

Mitchel Field: Long Island's Forgotten Air Force Base

By Robert G. Waldvogel



This beautifully restored Breeze Penguin can be seen at the Cradle of Aviation Museum located in the old Mitchel Field hangars. One of the earliest purpose-built basic trainers, the plane is incapable of flight. Its primary purpose was to teach the novice pilot from how to taxi the aircraft up to performing controlled takeoff runs, though if it did occur it was more of a hop, than flight. (AAHS archives, Frank Strnad collection, AAHS-S100014)

Students changing buildings at Hofstra University and Nassau Community College on Long Island are most likely oblivious to the fact that they are walking on areas that were once occupied by taxiways and runways. To which airport they belonged is either equally elusive to determine or altogether forgotten. But the two hangars which are now part of the nearby Cradle of Aviation Museum and house some 70 historic aircraft, may provide a clue. “Mitchel Field,” they indicate. But where exactly did this “field” go?

Early Area History

Military in purpose, Mitchel Field was located in an area originally designated the “Hempstead Plains” and became the latest in a line of such military installations.

“Most of the aviation activities on Long Island centered around the skies of the Hempstead Plains,” according to Reggie Shore in his article, “Mitchel Field and the History of Aviation on Long Island”.¹ The Hempstead Plains, a 60,000-acre area in the center of Nassau County, is the easternmost native grassland in North America and somewhat of a mystery because it cannot be explained by its geological foundation.

Devoid of trees and shrubs, it was an untouched expanse of grassland and with its obstruction-less characteristics, was conducive to flying during the early part of the 20th century.

“Scientists speculate that the presence of so much grass with so few other plants was caused by the Indians, who might have burned the land as an aid to hunting or farming,” Shore continues.²

While trees failed to rise from this flat field, airplanes eventually did from one designated “Mitchel,” but the military purposes the area had previously served were many.

During the Revolutionary War, for example, the 17th Light Dragoons of the British Army were stationed there and an Army enlistment center also took root. During the War of 1812 and the Mexican War, it became an infantry training post named Camp Black. During the Civil War, it served as that conflict’s base under the name of Camp Wilfred Scott. And during World War I, it became Camp Mills, and the 42nd (Rainbow) Division, which included the Fighting 69th Regiment, trained there.

“Camp Mills, an area of 913 acres lying just west of Mitchel Air Force Base, was the largest center of the American Expeditionary Forces during World War I, with some 80,000

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Hazelhurst Aviation Field Number 2 (Mitchel Field) was a flight training base during WW1. Here we see a colorized photograph of the flight line and hangars with a row of Curtiss "Jennies" in front. (Nassau County Museum, LISI-3778)

men under canvas and in barracks during the period," advises Elizabeth Brown in the "Historic Michel Field".³

The facility, initially known simply as "Hazelhurst Aviation Field Number 2," was leased by the government a year earlier, on July 1, 1917, from the Hempstead Plains Company.

Finally, the area was designated Michel Field on July 16, 1918, after New York City's youngest mayor, John Purroy Mitchel, who was killed in a Signal Corps Army Air Service airplane accident in Louisiana.

As Mitchel Air Force Base, it would progressively expand and play a multi-faceted training, patrol, and defense role during its 45-year history, doing so in a location that was just south of two other significant Long Island airports--Hazelhurst Field and Roosevelt Field.

Early Air Force Base Conditions and World War I

Designated an "Aeronautical General Supply Depot and Concentration Camp" the year before it became Mitchel Air Force Base, the facility stored and distributed supplies to three nearby fields where pilots trained for World War I air operations over France.

Although need dictated land-parcel acquisition for expansion purposes, the base was hardly a model of luxury.

"Mitchel's original buildings were constructed to house a large number of men temporarily while the needs of the Army following World War I were for a base to accommodate a small garrison on a permanent basis, and the field fell rapidly into disrepair," according to Brown.⁴

"Wooden barracks fell apart, the green paint peeled off, and there was hardly a hangar with a whole roof... The runways were loose dirt and there was only one hard-surfaced road in the area... When it rained, the entire field was a morass of mud."

Nevertheless, the still-named Field Number 2 planted its initial military roots.

A row of sizeable hangars, built in 1917, facilitated the training of personnel of the fledgling Army Air Corps, enabling them to gain their first practical taxi and high-speed ground experience in Breese Penguin aircraft.

Developed in response to a U.S. Army request for a beginning trainer in the French style, it featured a full set of controls, but the two-cylinder, horizontally-opposed, air-cooled, 28-hp Lawrance Model A engine and the very short wingspan rendered it incapable of flight. Concentrating on maneuverability while on the ground, student pilots learned to taxi it, gradually increasing its speed until they could move quickly from one end of the airfield to the other while maintaining full control. This became the threshold to full-flight, which required an aircraft with greater power and a larger wing.

That aircraft was the Curtiss JN-4 Jenny, which emerged from the factory doors only a mile away in Garden City, Long Island. Its pilot training was detailed in the U.S. Army Manual.

After the ground machinist rotated the propeller and yelled the prerequisite "Contact," the pilot replied with the same word, prompting the machinist to swing it and quickly stand clear of it, it stated.

Takeoff, if at all possible, needed to be directly into the wind, it recommended, and, after a short run, required the pilot to raise the tail, but maintain that position until it was well past its minimum flying speed.

A high-speed, low-angle climb enabled him to attain a safe altitude. Banks, it was advised, should not be initiated until the airplane reached at least an 800-foot height, although it was advisable to climb even higher before they should have been attempted.

A smooth, even turn was best achieved by means of combined rudder and aileron deflections, but a large, easy one with minimum bank was the most recommended method of doing so.



The sole example LWF H Owl, the largest plane at the time, was initially flight tested at Mitchel Field. Its poor performance and handling characteristics were never fixed and it was scrapped within a couple of years of delivery. (AAHS archive, Rayburn Ray collection, AAHS-D005943)

Emotionalization apparently factored into the flying experience.

“Once a safe altitude is reached, your anxiety diminishes, for with height there is safety, but remember to keep within gliding distance of a landing place,” it advised.

The landing itself required both a speed and an altitude reduction, but this was only achieved by turning the engine off, after determining the correct distance for a medium-velocity glide. The pilot’s emotional state was once again addressed, because doing so “introduced a calm before the thud and blunder of the (actual) landing.”

A slow, final glide to a level-off height of about six feet preceded a gentle flare so that both angle-of-attack and lift could be increased, now enabling the Jenny to graze the ground with its main and tail wheels before finally settling on to it.

Once prepared for combat, the Army Air Corps pilots were introduced to the Nieuport 17 fighter.

After becoming proficient in it, they were shipped overseas.

Although several squadrons were organized at Field Number 2, some, such as the 352nd Aero Squadron, remained Long Island-stationed, conducting twice-daily patrols off its shores to detect potential U-boat presences to avoid a repeat of the attack against the cruiser *USS San Diego*, which had occurred on July 19, 1918.

While World War I may have been viewed as the principal reason for the proliferation of troop casualties, the Spanish influenza was, in fact, the most major one, and they overtaxed Mitchel Field’s hospital facilities after their return to the U.S.

Because of its size and location, Mitchel Field became the only Army facility on Long Island and was reclassified as the primary base for the air defense of New York City.

Inter-War Record-Setting Flights

Despite these inauspicious beginnings, the Long Island

field became the location of numerous inter-war record-setting flights.

On May 22, 1920, for instance, then the world’s largest landplane made its maiden flight from there.

Of staggering proportions, the L.W.F. Engineering Company Model H, intended for overnight mail service between New York and Chicago and therefore often nicknamed the “Owl,” consisted of a central monocoque nacelle and two outer booms employing the manufacturer’s unique wood lamination process.

The straight, unstaggered, strut-interconnected, fabric-covered biplane wings, of birch and spruce, spanned 100.8 feet, although ailerons added 26 inches to either side.

Power was provided by three 400-hp Liberty V-12 engines turning two-bladed propellers; the tail was comprised of two horizontal stabilizers and three vertical fins; and the fixed undercarriage sported six wheels.

Trucked from the L.W.F. factory in College Point, Long Island, to Mitchel Field, the Model H, piloted by Second Lieutenant Ernest Harmon, took to the skies for the first time that day, but re-landed after an engine overheat. Two, but more successful, flights were made two days later.

Appropriate for neither mail nor bombing missions, the lumbering behemoth, exhibiting poor handling characteristics, was scrapped three years later.

During the July and August summer months of 1920, four de Havilland DH.4 biplanes departed Mitchel Field for Alaska, the maneuver constituting the Army’s first long-distance operation.

In the fall, First Lieutenant Corliss Champion Mosely, of the U.S. Army Air Service, won the first Pulitzer Trophy in an Engineering Division, designed and built, Verville-Packard R-1, cheered by a 25,000-strong crowd after the feat was achieved amid cold, cloudy, snow-threatening weather conditions.



October 1, 1924, view of Mitchel Field looking East. (USAAC photo)



Inspection of Army biplanes at Mitchel Field on April 4, 1930. The first seven aircraft from the left appear to be Curtiss Falcon observation planes. (Photo via Paul Freeman Abandoned & Little-Known Airfields)

Three years later, September 4, 1927, we see almost the same view (looking east) showing expanded construction of facilities. Note "MITCHEL" spelled out on the hangar roofs. (USAAC photo)

The R-1, a single-place and single-bay racing biplane, was powered by a 540-hp, water-cooled Packard Motor Car Company 1A-2025 engine.

The race itself, a 132-mile course entailing turning points at Henry J. Damm Field near Babylon and Lufberry Field in Wantagh, consisted of the timed, spaced-interval takeoffs of the 34 entrants, although one was immediately disqualified and 11 others withdrew because of mechanical difficulties.

The Pulitzer Trophy winning R-1, the last to take off, did so at 11:30 a.m.

“The interest in the spectators seemed to center on the much-heralded Verville-Packard, which had been undergoing secret tests...,” *The New York Times* reported. “The machine was the last to start. A cheer went up as the dark gray machine with lightning-like speed mounted the air, its course being marked by a stream of smoke several hundred feet in length.”

The R-1 won the race after a 44-minute, 29.57-second time, during which an average 178-mph speed was attained.

But aviation advancements did not always involve speed at the time.

In 1922, for example, the Army laid out the first “Model Airway” route from McCook Field, Ohio, to Mitchel Field and it entailed the establishment of emergency landing sites, markers, beacons, radio communication, and coordinated weather reports.

Also that year, experimental airship rendezvous and hook-up flights were conducted over the field with a Sperry Messenger, and in October of 1923, the first parachute jumping contest was held over it.

The goal of wings combined with speed was always distance and two notable achievements toward this end were made in 1924.

In the first, in June, Lt. Russell Lowell Maughan, a U.S. Army officer, crossed the continent in a Curtiss PW-8 in 21 hours, 48.5 minutes – or in under a single 24-hour period—from Mitchel Field to San Francisco.

“Taking off in a PW-8 at first light, Lieutenant Maughan raced the sun across the U.S. and after five refueling stops, landing at San Francisco 21 hours, 48.5 minutes later,” according to the National Museum of the United States Air Force. “Although he did not actually land before the sun set, he was credited with making the first dawn-to-dusk flight because of the loss of 1 hour, 20 minutes at McCook Field, Dayton, Ohio, due to the repair of damage to his airplane caused by an eager mechanic who accidentally twisted off a fuel line valve with an oversize monkey wrench.”

In the second distance feat, three months later, two of the four Douglas World Cruisers completed their around-the-world flights, landing at Mitchel Field on September 8 amid enthusiastic crowds.

In October of 1925, the National Air Races were held there for a second time and Lt. Cyrus Bettis of the U.S. Army Air Service set an FAI (*Federation Aeronautique Internationale*) World Record for Speed over a 100-kilometer (62.14-mile) course at an average speed of 401.28 kph (249.34 mph) in a Curtiss R3C-1 biplane powered by a water-cooled, normally-aspirated V-1400 Curtiss Aeroplane and Motor Company



This May 15, 1931, photo of Mitchel Field shows continued facilities expansion while the field itself is grass with a concrete apron. (USAAC photo)

engine that turned a two-bladed, fixed-pitch duralumin propeller. Like Mosely, he was awarded the Pulitzer Trophy for the achievement.

Two years later, Charles Lindbergh departed Mitchel Field, commencing his Guggenheim-sponsored national tour.

“Col. Charles A. Lindbergh, who had not stepped into a plane since he arrived here from Ottawa more than two weeks ago with his Spirit of St. Louis, made up for it yesterday,” *The New York Times* reported in a July 20, 1927 story. “He flew four ships, including his own Ryan monoplane and made five flights.

“About noon today, he will start from Mitchel Field in the Spirit of St. Louis on a three month tour of the nation. He will visit, exhibit his plane, and make speeches about aviation in seventy-five cities.

“Today he goes to Hartford. Tomorrow he will fly to Providence and thence to Boston. After a few more days in New England, he will swing west. He will fly alone in the Spirit of St. Louis, which accommodates only one passenger.”

Tackling one of many aviation obstacles at the time—namely, deteriorating, low-visibility, and foggy meteorological conditions that would later mandate IFR instrument flight rules navigation—Lt. James H. Doolittle, of the U.S. Army Air Corps, made the first entirely “blind” takeoff, flight, and landing at Mitchel Field on September 24, 1929, doing so only by reference to cockpit instrumentation.

“Flying from the rear cockpit of a civil-registered, two-place Consolidated NY-2 Husky training airplane, Doolittle had his visual reference to earth and sky completely cut off by a hood enclosure over his cockpit,” according to Bryan R. Swopes in his article “This Day in Aviation: 24 September 1929.” “A safety pilot, Lt. Benjamin Scoville Kelsey, rode in the forward cockpit, but the entire flight was conducted by Doolittle.”

A Sperry-manufactured gyroscopic compass, an artificial horizon, and a precision altimeter facilitated the feat, which entailed following a 15-mile course.



This 1937 photo shows two Martin B-10s in flight with Mitchel Field as a backdrop. Note that the field still has no paved runways. (John Voss collection via Paul Freeman Abandoned & Little-Known Airfields)



By March 26, 1936, the base facilities have been expanded with a large increase in base housing. (USAAC photo)



By August 3, 1938, the construction of the first paved runway at Mitchel Field is almost complete. (USAAC photo)



By July 1939, the second paved runway had been completed. (USAAC photo)



And by September 1940, the third paved runway was complete. (USAAC photo)

Harry Guggenheim, both a Long Islander and a friend of Lindbergh, funded and established the Mitchel Field-based Full Flight Laboratory and cooperated with the Sperry Gyroscope Company of Brooklyn, the Pioneer Instrument Company, also of Brooklyn, and the Kollsman Company of Queens, to design safety-enhancing instruments and systems.

Attempting to tame low-speed flight, it devised camber-increasing leading-edge slats and trailing edge flaps. Installed on a Curtiss Tanager, they enabled the type to win the \$100,000 Guggenheim Safe Aircraft Competition in October of 1929.

Judgment criteria for the competition stipulated that the aircraft must

- Use a reliable engine.
- Be structurally sound.
- Carry 5 pounds of load per 1 horsepower of engine power.
- Have adequate visibility for the pilot and observer.
- Demonstrate good stability.
- Be able to recover from abnormal flight conditions.
- Remain maneuverable, controllable, and safe if the engine failed during a steep climb.
- Have a maximum speed of at least 130 mph, a minimum speed of 30 mph, and a minimum gliding speed of 32 mph.
- Be able to take off within 75 feet and land within 40 feet.
- Be able to clear a 35-foot obstacle within 240 feet of take-off and 150 feet of landing.

Two years later, in May, the largest armada of airplanes ever assembled—exceeding 400—landed at Michel Field, partaking of the Army’s promotional and training program.

In 1934, the facility briefly served as the center of the Army’s northeast airmail operations with a fleet of some 70 aircraft based there. The operation can be traced to Hugo Black.

Re-elected to the Senate two years earlier, he undertook the investigation of government mail contracts and concluded that the private airlines had exploited the public by charging inflated rates in an effort to increase profitability.

Postmaster General James Farley, appointed in the new Roosevelt Administration, was tasked by presidential order to resolve Black’s discovered discrepancies by cancelling the existing private contracts and turning the carriage of mail over to the Army Air Corps.

But both the “remedy” and the Mitchel Field base of eastern terminus operations were fleeting because the inexperienced military pilots, operating open-cockpit, instrument-scarce biplanes and lacking knowledge of the established airmail routes, proved decidedly deficient. Indeed, a dozen such men perished within the first five weeks of the program and private airline rebidding was promptly reopened.

In October of 1936, the first military control tower was added to the top of the Operations Building, which had opened four years earlier, at Mitchel Field.

On May 12, 1938, the Long Island field became the base for long-range bomber rendezvous operations.

Three Boeing YB-17 Flying Fortresses—numbers 80, 81, and 82—of the 49th Bombardment Squadron’s 2nd



This May 1938 photo shows the Boeing XB-15 visiting Mitchel Field. One wonders if it landed on the turf field, or the newly construction paved one? (John Voss collection via Paul Freeman Abandoned & Little-Known Airfields)

Bombardment Group, partook of a long-range reconnaissance mission planned and navigated by 1st Lt. Curtiss E. LeMay, which was devised to intercept the Italian ocean liner *S.S. Rex*, at the end of its transatlantic crossing to New York.

After receiving the ship’s position report, the trio of bombers took off at 8:45 a.m., combating heavy rain, hail, high winds, and decreased visibility. But breaking out of a squall line more than three and a half hours later, at 12:23 p.m., they flew alongside the *Rex*, which was steaming 620 nautical miles east of Sandy Hook, N.J., at 12:25—or at precisely the calculated rendezvous time.

The event was broadcast live by the NBC radio crews aboard the YB-17s and the story subsequently appeared in *The New York Times* and the *New York Herald Tribune*.

“This was a striking example of the range, mobility, and accuracy of modern aviation at the time,” Joseph Alba wrote in his “Mitchel Field” article in *Metropolitan Airport News* magazine (February 2, 2020).

Air Force Base Expansion and World War II

As the eventual home of observation, bombardment, and pursuit air groups, the facility evolved into sizeable significance.

“Just as progressive, prosperous Nassau grew from the verdure of woodlands and potato farms into one of the country’s great industrial centers, so did Mitchel achieve a status of prime importance within the formidable structure of the United States Air Force,” according to the description booklet, *This is Mitchel Air Force Base*.

It progressively shed its initially dilapidated image.

“Mitchel Field continued to grow after World War I and between 1929 and 1932, a major new construction program was undertaken,” according to Joshua Stoff in *The Aerospace Heritage of Long Island*.⁵ “New brick barracks, officers’ clubs, housing, warehouses, and operational buildings were constructed, as well as eight massive steel and concrete hangars... Between the wars, Mitchel was the Army’s premier Air Corps base, featuring somewhat of a military country club



During WWII, a fourth paved runway was added along with hard stands for aircraft dispersal. This 1948 photo shows Mitchell Field in pretty much its final configuration. (USAF photo)

atmosphere with fine, (Georgian-style buildings), housing, clubs, pools, polo fields, and tree-lined streets.”

“The Georgian-style buildings erected in the period from 1927 to 1932 resulted in Mitchel being known as one of the most beautiful Army posts in the country,” Brown adds.⁶

“By the time the United States entered World War II, Mitchel Field had become the key Army Air Force installation on the east coast and the focal point for the organization of the air defense system for New York City and the entire northeast industrial region of the country, also known as the ‘Zone of the Interior,’” according to the Army Air Forces Historical

Association. “Much of the growth necessary to maintain this role happened rapidly. In 1939, only one reconnaissance and observation squadron were stationed at Mitchel Field. By 1941, several pursuit groups and medium bomber groups, as well as Signal Corps, Ordnance, and Quartermaster units, operated from the base. The fighter wing was well-positioned to provide air cover in the event of an enemy air attack.”

As the headquarters for the Northeast District and home of the First Air Force division, it played a central role during the war. The Air Support Command, which processed air personnel in transit, was activated in September of 1941 and in December, the Bomber and Interceptor Command Headquarters were moved to Mitchel.

“As a full-grown air installation during World War II, it played a major role in the defense of the Eastern United States and directly supported Allied operations in Europe as a center of air tactical training, troop garrisoning, supply, and medical treatment,” *This is Mitchel Air Force Base* continues.

As it expanded into one of the county’s largest Air Corps bases, the number of squadrons, which would eventually number 44 during its history, increased and would encompass observation, anti-submarine, troop carrier, reconnaissance, bombardment, pursuit, and fighter types.

Two P-40-equipped squadrons based there in 1940, for example, defended and protected New York City. A B-25 squadron was able to conduct the first wartime anti-submarine patrol on December 8 of the following year.

The Army Air Corps trained its pilots there and ferried more than a thousand B-17, B-24, and B-29 bombers to air bases in England between 1943 and 1944, the same year that German prisoners-of-war were held there.

“Every type of Army aircraft, in fact, flew from the base, including legendary models such as the Boeing B-17, the Lockheed P-38, the Curtiss P-40, the Republic P-47, and the North American P-51,” according to the Army Air Forces Historical Association. “The 8th Pursuit Group played a prominent role in the North African campaign, and the 33rd, the 80th, and the 89th Pursuit Groups all trained at Mitchel and distinguished themselves in action with the 8th Air Force in England.

“Army Air Corps operations designed to counter the submarine offensive off the Atlantic Coast from Boston to Philadelphia were directed from Mitchel Field from 1941 until



In 1948 Mitchel Field was home for the 2nd Fighter Squadron, an all-weather Northrop P-61 unit tasked with the defense of New York City. A task that ended in 1949. (Photo via Paul Freeman Abandoned & Little-Known Airfields)

this task was taken over by the Navy in late 1943. Air Medals were ultimately presented to the 50 Mitchel Field pilots who had flown millions of miles to protect convoys from submarine attack. Each one was cited for having flown more than 200 hours on patrol under difficult conditions.”

Soon virtually classifiable as a small city and one of three northeastern Army Air bases along with Langley Field in Virginia and Selfridge Field in Michigan, Mitchel Air Force Base sprouted 243 permanent buildings, four administration buildings, four warehouses, 10 magazines, 19 garages, a sawmill, a green house, a bakery, two swimming pools, a gymnasium, an Enlisted Men’s Club, an Officer’s Club, two chapels, and a theater.

Its size and impact could not be underestimated. As a community of 10,000—of which 5,000 were military personnel, 1,800 were assigned civilians, and 3,000 were dependents—its 1,117 acres were subdivided into the following aspects and uses.

Aspect	Use	Percentage
Land	Runways, taxiways, ramps, grass areas	40.2%
Buildings	Administration, barracks, dining halls, clubs	20.1%
Improved Grounds	Personal service facilities, athletic fields	11.7%
Roadways	Parking, courtyards	28.0%

Over and above the owned or rented homes in nearby communities, there were 1,199 family units in the base proper. Mitchel Manor, Mitchel Gardens, the Santini Housing Project, and the Trailer Park sections.

The Air Force Base, equipped with radio range and ground-controlled approach equipment; obstruction, approach, and flood lights; a control tower; a beacon; and a wind indicator, offered four paved, lighted runways, as follows.

Runway	Feet
05/23	5,508
09/27	4,960
12/30	5,142
18/36	4,800

Some runways were subsequently lengthened.

As of February 19, 1953, the Instrument Approach Chart for Mitchel Air Force base, located in Hempstead, N.Y., at an 85-foot elevation, indicated that a landing on a 301-degree heading required an “immediate climbing right turn to 1,500 feet and a return to the Mitchel Range” in the event of a missed approach.

Within a 25-mile radius, the minimum altitude varied according to the approach sector--1,500 feet from the northeast and southeast, 2,600 feet from the southwest, and 2,000 feet from the northwest.

The closest major airports were Idlewild International in Jamaica, Grumman in Bethpage, and Republic in Farmingdale, with Roosevelt Field having closed two years earlier, and the



During the early 1950s, Mitchel Field served as a base for a squadron of North American F-82 Twin Mustang night fighters. (Photo via Paul Freeman Abandoned & Little-Known Airfields)

closest other bases were Suffolk County Air Force Base on Long Island, Stewart Air Force Base in Newburgh, N.Y., and McGuire Air Force Base in Burlington County, New Jersey.

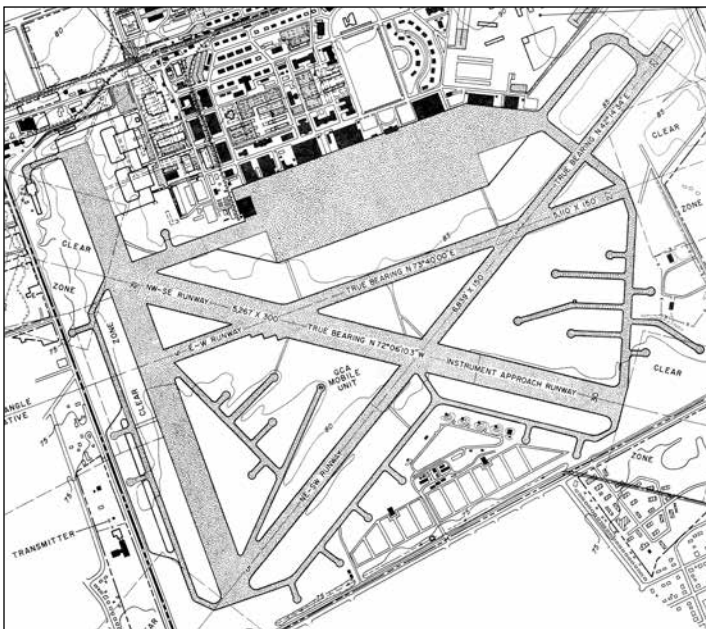
Aircraft assigned to the various units included the Beechcraft C-45, the Douglas C-47 Skytrain, the Douglas C-54 Sky-master, the Fairchild C-119, the Curtiss P-40 Warhawk, the Consolidated B-24 Liberator, the North American B-25 Mitchell, the Martin B-26 Marauder, the Convair C-131, the North American T-28 Trojan, the Lockheed T-33 Shooting Star, and the L-20, a military variant of the de Havilland Canada DHC-2 Beaver, to name just a few.

Post-War Purposes

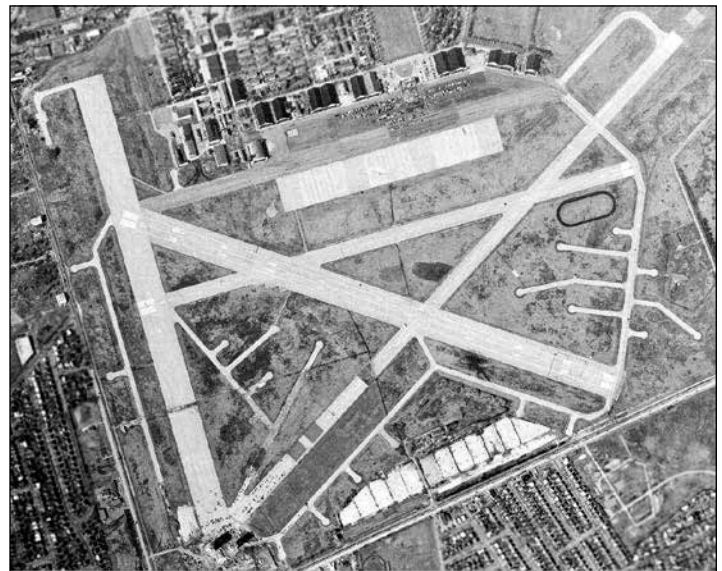
As World War II ended, so, too, did Mitchel Field’s primary purposes of training, housing, and equipping large numbers of combat groups to receiving and caring for the wounded re-tuning from the European battlefronts, leaving it to adopt a new role captured by its “Power for Peace” philosophy.

“In August of 1945, the world was done with its second big war and Mitchel’s job became a peaceful one,” *This is Mitchel Air Force Base* advises. “But there was none of the relaxation that existed between wars in the past, because the country knew the only insurance for permanent tranquility was in an active peace effort. So, the great war bases on Long Island paradoxically became the ones to prevent war under the enlightened theme of ‘Power for Peace.’”

After a brief transitional period, during which military demobilization, reassignment, and reconversion occurred, it fully adopted its new role by becoming the headquarters for the Air Defense Command, which itself was responsible for the entire country’s protection. Shortly thereafter, it was consolidated with the Tactical Air Command, forming the combined, re-designated Continental Air Command (CONAC) on December 1, 1948, which remained Mitchel-based.



1957 drawing of Mitchel Field shortly before its closing in June 1961. (Photo via Paul Freeman Abandoned & Little-Known Airfields)



A March 1966 aerial photo of Mitchel Field shows the beginning of its absorption into domestic urban development. Some of the initial construction for Hofstra University campus can be seen in the lower left at the end of the intersecting runways. ((Photo via Paul Freeman Abandoned & Little-Known Airfields)

“These mighty twins learned to walk here,” according to *This is Mitchel Air Force Base*. “Their trials and errors were first made here, although they soon outgrew the boundaries of any one base and became two of the world’s greatest striking forces and deterrents of aggression.”

The Continental Air Command selected Mitchel Field for its headquarters because of its extensive communication facilities, which included direct tie lines for an instant link with the Pentagon and an intra-communication system consisting of a then-advanced teletype, radio connection, and wireless network.

Although more than 330,000 officers and airmen came within the purview of its functional responsibility as one of the larger, major U.S. Air Force commands, and although it had a 27-function mission, its two significant ones included the administration, logistical support, and training of the Air Force Reserve and the supervision of training and inspection of the Air National Guard.

Other responsibilities included the following.

1. The processing of personnel of the thousands of Air Force officers and airmen going to or returning from overseas assignments at two primary installations.
2. The mobilizing of Air Force Reserve units and individuals in the event of war.
3. The continuing cooperation with the Civil Air Patrol and the Boy Scouts of America’s Explorer Program.

In 1949, Mitchel Field became the headquarters of the new First Air Force, which was responsible for the supervision of Air Reserve training in 15 states and the District of Columbia.

Three Air Force Reserve units were located there—the

514th Troop Carrier Wing (Reserve), the 2233rd Air Reserve Flying Center, and the 2623rd Air Reserve Center.

As the site of summer encampments, Mitchel hosted 41 such events in 1955.

1. Air National Guard (4)
2. Air Explorer (Boy Scouts) (35)
3. Civil Air Patrol (2)
4. Reserve Units of the Air Force (4)

And as the support base for multiple northeast-area Air Force activities, it averaged 3,951 monthly aircraft operations, of which 408 were pure-jet ones.

“As the site of the headquarters of the Continental Air Command and the First Air Force, as well as the location of several Air Reserve units, Mitchel has become known as the ‘Home of the Air Force Reserve,’” according to *This is Mitchel Air Force Base*. “No contributions to national defense could be more important. Our Reserve components, said President Eisenhower, might prove to be the ‘decisive margin’ in the event of another war.”

Final Days

“The base continued to be responsible for the air defense of New York City until 1949, when the defense mission was transferred to other facilities because of the danger involved in operating tactical aircraft over the rapidly expanding residential areas surrounding Mitchel,” according to Brown.⁷

Falling victim, like once-neighboring Roosevelt Field, to the soon-outpaced suburban expansion sparked by post-war economic prosperity, a housing shortage, and the increase in automobile



Google Earth view of the area around Mitchel Field as of 2025 with an overlay of the 1957 field layout. About the only recognizable remnants of the field are the main hangars (heavy solid color blocks in the center) now housing the Cradle of Aviation Museum and both ends of runway 5/23. Pretty much everything else has been developed. (Google Earth image with overlay)

ownership and highway construction, and subjected to public pressure to close after an on-field crash and one into Hofstra University's Barnard Hall, it succumbed to the changing times.

The 514th Troop Carrier Wing, operating Fairchild C-119 Flying Boxcars, was the last one to be stationed there, but was reassigned to McGuire Air Force Base in April of 1961. Although training flights with T-33s continued before this time, the airfield had been closed to transient traffic four years earlier to ensure safety and the Continental Air Command was relocated to Robins Air Force Base in Georgia at the same time that the 514th Troop Carrier Wing was forced to move.

Mitchel Field officially closed its doors on June 25, 1961, after a 45-year period and, once decommissioned, the property was turned over to Nassau County for redevelopment.

As had occurred with many other airfields and companies, the closure signaled personal and emotional losses in those who had been inextricably tied to it during their lives.

National Register of Historic Places

Like the other area airports, such as Hazelhurst and Roosevelt Fields, Mitchel, an exclusively-military one, combined with them to leave an aviation legacy on Long Island, as reflected by the intertwine of roads that now circumvent Nassau Community College, Museum Row, the Nassau Coliseum, and Hofstra University, bearing names like "Earle Ovington Boulevard," "James Doolittle Boulevard," "Charles A. Lindbergh Boulevard,"

and "Quentin Roosevelt Boulevard," along with the Cradle of Aviation Museum's hangars displaying the "Mitchel Field" name.

The last landing there took place 21 years after the base closed, on April 15, 1982.

"At 12:17 p.m. yesterday, against a light easterly wind and under a blaring sun, a Canadian-built de Havilland Canada Beaver emerged from the sky over the Nassau County Medical Center...and made a smooth landing on the 1,000-foot airstrip, the last remaining runway at the once-booming Mitchel Field Air Force Base," *Newsday* reported the day after the event.

The aircraft, which had made the brief sprint from the Grumman facility in Bethpage, was then donated to the Cradle of Aviation Museum.

Unlike the other area airports, Mitchel Field's remaining, highly-intact, 108-acre historic core provides tangible evidence of its former existence and was included on the National Register of Historic Places in 2018.

"Today is a proud day as we take a step back in time and celebrate one of the most significant spots in our town and in our country's history," Town of Hempstead Supervisor Laura Gillen said on the occasion. "Nobody could have imagined that this flat, treeless, hard-clay surface at the heart of the Hempstead Plains prairie would be the site of history, giving rise to such aviation titans as Glenn Curtiss, Wilbur and Orville Wright, Charles Lindbergh, Amelia Earhart, and Harry Guggenheim." ➔

End Notes

- 1 *Long Island Historical Journal*, Volume 11, Number 2, 1961, p. 216
- 2 *ibid*, p. 216.
- 3 *The Nassau County Historical Journal* (p. 4).
- 4 *ibid*, p. 5
- 5 Heart of the Lakes Publishing, 1989, p. 39
- 6 *op. cit.* p. 5
- 7 *op. cit.* pp 10-11

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About the Author

Robert G. Waldvogel has earned degrees, certificates, and licenses in aviation, teaching, writing, foreign languages, travel and tourism, computers, transportation, and Social Work from LIU Post, Farmingdale State College, Hofstra University, Nassau Community College, Adelphi University, New York Institute of Technology, Stony Brook University, the Nassau Association for Continuing Community Education at Molloy College, the Institute of Certified Travel Agents, the Air Safety Institute of the Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association, and some half-dozen major airlines. He has amassed three decades in the aviation industry with Capitol Air, Midway Airlines, Triangle Aviation Services, Royal Jordanian Airlines, Austrian Airlines, Sabena Belgian World Airways, Swissair, and Lufthansa-German Airlines in Ground Operations, Training, and Management.

He has created aviation curriculums for and taught at three international carriers, as well as at Farmingdale State College, the Long Island Educational Opportunity Center, and Hofstra University. He also created and taught the *Fundamentals of Writing Program* at several Long Island public libraries.

An aviation writer for Cole Palen's Old Rhinebeck Aerodrome, he has written some 50 books, training manuals, textbooks, and courses.

Fluent in three languages, he has traveled globally and extensively, and maintains professional affiliations with the Nassau Association for Continuing Community Education, the Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association, the Rhinebeck Aerodrome Museum, the National Air and Space Society, the Hofstra University Writers Community, the World Airline Historical Society.

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Endnotes

- 1 *Long Island Historical Journal*, Volume 11, Number 2, 1961, p. 216
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