

TEST PILOT MEMORIAL, EDWARDS AFB

By WILLIS L. NYE

The use of Muroc as a test area began in 1942 with the flights of the Bell XP-59, and has grown steadily over the years as the Air Force Flight Test Center, Edwards Air Force Base. The first airmen pilot killed while on active duty testing at the base were Lt.Col. Bernard D. Morley and SSgt. James M. Jones, whose A-24 crashed on 21 May 1944. Since that date, to the present time, a few more than 100 men, both military and civilian, have lost their lives in testing of experimental aircraft at Edwards, which is named for Capt. Glen Edwards, killed in June 1948 in the crash of the YB-49.

A tribute to the men who made the supreme sacrifice was established at Chapel No. 1, Edwards AFB, when the stained glass *Test Pilot Memorial Window* was dedicated on December 17th, 1967. The date was fittingly chosen as it was also the anniversary of the first powered flight of the Wright Brothers.

The name "MUROC" conjures a well defined meaning to the World War II airman and the pre-War aviation buff as well. Where did the name originate and when and how did Edwards Air Force Base be designated as the location for the U.S. Air Force Flight Test Center? The 300,000 acre Mohave Desert in Southern California was known as an awesome desert, with but a single water stop for the railroad, at Barstow, 67 miles east of Los Angeles. Until 1910, no determined effort had been made to populate the area. In that year the Corum Brothers, Clifford and Ralph, and Clifford's wife, Effie, spurred by a dollar-an-acre bounty, moved in and established a homestead on government land. The brothers erected a general store in the hope of attracting other hardy souls to the desert. In order to obtain mail and communication, they applied to the U.S. Post Office for permission to maintain a Post Office known as Corum, but this was denied on the basis that the name conflicted with an existing one in California. The brothers Corum were not to be denied. They reapplied for a branch Post Office by the name of MUROC, simply Corum spelled in reverse, a change that was approved by the postal authorities and so it has remained until this day.

In 1933 the U.S. Army Air Corps required a suitable bombardment range for practice purposes. New long-range bombardment airplanes were being acquired and an area that did not have any population, human or other, nearby

would be desirable. A survey was made of the available areas and the Rosamond and Rogers Dry Lake region in Southern California seemed to be the logical selection. Though isolated, it was reasonably close to the aircraft center of the Western United States located in the Los Angeles and San Diego areas, and to bases at San Diego, Riverside, and even the San Francisco Bay area. A survey party detailed by the U.S. Army Engineers Corps performed a survey of the area and work was undertaken to convert Rogers Dry Lake bed to a bombardment practice range. Limited facilities were erected and during the ensuing years bombardment practice was carried on by the U.S. Army Air Corps until 1942. After Pearl Harbor a replica Japanese heavy cruiser, dubbed the MUROC MARU, was constructed of wood near the center of the lake as a static target for the budding bombardiers from nearby training bases.

The Jet Age dawned, with a decided impact on the isolated desert area. On October 1st, 1942, the Bell Jet Fighter, the XP-59A, performed its first test flight from Rosamond Dry Lake, selected because of the long natural runway offered by the dry lake surface. Then followed other World War II aircraft such as the Lockheed XP-80, an improved jet fighter. Prior to October 1942, flight training for fighter and bombardment pilots was conducted from the south end of the range.

In latter 1942 additional facilities were constructed for testing of aircraft from the factories of Southern California. After the war, the need for continuing the testing facility at MUROC became evident because, as a test center, Wright Field had been outmoded by the speed and takeoff runs of the new age of aircraft.

The U.S. Air Force requested and obtained from Congress, the necessary funds to rebuild and expand MUROC into the most modern test flight facility in the World. Seven natural runways criss-cross the eleven mile length of Rogers Dry Lake surface, sunhardened and smoothed by the desert winds over the ages, providing an unmatched landing facility. The main runway is in excess of 15,000 feet, with approximately 3 miles of hardened overrun, thus comprising the longest usable runway in the world.

Since 1946, nearly all aircraft of the Armed Forces of the United States have been tested at MUROC, which on January 27th, 1950, was renamed EDWARDS AIR FORCE BASE to commemorate Captain Glen W. Edwards and this flight crew, who lost their lives when the Northrop YB-49 Flying Wing crashed.

The March Air Force Base community chapel, pictured here and on the rear cover.

