

General De Gaulle Visits Selfridge

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At the close of World War II, Selfridge Field was honored with a visit from one of the most prominent figures of the day, General Charles De Gaulle.

General De Gaulle flew into Selfridge Field on August 27, 1945, while in the United States to call on President Harry S. Truman. The purpose of his stop in Macomb County was to review the Free French cadets who had been stationed at Selfridge since March of 1945 to receive bomber training from Army Air Forces personnel.

De Gaulle's stop at Selfridge was brief, but it was not without ceremony and flair. The first foreign head of state to stop at the base was given a booming 21-gun salute as he stepped from his C-54 transport. After offering a crisp salute to the assembled American troops standing at attention on the flightline, the general dropped his proper military decorum and gathered his French cadets about him to encourage them much in the manner of a football coach.



The famed leader of the Free French offered greetings from home to his troops, then extended thanks to his American hosts:

I especially wanted to stop at Selfridge Field, this important American Air base, where the French Cadets receive the finishing touch to their training, to show my interest in there young students and to bring the thanks of France to the American people and their American Air Force for their help they have extended to us during the war, towards the formation of our crews and the rebuilding of our air force.

Following his address, De Gaulle saluted both nations, boarded his plane, and was gone. The visit had lasted only 40 minutes, but made a great impression upon his American hosts and was an

immeasurable morale boost for his French cadets.

The Free French personnel arrived at Selfridge for medium bomber training in the spring of 1945, just as the Allied forces were closing in on Germany. The aviators were under the command of Capt. Francois Serralta, who had lost his leg as a result of combat action over North Africa in 1942. The young men in his command ranged in age from 19 to 23, and many of them had lost both parents, brothers and sisters, and all worldly possessions during the German occupation of their homeland. When they came to America for training under the lend-lease program, they were filled with zeal for their task.



photos from [Air Force Historical Research Agency](#) contributed by P. Laverdet

Their training here was not without cost, however. A French pilot and three French enlisted crew members perished when their bomber nosed into Lake St. Clair about 5 miles from the base during a training mission in August, 1945. In October, a B-29 carrying six French crewmen mysteriously exploded in flight over Flat Rock, Michigan. Killed were Corp. Georges Voillemin, Sgt. Jean Pietri, Aspirant Ange M. Leca, Pvt. 2nd Class Francois Maniacci, Sgt. Pierre Audonnet and Sgt. Maurice M. Bouhier. Another French flier, Georges Laverdet, was killed in an automobile accident unrelated to his training.

The French cadets remained at Selfridge until February, 1946, when a formal retreat ceremony was held at the base and the fliers departed for their now-liberated homeland. During their 11-month stay, 700 French officers and 2,300 enlisted men had trained at Selfridge Field.

For further information about the Free French and the visit of General De Gaulle, we recommend:

- "Free French to Train at Selfridge," *Mount Clemens Daily Monitor-Leader*, March 20, 1945, p.1, col.7.
- "Colorful Soldier of France Heads Selfridge Group: French Troops Here Have Bitter Knowledge of Hun," *Mount Clemens Daily Monitor-Leader*, April 3, 1945, p.7, col.3.
- "Pilot Dies in Mid-Air Collision: Selfridge Field Crash Boats Hunt 2nd Flier," *Mount Clemens Daily Monitor-Leader*, July 20, 1945, p.1, col.1.
- "Fear All Dead in Plunge of Selfridge Ship," *Mount Clemens Daily Monitor-Leader*, August 2, 1945, p.1.
- "De Gaulle Visits Selfridge: French Leader Reviews Troops at Air Base," *Mount Clemens Daily Monitor-Leader*, August 28, 1945, p.1, col.1.
- "Selfridge Bomber Carries Six to Fiery Death," *Mount Clemens Daily Monitor-Leader*, October 19, 1945, p.1, col.5.
- "French Troops Leave Air Base," *Mount Clemens Daily Monitor-Leader*, February 19, 1946, p.1.