

Victor's Field

The Story of Chapman Field

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In the southeast corner of the Village of Pinecrest, there is a road that seems to have a mind of its own. Diving diagonally southeastward through the regular grid of avenues and streets, Chapman Field Drive crosses Ludlam Road on a beeline to Biscayne Bay, terminating at Old Cutler Road.

Less than a half mile south of that intersection on Old Cutler now stands the entrance to three prominent local landmarks: The Deering Bay Yacht & Country Club, the United States Department of Agriculture's Subtropical Horticulture Research Station and Dade County's Chapman Field Park. All three properties share a common ancestry, the U.S. Army's Cutler Aerial Gunnery Field, later renamed, Chapman Field.

Cutler Field

America had remained neutral for the first three years of World War I, which ignited in Europe in 1914. During that time, the US military began to closely watch the development of air warfare over England, France and Germany and realize the advantages of having aircraft over the battlefield. By the time America entered the war in 1917, Congress was ready to appropriate \$640 million for military aeronautics.

As powered flight was still in its infancy, there were few American pilots and fewer air bases on which to train them. In Florida, only Pensacola's Naval Air Station was operational at the time. New airfields were built throughout the country, including seaplane bases at Key West and at Dinner Key in Coconut Grove.

So, in 1917, 850 acres of pineland, scrub, marsh and seashore were purchased from Walter H. Browne of Kings County, New York and the Avocado Land Company of Jackson County, Missouri for a total cost of \$71,500. The northwestern corner of the property stood at what is now the intersection of Old Cutler Road and SW 67th Avenue, or Ludlam Road. The property line stretched from that point both eastward to the bay and also southward to SW 144th Street, jogging east to SW 64th Avenue and then southward again to the bay.

By September 1918, the dredging of a portion of the bayside marsh was completed, creating a landing field, a lagoon for water landings, and access channels to Biscayne Bay. Roads were constructed, wells were dug and water lines were laid underground. The new air base tapped into Miami's electrical grid and boilers were installed for steam heat.

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The Cutler Aerial Gunnery Field was a state-of-the-art facility for the Army flyers that came to complete their training in the use of guns in aircraft. Built as a model town on the high ground of a coral rock ridge, the base had a sewage system, a hospital with an operating room and an entertainment center, provided by the Knights of Columbus and the YMCA.

The coral, sand and clay landing field occupied what is now the golf course for Deering Bay. At its western edge, a row of hangers and maintenance shops sat beside the field, just east of what is now SW 60th Avenue, the entrance road into the Horticulture Research Station. Today, also within the USDA Station, an access road west of and parallel to 60th Avenue is a remnant of the old Ingraham Highway, which was relocated about three quarters of a mile to the west as the base was constructed. Ingraham Highway would eventually be renamed Old Cutler Road.

Victor

Victor Emmanuel Chapman was born in New York on April 17, 1890. The son of noted writer John Jay Chapman and grandson of Henry Grafton Chapman, the former president of the New York Stock Exchange, Victor was born a millionaire.

A sensitive and empathetic boy, Victor much preferred to be outdoors, exploring the woods and dreaming of adventure. As a schoolboy, he would sometimes harness a sled to a horse and while standing on the sled, drive around the countryside at a full gallop. It was common to see Victor dancing along the gutter of a barn roof, doing battle with a hornet's nest or falling from a pine tree, guiding himself down by the breaking branches.

Victor's free spirit was tempered at a young age by two deep and personal tragedies. At age six, his mother died in childbirth, plunging the devoted child into a fathomless grief. Six years later, Victor's younger brother, John, died tragically after falling into the torrent of a rapid river. The boy had been left alone by Victor for a moment, stumbled into the river, and unable to swim, was lost. The grief and guilt of this tragedy sent Victor into a period of sullen solitude. Slowly, the power of youth, time and the comfort of family brought Victor back to life.

Wealth and family tradition eventually brought him to Harvard, but Victor was a dull and uninspired student. Graduating from Harvard in 1913, he moved back to Paris, where he had lived for a year prior to entering college. His love of scenery and color moved him to study at the studio of classical architect, Georges Gromort, in preparation for his admittance into the renowned Beaux-Arts school of art and architecture.

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In August of 1914, France entered the Great War and the Chapmans retreated to London in anticipation of hostilities. Upon arrival, Victor walked the streets of London alone, finding them teeming with patriotic fervor. After he returned to the hotel, he informed his father and stepmother that he wished to enlist in the French Foreign Legion. His father, in an attempt to protect his adventurous son, suggested that Victor's motivation was frivolous and irresponsible in light of his studies and America's neutrality. Victor sullenly acquiesced and left the room. As soon as he had gone, his stepmother, who had grown quite close to the young man, reproached her husband, "He has submitted through his humility and through his reverence for you. But I had rather see him lying on the battlefield than see that look on his face." Within days, Victor was in France.

He spent a year as a machine gunner in the trenches of France, away from heavy fire, but subject to sporadic sniping and the filth, boredom and privation common to those in the infantry. Tall and solid, with the build of a linebacker, Victor gladly volunteered to dig trenches, build shelters and peel potatoes, anything to keep busy. His father wrote of him in his Memoir, "Victor could eat anything, sleep on anything, lift anything, endure anything. He never had enough of roughing it until he joined the Foreign Legion, and his year in the trenches made him taller, straighter, compactor, and gave him the walk, smile and eye of a self-confident man."

Victor caught a stray bullet in the right bicep one morning while running between trenches. He had a friend bandage the wound, rather than retreat to the rear for hospital care. "My friend understands bandaging as well as a nurse," he pleaded. "Let us attend to it, Sir. I don't want to play hookey." Only once did Victor allow the tragedy of war to bring him low. His best friend, Kohn, the Polish mathematician, was shot in the head as he and Victor leaned over the edge of the trench. Chapman carried his friend to first aid as he died in Victor's arms. "Save him, Sir," he cried to the surgeon, sobbing, "and I'll give you a hundred thousand francs." The Major surgeon could only reply, "All is over, my friend, control yourself."

The Lafayette Escadrille

Among the Chapman family's many influential connections at that time was Norman Prince, a Harvard grad and Chicago lawyer with an estate in France and a passionate love of aviation. Prince travelled to Paris in January 1915, with the idea of creating an aero squadron, composed exclusively of Americans, to join the French Army. Through Prince's persistent efforts and the diplomatic assistance of John Chapman, the Escadrille Americaine (American Squadron) was created in April 1916. The new aero squadron boosted French morale and fascinated American readers, but created a diplomatic problem for the U.S. government, officially neutral in the conflict. The name of the unit was therefore changed to the Escadrille Lafayette (or the Americanized, Lafayette Escadrille) on December 2, 1916.

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At the suggestion of his father, Victor sent an inquiry to Prince and found himself transferred to French aviation in August 1915. He served as a bombardier for about a month, was accepted for flight training in September, and received his flying papers as a pilot the following January. By April of 1916, Victor Chapman had become one of the nine founding members of the Lafayette Escadrille.

As John Chapman writes, "Victor's entry into the American Aviation was, to him, like being made a Knight. It transformed, one might almost say, transfigured him. If you could place him in a position of danger and let him watch scenery, he was in heaven. I do not think he was ever completely happy in his life till the day he got his flying papers."

Initially stationed at Luxeuil in eastern France for training, the squadron was soon transferred to Bar-le-Duc, about 50 miles south of the raging battle of Verdun. Twice a day or more, pilots would take their machines on patrol in small groups over the enemy lines on two-hour missions. The aircraft initially flown by the squadron was the French-built, Nieuport 11. Powered by an 80-horsepower engine, the single-seat biplane could reach a maximum speed of 85 mph and was fitted with a single machine gun, mounted on the top wing above the pilot's head.

On the morning of June 17, 1916, on patrol with three of his mates, the restless Chapman crossed over the Meuse River into enemy airspace, attacking a heavily armed German two-seater. His alarmed comrades immediately fell to his aid, and after a fierce battle, forced the German to dive for safety. Though the rest of his group had quite enough for the morning, Victor wasn't satisfied with the near miss. After refueling at Vadelaincourt airfield, and now without escort, he returned to the scene of the battle and soon found himself attacked by a squadron of five German planes. The leader of the squadron flew with extraordinary skill, in the jet-black Fokker of German ace, Oswald Boelcke. Anticipating Chapman's every move, the German maneuvered ever closer to the American, now fighting and flying for his very life. Boelcke, considered the father of air fighting tactics and mentor to the infamous Red Baron, raked Chapman's Nieuport with gunfire, severing two wing supports and a control wire, piercing both the windshield and a tire, a bullet ricocheting off the fuselage, creasing Victor's scalp. Blood streaming down his face, Chapman held on to the broken support rod with one hand, while steering with the other, breaking for the safety of nearby Froidos airfield when an opportune moment arrived.

After dinner and some bandaging to his head and to his machine, Victor flew home to Bar-le-Duc. True to form, Chapman refused both hospitalization and a respite in Paris, insisting on returning to the air the next day. Only the promise of a new 110 horsepower Nieuport 16 from his Captain, Georges Thénault, managed to persuade him to take a few days off.

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Oranges & Chocolate

Two days later, Victor's Pennsylvania-born and Texas-trained squadron mate, Clyde Balsley, was critically injured over Verdun and was taken to the hospital in Vadelaincourt. For the next several days, Victor flew his Nieuport 11 to the hospital at least once a day to visit with Balsley and cheer him up. Clyde, feverish with thirst, was unable to take any liquids for several days, owing to the ten bullet fragments that had perforated his intestine. Chapman asked the surgeon if Balsley might be permitted to suck the juice from oranges and the surgeon gave his consent, although there were no oranges to be found in the area. "Guess we'll fix that", said Victor. "I'll get you those oranges if I have to fly to Paris."

The weather was good on the morning of June 23, 1916, and Victor was eager to try his new, powerful, Nieuport 16. His head still bandaged, he flew the morning sortie over Verdun and his group returned to Bar-le-Duc at about nine o'clock for rest and refueling. Chapman had a hard landing that morning, breaking a support strap on the new plane. After lunch, a new strap and some fresh sparkplugs courtesy of Louis Bley, his French mechanic, Chapman returned to the field for the twelve-thirty patrol, carrying with him a bundle of oranges and chocolate, wrapped in newspaper. He handed the bundle to Louis as he entered the cockpit, instructing him to help him stow the package, saying, "I shall take a turn over the lines, and when I get back I shall stop at Vadelaincourt. I shall take the oranges and chocolate to poor Balsley at the hospital, for I think there is little hope of saving him." Shaking hands with the mechanic, he added, "Au revoir, I shall not be long."

Captain Thénault, future ace, Raoul Lufbery and his friend and mentor, Norman Prince, were already airborne as Chapman readied his machine for the afternoon sortie. Arriving at the lines, the three found two enemy fighters and dived on them. As they engaged, three more Germans entered the battle, overwhelming the Americans. After a brief skirmish, Thénault, Lufbery and Prince broke back across the French lines for base, without ever having seen Victor. Chapman, meanwhile, was just arriving at the scene. Seeing below him the nest of five Germans, he pushed the throttle to maximum and dropped, firing, into the thick of them. Two of the Germans immediately broke off and headed back to their field, but a third, German ace, Kurt Wintgens, took advantage of the mismatch, maneuvered into position and fired. Chapman, mortally wounded, slumped in the cockpit. The Nieuport, accelerating and out of control, had both wings sheared off by the terrific speed of its nearly vertical descent. Engine screaming, the bullet-riddled fuselage crashed into the ground near Douaumont, about five miles behind enemy lines.

On that clear, June afternoon, on a field in eastern France, 26-year-old Victor Emmanuel Chapman became the first American aviator to die in battle.

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Reaction to the death of Victor Chapman was enormous, both in France and in America. A funeral service was held at the American Church in Paris on July 4, a fitting accident of date that lent all the more international significance to the occasion. "America has sent us this sublime youth," wrote a French woman in attendance, "and our gratitude for him is such that it flows back upon his country. Never since the outbreak of the war has public sentiment been more deeply aroused." Chapman was posthumously awarded both the Médaille Militaire (Military Medal) and the Croix de Guerre (War Cross) for acts of bravery and heroism in action against an enemy force.

*Great-hearted, loyal, reckless for a friend;
Not counting risks, cool handed, clear of sight,
He gave himself to serve a lofty end,
And, like an eagle soaring in the light,
On wings unruffled by the wind's chance breath
He sought, and seeks his goal with steadfast flight,
Victor, indeed, in name, in life, in death!*

John Heard, Jr.

Chapman Field

On November 15, 1918, four days after the signing of the armistice that ended World War I, the Cutler Aerial Gunnery Field airfield was formally renamed the Victor Chapman Military Reservation by General W.L. Kenly, Chief of the Army's Division of Military Aeronautics.

The base was declared surplus in 1921 by the War Department and was to be put up for sale. Dr. David Fairchild, a plant explorer in charge of the Bureau's Office of Foreign Seed and Plant Introduction, took interest in the abandoned base and believed that it could be developed into an "Ellis Island for plants" - a place where sensitive plants could be bred for resistance to colder temperatures prior to their introduction to areas of the northern U.S. On April 26, 1923, the first trees were planted at the new USDA Plant Introduction Garden. The USDA acquired 95 acres of the old Army base initially, added another 65 acres in 1935, 37 more in 1947, and so now occupies 197 acres on the northwest section of the original property.

The station, renamed the Subtropical Horticultural Research Station in 1972, has evolved into a facility with three primary missions: To serve as a developer for improved and better environmentally adapted tropical plants, including fruit and ornamental trees, for use by growers and other research facilities, to study the Caribbean fruit fly, which invaded Florida in 1965 and attacks many fruits, and to investigate changes to local agriculture that would result from the restoration of a natural flow of water in the Florida Everglades.

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As World War II began, the Army Air Corps planned to build a major air base in Dade County. The Chapman Field site was immediately considered for revival, and the effort was supported by local landowners, real estate brokers, businessmen and politicians. Dr. Fairchild and Col. Robert J. Montgomery, an attorney and horticulturist, who owned 80 acres of land at the intersection of Red Road and SW 120th Street (Montgomery Drive), led the fight against redevelopment. They argued that the thousands of acres of property that would be required for the new base would require flat land, something that the uneven coastal ridge of the area couldn't provide. Furthermore, the area was rapidly developing, increasing property values and rendering the acreage prohibitively expensive for purchase. The Air Corps agreed and as a result, we had the development of Homestead Air Force Base, rather than Chapman Field Air Force Base.

In August 1942, the Army leased the airfield at Chapman Field to the Embry-Riddle Company, for training of both civilian and military pilots. Women, including some University of Miami coeds, participated in the training at Chapman Field as WASPs (Women's Air Force Service Pilots). Embry-Riddle eventually relocated their flight school to Opa-locka in 1947, after Dade County turned down a request to make Chapman Field a commercial airport.

In November 1947, the Chapman Field property that was not in possession of the USDA was declared surplus by the federal government. The University of Miami acquired 150 acres that included most of the old airfield and hanger area. Dade County received the remainder of the property to the northeast.

Finding the Chapman Field property either unsuitable or too expensive for its purposes, The University of Miami leased 128 acres of its land to developer Ben Cooper in 1956. The following year, after Cooper agreed to spend \$250,000 in improvements to the adjacent park property, the county leased him an additional 48 acres, and he used the combined properties to build King's Bay Yacht & Country Club, a semi-private golf course and clubhouse, for the neighboring community. The Club property changed hands several times over the next thirty years and eventually, Edward Easton, Armando Codina and Jeb Bush partnered to form Deering Bay Associates, redeveloping the property in 1991, now 220 acres, into the Deering Bay Yacht & Country Club.

Dade County had ambitious plans for Chapman Field Park in 1949, including a swimming beach, hiking trails, and a boat marina. Envisioned as a companion to Matheson Hammock, development of the park was doomed from a lack of accessibility to the property, title acquisition problems, a lack of development funds, and encroaching residential development. The county built a trash and recycling center for household trash, tree and yard cuttings and demolition debris on the northwest edge of the park, which is still in use today.

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Approval of the \$3.9 million "Decade of Progress" bond in 1972 infused new life into the park development project. A 200-slip marina, bait and tackle facilities, dry boat storage, a boat ramp, utilities, restrooms and picnicking facilities were all planned initially, but the concerns of neighbors and environmental issues stalled and eventually dramatically altered the plan. Three lighted ball fields were constructed near the park entrance, but the idea of a marina was abandoned in favor of boat ramps that would serve more people, and more ecologically friendly ideas were developed, including canoeing and sailing on the manmade lakes and canals.

Between 2002 and 2006, the ball fields underwent extensive remodeling, through the use of \$580,000 in funds provided by the South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD). New clay and grass infields, dugouts, batting cages, lighting and shaded bleachers have all been completed.

In November 2008, the SFWMD Governing Board approved investing over \$300,000 in additional funds to help restore the 566-acre, Chapman Field Park. The park project is intended to achieve several objectives, including clearing exotic vegetation, removing solid waste, re-establishing red mangroves, restoring historic wildlife habitat and improving water quality in Biscayne Bay.

In the decades since those 850 acres of wilderness were secured, the properties of Chapman Field have maintained the spirit of Victor Chapman. Likely too humble to be comfortable with the honor of having an airfield named for him, Victor, ever the adventuring outdoorsman, would have certainly appreciated the diverse uses for the natural beauty found at the intersection of the Villages of Pinecrest, Coral Gables and Palmetto Bay.

Dr. Kenward is a lifelong resident of the Village of Pinecrest. He may be contacted through his website: www.kenwardmedia.com

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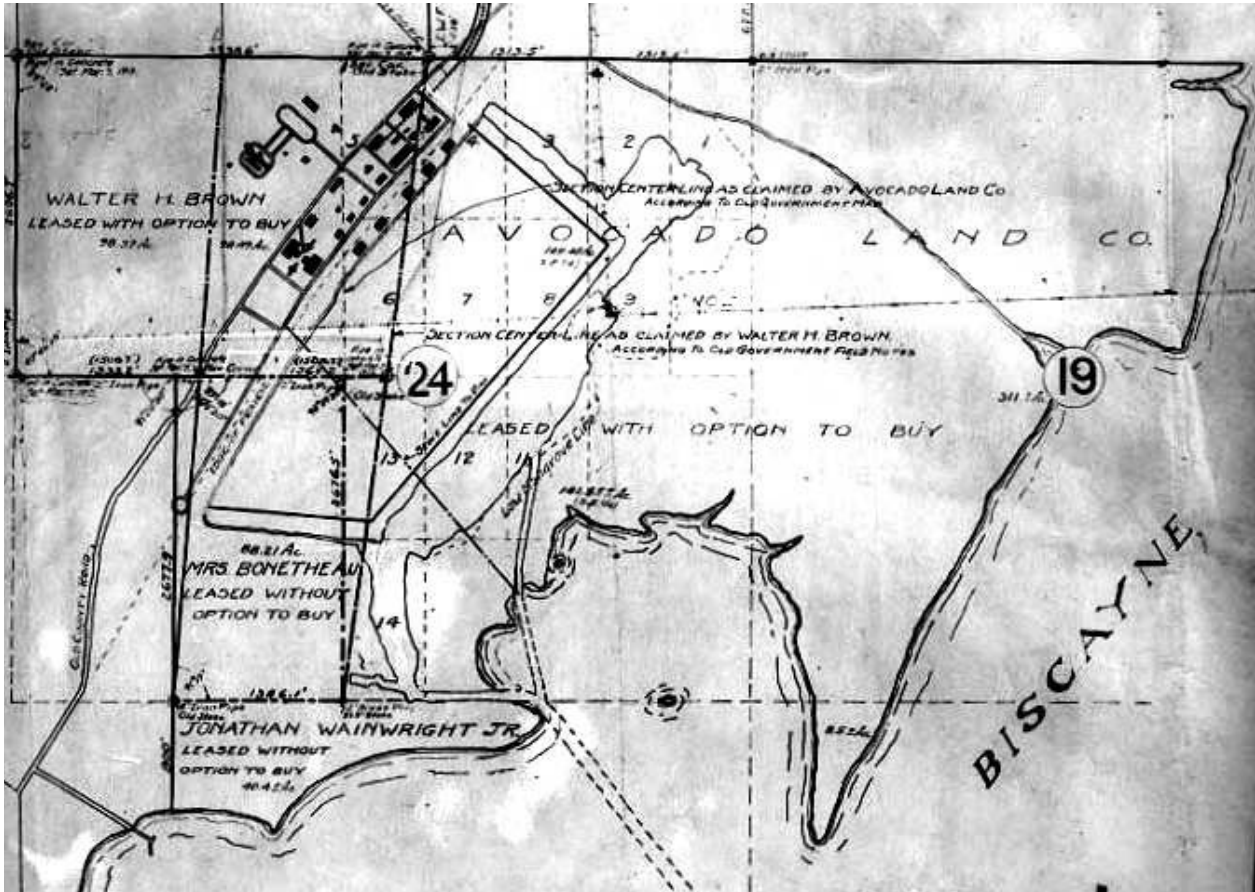
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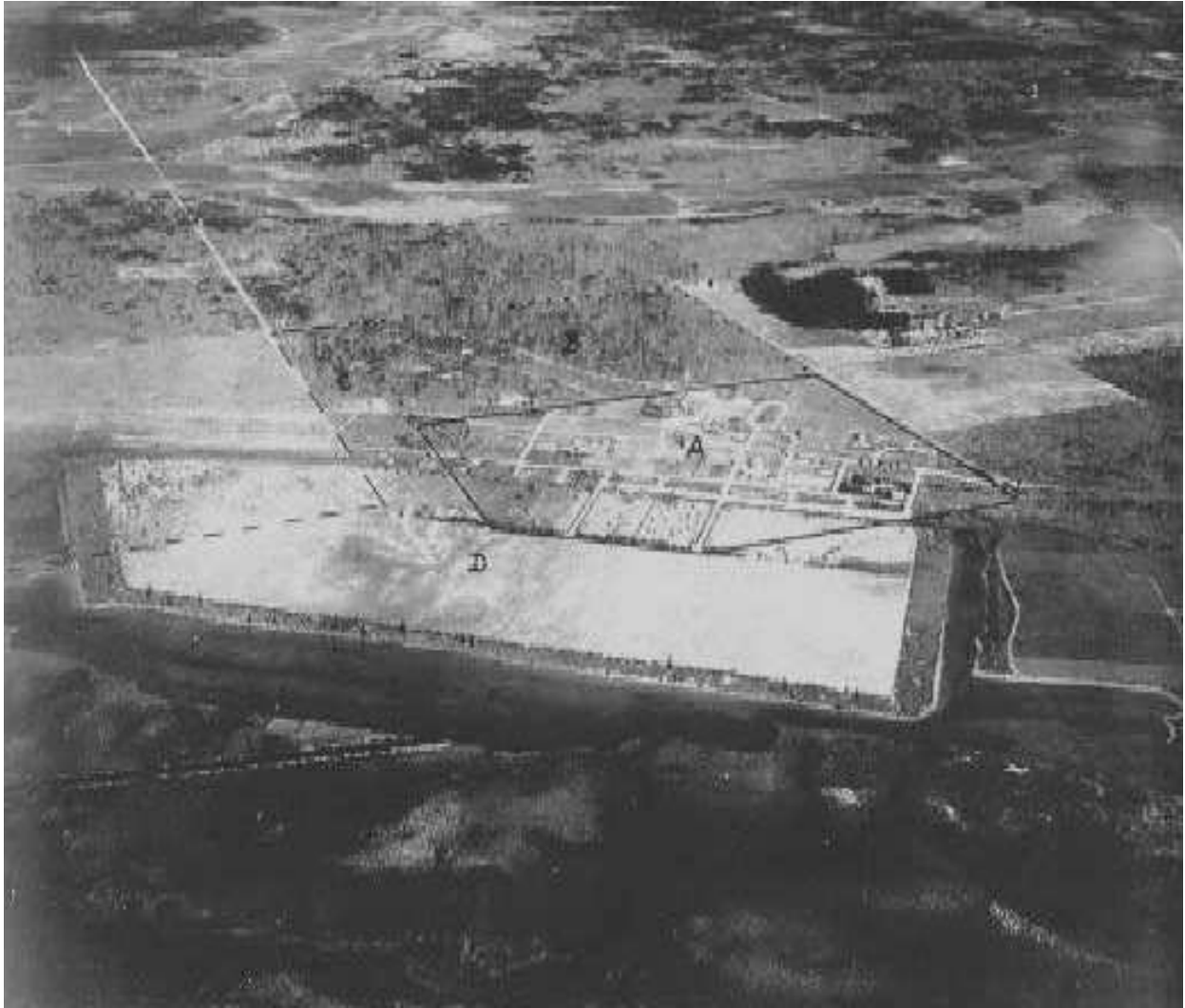
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A 1918 survey diagram of the Cutler Aerial Gunnery Field, later renamed Chapman Field

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A 1931 aerial view looking west-northwest at Chapman Field

Victor's Field

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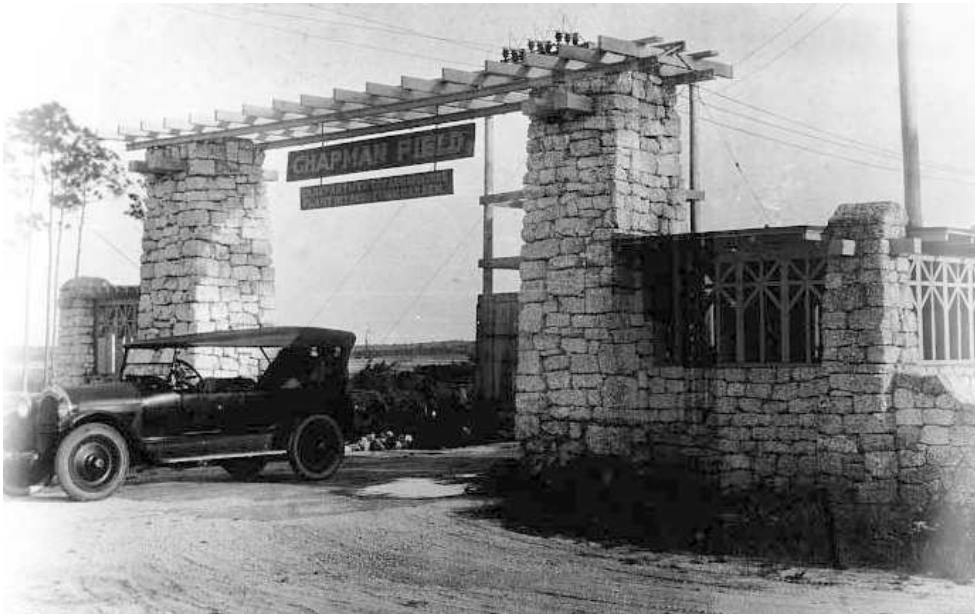
A 1938 USDA aerial photo of Chapman Field, from the Digital Library Center of the University of Florida's George A. Smathers Library

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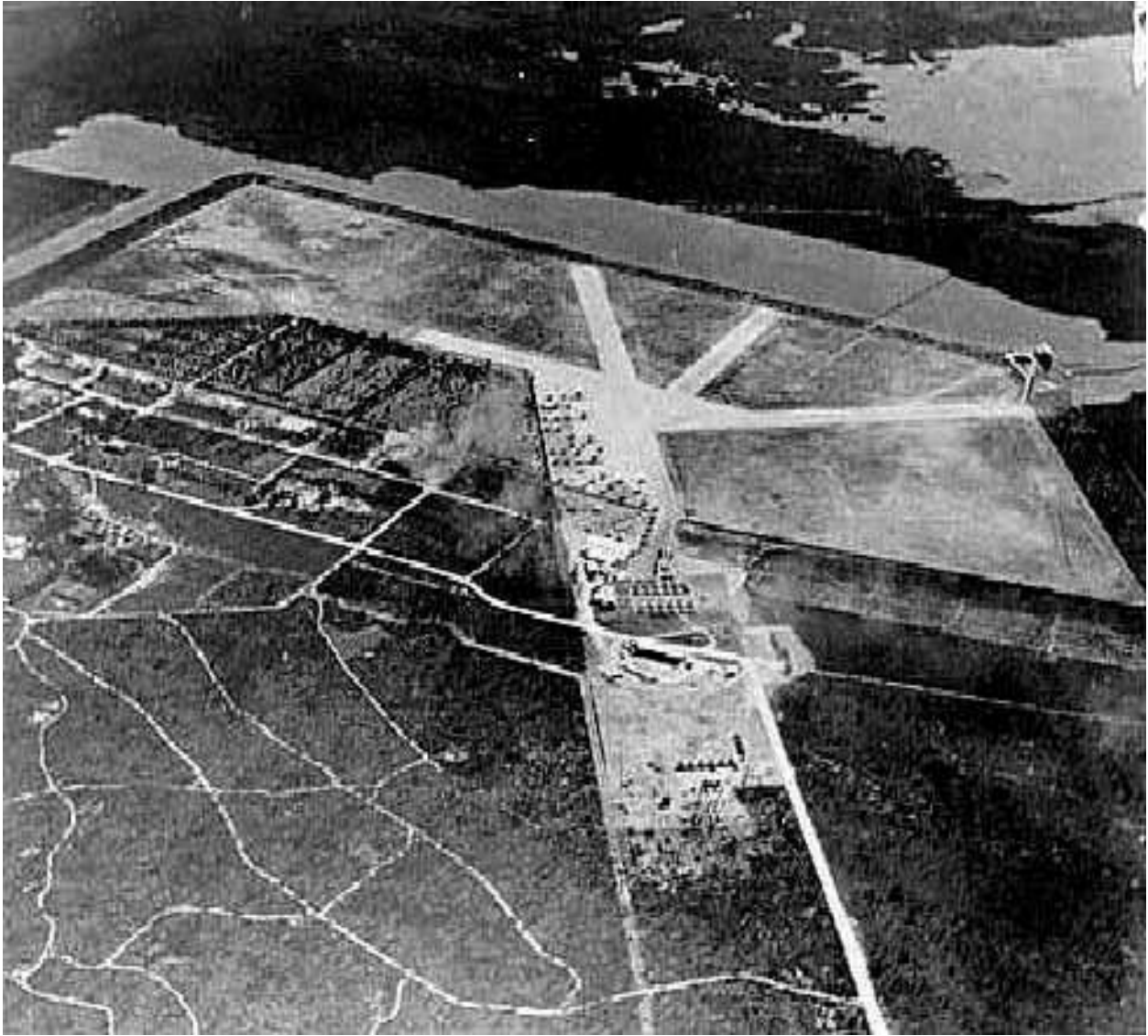
A 1940 aerial view looking north-northwest at Chapman Field



A view of the entrance gate to Chapman Field at Old Cutler Road

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A WW2-era aerial view looking east at Chapman Field

Victor's Field

The Story of Chapman Field



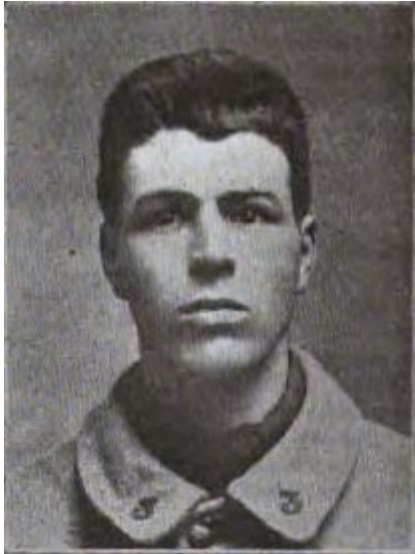
A WW2-era view of Chapman Field's Administration Building



Aerial photo of the site of Chapman Field, circa 2001

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Victor Emmanuel Chapman



Victor Chapman, Legionnaire

Victor's Field

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SOME OF THE AMERICANS WHO ARE FLYING FOR FRANCE

Left to right: Victor Chapman (killed), Elliot Cowdin, Bert Hall, Lieut. William Thaw, Capt. Thénault, Lieut. de Laage de Mux, Norman Prince (killed), Kiffin Rockwell (killed), and James McConnell

The Lafayette Escadrille

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Nieuport 11 with Lafayette Escadrille markings (Indian head decal)



Victor Chapman, pilot

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James McConnell, Kiffen Rockwell, Captain Georges Thénault, Norman Prince and Victor Chapman



Chapman's crash site near Douaumont (mislabeled, Beaumont), France