

French Lessons

With their own country occupied by Germany, French air cadets came to Alabama to learn to fly. Vive la Dixie!

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Instructor Herbert Cain introduces his French students to their new trainer. (AFHRA)

THE STUDENT PILOT KNEW HE HADN'T PERFORMED WELL, and back on the ground he waited for a chewing out by his flight instructor. Instead, the exasperated instructor marched him over to another officer on the flightline and told him to give the student hell—in French. The obliging officer was my father, Harry Dupont. It was 1943, and he and his fellow U.S. Army Air Forces flight instructors at Gunter Field in Montgomery, Alabama, were struggling to turn young Frenchmen into combat-ready pilots. Eventually, a partnership between the U.S. Army Air Forces and the Free French would bring nearly 5,000 Frenchmen to the United States to train for air crew and ground support positions during World War II. Though few U.S. instructors were able to speak much French, from 1943 to 1945, nearly 1,400 French recruits learned to fly over the piney woods of the American South.

When the Germans took over France in 1940, they devastated the country's air force, destroying hundreds of French airplanes, confiscating others for their own use, and grounding yet others by removing their propellers. Under the terms of the French-German armistice, the Germans permitted only a few French air force units to operate in France and its North African colonies, and only under German control.

Before the takeover, some pilots managed to fly to England, where they joined the Royal Air Force and flew missions over France and Germany. Eventually the exiled French banded together to form the Free French air force.

In November 1942 the Allies invaded North Africa, defeating the Axis forces there and liberating the French units in Algeria, Morocco, and later Tunisia. These units joined the Free French.

The Free French asked for U.S. aircraft and training to help re-create the French air force. In early 1943 the U.S. military agreed, seeing the benefits of the arrangement. The Allies needed more fliers, and the French had experience in North Africa. But North Africa did not have enough instructors or training fields, so U.S. Major General Carl Spaatz proposed that French student pilots be sent to the United States for flight training.

The French cadets who jumped at the chance to come to the United States for flight instruction had grown up at a time when boys read of World War I aces and dreamed about flying in combat to defend their country. German troops had taken over their towns, and they knew the traumas of occupation.

In November 1942 the cadets were subjected to preliminary testing of their physical and mental abilities, as well as some ground school subjects, such as navigation and gunnery. Those who passed were told to report to Camp Cazes in Casablanca, Morocco, a French air base with two sections, American and French. There the French got their first glimpse of Allied airpower. Compared to France's aging fleet, the aircraft—Spitfires, P-40s, P-38s, B-17s—were awe-inspiring: roaring, swift, and lethal.

One cadet, René Levêque, later recounted his amazement in a 1982 article in *Aerospace Historian*: "It was on the apron of a hangar in Casablanca that the future French cadets beheld the B-17 Flying Fortress for the first time. It dwarfed all other planes."

The training plan called for the French cadets to undergo primary training at a civilian facility near Tuscaloosa, Alabama, basic training at Gunter Field, advanced single-engine training at Craig Field, near Selma, and twin-engine training at Turner Field, outside Albany, Georgia. Later, more highly specialized training centers were established throughout the country, among them Tyndall Field in Florida for machine gunners, Lowry Field, Colorado, for armament technicians, and Scott Field, Illinois, for radio personnel.

The U.S. Army had experience training foreign air cadets. It had just concluded a two-year program in which 4,000 British cadets were sent to U.S. bases for flight training. But the British had provided some of their own instructors. The French, on the other hand, had no instructor pilots to spare. Many were stuck in France or languishing in German POW camps.

By early 1943, the search was on for instructors who could communicate with the French.

That January, my father graduated from Craig Field as an Army Air Forces fighter pilot. Hoping to use his new skills overseas, he was soon disappointed. "They wrote me asking if I would be interested in teaching basic training to Frenchmen," he recalls. His heritage had worked against him: He was a Louisiana Cajun, or Acadian—a descendant of French Canadians who

had fled British rule 250 years ago. French was my father's first language, and in the 1940s, when visiting his parents in southwest Louisiana, he still spoke mainly French.

"I wrote back and politely said no, I would rather take a combat assignment," he recalls. "I got a second letter that was no longer a question but an assignment."

Other pilots who had indicated a knowledge of French on Army personnel records received similar "invitations." Besides those of Cajun descent—men with names like Pellerin, Hebert, and Gautreaux—the Army recruited college French majors and the sons of wealthy families who had learned French from their nannies or during summers in Europe. Some instructors recruited for the effort spoke little or no French at all. Nineteen-year-old flight instructor Jack Wishnick saw a recruiting notice at a Greenville, Mississippi base. He had taken two years of high school French and failed the second year. But he was keen on transferring to Montgomery to be near a woman there. He managed to pass the language test by reciting one French sentence he had memorized.

"When the first group [of students] arrived, I finally had to tell my commanding officer I didn't speak French," says Wishnick. "He said that in my first group he would give me students who knew some English. Then he grabbed me by the neck and told me, 'By the end of 10 weeks, you better be fluent in French and they better be fluent in flying. Or you'll be doing night flying the rest of the war.' "

Ed Vorrier was stuck with instructor duty because the military thought his name sounded French. He protested that he was of German-Irish descent and spoke no French, but to no avail. He eventually learned French on the job. Some air fields offered French courses for the U.S. instructors, though the instructors I interviewed years later don't recall them.

The first detachment of French air cadets, about 100 enlisted men and officers, left Africa and sailed for the States on June 14, 1943. On arrival, a train took them to Craig Field for processing.

Years later, I asked one of that first group, René Levêque, what he thought of Alabama.

"Alabama? Alabama? What did I care about Alabama? We were in America!"

Jean Pichon, who arrived with the second French detachment, was amazed at what he saw. He had grown up in Bordeaux, and when he'd left the previous year, the town had been battered by food shortages, blackouts, and executions carried out by the Germans at night. Pichon remembers well his first impressions of 1943 America: "Everyone was happy. There were factories going, there was work, money, plenty to eat. And at night everything was lit up!" At his first meal at an Air Forces facility, he couldn't believe all the food laid out: eggs, butter, meat, milk...

The young recruits received their primary training at the Alabama Institute of Aeronautics at Van de Graaf Field, near Tuscaloosa, a field that had been recently carved out of farmland. Civilian instructors conducted primary training through interpreters, including, according to the Tuscaloosa News, "Mrs. Marguerite Taliaferro, a University French teacher, and Mrs. Gerrie Thielens, Tuscaloosa author." On the flightline, instructors told students what maneuvers they

would practice, and the translators did their best to explain the upcoming lesson. The News described the process as follows: "Before flying periods American instructors address Frenchmen on the flightline in long slow voices. Interpreters, waiting for convenient pauses, blaze out the same thing in lightning French.

"The students, on an average of 22 to 24 years old, lean and blackened by the African sun, listen eagerly, hang on every word."

In PT-17 Stearman trainers, instructors used hand signals to indicate the next maneuver, such as a climbing turn, a lazy-eight, or a power-on stall. (Later, hand signals were standardized and explained in French-language instructional materials.) René Levêque recalled inflight communication in his *Aerospace Historian* article: "The PT-17 Stearman used in primary training in 1943 was a 200 hp biplane with a narrow undercarriage, an open cockpit, only basic instruments, and no electronic intercom system. When the instructor had something to say, he talked into a kind of funnel, hoping that the roar of the engine, the hiss of the slipstreams, and the lack of concentration, or the bewilderment of his student did not cancel his message. When his words did reach attentive ears, it was always garbled, and almost invariably in a foreign language. Well planned lessons previewed on the ground with the instructor and a translator and strictly adhered to in the air were a must, with arms, head, finger, and hand language to the rescue."

Once they were back on the ground, the students were critiqued. "Regardez bien autour de vous!" ("Look around") was a typical post-flight comment, as well as "Ne vous crispez pas!" ("Don't tighten up"). But the flight instructors never were able to come up with a French equivalent of "Get on the ball!"

French texts and soundtracks for training films weren't available until January 1944, and formal English language training did not begin until April, 10 months after the arrival of the first detachment.

Nonetheless, the first group of 100 achieved an impressive 75 percent success rate at primary training and thus avoided reassignment to navigator or other non-pilot training. (Socially, they appeared to have been successful as well: The August 14, 1943 issue of the military *Training News* reported that "Americans at Van de Graaf like the enthusiastic, voluble French better than the reserved British cadets who preceded them.") In September, the pilots moved on to Gunter Field for basic training.

Basic posed new challenges for the French: instrument flying, night flying, cross-country flying—all without interpreters. The cadets trained on the BT-13 Vultee Valiant, which was bigger and heavier than the Stearman and also had a two-way radio and a dual-pitch propeller. In 10 weeks of training, each student pilot logged about 70 hours in the BT-13.

Basic was a learning experience for both instructor and student. My father's Cajun French had an antiquated vocabulary that reminded the students of language from a 200-year-old book, but it served him well. "We were at home with French," he says. "I think they understood us better than some of the instructors who learned it in college." He created a

dictionary for his fellow instructors of common aviation terms, with the French words spelled phonetically.

Problems other than language cropped up. Compared with Americans, the French had more vision problems that eventually disqualified them. They were also shorter, perhaps due to a poor diet in the years after World War I. Some French students compensated by using extra cushions on their seats. Later, the AT-6s' rudder pedals were fitted with extenders.

The U.S. Army Air Forces' History of Gunter Field, June–December, 1943 describes how the French students' approach to flight training differed from that of U.S. students: "They [the French] have the old world conception of education. That is, they are more interested in the theory than are our cadets, so they are more favorably disposed toward the Ground School compared to our cadets who are more practical and think that only flying is important."

U.S. officials made concessions to some cultural differences. For example, the French military included "aspirants"; these were analogous to U.S. "flight officers," but without a commission. So Turner Field officials let the aspirants there live in the student officers' quarters and frequent the officers' club.

Instructors remember that some French cadets, particularly those from rural areas, lacked mechanical ability. "A lot of them hadn't even been around cars," recalls Jack Wishnick. "I mean, we could at least adjust a carburetor." But he respected their courage and desire to fly, especially considering what many of them had gone through to escape German occupation. "Some of them had walked across the Pyrenees," he says.

Basic training was a high-pressure, potentially dangerous business, especially for those still scrambling to learn a second language. Initially, the French accident rate in basic was higher than that for U.S. cadets. My father once saw a formation takeoff in which the French student, instead of turning smoothly, turned hard left, colliding with another airplane and killing himself and his instructor. (Not all the accidents were the pilot's fault, though. Once, a Gunter ground crew forgot to replace an aircraft's gas tank cap, and as soon as the French student made his first maneuver in the craft, fuel spilled onto the engine and set it on fire. The aircraft went down behind a hill. Sometime later, the student pilot walked through the base's front gate carrying his parachute and announced sadly, "J'ai perdu mon avion"—I lost my airplane.)

As time went by and both students and instructors became better at each other's languages, the French cadets' accident rate dropped to about the level of the U.S. cadets. Tighter discipline on the ground also helped cut accidents, especially on solo flights. "In the early stages of the French program, instructors were allowed to maintain a friendly and informal relationship with the students," recounts one report. "It was felt that they had undergone great hardships, shown great initiative, and were in a difficult position, being in a strange country. In 1944, in order to lower the accident rate, and to put the program on the same basis as the American program, the relationship of instructor and student was limited strictly to the flight line, and [conversational] subjects [were confined to] flying, while on the line."

Adjustments made on both sides seemed to help. Of the first group of 75 French cadets at Gunter, 72 graduated and earned high praise. According to an Army report, they had shown “zealous enthusiasm” in most aspects of training.

Still, the language problems that had surfaced early in training sometimes continued into advanced training. According to a history of Craig Field, where pilots received single-engine instruction: “During the first part of their training [at Craig], the eager students had the tendency to indicate that they understood the instructions or explanations of their instructors, when actually the procedure under discussion was still a little vague to them.”

Eventually, 24 detachments of French cadets moved through primary, basic, and advanced training, earning their wings after more than 200 hours of training flights.

In 1998, I began asking my father about his experience training the Free French. He had flown with them, cussed at them, and celebrated with them at graduation, but he knew little about what had happened to them after their training days.

In August 1945, the French government had awarded my father French pilot wings, citing his contribution to the liberation of France. After the war, he served as a pilot in the Air Force Reserves, retiring as a captain in the 1950s and later working in corporate finance. We wondered if any of the French students had also stayed in aviation, so we placed a notice in a French air force publication. The responses started coming in:

“I was a student pilot at Gunter Field from July 3 to August 31, 1945,” wrote Andre Graveret. “I left the [French] air force in 1966 after 25 years of service with the rank of colonel.”

Jean Helye wrote that he remembered flying with my father when he was 19 years old. The retired French air force general had flown in combat in Indochina and Algeria, and later worked for the French aerospace manufacturer Aerospatiale.

Isabelle Degoy wrote, “My father, Marc Roche (class 45-1), on his return to France pursued a career in the French air force. He had tours of duty in France, Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Indochina, and Germany and flew on combat airplanes from the Spitfire to the Mirage.”

“I have some commonality with your father as I myself was a flight instructor on the T-6 during the Korean War,” wrote René Levy.

Before long, we learned of the Association Personnel Navigant Formé en Amérique—the Association of Flying Personnel Trained in America. The group’s reunions, publications, and Web site enable the former French cadets to keep their memories alive. My father and I submitted a notice to the APNFA publication and more letters and e-mails arrived.

In August 2001, we met René Levêque. The former trainee at Gunter became an instructor there and later married an American and settled in Alabama. He taught French and Spanish and until recently was an active pilot. At his home in Wetumpka, Alabama, he and my father pored over logbooks and photo albums. The two shared memories of Gunter: round-the-clock flight schedules, hurrying a landing when a thunderstorm was approaching, and, when things simmered down, the pool parties at the officers’ club.

The following year, we accepted an invitation to attend an APNFA luncheon at the Aero Club de Paris and visit several pilots in France. When the group's president, French air force General Theodore Mahlberg, addressed the group, he thanked my father and added, "You instructors were the first ones to teach us how to conduct ourselves as professionals—as pilots and in our careers."

General Jean Helye brought his photo album, with images of his year in America. One photo showed a smooth-faced 19-year-old peering out of an AT-6 cockpit; another, a young man in a flightsuit gulping down a Coca-Cola.

All had stories about their days after Gunter Field. Jean Kisling served as a P-47 instructor in Michigan. After the war, he embarked on a career as an Air France pilot, eventually logging more than 26,000 hours. In 1945, Robert Camby served as a B-26 Marauder instructor near Dodge City, Kansas. Eager to join his friends from the first detachment, he was finally posted to Naples, Italy; a week later, the war in Europe ended.

Hugues Robin opened his Paris home to us and pulled out maps, memorabilia, and photographs, including one of him and three buddies relaxing in front of their barracks in Alabama. The handsome teenagers smiling back at us seemed to say, "We were the lucky ones"—to be 18, flying, and discovering America.

All the French pilots who had trained in the United States had received both French and U.S. wings, and at Maurice Pochet's apartment near Cannes, he showed us his, encased in a glass globe. After training, Pochet flew the P-47 Thunderbolt, the war's largest single-engine fighter, over Germany. "Oh, that was a great airplane," my father said. Pochet made the thumbs-up sign. "A champion," he agreed.

Jean Pichon welcomed us to his retirement home in southwest France. His training done, he had served with a French fighter group in Italy, flying P-36s, P-39s, and P-63s. He went on to fly for Air France, a job he held for 40 years. His living room was filled with evidence of his 26,000 hours flying DC-3s, DC-4s, Constellations, and other Air France transports.

On Veteran's Day, 2001, my father, my two sisters, and I stood quietly at Oakwood Cemetery in Montgomery, Alabama, as a bagpiper wailed a tune and French and British flags snapped in the wind. About 150 people gathered to pay tribute to fallen French and British pilots of World War II. Twenty of the 100 French pilots who died in the United States are buried at Oakwood, alongside 80 British pilots. My father, 81, and René Levêque, 79, placed a wreath from the APNFA on a memorial plaque.

The ceremony is held every November on the peaceful, windy hillside that is the pilots' final resting place. Levêque attends every year.

The cemetery is the most visible reminder that French student pilots once raced across the skies of Alabama. Van de Graaf Field is now Tuscaloosa Municipal Airport. Gunter Field, now Gunter Annex, is no longer an airfield but an Air Force educational facility.

In France, the signs of the remarkable collaboration are also modest. Outside Paris, at Le Bourget Airport's Musée de l'Air et de l'Espace, a small PT-17 Stearman sits among World War II aircraft that are far more impressive-looking. Still, the Stearman bears witness to those days on a faraway dusty field when nervous young men first took to the air in the hope of flying for a liberated France.