

CAM Website Indoor Item Descriptions



WW II Room

The exhibits in this section of the museum include models of WW II aircraft, military aviation artifacts and other displays of this significant era in history.

Chico Army Airfield Exhibit

A part of the museum is devoted to the Chico Army Airfield which during WW II trained over 5000 pilots. Photos and maps illustrate this era. The History of the airfield began in September 1941.

History of the Chico Army Air Field by Justin M. Ruhge

The Chico Army Air Field began on September 11, 1941 when the Chico City Council formally signed a lease with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers representing the War Department for the use of 1,045 acres of land at \$1 per year with an option to buy. The City provided all utilities and service roads to the field. Between four and five million dollars were allocated for construction of all needed facilities in a very short time, as at other bases The Chico Army Air Field began on September 11, 1941 when the City Council of Chico formally signed a lease with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers representing the War Department for the use of 1,045 acres of land at \$1 per year with an option to buy. The City also provided all utilities and service roads to the field. Between four and five. Eventually 140 buildings as well as runways, aprons and service roads were constructed.

On April 15, 1942, the first cadre of permanent troops who managed the field moved in. The field was officially opened as the Chico Army Flying School on April 15, 1942. The first cadets arrived on April 25, 1942 from Moffett Field where they had already completed part of their basic flying in addition to their primary training. Basic training at Chico began on July 28, 1942. An all black company was assigned to the Field in August 1942.

El Roy Nathan stated: *"The cadets were organized in squadrons under Flying Training Groups. Some of the training was in classrooms, some on the Link Trainer or simulated flying, and the remainder of their time they trained on the Vultee BT-13 and BT-15s. These were blue and yellow planes that became familiar sights and sounds over Chico and the surrounding countryside. They were faster and heavier planes with more instrumentation than the cadets had used in their primary training. With*

about 300 aircraft taking off each morning, returning at noon, taking off again after lunch until landing about five P.M., there was constant and often frenzied activity going on."

- The first Flying School commander was Colonel John K. Nissley. Colonel George R. Hartman succeeded him in March 1943. Colonel Gerald Hoyle replaced him in the fall of 1943.
- The Field had access to the 533th Army Air Forces Band for parades. A weekly paper called *The Flyer* was published by the *Chico Record*.
- Auxiliary fields to Chico were located at Orlando No. 1, Kirkwood No. 2, Vina No. 3, Campbell No. 4 and Oroville No. 5.
- In March 1943 the Field name was changed to Chico Army Air Field.
- The first WACs arrived in October 1943. A cadre of black WACs was housed on an eleven-acre site across Cohasset Road from the Field. WASPS (Women's Army Service Pilots) frequently delivered planes to the field.
- At its peak, Chico Army Air Field had about 4,000 personnel. In the first two years, it trained 5,500 cadets and thousands of ground personnel.

In April 1944 the mission of the Field was changed from basic flying training of cadets to training of fighter pilots. An April 24, 1944 the Field was transferred from the Western Flying Training Command to the Fourth Air Force. Colonel Aaron W. Tyler replaced Colonel Hoyle.

The new command brought in pilots who had completed their basic and advanced training and received commissions prior to coming to Chico. Here they were to be taught tactics of combat flying using Bell King Cobra (P-63) planes, later switching to the twin-engine Lockheed P-38 Lightnings. These were all propeller planes. In May of 1945 jet training was introduced on the P-59 jet trainers, and in July the P-51 'Mustangs.'

"The P-38, P-51, and P-59s were all faster planes than the pilots had used previously and crashes (and deaths) doubled from 14 crashes with 8 deaths during the two years of basic training to 35 crashes and 16 deaths during the 16 months of fighter plane training. Most of these crash landings were in open fields around Chico. Tragic as they were, the accident rate was considered low for an operation of this nature and magnitude."

On August 25, 1945 the Fourth Air Force was replaced by the 21st Bombardment Wing. Its function was to process both personnel and aircraft for overseas assignment. Colonel Tyler continued as Commanding Officer of the Field. In October 1945 the Wing was redesignated the First Staging Command. Now the planes being processed were B-29 Superfortress bombers and crews.

On December 31, 1945, the Field was placed on inactive status. By the end of February most of the buildings were boarded up.

In late 1945 all but 65 of the military buildings had been disposed of as surplus government property the remaining buildings and the area with its well developed streets, utilities, connecting roads, and rail-line were assumed by the City. An Airport Commission was formed to administer the transformation into a municipal airport and an industrial park to attract and encourage industries to develop there

Today, only three of the original buildings remain with the Chico Air Museum occupying one of them.

Uniform Display Case

Authentic uniforms and related apparel from WW I through the modern era are on display. Each uniform is described in a reference book next to the uniform display area.

Thaddeus Kerns

In 1909 Thaddeus Kerns, “Chico’s Boy Aviator” made his first flight just south of the Chico Municipal Airport at the age of 15. This teenager constructed his flying machine in his family’s barn from illustrations in Popular Mechanics magazine. He constructed three different aircraft and applied for a patent on his unique wing design. Unfortunately, in July 1913, one month after turning 19, he died in a crash close to his home in Chico. The following is the Chico newspaper’s account of his death.

“Thaddeus Kerns, Northern California's only aviator, aged 19 years, was instantly killed at 6:15 last night within sight of his home on the Shasta road, when the lower wing spar of his aeroplane gave way at a height of eighty feet, causing the machine to turn turtle, diving into a grain field and tearing a hole into the soft ground.



B-29 Crash exhibit

In late 1945 a B-29 on final approach to the Chico Army airfield crashed. Artifacts, photos and detailed information about the crash are included in this exhibit. Amazingly, one crew member survived the crash and then returned to the scene years later where he recalled the incident.

Gift Shop

A section of the museum features aviation items for sale. Merchandise includes official Chico Air Museum apparel, books, aviation related toys and the official museum pin (shown below) and more. Proceeds from the gift shop help to maintain the nonprofit museum.



Jimmy Doolittle's' Desk

This is the desk used for many years by General Doolittle when he worked for Shell Oil Company as head of its aviation department. This magnificent desk was donated to the Chico Air Museum by Shell Oil in 2005.

Jimmy Doolittle Library

The museum's *Jimmy Doolittle Library* contains over 700 books and articles about aviation. Being able to check out books from the library is one of the benefits of being a Chico Air Museum member. The library also has on display General Doolittle's desk. There are also special photographs of his B-25 bomber.