*connection*

It didn't start with "The Right Stuff."

Long before the military came to occupy Muroc Dry Lake, long before the site became a center of flight testing, the area of the Mojave Desert that surrounds what's now Edwards Air Force Base had "star appeal."

The picturesque quality of the dry lakes, their isolation and singularity have attracted Hollywood production companies since the 1920s – making it one of the film industry's favorite back lots.



**Sam Shepard, portraying Capt. Chuck Yeager in "The Right Stuff," escapes from a fiery crash**

Ranging from the 1923 silent production of Cecil B. DeMille's "The Ten Commandments" to Touchstone Pictures' "Armageddon," released on July 1, 1998, Edwards has provided the set, the extras – and sometimes the story – for a wide variety of movies and TV shows.

[Silent era](#)

[Golden era](#)

[Pancho Barnes](#)

[The Right Stuff](#)

[Aviation thrillers](#)

[TV](#)

[Celebrity visits](#)

[On location today](#)

[Portfolio](#)



[Edwards Home](#) | [About Edwards](#) | [Base Guide](#) | [News](#) | [Products & Services](#)

[Environmental](#) | [Flight Safety](#) | [FOIA](#) | [Gallery](#) | [History](#) | [Job Opportunities](#) | [Maps](#) | [Museum](#) | [Organizations](#) | [Tours](#)  
| [Weather : Aviation](#) | [Weather : Local](#)

[Contracting](#) | [Links](#) | [Publications & Forms](#) | [R-2508 Air Space](#) | [Search](#) | [Site Map](#)

Please read our [Privacy and Security Notice](#)

Air Force Flight Test Center  
E-mail comments: [Public Affairs](#)  
Last updated: July 29, 2004

Public Affairs  
95 ABW/PA  
1 S. Rosamond Blvd.  
Edwards AFB, CA 93524

Public Affairs: (661) 277-3510  
FAX: (661) 277-2732  
DSN: 527-3510  
Base Operator: (661) 277-1110

## ABOUT EDWARDS - HISTORY



Since the silent film era, the stark scenery of the Mojave Desert has lured movie companies to the high desert, a mere 100 miles north of Hollywood.

Back then, a town named Muroc, founded by the families of homesteading farmers, stood on the shores of the dry lake now used for Edwards flight test missions.

Movies ranged from those set in ancient to modern times, as well as a few in between.

### **Horses and horseless carriages**

The backdrop of the dry lakes was great for westerns, including "The Santa Fe Trail" (1923). It starred popular cowboy actor Jack Perrin, also known for his roles in "talkies" such as "The Cactus Kid."

Ironically, Neva Gerber, the leading lady in "The Santa Fe Trail," may be better known in a real-life role – as the former fiancée of slain Hollywood director, William Desmond Taylor. His murder in 1922 was never solved.

In that same year, the lakebed was transformed from a horse trail into a racetrack. "Racing Hearts," a 20th century tale of auto racing, featured five race car drivers of the time: Edward Heffman, Jerry Wunderlich, Jimmy Murphy, Tommy Milton and Ralph DePalma.

### **Biblical drama**

In 1925, it was chariots rather than cars that were racing across the desert when director Fred Niblo filmed portions of the first version of "Ben-Hur" at Muroc. Notable for its early use of Technicolor for certain scenes, this silent movie nearly broke Sam Goldwyn and MGM.

But it was different Biblical epic that was to be the most famous silent picture shot at what is now Edwards Air Force Base.

In 1923, the great movie producer Cecil B. DeMille filmed many scenes from his original version of "The Ten Commandments" on the lakebed, now known as Rogers Dry Lake.

DeMille, known as a bit of a tyrant on the set, left indelible memories in the minds of the locals, as well as those working on the film.

The Antelope Valley Ledger Gazette, a local newspaper, reported that the usually small settlement of Muroc "had every appearance of a metropolitan city." Later, it described the production as "one of the most wonderful pictures ever attempted by a movie company."

According to the June 15, 1923 article, "500 people are said to be participating in the making of this film – 500 horses, a score or more of chariots and 54 autos comprise the paraphernalia being used in the casting."

Hollywood designer Egbert Pettey (1895-1981) told his biographer Biron about one of the first "test flights" at what was to become Edwards. It was made by actor Charles De Roche – not in an airplane, but in a chariot.

### **An early test flight**

During the shooting of the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt, all went well until De Roche, who was playing the Egyptian king Rameses, got into the chariot and tried to race across the dry lake. The problem was, he was wearing an elaborate garment designed by Pettey – an oval-shaped robe measuring 10 yards in length.

According to De Roche, "When he flicked his reigns and the team of horses galloped off, the wind caught in the folds of his robe – thirty feet of heavy double-faced fabric – and pulled him ass-over-tea-kettle out of the chariot which continued on its way without him.

"You never heard such language," Pettey is quoted as saying. "This pharaoh had been stopped dead in his tracks in front of the entire crew. I'm sure he swore in three or four languages. I never saw a more angry Frenchman in all my life than Charles De Roche after he hit the ground.

"Fortunately, the loose sand of the Mojave Desert cushioned his fall and he wasn't hurt in the incident. But, was he ever mad and did I ever get bawled out."

In 1956, DeMille remade a "talkie" version of "The Ten Commandments." But, in Pettey's view, it couldn't compare to the original filmed at Muroc, which included a hundred Jewish refugees who appeared as extras.

At the time of the filming, the news media reported the story about a ship of Jewish refugees that no country wanted to accept.

DeMille reportedly heard that the ship was anchored off the coast of California and sponsored the immigrants by offering them jobs as extras.

## Tent city in the desert

According to Pettey, the immigrants accepted the offer, and DeMille accommodated their strict Orthodox Jewish customs by building a separate Kosher commissary in the large tent city he had set up in the desert.

According to Pettey, "Each day before DeMille began shooting the film, these new immigrants would gather in front of their tents with their rabbis and pray. Participating in the picture wasn't work to them, it was a holy privilege.

"They were portraying the Biblical characters of their own people," described Pettey. "Because of their most recent experience, could anyone else have been better suited to understand the significance of the exodus?"

"There's a truth etched in the faces you see on the screen that's impossible to duplicate. If you ever see the film look for it."

Obviously, DeMille never forgot the power captured in this film. His 1956 remake was his epic swan song at the end of a long and illustrious career.

 [PREVIOUS](#)



[NEXT](#) 

[Edwards Home](#) | [About Edwards](#) | [Base Guide](#) | [News](#) | [Products & Services](#)

[Environmental](#) | [Flight Safety](#) | [FOIA](#) | [Gallery](#) | [History](#) | [Job Opportunities](#) | [Maps](#) | [Museum](#) | [Organizations](#) | [Tours](#) | [Weather : Aviation](#) | [Weather : Local](#)

[Contracting](#) | [Links](#) | [Publications & Forms](#) | [R-2508 Air Space](#) | [Search](#) | [Site Map](#)

Please read our [Privacy and Security Notice](#)

Air Force Flight Test Center  
E-mail comments: [Public Affairs](#)  
Last updated: July 29, 2004

Public Affairs  
95 ABW/PA  
1 S. Rosamond Blvd.  
Edwards AFB, CA 93524

Public Affairs: (661) 277-3510  
FAX: (661) 277-2732  
DSN: 527-3510  
Base Operator: (661) 277-1110

## ABOUT EDWARDS – HISTORY



**D**uring Hollywood's Golden Era, the themes of auto racing and flight testing – with some science fiction and western drama thrown in for good measure – were the focus of movies shot at what is now Edwards Air Force Base.

Actors including James Stewart, John Wayne, Janet Leigh and William Holden filmed on location on the dry lakebeds, both before and after these areas became part of the military facility.

### **Motor operas and horse operas**

"Speed" (1936), described in the New York Times as a "minor motor opera," stars James Stewart as a young test driver perfecting a carburetor that will revolutionize car engines. Stewart is out to break the world's speed record as he races his torpedo-shaped car across the dry lake, where the real-life drama of Edwards flight test mission is enacted today.

An obvious choice for westerns, the dry lake served as a dramatic backdrop for cowboys, Indians, pioneers and horses.

Roy Rogers filmed two movies at Muroc, including "Son of Paleface" (1952). The film had a cast filled with familiar names, including Iron Eyes Cody, Bing Crosby, Cecil B. DeMille, Bob Hope and Jane Russell.

### **A film of epic proportions**

A resident of Muroc, a town founded by homesteaders on the shores of the dry lake, remembers the filming of a different sort of western. It was an epic – probably the Academy Award-winning "Cimarron" (1931) starring Richard Dix and Irene Dunne. The premise of the movie centered around the 1889 Oklahoma land rush.

"They had all kinds of covered wagons," recalls Grace Adair Logan, the Muroc resident who was a young girl at the time. "The artillery and the calvary were all dressed in the Civil War-type costumes...There were literally hundreds of actors and extras...it was really a spectacle to see."

"Cimarron" was the first western to feature synchronous sound.

A celluloid spectacle of another kind featured an experimental aircraft being tested at Edwards, as well as the otherworldliness of the stark desert landscape.

### Martians invade Edwards

George Pal's 1953 sci-fi classic "War of the Worlds" spotlighted the Air Force's most exotic, futuristic-looking bomber of the time – the YB-49.

In a brief sequence, actor Philip Tong, who portrays the flying wing's pilot, occupied one of the big bomber's cockpits. In addition, much of the aerial footage in the film – used during the sequences in which the military is nuking the Martian invaders – was taken over Edwards Air Force Base.

In real life, Air Force test pilot Capt. Chuck Yeager broke the sound barrier – ushering in a whole new topic for Hollywood to capitalize on: [military aviation thrillers](#).

Films such as "Toward the Unknown" (1956), "Jet Pilot" (1957) and "X-15 (1961) were packed with edge-of-your-seat action and dangerous romantic liaisons long before Tom Cruise ever took to the skies in "Top Gun."



[Edwards Home](#) | [About Edwards](#) | [Base Guide](#) | [News](#) | [Products & Services](#)

[Environmental](#) | [Flight Safety](#) | [FOIA](#) | [Gallery](#) | [History](#) | [Job Opportunities](#) | [Maps](#) | [Museum](#) | [Organizations](#) | [Tours](#) | [Weather : Aviation](#) | [Weather : Local](#)

[Contracting](#) | [Links](#) | [Publications & Forms](#) | [R-2508 Air Space](#) | [Search](#) | [Site Map](#)

Please read our [Privacy and Security Notice](#)

Air Force Flight Test Center  
E-mail comments: [Public Affairs](#)  
Last updated: July 29, 2004

Public Affairs  
95 ABW/PA  
1 S. Rosamond Blvd.  
Edwards AFB, CA 93524

Public Affairs: (661) 277-3510  
FAX: (661) 277-2732  
DSN: 527-3510  
Base Operator: (661) 277-1110

## ABOUT EDWARDS – HISTORY



**K**nown for her rough humor and the clientele of test pilots at her "Happy Bottom Riding Club," aviatrix [Florence "Pancho" Barnes](#) rented out rooms – and sometimes patches of land – to Hollywood visitors and movie companies, at her ranch at Muroc. The ruins of ranch is located on what is now Edwards Air Force Base.

Motion picture companies would often rent the whole ranch for filming, including all of the rooms, plus making use of the airport, ranch, restaurant, bar and rodeo grounds.



**Pancho Barnes, pictured with TV personality Spade Cooley and Shirley Rabe, "Miss Rosamond," 1959**

Carl Bergman, an old timer in the film industry and a long time resident of nearby Lancaster, Calif., recalled, "Pancho would rent out property to the film companies if she owned it or not," he laughed. "She'd say, 'Yeah, I'll rent you that for \$125 a day.'"

Barnes' involvement with Hollywood began early: She started out in Hollywood as an animal trainer with her horses and dogs, working on the early "Rin Tin Tin" movies, and even doubling for Louise Fazenda in the horseback scenes. She also served as a scriptwriter, stunt double and a researcher for director Eric Von Stroheim.

Hollywood friends who used to frequent the ranch were Veronica Lake, Roy Rogers (who filmed two movies at Muroc, including "Son of Paleface"), TV personality Spade Cooley (later convicted for murdering his wife), Shelley Winters, Robert Taylor, Brian Donlevy, Edgar Bergen, Elizabeth Taylor with Nicki Hilton, Robert Mitchum, Robert Cummings, Dick Powell and Dean Jaeger.

She had friendships with the film luminaries of the time, such as Gary Cooper, Tyrone Power and Errol Flynn. Rumors abounded about romances with Ramon Novarro (who had the lead role of the 1926 version of "Ben-Hur," partially filmed on the lakebed) and Duncan Renaldo (the "Cisco Kid").

Bob Weatherwax, the owner of canine star Lassie, would also visit quite often. Especially after filming a movie, he would bring Lassie up to the ranch to rest and just "be a dog" for awhile.

In fact, at Barnes' wedding to her fourth and last husband, Eugene S. "Mac" McKendry, Lassie and Lassie Jr. were guests and performed. (Character actor and TV personality Vince Barnett served as emcee.)

Barnes, a former barnstormer, had flown in Howard Hughes' production "Hell's Angels," as well as in "The Dawn Patrol" and "The Flying Fool," (on which she also served as technical director).

As one of the founders of the Associated Motion Picture Stunt Pilots, Barnes was always receiving visits from fellow stunt pilots who flew into the ranch to talk "flying" with the test pilots. Famous movie pilot Paul Mantz flew to the ranch often.

On a sadder note, Wiley Post and Will Rogers Sr., stopped by the ranch on their way to Alaska in 1935, immediately before their tragic plane crash.

Barnes' days at Muroc were numbered, however. In 1953, a mysterious fire burned down the main buildings of the ranch, taking its memories of Hollywood celebrities with it. On May 22, 1954, Barnes' ranch became the property of the United States.

Yet, even Barnes' death in 1975 didn't extinguish her mystique. In 1988, actress Valerie Bertinelli starred in a TV movie based on the life of the aviatrix, but filmed primarily in Texas.

For the record, Bertinelli bears little resemblance to Barnes.

*Information provided by Dana Kilanowski was used in this story.*

 PREVIOUS



NEXT 

[Edwards Home](#) | [About Edwards](#) | [Base Guide](#) | [News](#) | [Products & Services](#)

[Environmental](#) | [Flight Safety](#) | [FOIA](#) | [Gallery](#) | [History](#) | [Job Opportunities](#) | [Maps](#) | [Museum](#) | [Organizations](#) |  
[Tours](#) | [Weather : Aviation](#) | [Weather : Local](#)

[Contracting](#) | [Links](#) | [Publications & Forms](#) | [R-2508 Air Space](#) | [Search](#) | [Site Map](#)

Please read our [Privacy and Security Notice](#)

Air Force Flight Test Center  
E-mail comments: [Public Affairs](#)  
Last updated: July 29, 2004

Public Affairs  
95 ABW/PA  
1 S. Rosamond Blvd.  
Edwards AFB, CA 93524

Public Affairs: (661) 277-3510  
FAX: (661) 277-2732  
DSN: 527-3510  
Base Operator: (661) 277-1110

## ABOUT EDWARDS - HISTORY

### Florence "Pancho" Barnes - Aviation's Companion



The saga of the Air Force Flight Test Center would not be complete without mention of one of its most enduring friends: Ms Florence Lowe Barnes, known to all the world by her favored nickname "Pancho." Never officially a part of the Edwards Air Force Base community, nor ever directly connected with the Air Force, she nevertheless spent many years as one of its most enduring champions and unswerving friends. In recent years, she has become familiar to the general public as the colorful, swashbuckling friend of America's best known test pilots. But the aviation community has always known her as a skilled professional and one of the respected figures in the Golden Age of flight. Long

before Pancho Barnes ever set foot in the Mojave Desert, she had already made her own mark in the progress of American aviation and women's role within it.

#### **The Early Years**

In retrospect, her life seems to have been star-crossed from its very beginning. Florence Lowe Barnes was born into a setting of family wealth and privilege on 14 July, 1901. She spent her childhood in a 32-room mansion in San Marino, California, then as now a genteel enclave of shaded estates and tasteful villas near Pasadena. The confidence and self-possession which tend to come with affluence and position would serve the young woman well in the years ahead. Two men dominated her early life. Her father, an avid outdoorsman, freely passed on his enthusiasms to his daughter, and the young Florence absorbed horsemanship and hunting

skills along with the genteel accomplishments taught by a series of private schools and tutors. Her grandfather, Professor Thaddeus Lowe, gave her another lasting gift--a fervor for aviation. One of the founders of the California Institute of Technology, he is better known to history as the intrepid balloonist who spied on the Confederate lines during the Civil War and organized the nation's first military air unit, the balloon corps for Lincoln's Army of the Potomac. The veteran aeronaut took his young granddaughter to see her first air show at the age of nine. It is probably too glib to say that the excitement of that outing changed her life forever, but there is no doubt that airplanes soon ranked with horses in her passions.

First, however, would come a proper marriage, followed by the birth of a son. At the age of 18, Florence wed the Reverend C. Rankin Barnes, a prominent Episcopal priest, and settled down to the duties expected of a proper clergyman's wife. In due course their son, William, was born. Not long afterwards, however, the young bride's self-reliant personality asserted itself in dramatic fashion: abandoning church and child in 1928, she disguised herself as a man and signed on as a crewmember aboard a freighter headed for Mexico. Once the ship was safely docked at San Blas with a cargo of bananas and contraband guns, she jumped ship with a renegade sailor and spent four months roaming through the revolution-torn interior. Somewhere along this trek, while riding a donkey, her comrade dubbed her "Pancho" for her fancied resemblance to Don Quixote's faithful companion. She was delighted with her new nickname, and kept it for the rest of her life.

## **Into the Air**

Returning to San Marino later that year, she turned her eyes toward the skies. By then, Wall Street's Bull Market was roaring along, the public was wildly air-minded in the aftermath of Lindbergh's flight to Paris, and the nation's adrenaline level perfectly matched her own. Pancho bought an OX-5 powered Travelair biplane, hired an irascible but expert instructor, and set out to learn how to fly. Defying her teacher's best efforts to discourage his "dilettante" student, she soloed after only six hours of instruction. The young socialite promptly celebrated this feat by taking a friend aloft and buzzing the field while her passenger wing-walked among the flying wires. From that point onward, aviation became the dominant note in her life.

Scorning the genteel aspects of her upbringing, Pancho took to wearing men's clothes, often oil-stained and disheveled, and to smoke cigars. Kitchen matches scratched across the seat of her pants replaced silver cigarette lighters, and her speech, never too delicate at the best of times, became notoriously coarse and salty. Although Pancho was always ready for a laugh, however, she was never a buffoon in the air. Always, she took flying seriously and went to great lengths to become a skilled pilot as well as a practical mechanic. Her professional approach to flying never, of course, prevented her from enjoying enormous fun along the way. Soon tiring of buzzing her husband's dignified church during Sunday morning services, she assembled something called "Pancho Barnes' Mystery Circus of the Air," and went on barnstorming tours with herself as a star performer. She shared the spotlight with an

improbably handsome parachute jumper named Slim, who specialized in enticing young females from the audience into their first airplane ride and shortly--to their great surprise--into their first parachute jump as well.

## Satisfaction in the Sky

The young aviatrix burst onto the national aviation scene barely a year after her first solo flight. In August, 1929, she joined nineteen other women in the Women's Air Derby, a transcontinental air race from Santa Monica to Cleveland. for women. This was the first Powder Puff Derby, still being flown today. She got as far as Pecos, Texas before she ran afoul of the casual airfield-management practices of the day, colliding with a truck driving down the runway. Pancho was unhurt, but her broken airplane put her out of the race for that year.

By then, her growing reputation enabled her to sign on with Union Oil Company for a three-year stint of demonstration flights and promotional work in return for sponsorship in many of the air races of the day. She returned to the Powder Puff Derby the following year in a powerful new Travelair *Mystery Ship*, a low-winged speedster with huge wheel spats which has been called the most beautiful of the great racing airplanes. Blasting across the route at an average speed of 196.19 mph, she took the world's speed record for women away from Amelia Earhart.

Not content with this, she honed her aerobatic skills and set out to become one of Hollywood's favorite stunt pilots. The film capital was no stranger to Pancho; even as a debutante she had slipped away from San Marino to dabble in movie work as a script girl and other jobs. The



adventurous aristocrat had even doubled for Louise Fazenda in the horseback scenes in the early Rin Tin Tin movies. Now she became the technical director for Pathe's *The Flying Fool*. Shortly she formed her own company and, with three pilots working for her, encouraged the studios to contract with her for guaranteed work, rather than the hit-or-miss method of hiring their own pilots each day. This marked the beginning of the Associated Motion Picture Pilots.

It was also the beginning of numerous "Pancho stories" which circulate freely today: her friendships with the film luminaries of the time--Gary Cooper, Tyrone Power, Errol Flynn--and rumors of romances with Ramon Navarro and/or Duncan Renaldo. There was a colorful

feud with Roscoe Turner involving an impromptu air race, Gilmore the lion, and a pair of powder-blue kidskin boots.

## Retreat to the Desert



All good times come to an end, however, and so it was for Pancho's dizzying world of flying, glamour, and money. The new talking motion pictures displaced many film careers and brought a new era to the movies. The nation settled ever deeper into the Depression and the fortune which Pancho inherited from her mother began to melt away, hastened by an indecorous conflict within her own family. Still officially married to the hapless churchman, she traded most of her surviving assets in 1935 for a small, quarter-section ranch in the desolate reaches of the western Mojave Desert. There, on the far side of the mountains which had loomed over her San Marino estate, Pancho Barnes took her 12-year-old son and settled down to the unlikely life of a rancher in the High Desert.

It is romantic, but not totally realistic, to think of the redoubtable Mrs. Barnes as a simple small-time farmer in the wilderness. A working ranch it was, but from the first she had a foreman and crew to raise alfalfa and care for the livestock--hogs, a few head of cattle, and of course horses. She was never without an airplane, and one of the first things she did was to scratch out an airstrip on the desert hardpan. She might be far from the lights and glitter on the other side of the San Gabriel Mountains, but she didn't cut herself off from her old friends and connections. Still, she loved the outdoors; she had all of the High Desert to ride across and, meanwhile, there was a living to be earned. Pancho set out to make the most of her new environment.

## A New Door Opens

Pancho's new world was remote, lying alongside a dirt road connecting two hamlets--Muroc and Rosamond. Her spread occupied the lowlands between two large desert playas. Nothing much ever came of Rosamond Dry Lake to the west. But some interesting activity was already stirring on the far shore of the other huge lake bed to the east. Rogers Dry Lake was 44 square miles of rock-hard flatness, the largest such lake in the world. Pancho arrived on the scene not long after the Army Air Corps did; in 1933, working parties in khaki had arrived to set up a bombing and gunnery range to serve the fighters and bombers from March Field, California. An orderly array of army tents housed the range keepers--a detachment of young

soldiers who must be fed. Army rations trucked up from Riverside were supplemented with whatever local-purchase foodstuffs might be available, and Pancho rose to the opportunity. Pork and milk from the ranch appeared in the Army mess hall, and Pancho shrewdly contracted to remove the encampment's garbage--which was recycled directly into her hog population.



Soon, Pancho began to expand her operations, enlarging her herd of milk cows and selling dairy products throughout the valley. The remains of her family money went into ranch improvements and within a few years the ranch had expanded from 80 acres to 368. She enlarged the ranch house and built a swimming pool--an exotic touch for the late 1930s. As war clouds gathered abroad and the nation began to shake off its peacetime torpor, the Air Corps began a long-overdue expansion. Even the bombing range grew larger; the government bought up great amounts of land; permanent buildings went up, and officers and enlisted men began to appear in larger numbers.

When World War II arrived in the High Desert, Pancho was swept along with the current. The gunnery range became Muroc Army Air Field, a huge expansion began on the western shore of the lake, and permanent runways were built for year-round use. Suddenly a major military installation lay only three miles down the road. Pancho had always been partial to her "Foreign Legion of the American Army" and she was delighted at the new turn of events. Patriotically, she made her ranch available to off-duty fliers. Officers--and especially pilots--were welcome in her swimming pool; often they stayed to dinner and the flying talk went on far into the night. Pancho offered her horses for the recreation of those who could ride, and bought more. By degrees, the desert exile became a hostess.

## The Good Years

In retrospect, it all had a kind of inevitability about it. The airmen loved Pancho's party atmosphere and the opportunities for other recreation were severely limited. Wartime money was suddenly available, visitors were always needing a place to stay, and Pancho had plenty of room to expand. A bar and restaurant appeared, then a dance hall, another bar, and a coffee shop. Most of the booze came up from Mexico in Pancho's plane and was dispensed freely; the more expensive stuff stayed under lock and key. The airstrip was enlarged and lighted for the increasing number of guests and friends who flew in, and a motel was built for their

convenience. Soon Pancho found herself the proud mistress of the Rancho Oro Verde Fly-Inn Dude Ranch.

Ever more boisterous, profane and swashbuckling, Pancho proceeded to have the time of her life. Almost gleefully, she allowed time and the dry desert air to transform her youthful appearance into the storied homeliness by which most remember her. To compensate, Pancho imported an ever-changing bevy of attractive hostesses to serve the weary airmen. Even the name of the ranch reflected the wartime gaiety, soon being nicknamed the Happy Bottom Riding Club in salute to the growing number of skilled and satisfied riders. Pilots were always her special comrades, and in the



natural course of events a stellar array of high-ranking officers appeared at the ranch and soon became her friends. Jimmy Doolittle, a pal from the air racing days, now sported three stars, and he was joined by many others, including the commander of the Army Air Forces, General H.H. "Hap" Arnold.

Thus, it was natural that when peacetime came and Muroc (soon to become Edwards Air Force Base) became the center for the nation's leading experimental flight testing center, that test pilots would replace the wartime fliers, and the party went on. Pancho's place remained popular for the same reasons it always had--in an area of limited resources, men with heavy responsibilities needed a congenial place to relax. Although many stories about Pancho and her hostesses are told with a knowing wink, it is also true that off-duty pilots love to do one thing above all--talk about flying. And there was plenty of that at Oro Verde.



Pancho was a staunch friend and confidante to many of the young professional fliers of the day--Al Boyd, Pete Everest, Jack Ridley and many others. Those that she liked, that is. Those whom she did not, or who carelessly patronized her, were swiftly and profanely shown the door. With Chuck Yeager, a bond was formed which lasted her



lifetime. Recent books and movies have glamorized the friendship between the sonic-busting test pilot and the high-flying hostess, but in truth it began much earlier when

Pancho found out that the young captain was also an avid outdoorsman. Several hunting and fishing expeditions, some of which ended raucously down in Mexico, sealed the friendship long before Captain Yeager had been chosen to bring the X-1 supersonic program to its ultimate success. When he did so, on 14 October 1947, Pancho was one of the few who knew about the official secret. Yeager won a free steak dinner for that feat, thereby starting a tradition for all pilots celebrating their first supersonic flight.

Yeager's boss in the flight test world, Col Albert Boyd, was another legendary old-time pilot who had warm regard for Pancho and her accomplishments. After he was promoted and had assumed command of the flight test establishment, General Boyd appeared less frequently at the ranch. Although he never hesitated to chew her out when her guests flew too close to his base, he remained a respected member of her circle of friends. But after his departure from Edwards in 1952, the good times rapidly drew to a close.

### An Era Closes



Soon after the next commander arrived on the scene, the entire atmosphere began to change. The reasons were many: conflicting requirements, personality clashes, and some genuine misunderstandings. The immediate catalyst was airspace which was becoming increasingly crowded with large numbers of new aircraft being tested, and the private airplanes of Pancho's guests. The borders of the base were already pressing hard upon Oro Verde, and a master plan had already been written calling for it to expand to its present western boundary. Sooner or later, something would have to give. But the times were changing as well. The brash camaraderie of the wartime years was giving way to the straight-laced Fifties, and the casual flying world of the 1940s was evolving into today's

relentlessly sober approach. Even the bachelor test pilots in their twenties were becoming married professionals in their early middle age. The Happy Bottom Riding Club was doomed in any event.

It was not long before condemnation proceedings were filed against Pancho's property, on the grounds that the ranch lay on a direct line with a proposed extension of the test center's main runway. There were genuine air safety considerations as well, and a master plan had already

called for the base to expand to the west. But the situation was greatly worsened by a complete lack of rapport between the principals, and conflicts soon escalated into name calling, unjust accusations, and ultimately into a flurry of acrimonious lawsuits. In the middle of the fray, coming at the worst possible time, a nighttime fire of unknown origin completely destroyed the ranch complex.

Pancho eventually won a considerable sum in the courts. She established herself on a new spread in another remote area, vowing to rebuild and continue as before. But much of the settlement went into attorney's fees and, at any rate, the psychological blows had been considerable. Pancho had lost not only her ranch and livelihood, but also a lifetime's accumulation of irreplaceable souvenirs and valuables. Perhaps worst of all, though, was the rift with her beloved Air Force. Then, like a relentless Greek tragedy, serious illness struck her. Although the redoubtable woman vowed never to surrender and went on to survive two cancer operations, the old zest for life gradually faded along with her energy. Pancho died, alone and undiscovered, in 1975.

Her son, Bill, became a pilot and owned a flying business in nearby Lancaster. He died in October, 1980, while flying a P-51 *Mustang* not far from the site of the old ranch.

## Epilogue



Of her personality and that clamorous era, little now remains: some concrete foundations and the remains of a fanciful stone fountain near the Edwards AFB firing range; a few photographs. The dim, rectangular outline of a dirt airstrip can still be made out from the air. There is a battered door from the ranch pickup, still faintly lettered, resting against a wall in the Air Force Flight Test Center Museum. But the Pancho stories still circulate freely in the flight community, some titillating, most nostalgic, all now recounted with tolerant smiles. For many years now, the people at

Edwards have gathered together on the site of the Happy Bottom Riding Club for an annual barbecue which goes far into the night. And in a hangar in nearby Mojave, Pancho's black-and-red Tavelaire *Mystery Ship* is gradually returning to its original splendor.

As always, Pancho had the last word: "*Well ----- it, we had more fun in a week than most of the weenies in the world have in a lifetime.*"

[Edwards Home](#) | [About Edwards](#) | [Base Guide](#) | [News](#) | [Products & Services](#) | [Contracting](#)

[Environmental](#) | [Gallery](#) | [History](#) | [Job Opportunities](#) | [Maps](#) | [Museum](#) | [Open House & Air Show](#) | [Units](#) |  
[Tours](#) | [Weather : Aviation](#) | [Weather : Local](#) | [Flight Safety](#)

[FOIA](#) | [Links](#) | [Publications & Forms](#) | [R-2508 Air Space](#) | [Search](#) | [Site Map](#) | [Weather: Aviation](#) | [Weather:  
Local](#)

Please read our [Privacy and Security Notice](#).

Air Force Flight Test Center  
E-mail comments: [Public Affairs](#)  
Last updated: July 25, 2006

Public Affairs  
95 ABW/PA  
1 S. Rosamond Blvd.  
Edwards AFB, CA 93524

Public Affairs: (661) 277-3510  
FAX: (661) 277-2732  
DSN: 527-3510  
Base Operator: (661) 277-1110

## ABOUT EDWARDS - HISTORY



Of all of the movies which were made at Edwards Air Force Base in the last generation, it was "The Right Stuff" which went the furthest to define the flight test world in the public mind.

Author Tom Wolfe's best-selling book about the birth of America's space program concentrated on the Mercury program and the nation's first astronauts.

Although Chuck Yeager never went into space, Wolfe considered his historic supersonic flight to be mankind's first step on the way to orbital flight. Thus, the first third of the film version revisits the X-1 era in loving (and somewhat exaggerated) detail: dusty Muroc air base, dashing test pilots, Pancho's place, the orange rocket plane and a laconic Chuck Yeager (played by Sam Shepard), broken ribs and all.



**Sam Shepard, portraying Capt. Chuck Yeager in "The Right Stuff," rides toward the X-1**

In a nice twist of fate, General Yeager himself played a cameo role as Fred the bartender.

### **A few misconceptions**

The Air Force Flight Test Center provided extensive assistance to the film's producers.

A wide variety of exotic aircraft crowded the ramps of South Base, where most of the shooting was done: Canadair Sabres portraying F-86Es, a Hawker Hunter painted up as a D-558-2, the Confederate Air Force B-29 in the role of the X-1 mother ship. Besides technical support, the center's leaders and personnel furnished the producers and writers with a great deal of information on the personalities and events of the early supersonic era.

In spite of all, errors crept in; most were minor, but the storyline portrayed Col. Jack Ridley

taking an active role in affairs long after his actual death in 1957. Others could be considered "artistic error."

For the record, pilots did not impulsively jump into jet fighters and take them off for a jaunt, especially without the help of ground crew.

Horses are not allowed at the flight line nor on the lakebed.

Errors and exaggerations aside, though, the film enjoyed popular success and won four Academy Awards (out of eight nominations) in 1984.

It was the film's lengthy opening section, filmed at Edwards, which did so much to associate modern test flying in the public mind with the raucous and raffish image portrayed by its actors.

### **The real 'right stuff'**

Like so much else, the reality is part truth and part fiction. Today's experimental test pilots invariably are sober and businesslike people who view their exacting profession without romanticism. Yet, in truth, they must also have a solid measure of the "right stuff" in their souls as well, or they would never have begun the long and arduous journey to the cockpit.

So it is there, all right – carefully disciplined and controlled, but still present. It is just in poor taste to talk about it.

 [PREVIOUS](#)



[NEXT](#) 

[Edwards Home](#) | [About Edwards](#) | [Base Guide](#) | [News](#) | [Products & Services](#)

[Environmental](#) | [Flight Safety](#) | [FOIA](#) | [Gallery](#) | [History](#) | [Job Opportunities](#) | [Maps](#) | [Museum](#) | [Organizations](#) | [Tours](#) | [Weather : Aviation](#) | [Weather : Local](#)

[Contracting](#) | [Links](#) | [Publications & Forms](#) | [R-2508 Air Space](#) | [Search](#) | [Site Map](#)

Please read our [Privacy and Security Notice](#)

Air Force Flight Test Center  
E-mail comments: [Public Affairs](#)  
Last updated: July 29, 2004

Public Affairs  
95 ABW/PA  
1 S. Rosamond Blvd.  
Edwards AFB, CA 93524

Public Affairs: (661) 277-3510  
FAX: (661) 277-2732  
DSN: 527-3510  
Base Operator: (661) 277-1110

## ABOUT EDWARDS – HISTORY



In the first decades after World War II, the world of aviation entered a new and exciting era.

The colorful propeller-driven warbirds that had defeated the Axis forces swiftly gave way to sleek, highly streamlined shapes thundering through the skies. The jet engine made the 1950s into a new golden age of high-speed flight, and the rocket-propelled 1960s were not far behind.

Suddenly, it seemed like the day of Buck Rogers had finally arrived: fire belched from tailcones, swept wings replaced the straight, and a rumbling thunder replaced the throaty roar of piston engines.

The warriors in the cockpits gained a new image as well. Leather flight jackets and rumpled 50-mission hats, so fitting in "12 O-Clock High," suddenly became passe – pilots of the modern age now wore sleek crash helmets and tight pressure suits. They looked and walked like spacemen.

The new era bred new enemies as well.

### A new set of foes

Although the evil Nazis and deadly kamikazis had disappeared, the emerging Cold War soon furnished America's Hollywood warriors with a new set of dastardly opponents: steely-eyed Communist agents, hyper-advanced Russian fighters, and the overwhelming strength of the Soviet Air Force.



Movie poster for "X-15"

And, waiting patiently beyond these foes was the most formidable adversary of all – the sky itself.

Jet and rocket power now put man into the deadly reaches of the upper atmosphere into the

very fringes of space – and soon beyond. The day of the test pilot had returned, and once again moviemakers turned their attention to the desert runways and action-filled skies of America's greatest Flight Test Center.

One of the first postwar epics to be filmed at Edwards Air Force Base was the Warner Brothers' "Toward the Unknown."

### **A return to the skies**

The plot of this 1956 adventure drama was centered here as well. William Holden starred as an ill-starred ex-combat pilot who had dishonored himself by yielding to brutal Communist brainwashing techniques. No longer allowed to fly, he burned for a chance to return to the cockpit and redeem his reputation.

A highly experimental new jet plane finally gave him an opportunity to clear his name and once more serve his country. Faith, courage, and romance triumphed over a general's skepticism. James Garner made his film debut as Major Joe Craven. "Toward the Unknown" was released in Great Britain that same year, under the title "Brink of Hell."

In a film of this nature, the aircraft which appear are usually at least as interesting as the human actors. Several interesting ones starred in this thriller.

The rare Martin XB-51 three-engined bomber made an appearance as the "XF-120," and airplane buffs still seek out footage of the rocket-powered Bell X-2 and the Douglas X-3 "Stiletto" research planes.



**"Toward the Unknown" adviser Pete Everest with actor William Holden at Edwards, 1956**

Interestingly, the real-life fame of one of the anonymous F-94C "Starfire" pilots in the action scenes far outlasted the movie itself. Lt. Col. "Pete" Everest, an experimental test pilot who flew most of the X-planes before retiring as a brigadier general, was chief of the Flight Test Operations division. Numerous other planes from the Flight Test Center also appeared in this film: the XF-92A (masquerading in the movie as a "Gilbert XF-120"), F-100 and F-101, the Douglas B-66 and a mighty Convair B-36. Whatever the movie's qualities might have been as judged by later standards, its lineup of airborne talent was impressive.

### **Drama or satire?**

A scant year later, Edwards became identified with another aviation epic.

Howard Hughes filmed his "Jet Pilot" in 1950, but then tinkered with it for seven years. Eventually it was released in 1957, after many of its scenes were re-filmed with newer aircraft. Modern viewers are uncertain whether Hughes intended the movie to be a tense Cold War drama or a tongue-in-cheek satire of the action genre.

At any rate, the public was treated to a fast-paced production starring John Wayne as a doughty Air Force colonel stationed at a remote base in the Alaska wilderness – scant minutes away from the Soviet border. The story revolved around an improbably attractive blond Russian jet pilot, Janet Leigh, pretending to defect to the side of Democracy in order to snare Wayne for interrogation.

Plot and counterplot alternated with thrilling flying scenes until love eventually foiled the Communist schemes, and decency and honor prevailed.

Whatever depth the plot might have lacked, the film made up for in technical expertise. Moviegoers were treated to a Technicolor showcase of 1950s jets, with Chuck Yeager flying anonymously in some of the scenes. If the film's Soviet "Yak-12" turned out to be a USAF T-33 decked out with red stars, no great harm was done. The cinematography was elegant and the Alaska scenes are beautiful.

One unforgettable sequence had Wayne and Leigh winging their F-86s through moonlight skies on a poetic honeymoon flight.

### **Return to mach**

The year 1957 also witnessed "Destination 60,000 by United Artists, a black-and-white return to the supersonic test pilot theme.

Pat Conway starred as Jeff Connors, an improbably undisciplined test pilot whose slapdash antics worried his boss, Col. Ed Buckley (Preston Foster.) After Buckley narrowly escaped disaster in a hot new ship, however, the rogue pilot recalled the hard-won lessons he had learned in air combat and he proceeded to save the day in professional fashion.

While the film was no threat to the Academy Award hopefuls of the year, it was entertaining and helped to feed an audience's enthusiasm for exciting airplanes and aerial derring-do. Once again, Edwards AFB's flight line was shown to dramatic advantage, and the movie added to the Flight Test Center's reputation with the general public.

### **More derring-do**

Twentieth Century Fox's "Thundering Jets" appeared the following year and followed much the same pattern of recklessness, sudden danger and ultimate redemption.

In this black-and-white drama, an Air Force hero (Robert Dix) was chagrined at finding himself assigned to humdrum training duty at Edwards. A deadly crisis in an out-of-control T-33, however, forced him to the limits of his skill and reawakened him to his real duties. The jet and the student were saved at the last moment, the hero reaffirmed the high standards of his professional calling, and even the love interest (Audrey Dalton) turned out right in the end.

### **Early Bronson**

"X-15," which came along in 1961, was a project of a much different character.

Although it, too, was an action film, NASA viewed it as an opportunity to publicize the high-performing X-15 rocket research plane to the American public. The space agency made extensive footage of X-15 flights available to the production company, which in turn hired Jimmy Stewart to narrate portions of the drama.

The plot itself was fairly standard. Three test pilots at Edwards AFB (led by Charles Bronson) labored together on the research project. When something went horribly wrong during a test, one of the pilots died heroically while saving the others. A young Mary Tyler Moore played one of the love interests. If the story line was not weighty, it served admirably to hold the film together and to highlight the flying scenes which were, after all, its main purpose.

Although "X-15" really ended up publicizing the rocket airplane more than the actual joint Air Force-Navy-NASA hypersonic flight research project, everyone benefited in the end.

American filmgoers were able, for the first time, to watch actual footage of the airborne launch, flight and recovery of the famed research craft. In turn, the movie focused public attention on aerospace exploration just as the nation was poised to begin its manned space programs.

Both NASA and the Air Force ended up looking well. Frank Sinatra, president of E-C Productions which made the film for United Artists, donated some of its profits to the Secretary of the Air Force, to be used for Air Force charities.

### **Forward in time**

By the early 1980s, numerous innovations had come to popular cinema: darker plots, better technical effects, personality-driven actors, the antihero.

Many of these could be seen in "Firefox," the movie version of a high-tech espionage thriller novel.

Produced and directed by Clint Eastwood, who also acted in the lead role, the basic plot was not complicated: a raffish soldier-of-fortune type fighter pilot is smuggled into the Soviet

Union to steal a fabulously-advanced "MiG-31" fighter plane nicknamed "Firefox." This warplane was so futuristic that its pilot could fly it by thought alone.

The hero filched the plane (from the Edwards weight-and-balance hangar), and the great chase began. The movie's characters were more complex and intense than their counterparts of the 1950s, and the mood of the picture was often surly. But at bottom it was aerial action which counted with the audience, and the film offered plenty of that.

Much of the filming was done on the Edwards ramp, where an F-4 Phantom and a T-38 had been made available for cockpit shots. The large hangar was also used for the night scenes. As with the other movies, the Flight Test Center provided general support as well, and many of the base personnel enjoyed the chance to appear in the film as extras.

*Information and photos from Carrie Schatzi's "Toward the Unknown" web site was used in this story.*

 **PREVIOUS**



**NEXT** 

[Edwards Home](#) | [About Edwards](#) | [Base Guide](#) | [News](#) | [Products & Services](#)

[Environmental](#) | [Flight Safety](#) | [FOIA](#) | [Gallery](#) | [History](#) | [Job Opportunities](#) | [Maps](#) | [Museum](#) | [Organizations](#) | [Tours](#) | [Weather : Aviation](#) | [Weather : Local](#)

[Contracting](#) | [Links](#) | [Publications & Forms](#) | [R-2508 Air Space](#) | [Search](#) | [Site Map](#)

Please read our [Privacy and Security Notice](#)

Air Force Flight Test Center  
E-mail comments: [Public Affairs](#)  
Last updated: July 29, 2004

Public Affairs  
95 ABW/PA  
1 S. Rosamond Blvd.  
Edwards AFB, CA 93524

Public Affairs: (661) 277-3510  
FAX: (661) 277-2732  
DSN: 527-3510  
Base Operator: (661) 277-1110

## ABOUT EDWARDS - HISTORY



**B**ecause Edwards Air Force Base is a mere 100 miles or so northeast of Hollywood and Vine, it has served for years as a relatively inexpensive "on location" setting for TV productions.

Although not as exotic as, for instance, Utah's Monument Valley, the scenery has all the right ingredients for productions ranging from TV westerns to the "Twilight Zone."

At least one episode of Rod Serling's "The Twilight Zone," perhaps the first regular TV show focusing on the paranormal, was filmed at Edwards.

"King Nine Will Not Return" featured Bob Cummings as a bomber pilot who crashes in the desert and is haunted by the images of his dead crew. The episode originally aired Sept. 30, 1960.

Other various and sundry productions occurred about this time. The series "Steve Canyon" (1958-60) starring Dean Fredericks, brought the comic strip character to television. A photo in the Edwards History Office archives captures a scene shot on the lakebed.



**Scott Bakula of "Quantum Leap" pictured at Edwards AFB with a mock-up of the X-2**

Music performers also put in appearances: Tennessee Ernie Ford broadcast his TV show live from the flightline, circa 1960. In 1967, singing duo Sonny and Cher were caught in a snapshot by a *Desert Wings* photographer, as they embraced against the backdrop of the lakebed. Unfortunately, all may not have been groovy during this filming, as, apparently, the production was never shown.

### **A military presence on TV**

Stories built around military activities in the desert provided the premise for many TV productions over the years.

An episode of "The Man and the Challenge" titled "Hurricane Mesa" featured shots of the 20,000-foot-long high speed track. According to a Jan. 29, 1960, *Desert Wings* article, more than 60 movie and television actors, cameramen and technicians descended on the Air Force Flight Test Center after relocation became necessary because of a snowfall in Utah's Zion National Park, where filming had been taking place.

The story dealt with the testing and development of double upward ejection seats for Air Force jets and the medical problems faced by the show's lead, a medical doctor played by George Nader.

In February 1967, "Rat Patrol," a popular TV show of the era, filmed an episode on the west side of the base near the town of Rosamond, according to a *Desert Wings* photo caption. The premise of the series was based on three Americans who end up in the North African campaign early in World War II, forming an unlikely team with a British Sergeant as a "Long Range Desert Group." The "Rat Patrol" generally creates havoc for one German officer, in particular while engaging in frontal assaults, subtle espionage and other mayhem.

The 1978 TV movie "The Courage and the Passion," was loosely centered around flight testing at Edwards Air Force Base. Vince Edwards starred as the flight test commander, and Don Meredith portrayed an ill-fated F-104 test pilot. As a series pilot movie (that never got picked up as a series), the show proved to be more of a soap opera dealing with the off-base loves and lusts of the characters.

### Say 'uncle'

Other TV series which visited Edwards, included "The Man from U.N.C.L.E."

The series, which ran from 1964-68, centered around the adventures of secret agents Napoleon Solo (Robert Vaughn) and Illya Kuryakin (David McCallum), who represented the United Network Command for Law and Enforcement. In the Nov. 10, 1967 issue of the *Desert Wings*, McCallum is pictured "inspecting fired airplane parts on Rosamond Dry Lake, which simulates a downed T.H.R.U.S.H. aircraft." (According to the "Man from U.N.C.L.E." frequently asked questions list, the acronym T.H.R.U.S.H. stands for "Technical Hierarchy for the Removal of Undesirables and the Subjugation of Humanity.")

On a more humorous note, the sit-com "I Dream of Jeannie" featured an Edwards landmark regularly – each week, during the opening credits, actor Larry Hagman (as Capt. Anthony Nelson), walked through the front doors of NASA's Dryden Research Facility . In truth, only a few scenes actually were shot at Edwards. The



show aired from 1965-70.



*NASA-Dryden photo*

**As Capt. Anthony Nelson, actor Larry Hagman was shown weekly entering the NASA-Dryden Research Center on TV's "I Dream of Jeannie"**

## A bionic pilot

Of course, the whole premise of "The Six Million Dollar Man" was based on a fictional Air Force Colonel (Reserves), stationed at Edwards Air Force Base. The character, Steve Austin (Lee Majors), was a test pilot/astronaut who was "rebuilt" into a cyborg – a "bionic" man – after having lost his left eye, right arm and both legs in the fictionalized version of the crash on the Edwards runway of the M2-F2, a "flying body configuration" built by Northrop Corp. (Bruce Peterson, the real pilot of that craft, also survived.)



*NASA-Dryden photo*

**Footage of the crash on Rogers Dry Lake of the M2-F2 lifting body was shown weekly on the TV series "The Six Million Dollar Man"**

Footage from the actual crash was used in the show's weekly intro. A photo in the *Desert Wings* pictures Majors in the cockpit of the HL-10 when he visited Edwards in September 1974.

Of course, the dry lake has always been a favorite setting for westerns.

In 1974, "The Godchild," a TV movie starring [Jack Palance](#) and Keith Carradine, was filmed at Edwards. The movie, a remake of "Three Godfathers" (1919, 1926, 1936 and 1948), was an early work by "Saturday Night Fever" director John Badham.

By 1983, following the success of the movie "The Right Stuff," stories about military aviation became popular again after a long dry spell.

"Call to Glory," a TV series that appeared on NBC, had a short run (1984-85), in which actor Craig T. Nelson depicted an Air Force pilot. The pilot episode, centering on the U-2 overflights during the Cuban Missile Crisis, was filmed in large part on location at Edwards Air Force Base. The series sank quickly out of sight with each succeeding episodic week, as the stories wandered further from its original, reasonably authentic beginnings.

## The leap to Edwards

One successful science fiction series filmed set the pilot episode at Edwards. "Quantum Leap," enjoyed a four-year run from 1989 to 1993 on NBC.

The show starred Scott Bakula as physicist Dr. Samuel Beckett, who wants to prove his "quantum leap" time travel theory before funding runs out. He does this by jumping into his time machine, thereby "leaping into" the year 1956 and taking on the persona of fictional test

pilot Tom Stratton. In order to return "home," he must discover what must be "put right that once went wrong." In this first episode, titled "Genesis," he has to successfully fly the X-2 to Mach 3. Once accomplished, Dr. Beckett "leaps" again, always hoping for "The Leap Back."

The show's producers apparently put some effort into authenticity, because at least one detail – of the local Muroc (Edwards) telephone exchange in use during the 1950s – was right on the money. In addition, Capt. Milburn Apt actually did take the X-2 to Mach 3.2 on Sept. 27, 1956, but was killed when trying to eject after the aircraft encountered the inertial coupling phenomenon.

Similar types of historical events have been captured in the most [recent dramatic TV](#) series to be filmed at Edwards: "From the Earth to the Moon."

The HBO series, created by "Apollo 13" star Tom Hanks, depicts crucial developments and events during the NASA Apollo space missions.



[Edwards Home](#) | [About Edwards](#) | [Base Guide](#) | [News](#) | [Products & Services](#)

[Environmental](#) | [Flight Safety](#) | [FOIA](#) | [Gallery](#) | [History](#) | [Job Opportunities](#) | [Maps](#) | [Museum](#) | [Organizations](#) | [Tours](#) | [Weather : Aviation](#) | [Weather : Local](#)

[Contracting](#) | [Links](#) | [Publications & Forms](#) | [R-2508 Air Space](#) | [Search](#) | [Site Map](#)

Please read our [Privacy and Security Notice](#)

Air Force Flight Test Center  
E-mail comments: [Public Affairs](#)  
Last updated: July 29, 2004

Public Affairs  
95 ABW/PA  
1 S. Rosamond Blvd.  
Edwards AFB, CA 93524

Public Affairs: (661) 277-3510  
FAX: (661) 277-2732  
DSN: 527-3510  
Base Operator: (661) 277-1110

## ABOUT EDWARDS – HISTORY



Over the years, the Air Force Flight Test Center has attracted a wide range of celebrities intrigued with the Edwards flight test mission – as well as a number of entertainers who were just doing their jobs.

During World War II, especially, Hollywood stars and starlets paid frequent visits to what was then known as Muroc Army Air Field, in an effort to keep up the GI morale.

Exciting announcements would be posted in the base newspaper at the time: "Ten acts of personalities from radio, stage and screen will be presented at the Post Theater Sunday" and "Jack Benny, for years the nation's number one comedian of the airwaves, will broadcast from Muroc's Post Theater tomorrow afternoon..."

Boosting morale was important with a war going on, and the entertainers of the day took the job seriously.



**Jimmy Durante at Edwards**

All-round entertainer Jimmy Durante was described in the Feb. 3, 1945, *Muroc Mirage* as "a great (guy), hitting spots like Muroc twice each week to give shows, while still filling his job with Gary Moore on the Camel Caravan, and getting ready to do a movie – and then go overseas."

Durante, who performed at Muroc with Edward G. Robinson for two shows on Jan. 31, 1945, was interviewed by the base newspaper reporter. Durante spoke very highly of the troops: "Ah, dese guys are a great bunch, a great bunch. Ya take tonight, frinstance; dese guys got intelligence."

In reference to the many letters he received from GIs stationed overseas, he said, "Ah, it makes me feel terrific. Ya know, General Eisenhower sent us a wire requestin' us to come over." According to the report, Durante smiled with "pride and wonder" as he said this.

About this time, one Muroc resident had especially close ties with Hollywood: [Pancho Barnes](#).

Barnes, a former barnstormer who had flown in Howard Hughes' production "Hell's Angels," (some of which may have been filmed at Muroc) had built a ranch in the desert near the dry lake and advertised it to celebrities as a resort. She also flew in "The Dawn Patrol" and "The Flying Fool."

Near the end of the war, there was one particularly famous actress who stayed for an extended visit at Muroc Army Air Field.

Jacqueline Wells (a.k.a. Julie Bishop), became the wife of Col. Clarence Shoop in July 1944. At 30 years old and a full colonel, Shoop arrived at Muroc in May 1945 to serve as Base Commander.

Wells is probably best known as the object of Bela Lugosi's obsession in the 1934 film, "The Black Cat." She starred in many other movies, as well, including "Tarzan the Fearless" (1933), "Sands of Iwo Jima" (1949) and more than 70 others. After a career of more than 30 years, Wells made her last film in 1957.

Shoop's Hollywood connections began before he married Wells: During World War II, on furlough in the states awaiting assignment, Shoop accepted the job of technical adviser to Paramount Studios during the filming of "You Came Along." He went on to become a general, eventually being put in charge of the California National Guard.

Col. Shoop, who returned to the movie industry after his Air Force duty, had a brother also stationed at Muroc. Maj. Richard Shoop.

During Maj. Shoop's time at Muroc, he befriended actress Gloria DeHaven, whose career in Hollywood has spanned 40 years. Her films included "The Yellow Cab Man" (1950), "Two Tickets To Broadway" (1951) and "So This Is Paris" (1954). She's also done an episode or two of television's "Murder, She Wrote." Her latest film is "Out to Sea" (1997) with Jack Lemmon.

Soon after the war, Capt. Chuck Yeager broke the sound barrier in the X-1 – and what was now known as Muroc Air Force Base became famous throughout the world for its flight test activity, as well as the test pilot machismo that went with it.

One of those pilots, Capt. Glen Edwards, had his head turned by Hollywood starlet Joan Leslie. A frequent companion of Edwards, Leslie starred in a variety of movies of the period, including "Born to be Bad," "Sergeant York" and "Yankee Doodle Dandy."



In the February 1946 issue of *Movieland*, it is reported that "Joan's still never too tied-up to entertain service men in military camps, in hospitals, and in her own home. That Burbank house is a week-end mecca for visiting GI's, and she entertains simply and graciously with badminton bouts, ping-pong, home-made cookies and pleasant chatter. Her popularity with men in uniform is, they claim, because she's 'so much like the girl next door.'"



**Capt. Glen Edwards and Joan Leslie**

It was her "girl next door" quality that attracted Edwards to the actress, according to his description of her in Nov. 24, 1945 entry of his diary: "A swell kid – one you'd like to come home to – unaffected, real – didn't have time to get her phone number – AH ME!"

Despite Edwards' initial inability to snag Leslie's phone number, the romance flourished, and was followed closely by the Hollywood gossip columnists. On Jan 3, 1946, Edwards wrote, "Louella Parsons reported in her column today that we are getting 'more serious.' My, oh my, this long distance romancing with neither party communicating is quite the thing."

The following February, he wrote that he had sent Leslie a Valentine, "the first Valentine I bought in years."

Tragically, Edwards died on June 5, 1948, after the YB-49 "Flying Wing" he was testing crashed onto the desert floor, killing the pilot and his four crew mates. A year and a half later, the Air Force renamed Muroc in his honor, to Edwards Air Force Base.

A myriad of other celebrities have dropped by Edwards for a variety of events. When the NCO (non-commissioned officer's) club was built in 1944, actress Mitzi Gaynor was present, with a myriad of other stars, to cut the ribbon.

On March 4, 1956, while actors William Holden and Lloyd Nolan were on location for the Paramount's military aviation feature, "Toward the Unknown," Art Linkletter brought a group of Hollywood radio television personalities to Edwards to interview the movie crew.

Other visitors have included Red Skelton, who dropped by long enough for a photo near the lakebed, as well as, in separate visits, actors Danny Kaye ("The Secret Life of Walter Mitty") and Linda Darnell ("No Way Out") who got their photographs taken in the cockpits of jets. In more recent times, muscle man-turned-actor Arnold Schwarzenegger dropped by.

The center has been the host of numerous celebrities eager to see the space shuttle landings during the 1980s and '90s. Among these were John Denver and "Star Trek" alumni Leonard Nimoy and William Shatner.

But, by far, the biggest star who ever visited Edwards was a famous actor who used to host a show about the Mojave Desert.

Once the host of "Death Valley Days," President Ronald Reagan paid a visit on July 4, 1982, to witness, along with thousands of other Americans, the landing of the Space Shuttle Columbia.

*Information provided by James H. Farmer was used in this story.*



<a href="#">Edwards Home</a>   <a href="#">About Edwards</a>   <a href="#">Base Guide</a>   <a href="#">News</a>   <a href="#">Products &amp; Services</a>
<a href="#">Environmental</a>   <a href="#">Flight Safety</a>   <a href="#">FOIA</a>   <a href="#">Gallery</a>   <a href="#">History</a>   <a href="#">Job Opportunities</a>   <a href="#">Maps</a>   <a href="#">Museum</a>   <a href="#">Organizations</a>   <a href="#">Tours</a>   <a href="#">Weather : Aviation</a>   <a href="#">Weather : Local</a>
<a href="#">Contracting</a>   <a href="#">Links</a>   <a href="#">Publications &amp; Forms</a>   <a href="#">R-2508 Air Space</a>   <a href="#">Search</a>   <a href="#">Site Map</a>

Please read our [Privacy and Security Notice](#)

Air Force Flight Test Center  
E-mail comments: [Public Affairs](#)  
Last updated: July 29, 2004

Public Affairs  
95 ABW/PA  
1 S. Rosamond Blvd.  
Edwards AFB, CA 93524

Public Affairs: (661) 277-3510  
FAX: (661) 277-2732  
DSN: 527-3510  
Base Operator: (661) 277-1110

## ABOUT EDWARDS - HISTORY



In March 1998, there was a UFO sighting at South Base, Edwards Air Force Base. The time was 11 p.m., and witnesses included personnel at the B-2 test facility.

The witnesses described "a large aircraft, moving very slowly, several hundred feet above the ground." Some said it appeared to hover.

As it turns out, the "aircraft" was a movie prop for one of the most recent TV productions filmed at Edwards: HBO's "From the Earth to the Moon."

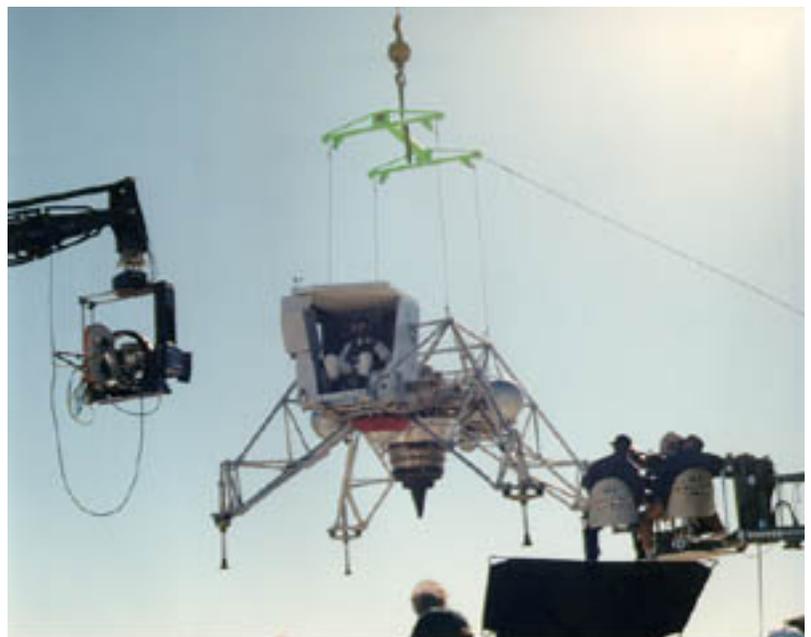
The mini-series, produced for the cable network by "Apollo 13" star Tom Hanks, was filmed at Edwards and other suitable locations, such as Kennedy Space Center and the Naval Training Center in Orlando, Fla.

The prop misidentified as a UFO was suspended from a mobile crane, unseen by witnesses in the darkness. It was tens, not hundreds, of feet about the ground.

### The story of Apollo

The series premiered on April 5, dramatically presenting the story of the Apollo space program – including many lift-offs, lunar landings and splashdowns. Virtually every aspect of the story was examined, from the men who made the voyages to the men and women who made it possible for them to go.

The episode filmed at Edwards was "Mare Tranquilitatis." Although the series concluded in May, HBO has announced there will probably be a rebroadcast in the fall.



*NASA-Dryden photo*

**The scene depicting the first Apollo moon landing from HBO's "From the Earth to the Moon" was filmed at Edwards Air Force Base**

In 1998, Edwards Air Force Base played host to two other major Hollywood productions: Paramount's "Deep Impact" and Touchstone's "Armageddon," the latter of which premieres July 1.

### The sky is falling

"Deep Impact and "Armageddon both focus on the threat of an asteroid on a collision course with Earth.

The movie company which filmed scenes for "Deep Impact" stayed two days, shooting in one of NASA's hangars. Scenes included F-15s, F-18s and a shot of the SR-71 being towed in front of the hangar, according to the Dryden Flight Research Center's Public Affairs officer.

 [PREVIOUS](#)



[NEXT](#) 

[Edwards Home](#) | [About Edwards](#) | [Base Guide](#) | [News](#) | [Products & Services](#)

[Environmental](#) | [Flight Safety](#) | [FOIA](#) | [Gallery](#) | [History](#) | [Job Opportunities](#) | [Maps](#) | [Museum](#) | [Organizations](#) | [Tours](#) | [Weather : Aviation](#) | [Weather : Local](#)

[Contracting](#) | [Links](#) | [Publications & Forms](#) | [R-2508 Air Space](#) | [Search](#) | [Site Map](#)

Please read our [Privacy and Security Notice](#)

Air Force Flight Test Center  
E-mail comments: [Public Affairs](#)  
Last updated: July 29, 2004

Public Affairs  
95 ABW/PA  
1 S. Rosamond Blvd.  
Edwards AFB, CA 93524

Public Affairs: (661) 277-3510  
FAX: (661) 277-2732  
DSN: 527-3510  
Base Operator: (661) 277-1110

ABOUT EDWARDS - HISTORY



\* Click on thumbnails to see the full size version.



Poster for the movie "Jet Pilot" starring John Wayne



Capt. Glen Edwards and Eleanor Parker



Linda Darnell in a P-38 cockpit



Jimmy Durante at the Officer's Club



Jack Benny at the Edwards AFB theater



Capt. Glen Edwards and girlfriend, actress Joan Leslie



Bob Hope with Francis Langford and Skinny Ennes at the Edwards AFB theater



Danny Kaye prepping for flight with Capt. Walt Daniel



Mitzi Gaynor, Raymond Burr, Anita Gordon, Rennie McEnvoy, Dorothy Porter, Barbara Darrell, Tom Danson at Edwards 1954 ribbon-cutting



Lt. Col. "Pete" Everest and William Holden on set of "Toward the Unknown"



Charles Bronson in "X-15"



Diamond formations of Edwards aircraft starred in finale of "Toward the Unknown"



Jack Palance and director John Badham during filming of "The Godchild"



Stars of "Deep Impact" film a scene at NASA-Dryden



Bryan Cranston, portrays astronaut Buzz Aldrin in lunar module for "From the Earth to the Moon"



Several scenes from Touchstone Pictures' "Armageddon" was filmed at Edwards AFB

 **PREVIOUS**



[Edwards Home](#) | [About Edwards](#) | [Base Guide](#) | [News](#) | [Products & Services](#)

[Environmental](#) | [Flight Safety](#) | [FOIA](#) | [Gallery](#) | [History](#) | [Job Opportunities](#) | [Maps](#) | [Museum](#) | [Organizations](#) | [Tours](#) | [Weather : Aviation](#) | [Weather : Local](#)

[Contracting](#) | [Links](#) | [Publications & Forms](#) | [R-2508 Air Space](#) | [Search](#) | [Site Map](#)

Please read our [Privacy and Security Notice](#)

Air Force Flight Test Center  
E-mail comments: [Public Affairs](#)  
Last updated: July 29, 2004

Public Affairs  
95 ABW/PA  
1 S. Rosamond Blvd.  
Edwards AFB, CA 93524

Public Affairs: (661) 277-3510  
FAX: (661) 277-2732  
DSN: 527-3510  
Base Operator: (661) 277-1110



**The cast of Touchstone's "Armageddon" includes (from left) Steve Buscemi, Will Patton, Bruce Willis, Ben Affleck, Michael Duncan and Owen Wilson. Several scenes were filmed at Edwards Air Force Base.**





*NASA-Dryden photo*

**Charles Bronson in "X-15"**



**Danny Kaye and Capt. Walt Daniel**



**Linda Darnel in P-38 cockpit, Muroc Gunnery Range, 1945.  
Courtesy of retired Col. Robert L. Jones, stationed at Muroc 1945-47**



**Jimmy Durante and Bill Robinson (top dancer) at O Club**







**Francis Langford, Skinny Ennes and Bob Hope**



*NASA-Dryden photo*

**Some scenes for "Deep Impact" were filmed in a hangar at the Dryden Flight Research Center. Pictured from left are Alexander Baluyev, Blair Underwood, Jon Favreau, Ron Eldard, Laura Innes and Robert Duvall**



**Mitzi Gaynor, Raymond Burr, Anita Gordon,  
Rennie McEnvoy, Dorothy Porter, Barbara  
Darrell, Tom Danson**







