-40.
2. Mary T. Wolf, *Wurtsmith Air Force Base, 1924-1980*, p. 8. Unpublished (1980). A draft copy prepared by Sergeant Mary Wolf, 379th Bomb Wing Historian.
3. Wolf, pp. 9-10.
4. *Unit History* (1), p. 9.
5. *Unit History* (1), p. 14.
6. Wolf, p. 11.
7. Robert B. Kane, *So Far From Home: Royal Air Force and Free French Air Force Flight Training at Maxwell and Gunter Fields during World War II* (Montgomery AL: New South Books, 2016), pp. 53-54.
8. Wesley Frank Craven and James Lea Cate, eds., "Men and Planes," *The Army Air Forces in World War II, Vol. 6* (Office of Air Force History, 1983), pp. 697-698.
9. Kane, *So Far From Home*, pp. 55-56.
10. Patrick Ehrhardt, Jean-Paul Quentric, and Jean Fleury, *Ailes Françaises en Amérique du Nord, 1943-1958* [*French Wings in North America, 1943-1958*] (Association pour la Recherche de Documentation sur l'Histoire de l'Aéronautique Navale [ARDHAM], 2009). Statistics pertaining to French training program in the United States during WWII are found in Section I, pp. 15-277. Kane provides slightly different figures: 1,351 pilots, 74 navigators, 253 bombardiers, and 955 gunners (*So Far From Home*, p. 76).
11. Ehrhardt, Quentric, and Fleury, *Ailes Françaises*, Section I.
12. *Unit History* (1), p. 20.
13. *Unit History* (1), p. 21.
14. *Unit History* (1), p. 28.
15. *Unit History* (1), p. 60.
16. *Unit History* (1), p. 44.
17. Arlie Blood, *Only Angels Have Wings* (Privately printed, 1997), p. 106.
18. Blood, p. 107.
19. Jerry Wagner, *World War Two, Oscoda and Au Sable* (Iosco County Historical Association, 1987), p. 23.
20. Blood, p. 108.
21. Wagner, p. 21.
22. Wagner, pp. 20-21.
23. Wagner, p. 20.
24. Rene C. Leveque, "The Early Training of French Pilots in the U. S.," *Aerospace Historian*, December 1982 (Vol. 29, No. 4), pp. 257-258; see also Janelle Dupont, "French Lessons," *Air & Space*, March 2004, pp. 55-60.
25. Leveque, p. 257.
26. *Unit History* (2), *Oscoda Army Air Field, 1 August 1944 to 31 October 1944*, pp. 12-13; see also Barbara Simpson, "Unlocking the Mystery Behind P-47 Wreckage," *Sarnia [Ontario] Observer*, 28 August 2012; found on *Sarnia Observer* web site, 9 February 2015.
27. Simpson.
28. *Unit History* (2), p. 12.
29. Wagner, p. 22. For many years afterwards, the oak tree on my grandfather's farm bore a whitewashed scar testifying to its role in the accident.
30. *Unit History* (2), pp. 13-15; "Buzz Flight' Killing Aired," *Circleville [Ohio] Herald*, 2 September 1944; article found on *Newspapers.Com*.
31. *Unit History* (4), *Oscoda Army Air Field, 1 February 1945 to 12 April 1945*, p. 8.
32. *Unit History* (3), *Oscoda Army Air Field, 1 November 1944 to 31 January 1945*, p. 3.
33. Wagner, pp. 61-62.

