# BUILDING A BASE
## Selfridge and the Army

*A TACOM HISTORY OFFICE PUBLICATION, 1996*

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*COMPILED BY*
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**Cover:** Selfridge Field's 400 area under construction, 30 August 1934

# Introduction

This is the ground-level story of Selfridge Air National Guard Base—the Army perspective. It looks at the base's origins and family housing history. The U.S. Army Tank-automotive and Armaments Command, or TACOM, has had responsibility for most of Selfridge's family housing since 1975. TACOM's military personnel have formed a strong community at Selfridge, and this short history is designed to give that community a context.

It is drawn from various histories of Selfridge on file at the TACOM History Office. These accounts include a 1952 biographical sketch of Thomas Selfridge from the U.S. Air Force Historical Research Center; "Selfridge Air Force Base: 50th Anniversary, 1917-1967"; "Selfridge Air National Guard Base From 1917 to the 1970's: An Unofficial History"; "The History of Selfridge," from the 1986 Selfridge Air Show program; Joseph Mihalak's 1988 study, "Evolution of Family Housing, Selfridge Air National Guard Base, Mount Clemens, Michigan"; and "Cultural Landscape Evaluation Draft," a 1996 Air National Guard survey of Selfridge's history. This volume's third chapter is based largely on Mr. Mihalak's study.

The late Colonel Robert Stone of the Selfridge Military Air Museum provided comments on this text, as well as some of the photographs. Colonel Stone served most of his thirty-eight year service career at Selfridge. Between his retirement in 1978 and his death in May 1996, he devoted himself to the Selfridge museum. There he served as executive director, curator, and full-time volunteer. He single-handedly preserved much of Selfridge's history, particularly its aviation history. A comprehensive history of Selfridge, building on this Army-oriented study, would be the perfect tribute to Colonel Stone.

*Dale Prentiss, Ph.D.*
*Command Historian*

# Contents


| | |
|---|---|
| Introduction | iv |
| 1: Thomas Selfridge . . . . | 1 |
| 2: Building a Base . . . . | 6 |
| 3: Housing at Selfridge | 18 |
| 4: Conclusion | 38 |
| Appendix | 39 |


# List of Photos


| | |
|---|---|
| 400 area under construction, August 1934 . . . . . | Cover |
| Thomas Etholan Selfridge | 1 |
| Orville Wright and Thomas Selfridge . . . . . | 3 |
| Wreck of the Wright Flyer | 4 |
| Henry Bourne Joy | 6 |
| Construction barges at Selfridge, 11 June 1917 | 7 |
| Selfridge mess hall, 1917 . | 8-9 |
| A muddy base, June 1917 | 10 |
| Pursuit Line, 11 June 1930 | 15 |
| The old and the new, 1930s | 17 |
| Aerial view, Selfridge Field, 28 April 1928 | 19 |

Commander's house, 1934 . . 20

300 area barracks under construction, October 1927 21

Non-commissioned officer housing, July 1931 22

Blueprints for the 400 complex, August 1929 . 23

400 area under construction, October 1931 . . 24

Cape Cod style houses, August 1934 . . . . . 25

Greek revival houses, August 1934 . . . . . 26

Building 409 . . . . . 27

Building 424 28

Building 426 29

Buildings 474 and 482 30

Building 447 . . . 31

Building 509 . . . 32

700 area family housing 33

Vandenberg Village . . . . . 34

Sebille Manor under construction, 1960 . . . . . 37

# Ch. 1: Thomas Selfridge

## A Fitting Memorial

Thomas Etholan Selfridge

Thomas E. Selfridge was a visionary. But visionaries sometimes suffer for their dreams, and in September 1908, Lieutenant Selfridge became the world's first aircraft fatality. He was only twenty-six years old. Had he not died young, Selfridge might be remembered by all Americans as a pioneering airman. As it was, he was the first Army officer to see the potential of powered flight. An air base is a fitting memorial to him.

Born in 1882, Selfridge grew up in San Francisco, played football at West Point, and graduated in the Class of 1903. First in the class that year was Douglas MacArthur; Selfridge stood thirty-first. Trained as an artilleryman, Lieutenant Selfridge was assigned in 1903 to Fort Morgan, Alabama, and then, in 1906, to the Presidio in San Francisco. When the great San Francisco earthquake and a subsequent fire destroyed the city that spring, Selfridge was put in charge of relief supplies arriving by ship.

In August, the promising young officer was promoted to first lieutenant and ordered to return to the Academy to serve as an instructor in Ordnance and Gunnery. Back at West Point during the 1906-07 school year, he taught cadets, studied music and fencing, and began translating German military and scientific papers for the General Staff.

### A Desire to Fly

The flimsy new flying machines fascinated Selfridge.

The academic exercise of translation took an unexpected turn. Selfridge translated an article about aviation, and from that point on he was consumed by a desire to fly. Wilbur and Orville Wright had made the world's first powered flight in December 1903, so at the time Selfridge began his work the airplane was only three years old. But the flimsy new machines fascinated Selfridge, and he asked to work with the Wrights. When the brothers turned down his request, he made another connection. The librarian at the Academy introduced him to Alexander

gunnery school. The mechanics courses ended, and instructors in gunnery were brought in from the French Flying Corps, the British Royal Flying Corps and the Canadian Royal Flying Corps. It was in this course that Selfridge base suffered its first casualty. On June 26, 1918, Second Lieutenant John Patrick Boyle crashed into a pasture north of the field and died as a result of injuries sustained in the accident.

The accident aside, by July the base had reached its peak performance in gunnery training. Over 250 students were enrolled at one time, and they helped set a record that has never since been equaled at Selfridge: fifty-two planes in the air over the field at once! Classes were so full that 150 Lewis air guns, 60 Lewis ground guns, 80 Marlin air guns, 90 camera guns, and 10 aerial cameras were in use daily.

In sixteen months Selfridge had grown to over 1,200 air servicemen. Still, it was more of a camp than a base, and an uncomfortable one at that.

At the end of World War I, the base population was 1,028 enlisted men and 200 officers. The base had trained 72 pilots (including Capt. Eddie Rickenbacker, top World War II ace), 700 mechanics, and 1,002 aerial gunners. In sixteen months (from July 1917 to November 1918), Selfridge had grown from a small handful of Michigan Guardsmen to over 1,200 air servicemen. Still, it was more of a camp than a base, and an uncomfortable one at that. The men were living in damp tar-paper shacks hastily erected in the wake of the flood, and pilots were still trying to negotiate over the gravel drainage ditches. The base hardly had an air of permanence.

## Flight Records

In the immediate post-Armistice period, Selfridge's claim to fame lay in its cross-country flight records. In 1918 and 1919—little more than a decade after flights like Lieutenant Selfridge's had lasted for seconds—trips as far as Jackson, Pontiac, or Lansing were still considered tremendous accomplishments. Major N. J. Boots, who had assumed command of the field in April 1919, decided to push the distance further. He promptly set a record when he flew from Selfridge to the Tennessee-Kentucky state line in six hours. Later that year he flew from Selfridge to New York in the unheard-of time of four hours and thirty-seven minutes, another record.

Reduced to a staff of fourteen civilians, the field, for all practical purposes, ceased to exist.

As those excursions indicate, post-war demobilization had changed the base. Men who had enlisted for the duration were being discharged, and no new students were replacing them. Although the war-famed 1st Pursuit Group—which included Rickenbacker's Squadron, the "Hat-in-the-Ring" 94th—was ordered in late June to reorganize at Selfridge after its return from France, it was transferred to Kelly Field, Texas, two months later. Following an order from Washington, all but forty men left Selfridge for Texas on August 28, 1919. Eventually only one training plane was maintained in flying condition. Reduced to a staff of fourteen civilians, the field, for all practical purposes, ceased to exist.

## Private Property

It was, after all, still private property, and government appraisers felt that Henry Joy's asking price of $190,000 was too high (Joyce felt the land was really worth twice that; a subsequent estimate appraised it between $180,000 and $400,000). Cost aside, Selfridge had turned out to be a bit of a white elephant for the Army. Between the flood, the winter flying conditions and the constant drainage problems, it had hardly been problem-free, and the military of the 1920s was considerably smaller than it had been in the war.

Finally, Joy himself was not all that interested in selling. The sound of gunnery practice next door to his rural retreat no longer appealed to him. The property, he accurately pointed out, "was low and undesirable as it could be made satisfactorily useful only at great expense, and required always to be 'pumped,' as natural drainage was not available."

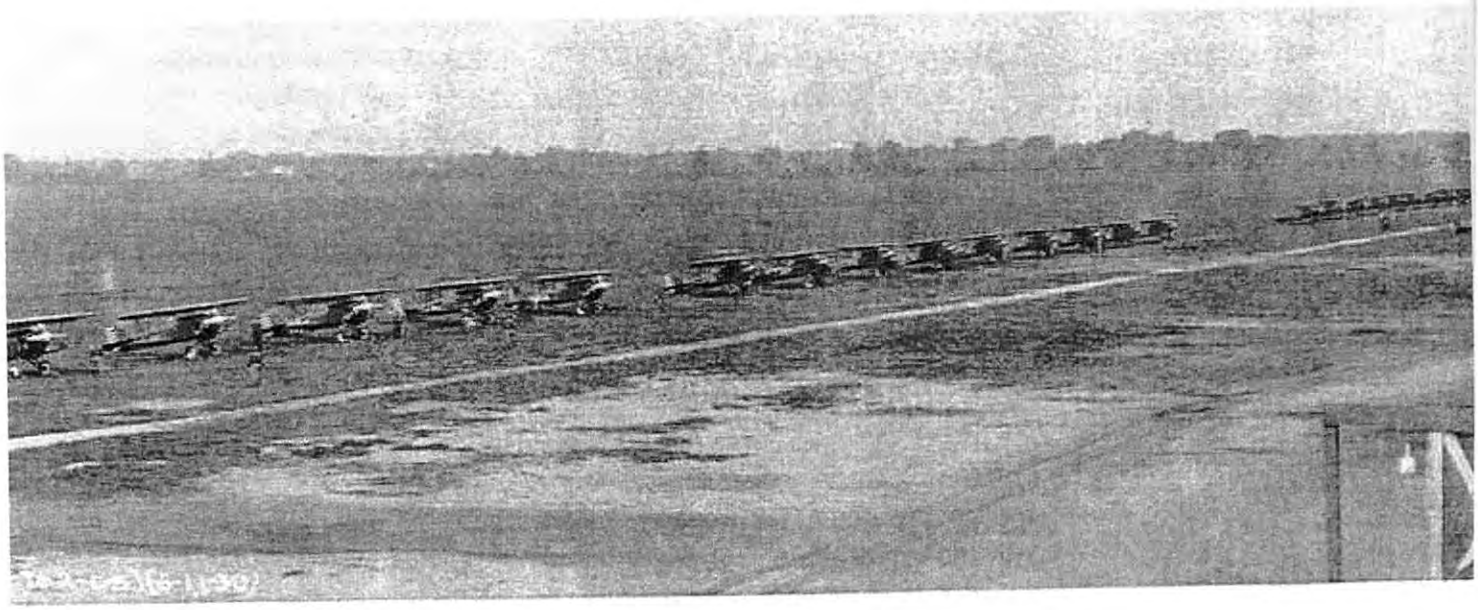
## A Permanent Base

Nevertheless, the National Aeronautics Advisory Committee argued that the Army should acquire Selfridge because the field was so close to Detroit, a center of industry and development. Community leaders in Mount Clemens, legislators, corporate executives, and Detroit's political boosters pushed that argument. And the Army went along: on June 29, 1921, one day before the option was to expire, after moving to condemn the field, the Army bought it for the option price of $190,000. For whatever

reason, practicality or politics, Selfridge became a permanent military post.

Selfridge returned to life, this time as a pursuit (fighter) base, when the 1st Pursuit Group returned from Texas on July 1, 1922. The movement of the group to Selfridge attracted national attention because it was the first time that such a long trip had been made by so many planes. Even though the trip was actually made in three hops, the transfer of the 1st Support Group helped show that long-distance flight could be a practicality rather than a novelty.

The group was to make Selfridge its home for the next twenty



**Pursuit Line, 11 June 1930**

years. Over that time, many of the pioneers of early air development were to receive their training at the base. Over 150 men who eventually became generals served at Selfridge at some point in their careers. But Selfridge's most famous resident never became a general. Assigned to the base fresh from the San Antonio Air Cadet Training Center in 1924, Charles Lindbergh

became an international hero instead when in 1927 he became the first man to fly solo across the Atlantic.

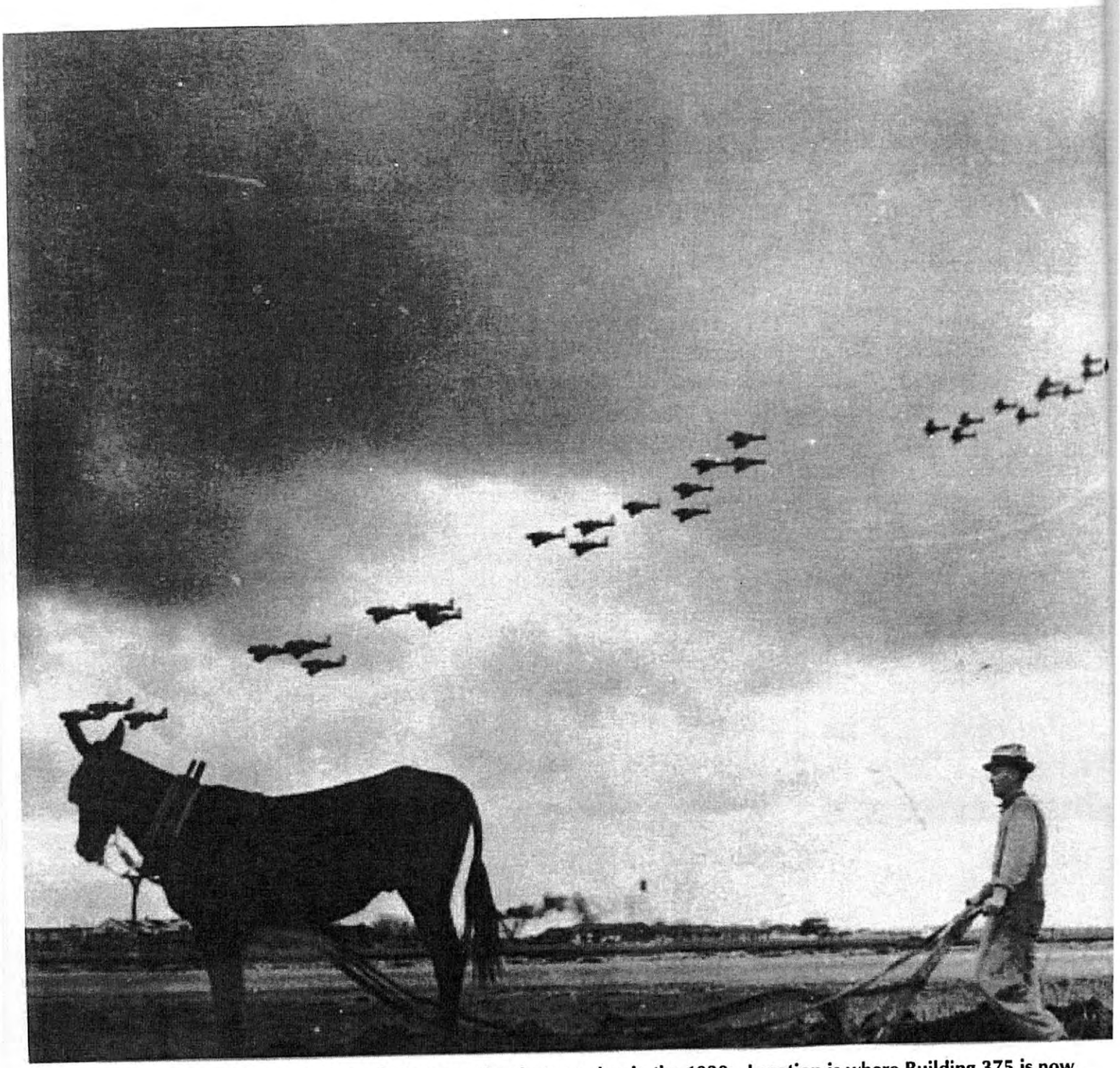
## The World's Best

Assigned to Selfridge fresh from cadet training in 1924, Charles Lindbergh would become an international hero three years later.

Selfridge was a place of innovation and daring in the early twenties. The first jettisonable auxiliary fuel tank was tested at Selfridge in 1923. The 1st Pursuit Group of that day claimed the world's best military pilots, and representatives from many other nations of the world were sent to study their flying techniques.

The group's pilots were also more than happy to show off these techniques in popular air shows, and the base hosted races as well. The 1922 National Air Races, held at Selfridge, saw the first airplane speed over 200 miles-per-hour. Lieutenant R.L. Maugn managed to fly an astonishing 244-miles-per-hour, the same rate a cannon ball shot through the air during the Civil War! It was the fastest any human had ever gone: four miles a minute.

The extensive activities of the 1st Pursuit Group won worldwide attention and helped emphasize the effectiveness and future importance of military aviation. But despite all the activity, Selfridge still seemed impermanent, and still remained in danger of being closed. And why not? After all, it was still a marsh, and the housing was still tar-paper shacks.



**The new and the old, as seen through the eyes of a photographer in the 1930s. Location is where Building 375 is now.**

# Ch. 3: Housing at Selfridge

## Permanent Buildings for a Permanent Base

The shacks that served as Selfridge's housing were falling apart.

In the 1920s, the shacks that served as Selfridge's housing were falling apart. "Living conditions are such that the morale of the corps is being maintained with difficulty," complained Selfridge's understated commander in the mid-twenties. "Soft coal and drafty billets are not conductive to enthusiasm among young men." Officers with families lived in wooden barracks. Even the commander's house wasn't much better; a wooden building, it stood on a small island (since joined to the base) just west of today's Lufberry area.

### Order Rescinded

Something clearly had to be done, but as Army engineers contemplated plans for permanent structures in 1925 they instead threw up their hands and recommended the field be closed. Henry Joy had been right. Chief of Air Services Major General Mason M. Patrick then made an inspection and agreed that because of its faulty drainage, the property was entirely unsuited to the type of construction needed. The order making Selfridge a permanent installation was rescinded.

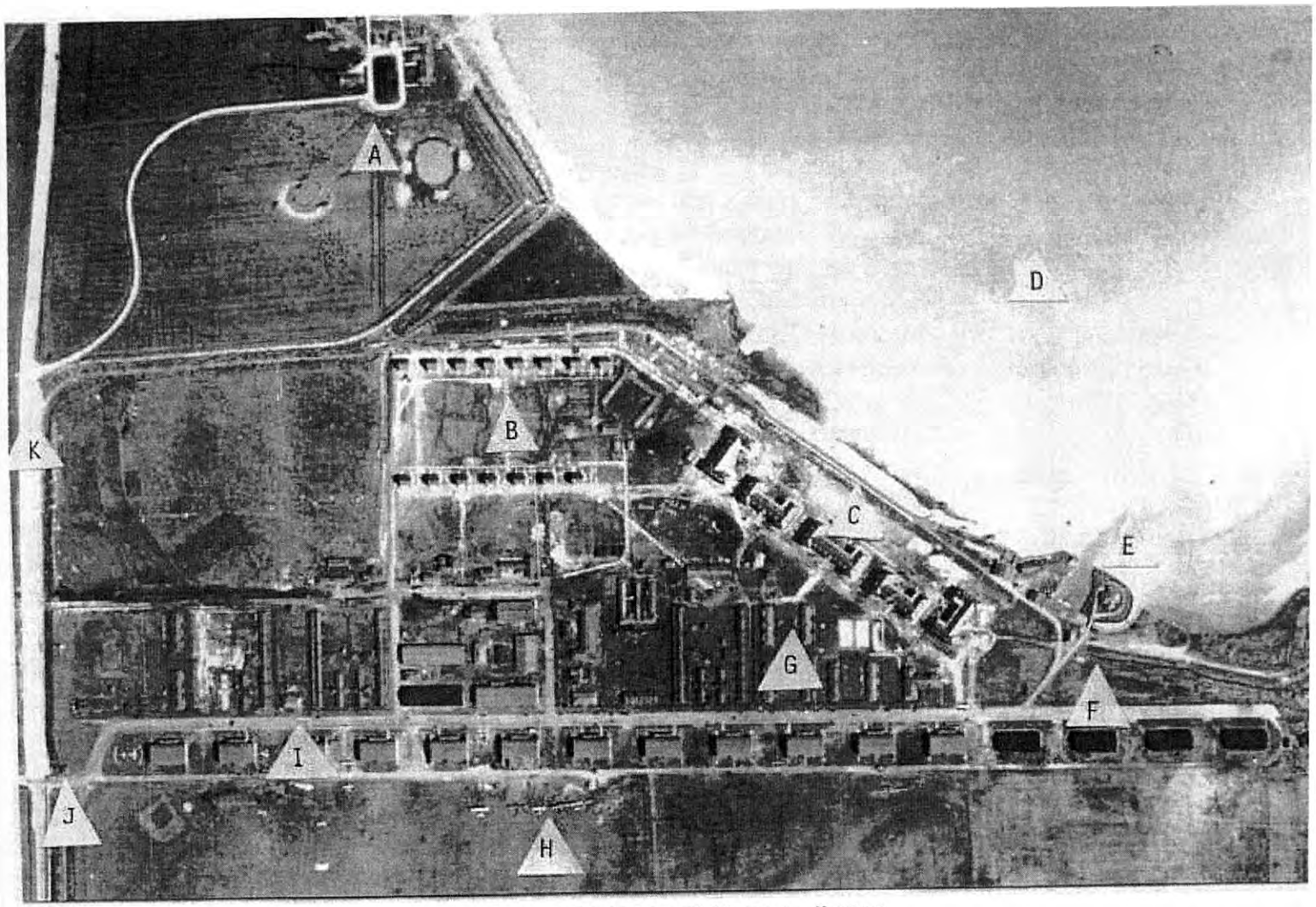
Politics again came into play. Citizens of Detroit and Mount Clemens formed delegations to Washington to lodge protests. The government considered, among other proposals, moving the base to a new location northwest of Detroit.

Instead Selfridge underwent another drainage survey. At the request of Selfridge's commander a construction engineer for the Ford Motor Company, R. V. Dudley, made a new survey. His proposed drainage system met with government approval. The installation again was declared permanent, and in May 1925 Congress approved a multi-million dollar building plan for Selfridge.

## Dudley's Drainage System

Dudley's drainage system was extensive. It had to be. Almost thirty inches of rain fall on Selfridge every year, and the base's average elevation is nearly three feet below lake level. The new system had sixty-three miles of underground drains, and a pumping station with a capacity of 19,000 gallons per minute.

Construction was underway by 1927 but Selfridge did not clear its final hurdle to permanency in 1929. Once again political




**Aerial view of Selfridge Field, 28 April 1928**

**LEGEND: A) Henry B. Joy estate; B) NCO family housing; C) enlisted barracks; D) Lake St. Clair; E) base commander's house; F) Wilbur Wright Boulevard; G) officer family housing; H) airplanes; I) hangar line; J) Joy Boulevard; K) Jefferson Avenue**

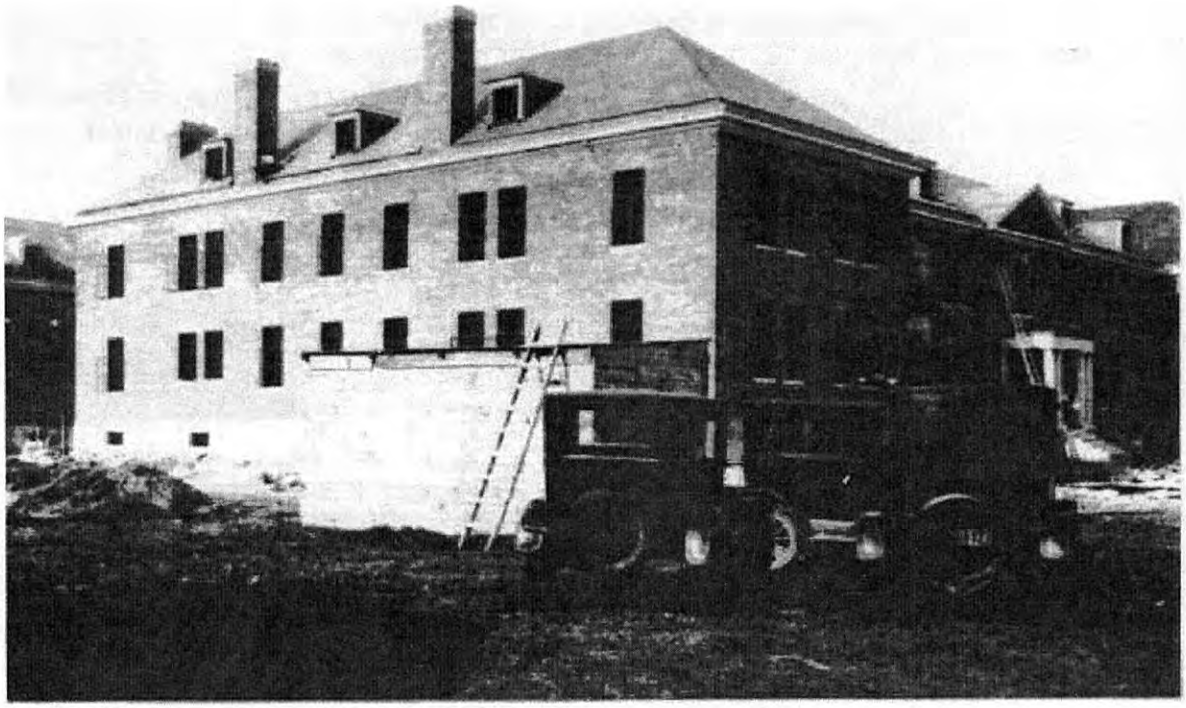
pressure was involved, though this time it was exerted against the base. Senators Bingham and Reed of Pennsylvania led a Congressional fight to have the field moved east—presumably somewhere like Pennsylvania. They stressed the isolated site of the Michigan field, and demanded more air protection for the seaboard states.

Again, aviation-minded Michigan citizens stormed Washington with their protests, and the proposal went down to defeat. Twelve years after it had become a base, Selfridge was ready for some permanent housing.

**The base commander's house in 1934. Note construction in the background**

## Mid-1920s through the 1930s

The first permanent family housing to be built at Selfridge was the 200 area, then as now used as non-commissioned officer (NCO) residences. Constructed in four phases—in 1927, 1930, 1932, and 1934—the 200 area now consists of thirty-nine two-story duplex buildings, divided into seventy-eight two or three-bedroom units. Along with the 400 area officer residences, this is the only family housing at Selfridge to have basements.



**300 area barracks under construction, October 1927**

Work finished on the first and largest group of NCO family quarters, totaling fifteen duplexes, in December 1927. This group included Buildings 228, 230, 232, 234, 236, 237, and 238 on the south of George Avenue, and Buildings 259, 261, 263, 265, 267, 268, 269, and 270 between Wooten and Mitchell Streets. Ranging in size from 1,867 square feet to 2,146 square feet, the buildings cost about $11,000 apiece, regardless of size.

The second phase, a group of seven duplexes, finished construction in December 1930. Located between Mitchell and Roulott Streets, these buildings (numbers 256, 257, 258, 260, 262, 2643 and 266) each have 2,251 square feet and cost $13,400 when built.

In January 1932 builders completed a third series of units, consisting of ten duplexes. Buildings 227, 229, 231, 233, and 235 are on the north of George Avenue, while Buildings 246, 248, 252, 253, and 254 are between Birch and Wagner Streets. Each of these buildings contains 2,980 square feet and cost $13,300.

**200 area, non-commisioned officer housing excavation, July 1931**

Construction ended on the final complement of NCO family quarters in December 1934. These included Buildings 240, 242, 244, 250, and 251, located between Birch and Wagner Streets, and Buildings 245 and 247, between Beach and Birch Streets. These seven buildings are the largest of the NCO duplexes. Each contains 3,076 square feet. They cost about $16,000 per unit in 1934.

In 1932, after acquiring more lakefront property, the government also finished building a seawall. As work progressed on the

Graham Bell, the inventor of the telephone and an aviation enthusiast himself.

At the time, Bell was conducting experiments with tetrahedral kites, which he believed could be a step toward an improved aircraft. He proposed that a honeycomb structure of tetrahedral cells could be the supporting apparatus of an airplane which would be especially stable in gusts of wind. This was all-important in the days when planes were so light.

Bell invited the impressive young officer to his family summer home in Nova Scotia. Throughout the summer of 1907, Selfridge helped Bell experiment with kites large enough to carry a man over water by speedboat. It was this way that Selfridge made his first ascent. He "flew" for seven minutes in a gigantic Bell kite, "The Cygnet," rising to a height of 168 feet. Only a handful of people had ever been as far above solid ground. It must have been an exhilarating experience.

Only a handful of people had ever been as far above solid ground.

In the fall, Selfridge convinced Bell to move his experiments to Hammondsport, New York, where Glenn H. Curtiss was building 40-horsepower, 8-cylinder gasoline engines he hoped would power aircraft. Bell, in turn, convinced President Taft to order that the Army detail Lieutenant Selfridge as a special observer in Hammondsport. There Bell, Selfridge, Curtiss, and two Canadian engineers, F.W. Baldwin and J.A.D. McCurdy, together formed what they called the Aerial Experiment Association (AEA), financed by a $30,000 gift from Mrs. Bell.

Selfridge designed the group's first airplane. Officially known as "Aerodrome Number One," it was called "Red Wing" because of the red silk that covered it. It took only seven weeks to design and build. By the spring of 1908 it was ready for testing, but Selfridge had been called to Washington to make an exhibition balloon ascent. On March 12 Baldwin piloted it instead. After 318 feet (and a sudden stop) he emerged from the wreckage bruised but not seriously injured.

## Rough Landings

This was not at all an uncommon experience with early flights. Lasting for only seconds, they generally traveled no more than a few hundred feet at extremely low elevations (often only a few feet off the ground). Under these conditions rough landings and crashes were part of the flying experience, and could only be expected. Flying was both a scientific endeavor and a daredevil sport. The Red Wing proved this again. Five days later it was tested again, and damaged this time beyond repair.

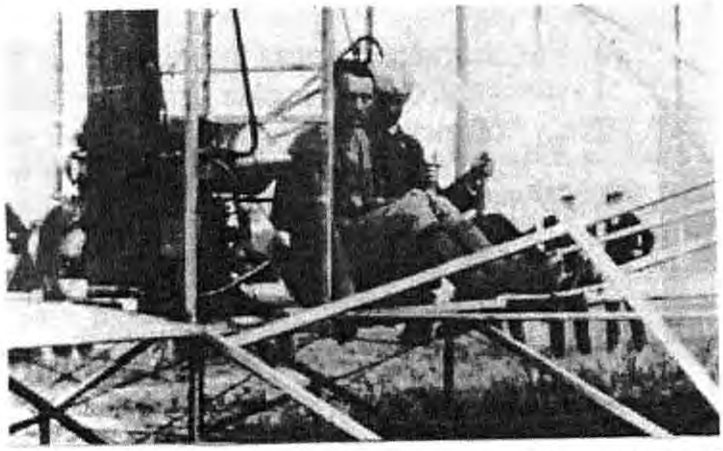
Flying was both a scientific endeavor and a daredevil sport.

Selfridge himself flew for the first time on May 19, 1908, on "White Wing," Baldwin's subsequent AEA design. For ten seconds he flew three feet off the ground for a distance of 100 feet. Those ten seconds made him one of the first pilots in the world, as well as the first Army officer ever to fly an airplane.

Selfridge flew White Wing once more that day, and six more times in August. He was assigned that summer to the infant Signal Corps Aeronautical Division at Fort Myer, Virginia, where he helped design Army Dirigible Number One. While at Fort Myer he made a number of flights in the dirigible, and three free balloon ascents.

## Orville Wright

Then, in mid-September, 1908, Orville Wright came to Fort



**Orville Wright and Thomas Selfridge preparing to fly, 17 September 1908**

Myer to demonstrate his Wright Flyer to the Army. Always eager to fly, Selfridge had wrangled a chance at a ride with Wright on September 19, but found that subsequent orders to go to the Missouri State Fair and Military Tournament for a dirigible exhibition made that flight impossible. It appeared he would miss his chance, but at the last minute another officer traded him the flight on the 17th. It was a bad break for Selfridge.

Orville had flown solo around the Fort Myer parade ground in the morning, and been unsatisfied with one of the Wright Flyer's propellers. He replaced it with a newer, longer version in time for Selfridge's afternoon ride. The new style of propeller had never been flight-tested.

The Flyer circled the Fort Myer parade ground four-and-a-half times at 150 feet. Suddenly, halfway through the fifth circuit, there was a loud bang and the end of the propeller blade fell off. Struggling for control, Wright shut off the engine and managed to glide to about 75 feet. All at once the Flyer nose-dived to the ground.

**The wreck of the Wright Flyer, 17 September 1908**

## The First Aircraft Fatality

Selfridge died three hours later; Wright was hospitalized for three months. The Flyer's vibration had caused the propeller to hit a guy wire, tearing the wire out of its fastening and disintegrating the propeller, which then caused further damage to the fragile canvas and wood machine. In the crash, Selfridge and Wright had been thrown against the remaining wires.

"Selfridge would undoubtedly have served the Air Corps as its first and leading aeronautical engineer and technical expert," his commander said later. Actually, he already had been functioning in those capacities. The young officer had invented his own specialty.

The Army bought an improved version of the Wright Flyer the following year. Selfridge, whose life total of flight time can be measured in minutes, would have approved. He had believed in the airplane's potential as much as anyone. Interred at Arlington National Cemetery, he also is memorialized at the U.S. Air Force Air Museum, at the cemetery of the United States Military Academy, and in Selfridge Air National Guard Base.

Selfridge would undoubtedly have served the Air Corps as its first and leading aeronautical engineer and technical expert.

—LT Selfridge's commander

# Ch. 2: Building a Base

## Henry B. Joy

Henry Bourne Joy

At about the same time as Selfridge was first contacting Bell, another visionary had an idea. A Michigan Central Railroad heir and a Packard Motor Car executive, Henry B. Joy knew transportation, and he saw the potential of the airplane. He purchased over 800 acres of marshy Macomb County land, about twenty-five miles north of Detroit on Lake St. Clair, as a company testing ground for automobiles and the new flying machines. Unfortunately for Joy, Packard's board of directors didn't want the field. He was stuck with it.

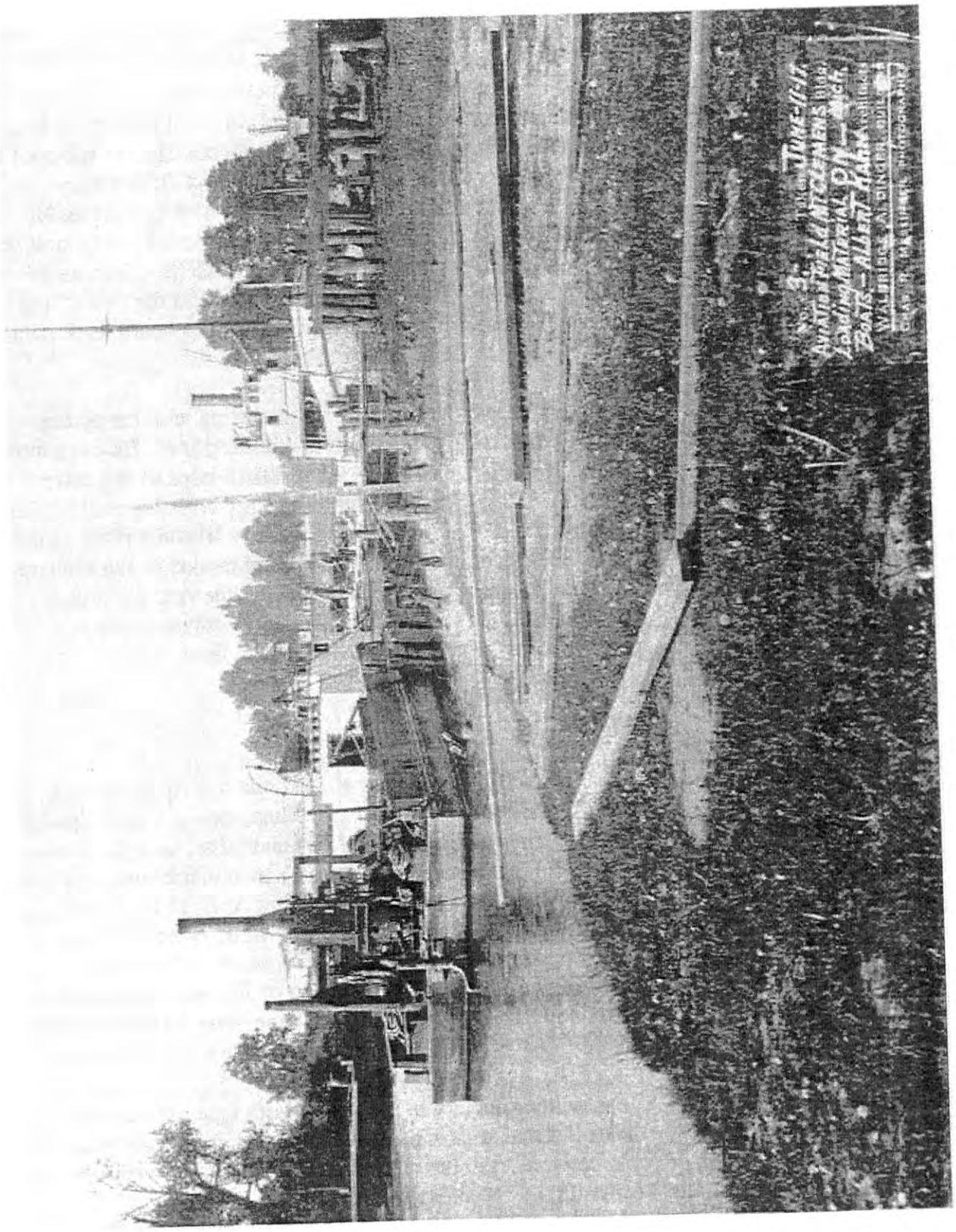
Joy went ahead and turned it into a testing area for planes anyway (Packard later used it to test cars, too). He even moved there. He built an estate on the northern edge of the marshy land and, thinking big, christened it the "Joy Aviation Field." And an aviation field it became. Along the way it won a place in military aviation history even before the Army owned it. On January 21, 1911, Lieutenant Paul Beck conducted the Army's first radiotelegraphic transmission from an airplane while in a borrowed plane some 100 feet over the field.

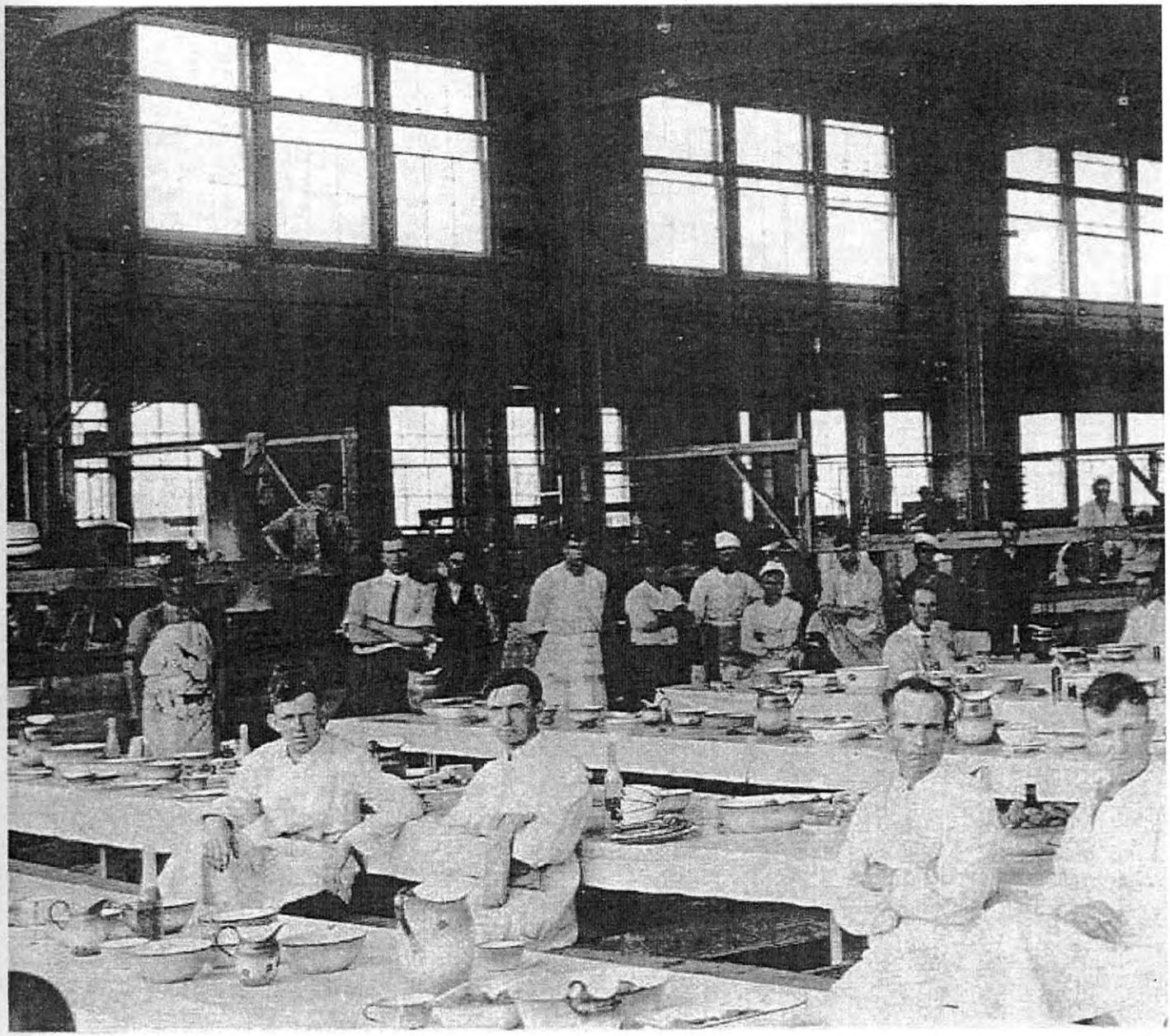
## World War

The field was also used for at least one test flight. In early 1917, Slim Lewis, one of the first test pilots, flew a Dehavilland 4 built for the Army by Fisher Body. By and large, though, Joy Aviation Field remained little more than marshlands until the United States entered World War I in April 1917. It stayed waterlogged for some time after, as well. After the U.S. declared war, civic boosters from Detroit successfully lobbied in Washington for the transformation of Joy Field into a military base. Joy leased 642 acres to the government for the cost of his interest and agreed to a government option to buy.

Joy Aviation Field was associated with aviation and was close to Detroit. Otherwise it had little going for it.

Joy Aviation Field was associated with aviation and was close to Detroit. Otherwise it had little going for it. It was relatively inaccessible from the city, for instance, and proved difficult to build on.

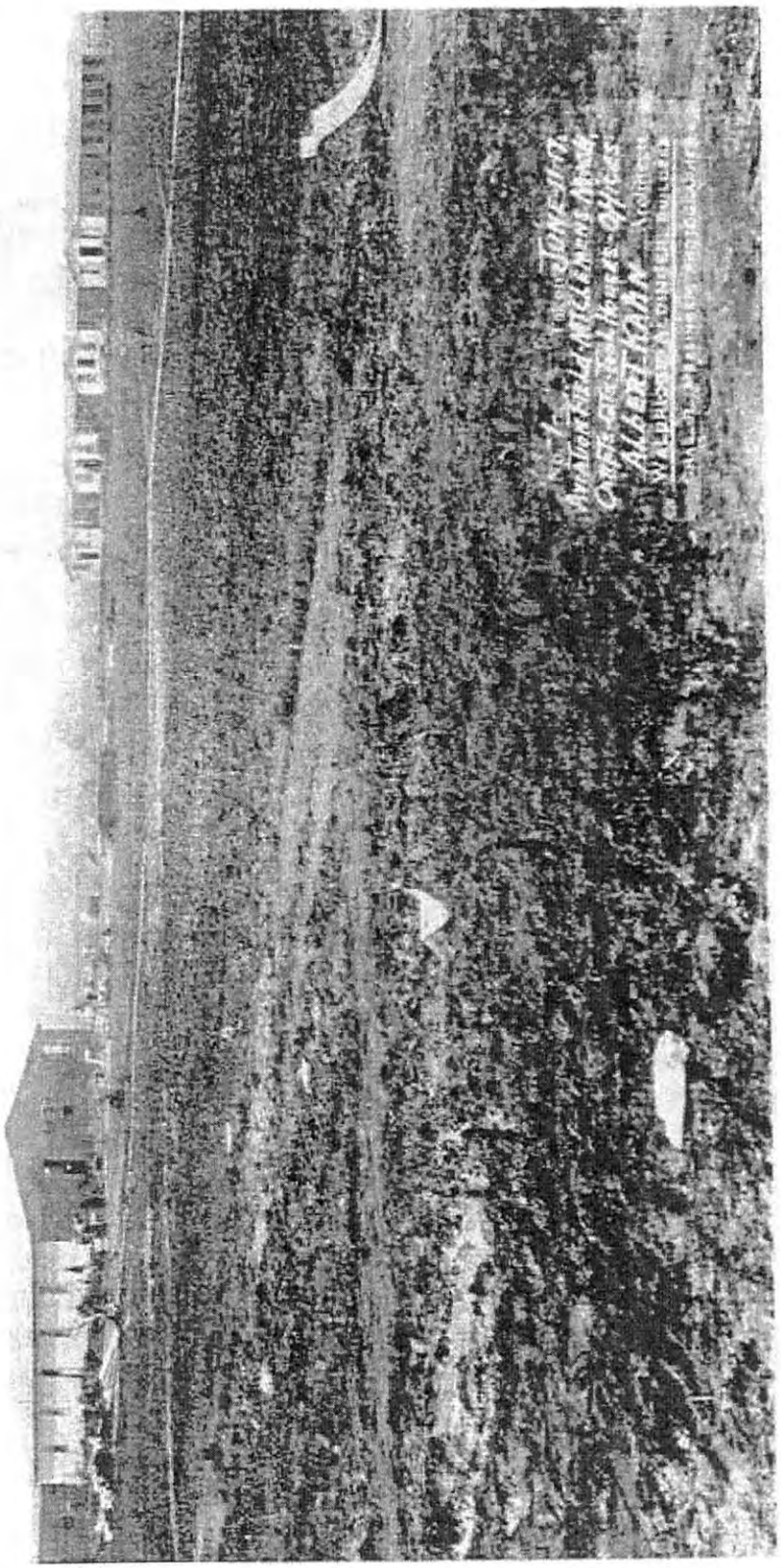




**Pages 8 and 9: The Selfridge Mess Hall in 1917 served construction workers meals and offered them a place to relax.** The building was later used as a hangar.

Pages 7 and 10: Construction materials were barged to the site along the Detroit River and Lake St. Clair, and workers lived and worked in a sea of mud.

No. 12. Taken July 6
Selfridge Field, Mich.
Mt. Clemens, Mich.
Mess-Hall.
Architects
Walbridge-Aldinger, Builders
Chas. R. Messinger, Photographer



Most of the field was lower than lake level. The road was a muddy quagmire.

Crews were able to deliver some construction equipment and supplies for the new base by barge, but by land the site was often unreachable. In the spring of 1917 the one access road turned into a muddy quagmire under hundreds of freight wagons and trucks loaded with lumber and building supplies.

It was muddy because most of the field was actually lower than lake level. For a time, nearly every truck had to be dragged from Mount Clemens by huge steam-powered tractors. Engineers built a plank road of four-inch timbers to the site, but this too failed under the strain of materials being rushed against an urgent deadline.

Through Herculean labors the marsh became an airfield. It was activated as a military installation on July 1, 1917, and renamed in honor of Lieutenant Selfridge. The first military men to occupy the fledgling base were members of Company G of the 33rd Michigan National Guard, who had the unenviable task of preparing the muddy ground for the soon-to-arrive active duty forces. Those forces, the 8th and 9th Aero Squadrons of the U.S. Army Signal Corps, arrived from Kelly Field, Texas, on July 7.

Several student fliers worked all that night assembling a Curtiss JN-4D biplane (the "Jenny"), Selfridge's first official craft. The next day Captain Byron Q. Jones took the brand-new machine on the first military flight from the new military field. Except for a nosed-in landing (the mud was good for something after all), this inaugural flight was a success. Selfridge was an airbase.

## Flight Lessons

Pilot training began nine days later, on July 16, 1917. In those days, Air Pilot School was brief. In the first few days, students were given a few "hops"; four weeks later, they had a commission and were on their way to Europe. Altogether, seventy-two men won their "Junior Military Aviation" ratings. All together they logged 3,759 hours of flying time, only about 60 hours each.

Although in its first few months Selfridge acted primarily an elementary pilot training school, it also offered courses in

advanced flying, bombing, radio, and photography. But flying in flimsy open planes was impractical during a Michigan winter, so the student pilots were sent to Lake Charles, Louisiana, and Chapman Field in Miami, Florida. Selfridge converted to a training school for aero-mechanics.

## The 1918 Flood

Nature asserted herself in March 1918.

Selfridge was booming. But the land was still low, and nature asserted itself in March 1918. An ice blockade in the Clinton River, swollen by the spring thaws, gave way and sent flood waters rushing across the entire field until water and mud stood three feet deep in the new buildings.

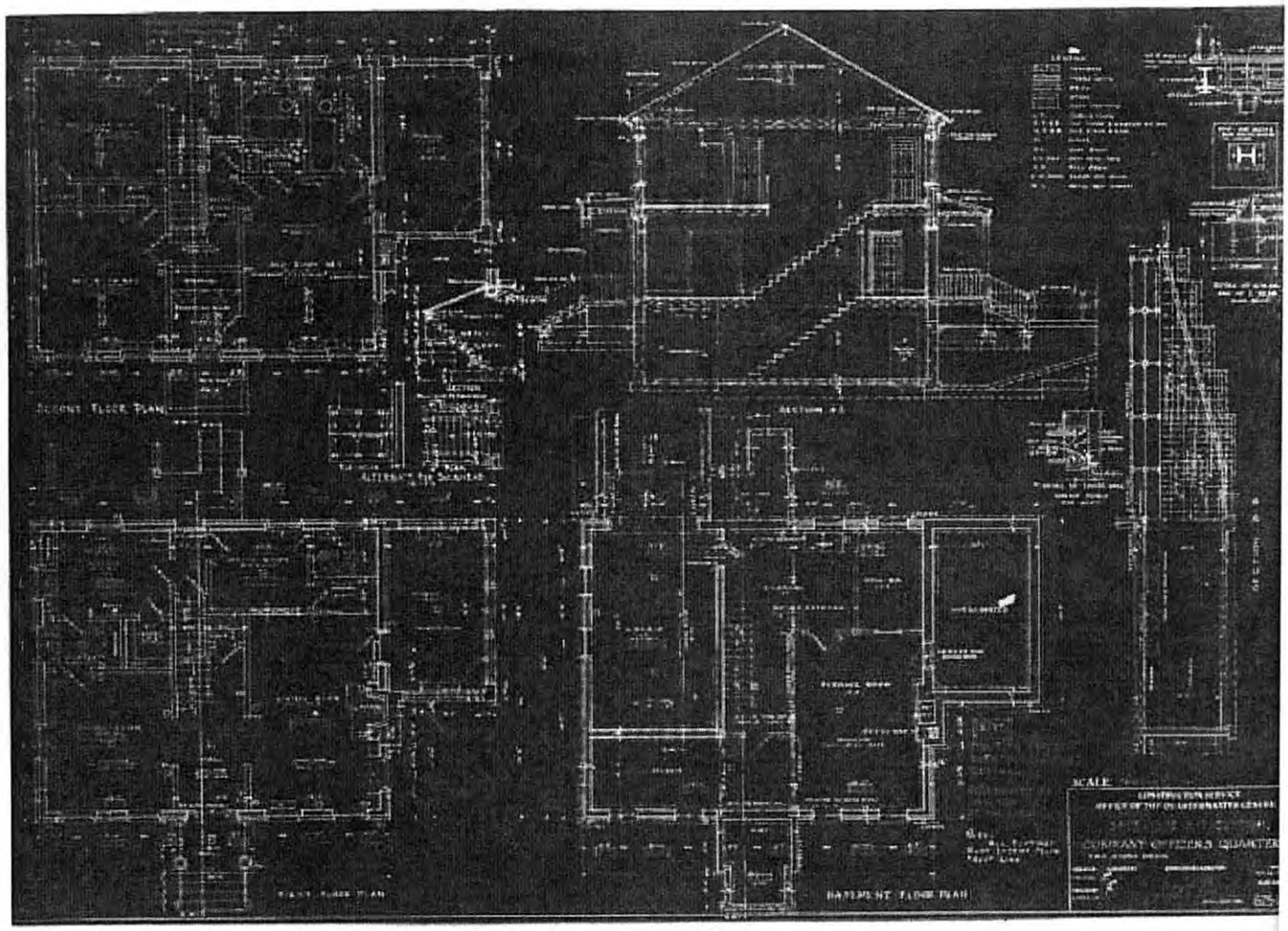
Soldiers slogged through the waters to nearby Mount Clemens, loaded with official records, perishable equipment, and survival gear. Their misery, however, was soon matched by schoolchildren's joy, because city officials dismissed school for the day. More than 1,000 weary men spent the night in Mount Clemens schools and lodge halls.

That was Selfridge's only flood but, because of its location, drainage of the landing field would remain a problem for quite some time. "Selfridge was a sod field for many years," one early resident remembered years later. "As it was flat and drained poorly, French drains were laid at intervals across the field. This type of drain is merely a ditch filled with coarse gravel which drains the neighboring area and allows the water to run into the main ditch around the field. It was a problem to keep the surface of the gravel level with the sod, which made a major problem in takeoff and landing. When the wind was right to take off parallel with the drains, it was simple, but when the planes had to cross the drains, there were galloping takeoffs and landings. Nevertheless, such operations gave the student pilots an alibi for poor performance on the field."

## Gunnery School

Two weeks after the 1918 flood, Lieutenant Colonel L.W. MacIntosh assumed command of Selfridge and began preparations to convert it yet again, this time into an aerial

second, third, and fourth stages of the NCO family quarters, the badly needed seawall was underway along the lakeshore. Behind it, landfill—primarily bottom sand dredged from Anchor Bay—turned the marsh into a protected site suitable for housing. Work finished on the seawall in 1932. The sixty-three two-story officer residences in the 400 area behind it were completed, by and large, in three phases.



**Blueprints of floor plans for the 400 area complex, August 1929**

These buildings are unique in that they are the only of Selfridge's family quarters to offer garages. Although today's 400 area is made up primarily of general officers, colonels, and lieutenant colonels, the buildings were originally constructed to house families of company grade officers (lieutenants and captains) in

three-bedroom buildings, and field grade officers (majors through colonels) in four-bedroom buildings.

In May 1931 work ended on the first and largest segment of this area, which amounted to thirty-six units. Four of these, Buildings 447, 474, 478 (later razed), and 482, are four-bedroom field grade officer quarters built in the Strauble circle area. The rest, three-bedroom variety intended for company grade officer quarters, lay between Skeel Avenue on the south, and Kelly and Wold Avenues on the north. These include a number of houses on Straubble circle. Buildings 434, 435, 436, 437, 439, 441, 443, 445, 449, 451, 453, 455, 456, 457, 458, 459, 460, 462, 464, 466, 468, 470, 472, 476, 480, 484, 486, 488, 490, 492, 494, and 496 were all constructed in this phase. Like the four-bedroom places, each of the company grade houses has 2,686 square feet. But they cost less to build: about $12,990, nearly $1,000 less than the cost of the four-bedroom, field grade officers' quarters.

**The 400 area complex under construction, October 1931. Building 424 is in the foreground.**

The 400 area houses built next include ten field grade officers quarters. The first eight (Buildings 438, 440, 442, 444, 448,

450, 452, and 454), completed in December 1931, are immediately south of Skeel. Again, each had 2,686 square feet. They cost around $12,670 apiece. The last two homes built during this period were Buildings 424 and 426, sited north of George Avenue.

The houses erected in the first and second phases of the 400 area's construction are similarly styled, center entrance Georgian revival buildings distinguished mainly by their pedimented ionic entrances. The houses built in the third phase, however, are distinctly different. Ten company grade officer quarters, distinguished by prominent dormers on their second floors, were built as "Cape Cods." These also had detached garages (all the colonials had attached garages). Six of these homes (Buildings 461, 463, 465, 467, 469, and 471) are between Keith and Kelly Avenues, while four (Buildings 422, 423, 427, and 428) are north of George Avenue. These houses, completed in December 1934, cost $12,775 each.

**Company grade officer quarters of the Cape Cod design, August 1934**

The rest of the houses are in the Greek revival style. These are particularly marked by circular attic windows and inlaid arches over off-center front entrances. Six company grade officer quarters of this design (Buildings 403, 404, 405, 406, 407, and 408) were finished in January 1935 on Lufberry. The last of the six, Building 409, is just northeast of Lufberry. Each of these houses has 2,380 square feet and an attached garage, and cost $13,305 to build.

**Greek revival buildings 408, 406, and 404 (l—r), August 1934**

The last residential buildings built before World War II were Building 410 and Building 400. Building 410, the Transient Officers Quarters, was completed in November 1930 at a cost of $184,950. Offering twenty-six rooms with baths, the original structure had 35,597 square feet. This increased by 1,000 square feet in September 1957 when the porch was enclosed. Building

400, the Officers Club, which was finished in September 1933 for $50,960. The club had 7,665 square feet until two one-story additions went up in April 1958. Since then a 240-square foot offset added in October 1958 and a 700-square foot kitchen enlargement finished in September 1967 have brought the total area to 10,170 square feet.

## The Generals' Houses

No houses at Selfridge were ever built specifically for generals, and no tank-automotive generals lived on the base before the Air Force transferred control to the Army in July 1971. In August 1971, Brigadier General Chester McKeen made the pioneering move. By the middle of the decade Selfridge would be home to most of the tank-automotive command structure.

Over the years seven houses in the 400 area have been residences of installation commanders and generals—Building 409, a Greek revival house, and Buildings 424, 426, 447, 474, 454, and 482, all Georgian revivals. Beginning in the mid 1970s, commanders of TACOM and of its predecessor organizations consistently

**Building 409, Quarters One**

four of these houses for residences. Since May 1993 two homes, Buildings 409 and 424, have been designated as housing for general officers.

Building 409 is located near Lufberry and overlooks Lake St. Clair. Completed in January 1935, it cost $14,615, and has 3,187 square feet. This house appears to be the only unit in the 400 area ever used for a purpose other than family housing. It served as the base commander's house prior to World War II, but during the war it became a nurses' quarters, accommodating seven women. Probably at this point the attached garage was converted to a fifth bedroom (with bath), making Building 409 the sole set of quarters at Selfridge to have five bedrooms and four baths.

Sometime after the war ended the unit reverted to field grade officer quarters, but it housed nurses again between June 1963 and July 1966. After the nurses left, Building 409 became the home of a series of families headed by majors through colonels, until Major General Oscar Decker moved into it in 1977. Since then only generals' families have lived there.

Building 424 sits on the north of George Avenue overlooking the golf course. Along with Building 426, this 3,462 square foot

Building 424

golf course. Along with Building 426, this 3,462 square foot structure is the largest single family quarters at Selfridge. Completed in February 1932 for $15,675, it was the most expensive individual residence on the base. The house has been occupied continuously by generals since 1976.

Building 426 housed general officers until July 1995, when it became the TACOM Chief of Staff's residence. Like Building 424, it is on the north of George Avenue with a golf course view. has 3,462 square feet, and was completed in February 1932, but it cost slightly less—$14,865. While there may be a possibility that in the past this building housed U.S. Air Force general officers, occupancy records show only that U.S. Army generals have resided there.

Building 474 last housed a general in 1977. Located on the west side of the Strauble circle, it contains 2,686 square feet and was completed in May 1931 for $13,920. Since the 1960s it has housed families of all ranks from major through major general. The last general to reside there left in January 1977.

Building 482 is situated on the east side of Strauble circle opposite Building 474. Like Building 474, it has 2,686 square

**Building 426**

Building 474

Building 482

feet, cost $13,920, and was finished in May 1931. Between 1959 and 1973, majors and colonels lived in the house. General officers lived there from October 1973 through September 1992.

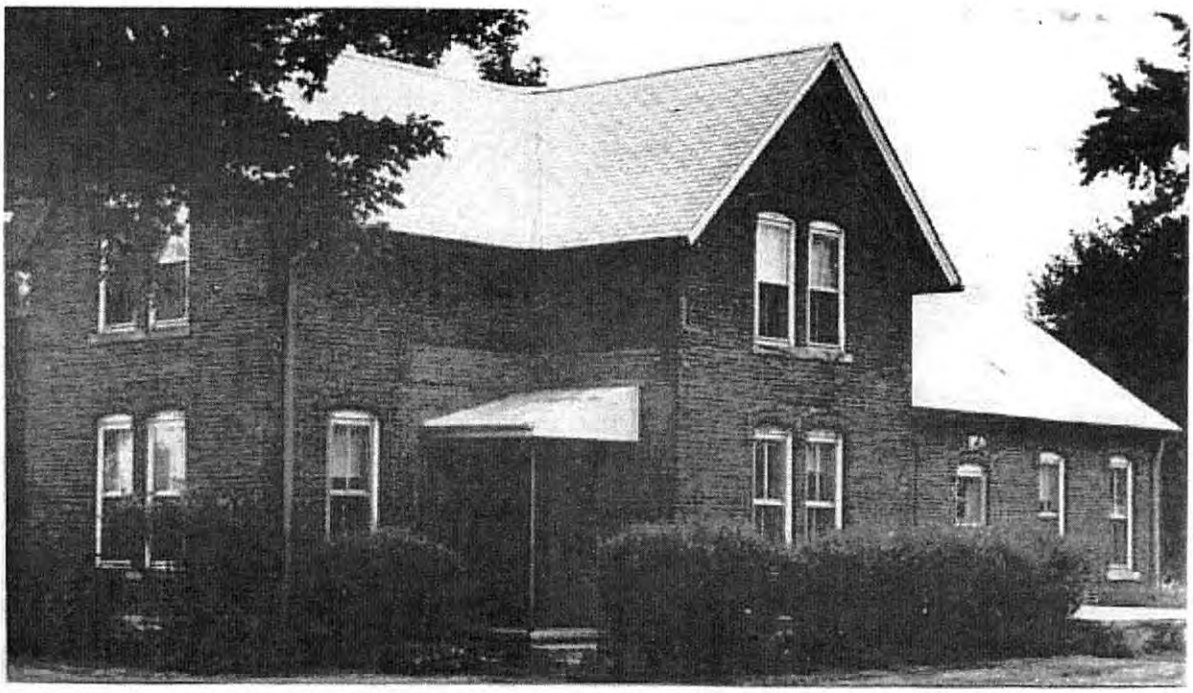
The final homes a general officer used are Buildings 447 and 454 on Skeel, which backs up to the Strauble circle area. These homes also have 2,686 square feet, and were completed in May 1931 for $13,920. The only general to live in Building 447 was Brigadier General Carl W. Tipton, who was living in the house as a colonel at the time of his promotion in May 1986. He moved to the larger Building 426 when it became available that August. The sole general to live in Building 454 was Brigadier General Donald M. Babers, who moved to Building 424 when he became TARCOM's deputy commanding general.

**Building 447**

## Post-WWII Housing

Between the attack on Pearl Harbor and the end of 1942, Selfridge expanded to almost five times its original size. From its

original 641 acres, Selfridge grew to 3,000 acres. Invoking the War Powers Act, the U.S. Attorney in Detroit condemned the area bounded by Jefferson Avenue and Sugarbush Road. Until this time Jefferson Avenue, now the main street of the base, had been the western boundary; Joy Road was an open thoroughfare to Mount Clemens. Building 152, an Air National Guard warehouse, was a restaurant on the corner of Jefferson and Joy.



**Building 509**

Despite the expansion, no new family housing was built on the base during the World War II years. Selfridge's growth, however, did bring two pre-existing farmhouses onto the base as family housing assets. The base's oldest structure, Building 509, was built in 1870. It is a five-bedroom, one-bath home with 2,665 square feet. Remotely located in Selfridge's far west sector, it was used as family quarters until a few years prior to its formal transfer to the Navy in December 1982. The second farmhouse, Building 511, was a very small, two-bedroom, one-bath structure of 966 square feet. Also located on the west side of the base, it housed military families until 1980, then was left vacant until it was razed in 1984 to save maintenance costs.

After the war Selfridge expanded its housing stock, beginning in June 1950 when five row houses (Buildings 769, 770, 774, 775, and 776) were completed on the site of the old Henry B. Joy estate, now the area of Johnson and William Streets. Each of these five structures has eight three-bedroom and one-bath family quarters consisting of 1,483 square feet. Individual cost was $107,235.

**The 700 area family housing units**

True to the spirit of the times, for a while Selfridge also had its own trailer park. The base built a sixty-four pad park on its west side in 1950 to accommodate trailers owned by service members. It park expanded in 1959 and 1960, adding eight lots each year. Over the next decade, however, trailers got bigger, and the park had to reconfigure in 1975. After that it held seventy-seven units, but it was still too cramped. The base spent more by 1975 on the park's operation and maintenance than it earned from rent and utility charges. Since there was excess family housing at Selfridge, the trailer park began to be phased out in 1977. It closed in 1980. In 1982 the Army relinquished its permit for the trailer park back to the Air Force which, in April 1984,

transferred the property to the Navy. The Navy has since removed the pads and is using the site for other purposes.

## Vandenberg Village

The early 1950s building boom at Selfridge climaxed with the addition of thirty apartment buildings, commonly termed Wherry units, in the far north portion of the base just east of Jefferson Avenue. Collectively known as Vandenberg Village, these buildings became feasible after congressional passage of the Wherry Act and the National Housing Act in the late 1940s.

**Vandenberg Village**

These laws encouraged private developers to build housing on property leased from the government. In January 1951 the Secretary of the Air Force leased Selfridge Air Force Base land for seventy-five years (at $100 a year) to Selfridge Apartments, Inc., owned by E. H. Marhoefer of Chicago. Selfridge Apartments agreed to build and maintain a 511 unit housing project.

Despite the seventy-five year lease and a thirty-five year, 3½ percent mortgage, Selfridge Apartments' control of Vandenberg Village was short-lived. A 1956 law required that the government purchase on-base private housing (in this case, the Wherry

quarters) when new housing units constructed by the government competed with them. This law came into play in 1957, when Selfridge officials began planning the Capehart project. Accordingly, the Secretary of the Air Force took possession of Vandenberg Village from Selfridge Apartments in February 1958 and assumed the mortgage outstanding on the property. In the early proceedings, the government offered Marhoefer $450,000 in compensation, but in March 1963 a U.S. District Court jury upped the award to $650,000.

The Wherry units range in size from one bedroom/one bath units of 748 square feet to four bedrooms/two bath apartments of 1,723 square feet. They were constructed in 1951 and are organized in two clusters. The northernmost group of sixteen structures is sited along the semicircular Wurtsmith Drive and was originally officer family housing. Comprising this community of 274 units were Buildings 905, 907, 908, 909, 910, 911, 912, 914, 915, 916, 917, 918, 919, 922, 923, and 924. Just to the south, fourteen airmen family housing buildings were located around Arnold Circle. Originally designed to quarter 237 families, these were Buildings 925, 927, 928, 929, 930, 931, 935, 936, 937, 939, 942, 943, 944, and 945. In 1956 four of the officers' buildings (Nos. 905, 910, 922, and 923), fronting on busy Jefferson Avenue, were converted to airmen family occupancy, due to vacancies in the officers' units and the lengthy waiting list for airmen's housing. Officers vacated the remaining twelve buildings when the Capehart housing project opened in 1960-61.

Though Vandenberg Village initially consisted of 511 units in thirty buildings, a series of alterations over the years decreased the total by 109 units and three buildings. Building 937 was razed in 1981. A 1974 fire had burnt out seven units and caused permanent structural damage. In 1982 Building 945 became the Selfridge Community Service Center Building. The following year Building 943 became an industrial building. In 1984 Buildings 905, 911, 915, 922, 923, and 924 each lost two one-bedroom units to bachelor housing. Finally, Building 916 had seven of its units converted in 1986 to a Guest House operation. The combined 1984-86 actions cut the total available family housing units to 402 while retaining the number of buildings for such use at twenty-seven. Currently, all of these

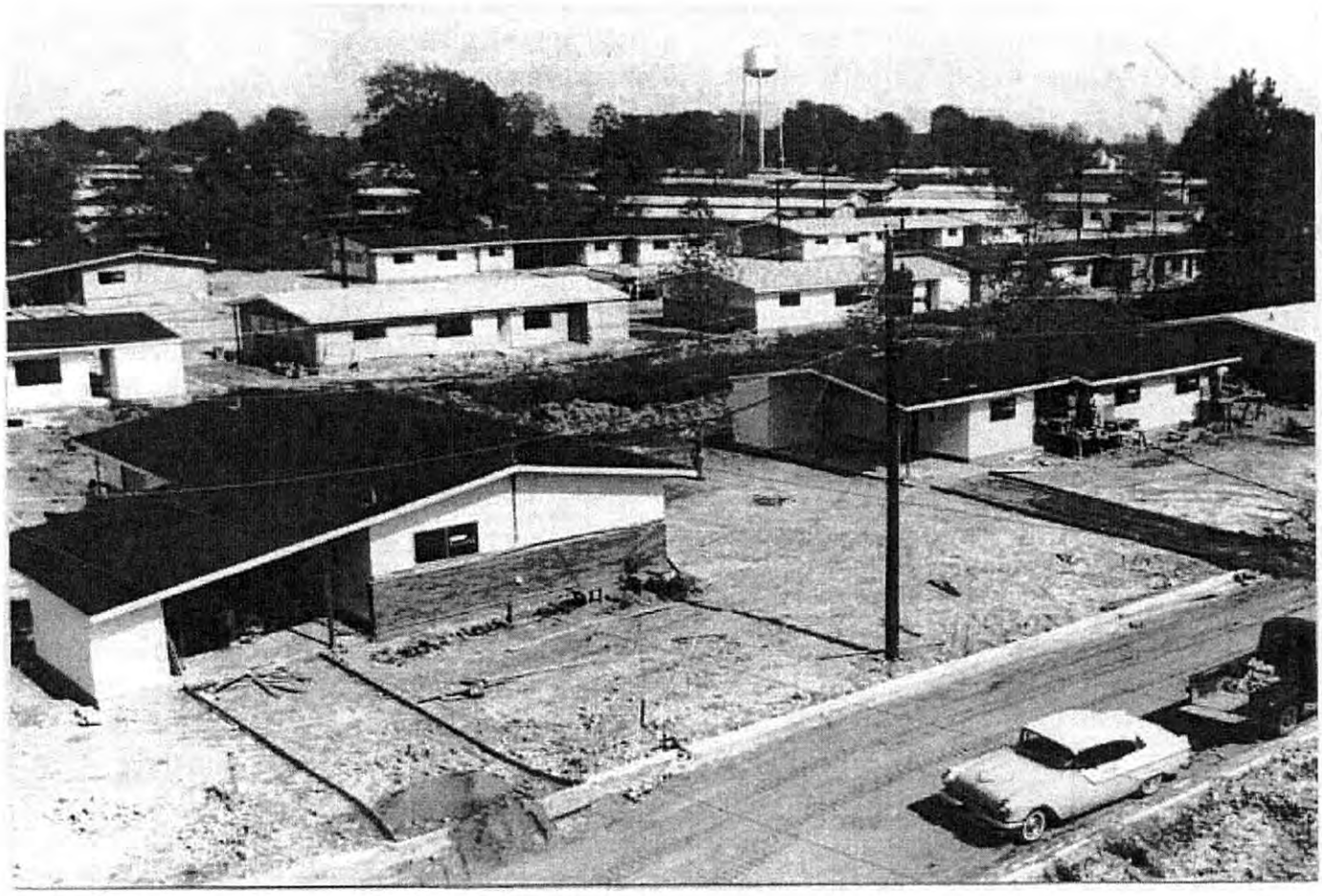
quarters are employed as enlisted service member family housing. Vandenberg Village was renovated in 1989 and 1990.

## Sebille Manor

Last of the postwar Selfridge housing areas to be built was the Capehart project, also known as Sebille Manor. This development was an outgrowth of the Capehart Amendment of 1956 to the National Housing Act, which called for housing projects to be constructed on government-owned property by private contractors through use of Federal Housing Administration (FHA) mortgage financing. To work around the private contractor provision, the U.S. Air Force formed its own corporation, Selfridge Air Force Base Housing, Inc., to undertake the Sebille Manor project.

For this project the government bought in June 1959 three tracts of land, two and a half miles northeast of the air base in Chesterfield Township, encompassing 102.69 acres. (The government offered a combined total of $69,050 to three owners during course of the condemnation action, but in November 1961 a U.S. District Court jury raised the sum to $98,550.) With the land chosen, the Secretary of the Air Force entered into three separate fifty-five year leases with Selfridge Air Force Base Housing, Inc., in September 1959. The Air Force in effect leased the land to itself. For an annual individual lease fee of $1,000, the Air Force's quasi-corporation agreed to build Units 129, 128, and 123 on the respective tracts.

On 24 September 1959, Selfridge Air Force Base Housing, Inc., took out three 26½-year mortgages at a 4½ percent interest rate to fund the construction costs. One mortgage was for $2,131,600, covering 129 family housing units; a second totaled $2,092,900 for 128 units; and the third amounted to $2,019,200 for the final 123 units in the 380-unit Sebille Manor. Site clearance and grading of the property for the house sites and roads began in October 1959. The first fifteen houses were ready for occupancy in September 1960, and the entire project completed in February 1961.



**Sebille Manor under construction, 1960**

Sebille Manor's 380 units are in 243 separate ranch-style buildings. 106 units are single family, three-bedroom, two-bath places with 1,450 square feet. Another 220 units comprise 110 duplexes, each unit having three bedrooms, two baths, and 1,326 square feet. The final fifty-four units are in twenty-seven duplexes, each offering four bedrooms, two baths, and 1,350 square feet. These houses are NCO and officer residences for TACOM and the other service organizations in the Selfridge community. Sebille Manor's houses were renovated in 1988 and 1989.

# Ch. 4: Conclusion

## The Selfridge Community

Today Selfridge Air National Guard Base is one of the busiest, most diverse military installations in the United States. A base of operations for all elements of the service including the Coast Guard, Selfridge encompasses some 680 buildings, 9,000- and 4,870-foot runways, over a million square yards of taxiway and paved aircraft parking ramps, thirty-nine miles of paved roads, and seven miles of railroad track.

The only military base currently open in Michigan, Selfridge contains the only government-owned family housing in the Detroit area. For that reason, the base known as "The Home of Generals" (over 150 generals spent parts of their careers there) is also home to a far larger group. Over many years, thousands of privates, non-commissioned officers, and junior and senior officers who served their country well have also come home to Selfridge.

For a short while in 1995, it appeared that Selfridge might close, not as a base but as a community. Early that year the Defense Department recommended to the Base Realignment and Closure Commission that the Army garrison at Selfridge be shut down, and that the Army community be dispersed on the grounds that sufficient commercial housing was available in the area. Ultimately the commission decided not to proceed with this recommendation. By the end of 1995 the TACOM Support Activity at Selfridge had served more than 52,000 active and retired military and their families. The community remains vital and viable for the foreseeable future.

# Appendix

## Generals' Housing Genealogy

All tank-automotive commanding generals up to and including Major General Harold Hardin (who departed in June 1979), lived either at Arsenal Acres or in private housing of their own choice. (Arsenal Acres, a small government-owned enclave of brick three- and four-bedroom houses located a few miles from the Detroit Arsenal, has been used for various purposes since.) Beginning with General Hardin's successor, General Oscar Decker, all TACOM commanders have lived at Selfridge.

The TACOM Deputy Commanding General (DCG) position was first established in 1968. Beginning in 1971 with Brigadier General Chester McKeen, the DCGs had the option of living at Selfridge. Later, Brigadier General Arthur Holmes (DCG, TARCOM, June 1979-September 1980) and Brigadier General David Stallings (DCG, TACOM, March 1981-April 1983) also lived at Arsenal Acres. Since General Stallings' departure, all TACOM DCGs have been housed at Selfridge.

All general officers serving in the Detroit area as program managers for tank-automotive systems over the years have also lived at Selfridge.

### Building 409, Quarters One (near Lufberry Hall)

MG Oscar C. Decker, Jr., CG, TARADCOM, later CG, TARCOM, and later CG, TACOM, January 1977-June 1983
MG Robert Sunell, PM, Tank Systems, July 1983-January 1986
BG Peter M. McVey, PM, Tank Systems, and later PEO, Close Combat Vehicles, February 1986-July 1987
MG William Flynn, CG, TACOM, August 1987-August 1989
MG Leo J. Pigaty, CG, TACOM, August 1989-February 1992
MG Joseph Raffiani, Jr., CG TACOM, March 1992-October 1994
MG Edward L. Andrews. CG. TACOM. November 1994-

Building 424 (George Avenue)

MG Harold Maddux, CG, Tenth Air Force, August 1959-January 1961
BG Cecil Lessig, CG, Fifth Air Force Reserve Region, August 1961-June 1962
BG Charles Young, CG, Fifth Air Force Reserve Region, July 1962-January 1963
BG John Dean, CG, Second Air Force Reserve Region, December 1969-August 1970
BG (later MG) Donald Babers, DCG, TARCOM, and later PM, Ml Tank System, September 1976-July 1980
MG Duard D. Ball, PM, Ml Abrams Tank Systems, and later CG, TACOM, July 1980-August 1984
MG Arthur Holmes, Jr., CG, TACOM, September 1984-June 1987
BG Peter M. McVey, PEO, Close Combat Vehicles, July 1987-August 1993
MG John E. Longhouser, PEO, Armored Systems Modernization, October 1993-

Building 426 (George Avenue)

BG Chester McKeen, DCG, TACOM, August 1971-November 1972
BG Frank P. Clarke, DCG, TACOM, November 1972-August 1973
BG (later MG) Robert Baer, PM, XM1 Tank System, September 1973-July 1977
BG Andrew Anderson, DCG, TARCOM, and later CG, TARADCOM, September 1977-October 1980
BG Church Matthews, DCG for R&D, TACOM, November 1980-January 1983
BG Carlton Weidenthal, DCG for Procurement and Readiness, later DCG for R&D, TACOM, June 1983-May 1985
BG Claude Donovan, PM, Light Combat Vehicles, July 1985-August 1986
BG Carl W. Tipton, DCG for Procurement and Readiness, TACOM, August 1986-August 1989
BG Joseph Raffiani, Jr., DCG for Procurement and Readiness, September 1989-August 1990

BG James W. Monroe, DCG for Procurement and Readiness, June 1991-July 1994
COL Patrick Kirby, TACOM Chief of Staff, August 1995-

Building 474 (Strauble Circle—West)

BG Robert Baer, PM, XM1 Tank System, August 1972-September 1973
BG (later MG) Oscar C. Decker, Jr., Dir. of Procurement and Production and later DCG, TACOM, September 1973-January 1977

Building 482 (Strauble Circle—East)

BG Anthony Daskevich, DCG, TACOM, October 1973-June 1975
BG Stan Sheridan, PM, Fighting Vehicle Systems, July 1975-November 1978
BG Philip Bolte, PM, Fighting Vehicle Systems, May 1979-July 1980
BG Donald Whalen, PM, Bradley Fighting Vehicle Systems, July 1980-October 1983
BG William Flynn, DCG for Procurement and Readiness, TACOM, March 1984-June 1986
BG James Ball, PM, Tactical Vehicles, and later PEO, Combat Support, August 1986-August 1988
BG Ronald V. Hite, Deputy PEO, Heavy Force Modernization (future), August 1988-July 1990
BG Anthony C. Triffilette, Deputy PEO, Armored Systems Modernization, June 1991-September 1992

Building 447 (Skeel Avenue)

BG Carl W. Tipton, DCG for Procurement and Readiness, TACOM, May 1986-August 1986

Building 454 (Skeel Avenue)

BG Donald M. Babers, Director of Procurement and Production, TACOM, January 1975-September 1976