

Capturing history

“The goal of this project, which was established in 1996, is to capture history from the individuals who provided the country and the world with an avenue to space and the Moon,” Rebecca Wright, project lead for the JSC Oral History Project, said.

The JSC Oral History Project has achieved much success in turning this vision into reality. Already, historians have talked to 435 individuals in 525 different audio sessions. During these sessions, participants who have served in key roles during Mercury, Gemini, Apollo, Skylab and Shuttle programs share their personal experiences regarding their service to the space program. Topics and questions for the interviews focus on the historical contributions of that individual, but they also gravitate toward various memories and stories that are truly one-of-a-kind.

“The first thing we do when we’re given a name to interview is research,” Wright said. “We use the research so that we can do an oral history to help facilitate the interview. It makes the participants feel good that someone’s researched them, and we are able to lead them through and try to get as much detailed information as we can. Some are very technical and want to still talk about the technical work that they did. Some are very reflective, so the material ranges that we get back from them.”

The interview process is described by Wright as informal. Most interviews take place in the Oral History Office with simply a table, chairs and audio recording equipment. The interview is very conversational in format.

Many common themes take shape in the interviews.

“We’ve had some really emotional times,” Wright said. “Almost all of them talk about how space exploration isn’t accomplished by one individual; it is accomplished by a team. Neil Armstrong made the comment that thousands of people come together to make a mission successful. It’s always rewarding to hear about the teamwork and camaraderie that they have.”

Other topics often brought up are the importance of community and the passion behind employees striving toward a national goal.

The JSC Oral History Project is given an annual comprehensive goal of approximately 40-50 interview targets. However, competing influences such as scheduling conflicts, illnesses, the ability of the participant to travel and family priorities often shorten the list. In actuality, the project averages 25-30 interviews each year.

President John F. Kennedy in his historic message to a joint session of the Congress, on May 25, 1961 declared, “...I believe this nation should commit itself to achieving the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the Moon and returning him safely to the Earth.” This goal was achieved when astronaut Neil A. Armstrong became the first human to set foot upon the Moon at 10:56 p.m. EDT, July 20, 1969.



“The highest priorities are those actuarially at risk, such as Moonwalkers and those who orbited the Moon, and then it ripples out from there. Starting in 1997, we put together what is really sort of an annual wish list,” Bill Larsen, JSC historian, said. “But we always have eyes bigger than our tummies. You have to be that way, because some people aren’t going to be available that you’d like to see on the schedule.”

The project has interviewed well-known NASA icons such as Neil Armstrong, Maxime Faget, Eugene Kranz, Steven Nagel and Walter Schirra. In addition to the recognizable names, many special groups have been interviewed to collect their distinctive views on NASA’s history.

“There’s a group on the JSC Oral History Project Web site called HERSTORY, which highlights the women who have made significant contributions throughout the history of NASA during times when, essentially, it was otherwise all guys,” Larsen said.

Other interesting projects include a book titled Shuttle-Mir: The United States and Russian Share History’s Highest Stage, by Clay Morgan. The book includes many oral histories of those involved in the Shuttle-Mir program.

A more sobering job was a large collection of interviews done during the Columbia recovery effort.

“Some of the managers in Lufkin believed that something needed to be recorded to capture the camaraderie, the support and all the workings going on there,” Wright said.

“We talked to everyone from the Department of Public Safety to sheriffs to county judges to volunteers,” Larsen said. “It really empowered us to know that we could mobilize this kind of recovery effort, and we are trying to put something together that reflects that. There are some really inspirational stories that needed to be shared.”

The JSC Oral History Project does more than just collect oral histories. The project also transfers existing interviews, press conferences and related materials from obsolete or decaying media to compact disc. To date, more than 460 “rescues” of old tapes have been completed.

To learn more about the JSC Oral History Project and to view the interview transcript archives, visit http://www.jsc.nasa.gov/history/oral_histories/oral_histories.htm.

Just moments following ignition, the Space Shuttle Challenger, mated to its two solid rocket boosters and an external fuel tank, soars toward a week-long mission in Earth orbit. Note the diamond shock effect in the vicinity of the three main engines. Launch occurred at 5:00 p.m. (EDT), July 29, 1985.

Ellington Field

A JOURNEY THROUGH HISTORY

by Johannes T. Ragin

IT'S HARD NOT TO NOTICE. Yet at the same time, one simply forgets the importance of the consistent hum of planes that go in and out of Ellington Field.

Ellington Field has long been an economic, military and civil staple of the space program. The importance of Ellington Field began back in 1917, the year it was first established. With the invention of the Wright C. Flyer in 1903, The War Department realized that powered flight had many military applications. When World War I broke out, trained pilots were in high demand. To meet this demand, Ellington Field was constructed in September of 1917.

"If it weren't for the military, Ellington probably wouldn't exist," said Mitchell Polt, International Space Station payload integration manager for United Space Alliance and Ellington Field flight instructor.

The land that Ellington encompasses today was purchased from Dr. R. W. Knox and the Wright Land Company about 25 miles south of Houston.

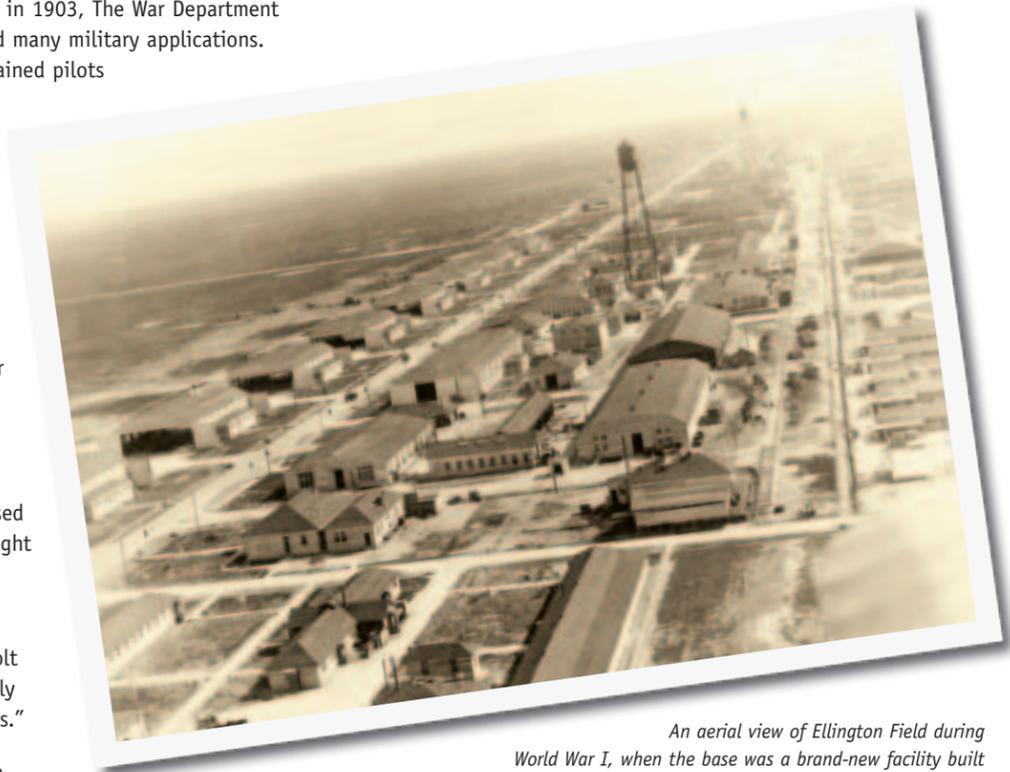
"Ellington is an old airfield," Polt said. "Back then, it was certainly considered out in the boondocks."

However, as the city of Houston began to grow and spread outward, Ellington Field literally grew into the city's own backyard.

Ellington Field was named after the late Lamar Ellington, who lost his life in a test flight at the North Island Army Aviation School in California.

With World War I coming to an end, Ellington Field deactivated as a military base. Nevertheless, Ellington adopted the 111th

Air National Guard unit on June 29, 1923. The War Department realized the American troops sent to World War I were ill equipped and poorly trained. As a result, National Guard units were being established around the country to keep peacetime soldiers combat-ready. The 111th Fighter Squadron then moved to the Houston Municipal Airport and Ellington went out of operation for 12 years.



An aerial view of Ellington Field during World War I, when the base was a brand-new facility built 25 miles south of Houston.

As Americans were drawn into another world war, airfields were once again in demand to prepare soldiers for combat. Ellington was then rebuilt to support the 69th, 70th, 71st, 72nd, 74th, 75th and 76th Fighter Squadrons. Ellington was also the site for the first Bombardier School, which was responsible for training 28,000 bombardier pilots a year.

When the Air Force broke off from the Army in September 1947, Ellington Field was renamed Ellington Air Force Base. After World War II, Ellington was home to the only U.S. Air Force Navigator Training School. Ellington remained an active air force base until 1959, when it made the transition into an air force reserve facility. During that year, the Air Force Reserve and the Air National Guard were the only units conducting flight operations out of Ellington Air Force Base.

NASA became a tenant of Ellington in 1962. In 1984, the city of Houston purchased Ellington Air Force Base and renamed it Ellington Field. From that day forward, Ellington supported civil and military operations. It has also been home to many different businesses and government agencies.

"After the city of Houston took possession in the mid-1980s, I saw activities at Ellington increase. Between NASA, the Texas Air National Guard, Coast Guard, Army aviation, Continental Express, United Parcel Service (UPS) and general aviation, there was a lot of activity going on there!" Polt said. "I was sorry to see Continental Express and UPS leave, but I'm hopeful that general aviation activities will continue to grow."

Today, Ellington Field is very important to NASA's success as an organization. NASA and contractor employees report to Ellington daily to support NASA aircraft operations. The bulk of NASA's aircraft are kept and maintained at Ellington Field.

NASA astronauts also conduct training exercises out of Ellington. The main jet aircraft used for astronaut training is the T-38N.

"We use this aircraft primarily for syllabus training, to train the new people and to keep the experienced proficient. As crews get ready for flight, training exercises are intensified," said John Starnes, aviation safety and program manager.

Ellington is run much like the rest of Johnson Space Center.

"At Ellington, we follow the exact same safety procedures that they do at NASA. As an Agency, we follow Office of Safety and Health Administration standards," Starnes said.



NASA 573-30625



NASA 573-30627

With fighter planes stationed in the background (top), World War I soldiers gather at Ellington Field.

Ellington Field was established in 1917 due to the high demand for trained pilots in response to the war.

NASA aircraft at Ellington have to be constantly maintained. The maintenance of the aircraft brings up safety issues that do not have to be addressed at JSC.

Starnes notes that as long as NASA is around, NASA's presence will always be at Ellington Field. This small airport, though not much in the limelight, is vital due to the services it provides to the community and NASA's space program.