LCAFB stands where rice was once king

(Editor's note: Chennault Air Force Base was deactivated in 1962 and the property turned over to the General Services Administration. The Calcasieu Parish Police Jury purchased the base from GSA in 1965 and leased it with a purchase option to Lockheed Aircraft Service Co.)

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From a rice paddy on the east side of Lake Charles to a "ready to fight" B-47 Strategic Air Command Air Division, is in short, the history of Lake Charles Air Force Base.

Plans for the base began in the spring of 1941 when the city purchased a tract of land for the base. Within a short time, official approval of the location was obtained.

Actual construction began in August, 1941, and the field designated a flying school on March 28, 1942. During the war years the base turned out more than 2,000 aviation cadets for the old Army Air Corps.

A general curtailment of activities followed the end of the war and in October, 1946, the base was deactivated.

In early spring of 1951, the B-29 flying 44th Bombardment Wing under the command Col. C. J. Cochrane moved to Lake Charles and reactivated the base.

Activation of the base brought forth many problems, not the least of which was housing the 44th. Wing Housing Plan brought national attention to Lake Charles and was adopted at other Air Force bases in which a shortage of housing existed. The plan was aimed at placing additional rental units on the market.

By September, 1951, the base was in full operation with various facilities such as clubs and athletic fields opened. The first issue of the base's newspaper, the SKYWAY TIMES was published. This newspaper boasted as being the largest in the entire Air Force with a 24 page paper and more than 5,000 copies printed for its first issue.

Construction of a gigantic runway began. The runway, completed about a year later, is 10,000 feet long with a depth of 13 to 17 inches. More than a million square yards of cement were poured. A permanent headquarters building was occupied by the 44th Wing also.

On October 19, 1951, the 68th Strategic Reconnaissance Wing (M) was activated at the base under the command of Col. Lowell G. Sidwell. The wing was to undergo operational training under the 44th Wing. Every man in the wing from the commander to the line mechanic received training from airmen in their equivalent job in the 44th Wing. Later, the 86th Wing was assigned permanently to the base.

Starting the year 1952, $7 million were allotted for base construction and a defense housing section was opened just outside the base.

May 17, 1952, the first Armed Forces Day was celebrated at the base with over 25,000 citizens of Southwest Louisiana crowding the flight line for a close look at a large variety of Air Force aircraft.

The base came of age in June with a reorganization under a Strategic Air Command air division. Col. Cochrane was named 806th Air Division commander and the 68th was redesignated to a bombardment wing.

Control of the base was passed from the 21st Air Division to the war -famed Second Air Force. Col. David G. Alford was named commander of the Air Base Group activated under the 806th Air Division with the job of providing support for the 44th and 68th Bombardment Wings.

The 44th Wing continued its job of training Far East Air Force B-29 replacement crews.

General Raymond L. Winn arrived on the base November 3, 1952, to become commander of the 806th Air Division. Later, a construction program for the base totaling over $23 million was announced. This included construction which was underway, under contract, or authorized.

The New Year was celebrated with the news that the 44th Bomb Wing would go on temporary duty in North Africa as a part of the Strategic Air Command's policy of rotating combat wings to advanced bases for training.

During May the base welcomed its first jet aircraft, a T-33 which was used as a transition aircraft for B-29 pilots to jet. A ground control approach unit was set up on the base runway to aid aircraft in landing in inclement weather.

Another construction authorization of over $250 thousand was announced for a new chapel, officers' mess, dental clinic and service club.

Climax of the year's activities came at 1:35 p.m. June 23 when the first B-47 to be assigned to the 44th was "greeted" by thousands of airmen on the base flight line. With the later arrival of KC-97 Stratotankers for in-flight, B-47 refueling, the 44th began full scale training operations.