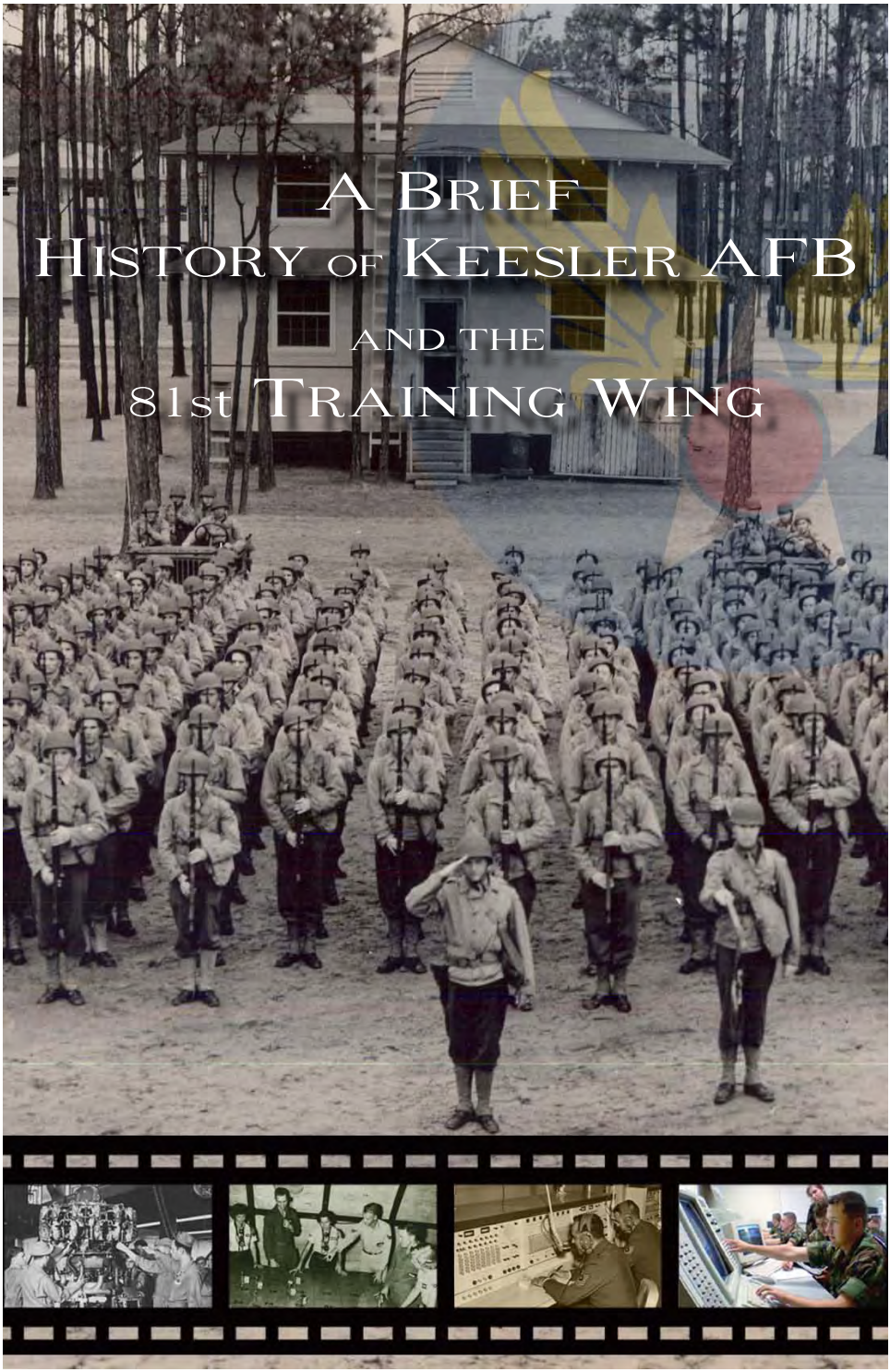
A Brief History of Keesler AFB and the 81st Training Wing



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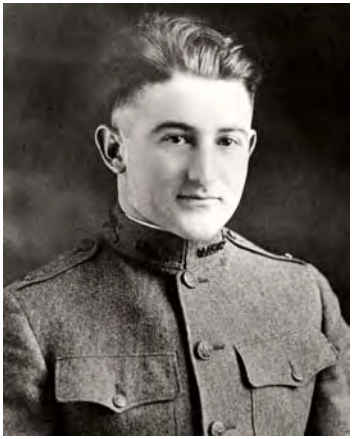


Second Lieutenant Samuel Reeves Keesler, Jr.
1896 - 1918

Samuel Reeves Keesler, Jr., was born in Greenwood, Mississippi on 11 April 1896. He was an outstanding student leader and athlete in high school and at Davidson College in North Carolina.

Keesler entered the U.S. Army Air Service on 13 May 1917. He was commissioned a second lieutenant on 15 August, and received training as an aerial observer at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, before sailing to France in March 1918. After additional training in aerial gunnery and artillery fire control, Lieutenant Keesler was assigned to the 24th Aero Squadron, in the Verdun sector on the Western Front, on 26 August 1918.

During World War I, while performing a reconnaissance mission behind German lines in the late afternoon of 8 October 1918, Keesler and his pilot, First Lieutenant Harold W. Riley, came under heavy gunfire from four enemy aircraft. Riley quickly lost control of the badly damaged airplane while Keesler continued to fend off the attackers even as they plummeted to the ground. Seriously wounded during the battle and the ensuing crash landing, Keesler and Riley were eventually captured by German ground troops and held prisoner. Unable to receive immediate medical attention, Keesler died from his injuries the following day.

AMERICAN EXPEDITIONARY FORCES
U.S. AIR SERVICE, PARIS

France, January 16th. 1919.

From: 1st. Lieut H. W. Riley, 24th Aero Squadron

To: Chief of Air Service, American E. F., (Thru channels)

Subject: Distinguished conduct of 2nd. Lieut Samuel B. Keesler, observer, 24th. Aero Squadron.

1. In the late afternoon of the 8th. of October, 1918, Lieut. Keesler and myself were on a mission east of Verdun. Shortly after we crossed the lines and just before we had covered the assigned territory, four Fokkers came from the French side of the line and attacked us. I am certain Lieut. Keesler shot down the leader as he attacked first, and I saw him go down in a steep nose dive. The other three E. A. opened fire immediately and crippled one aileron, shot away my rudder controls and part of my elevators. Lieut. Keesler fired all the way down and after we crashed, although he had been shot three times thru the chest and three times in the abdomen. The three Huns hung over us at a low altitude and kept firing after we were clear of the wreck. Lieut. Keesler was hit in the hip before we could get under cover. From 3:15 until 12:00 that night, when we reached a dressing station, Lieut. Keesler received no medical attention and although he must have suffered terribly, he showed wonderful self-control and won the admiration of all the German soldiers who came to look at him. Lieut. Keesler died the following noon.

2. Lieut. Keesler's conduct was a grand demonstration of the morale of our Air Service and I hope it will not go unrecognized.

Harold W. Riley

H. W. Riley,
1st Lieut., A. S., U.S.A.
Pilot, 24th Aero Squadron.

History of Keesler Air Force Base

Early Development

Great harvests of seafood and timber gave the Gulf Coast economy several bursts of spectacular growth during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. By the late 1920s, however, the once-incredible seafood hauls had tapered off and the seemingly endless forests had been logged out, leaving tourism as the largest remaining source of revenue for the city of Biloxi. Unfortunately tourism only travels with prosperity and by the time the Great Depression had reached its halfway mark in the mid-1930s, Biloxi officials knew the city would need an economic transfusion if it were to survive. City Mayor Louis Braun, Chamber of Commerce Secretary Anthony V. Ragusin and other city officials began looking for new and better ways to market Biloxi's attractions.

Improved access was one obvious measure, so city officials decided to build a commercial airport several miles northwest of the city's business district. Plans approved by the Civil Aeronautics Administration called for a large hangar, weather station, beacon light, and a 3,000-foot runway. The federal Works Projects Administration (WPA) provided funding and workers began clearing the site in 1935. Army Air Corps maneuvers were conducted at the airport in 1938—at the time the largest peacetime military event in the South since the Civil War. No one could have foreseen it then, but Biloxi's airport was about to become the seed from which would grow one of the finest military technical training complexes in the United States.

While Biloxi struggled to work its way out of the Depression, world events were setting great changes in motion. Totalitarian regimes had come to power in Europe and the Far East and their aggressive policies threatened world peace. In the summer of 1938, President Franklin D. Roosevelt warned America of the growing danger, and he proposed greatly increased government spending to modernize the nation's long-neglected defenses. Amidst heated opposition by isolationists, the Congress agreed by the narrowest of

margins to support Roosevelt's military expansion programs, including enlargement of the Air Corps. That Fall, the War Department drafted plans for an air force of up to 10,000 modern, combat-ready planes—an increase of almost ten-fold over the existing establishment—along with proportionally expanded training programs for the huge numbers of additional aircrew, aircraft and engine mechanics, and other support personnel that would be needed.

Given the enormity of the task, it was immediately apparent that the Air Corps' existing training establishment would have to be supplemented, especially with regard to aircrew production. A cooperative plan was soon devised in which private enterprise would provide instructors and training facilities, while the government would furnish students and trainer aircraft. Within months, contract-flying schools were springing up all over the country. Seeking every opportunity to broaden the city's economic base, Biloxi officials closely followed those developments. In April 1939, they asked members of Mississippi's congressional delegation to provide them with more information about the Army's pilot training program. City officials heard nothing for almost a year, and then came the disheartening news that the War Department was not inclined to build any facilities in coastal towns for fear of attack by enemy naval forces.

Meanwhile, war had broken out in Europe and the Army Air Corps training bases quickly filled to capacity. The War Department announced its intention to build two new ground crew training bases. Biloxi officials were hopeful their city would house one of those bases regardless of the risk of coastal attack. On 4 November 1940, Chamber of Commerce Secretary Ragusin sent a proposal to Brigadier General Rush B. Lincoln, the commanding general of Chanute Field, Illinois, and the Air Corps official responsible for identifying potential training sites. Ragusin pleaded that Biloxi be considered as a potential site for a new base, and he offered the use of the city's airport to “sweeten the deal,” along with access improvements and additional land for school facilities. Ragusin's offer was attractive, and General Lincoln sent two of his staff, Lt Col Arthur W. Brock and Capt William P. Sloan, to visit the area. Colonel Brock was impressed with the location, the climate and the strong support from the local community.

Encouraged by the Army's interest, Biloxi officials worked feverishly to have the runway paved and to obtain options on additional land in preparation for a bid to acquire the new base. By early January 1941, city officials had assembled their formal offer; the package included the airport, the Naval Reserve Park, and parts of Oak Park sufficient enough to support a 5,200 capacity technical training school. In addition, Ragusin and Mayor Braun had persuaded the Veterans Administration to release a section of its land needed to extend the airport runway to 5,500 feet.

The Biloxi airport, ballpark and golf course as it appeared in 1941.

General Lincoln was sold on the city's proposal, and he recommended Biloxi as one of two locations most suitable for a new technical training base. But events had already moved well beyond the projections of 1941, and when the War Department anticipated the schools' student capacity would increase from 5,200 to 12,000 and then to 24,000 troops, Army engineers had to revise building plans. More land had to be acquired and additional government monies had to be appropriated. The city responded in-kind with an expanded proposal that added the Biloxi Golf Club's links and clubhouse, the Wilkes Boy Scout Camp, a softball park, and numerous privately owned parcels to the original offer—in all, some 685 acres. On 6 March 1941, the War Department notified Mayor Braun that Biloxi officially had been selected.

Base Construction

Congress initially appropriated $6 million for base construction at Biloxi and an additional $2 million for equipment. By the time the War Department allocated the funds in April 1941, the projected cost had risen to $9.6 million. On 14 June 1941, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers awarded Newton, Glenn and Knost Construction Company and J. A. Jones Construction Company contracts totaling $10 million to build Biloxi's technical training facility. At the time, it was the most expensive government project ever undertaken in the state of Mississippi.

Surveyors laid out streets even as buildings were being constructed. East-west thoroughfares received letter designations, while north-south streets were numbered. The Corps of Engineers built rail spurs from the Louisville & Nashville Railroad's main tracks onto the base for freight shipments. By early July, construction was in full swing and the project was employing thousands of laborers—many from the local area. In less than three months they had created "a city within a city." As originally built, the base consisted of over 660 buildings. After a decade of hard times, the construction contracts and their attendant payrolls made Biloxi's merchants ecstatic; prosperity had returned to the Gulf Coast.

The War Department activated Army Air Corps Station No. 8, Aviation Mechanics School, Biloxi, Mississippi, on 12 June 1941. City officials wanted the base named after a notable figure in the local area's history, but it was War Department policy to name installations after military service members killed in action. In late June, Mayor Braun received word that the new base would be named in honor of Second Lieutenant Samuel Reeves Keesler, Jr., of Greenwood, Mississippi. Lieutenant Keesler perished during World War I while serving in France as an aerial observer assigned to the 24th Aero Squadron, U.S. Army Air Service. On 25 August 1941, Army Air Corps Station No. 8 was officially designated Keesler Army Airfield.

First Soldiers Arrive

Captain Samuel A. Mundell arrived in Biloxi on 12 June 1941. He was joined two days later by a “start up” cadre from Scott Field, Illinois, consisting of a second lieutenant and 20 enlisted personnel. Lieutenant Colonel William J. Hanlon arrived on 16 June and assumed command from Captain Mundell. The same Arthur W. Brock who had first examined the site in January, now promoted to colonel, arrived on 17 July to become the base's first permanent commander.

Troops soon began pouring in to the base. With barracks construction still incomplete, the only available housing consisted of 650 tents pitched in the former Naval Reserve Park. On 8 September 1941, the 310th Technical School Squadron (the mess unit) became the first squadron to move into the new barracks. Before the end of the month, three basic training units, the 301st, 303d, and 304th Technical School Squadrons, had also moved into permanent quarters.

Basic Training

When the War Department activated Keesler Field in June 1941, the local community thought it was only getting a technical training center with a student population that may have peaked at 20,000 troops. However, expectations changed dramatically that summer, as the nation suddenly began to prepare in earnest for war. Not only was Keesler to house a technical training center, but it would also host one of the Army's newest replacement, or basic training centers. Keesler's population nearly doubled overnight.

Unfortunately, base planners were not aware that parts of Keesler had a drainage problem. When the rainy season arrived, “tent city” became “swamp city.” Base recruits even nicknamed one area “Guadacanal,” but it wasn’t long before engineers found a solution to the problem. They built wooden platforms that raised the tents off the ground. Builders eventually replaced the tents with 398 tarpaper hutments that housed 15 soldiers each. The total cost of the project was $346,708, plus an additional $6,206 for electricity.

The first shipment of recruits arrived at Keesler Field on 21 August 1941. During World War II, the Army's basic training program was little more than a reception process. It accessioned and outfitted new recruits, gave them a brief introduction to military life, and then shipped them to a technical school. At Keesler, basic training lasted four weeks, during which classifiers determined the type of follow-on schooling each recruit would receive. Many stayed at Keesler to become airplane and engine mechanics, while others transferred to aerial gunnery or aviation cadet schools. Trains passed through Keesler daily, dropping off new trainees while picking up recent graduates.

Row of barracks in various stages of completion, Fall 1941.

Throughout its service at Keesler, the Basic Training Center was extremely undermanned on average, the center had only one officer assigned for every 404 trainees and one enlisted instructor for 62 recruits. By September 1944, the number of recruits had dropped, but the workload remained constant as Keesler personnel began processing veteran ground troops and combat crews who had returned from duty overseas. Basic training scaled down drastically after the end of World War II, and it was finally discontinued at Keesler on 30 June 1946.

Technical Training

Technical training school officers and staff began arriving at Keesler Field in mid-July 1941, primarily from Chanute Field, Illinois. There was little time to waste, as they had only a few months in which to assemble equipment and to prepare class lectures and schedules before the school opened on 29 September.

The new academic buildings were still under construction when the Airplane and Engine Mechanics School opened. Basic branch students received instruction in five barracks, and instructor branch students were assigned to temporary classrooms set up in commandeered circus tents. Completion of the last of six academic buildings made these temporary measures unnecessary after October 1941.

In 1942, the Army Air Forces directed Keesler Field headquarters to focus more heavily on training mechanics for B-24 Liberator heavy bombers. The school received its first B-24 in late September 1942. Six more arrived shortly thereafter and specialized B-24 maintenance training began on 19 October. At the same time, the technical school began operating 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and class sizes grew from 800 to 900 and then to 1,000 students. The shortage of qualified instructors was so severe that one-half of the first graduating class was held back to teach. Over time, Keesler gradually replaced military instructors with civilians.

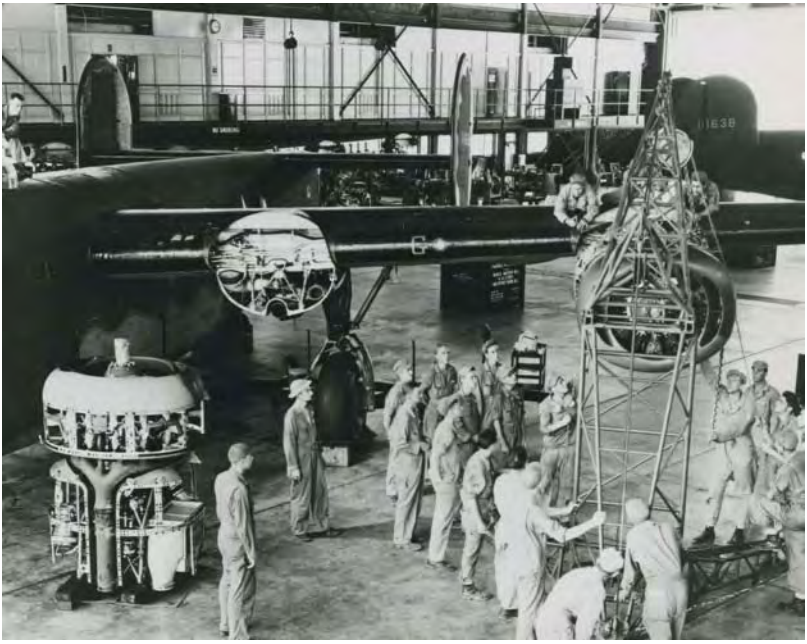
Generally unbeknownst to many, was the role that the Tuskegee Airmen and other black troops played at Keesler. More that 7,000 African-Americans were stationed at Keesler Field by the Autumn of 1943. These soldiers included pre-aviation cadets, radio operators, aviation technicians, bombardiers, and aviation mechanics. Many others, like First Sergeant Lucius Theus, a future major general, also served with distinction in Keesler's permanently assigned black units that were not connected to Tuskegee. These African-American service members took a giant step forward in their goal of winning wars on two fronts—the struggle against racism at home and the fight against foreign enemies.

Keesler's first graduating class of African-American airplane mechanics, 1944.

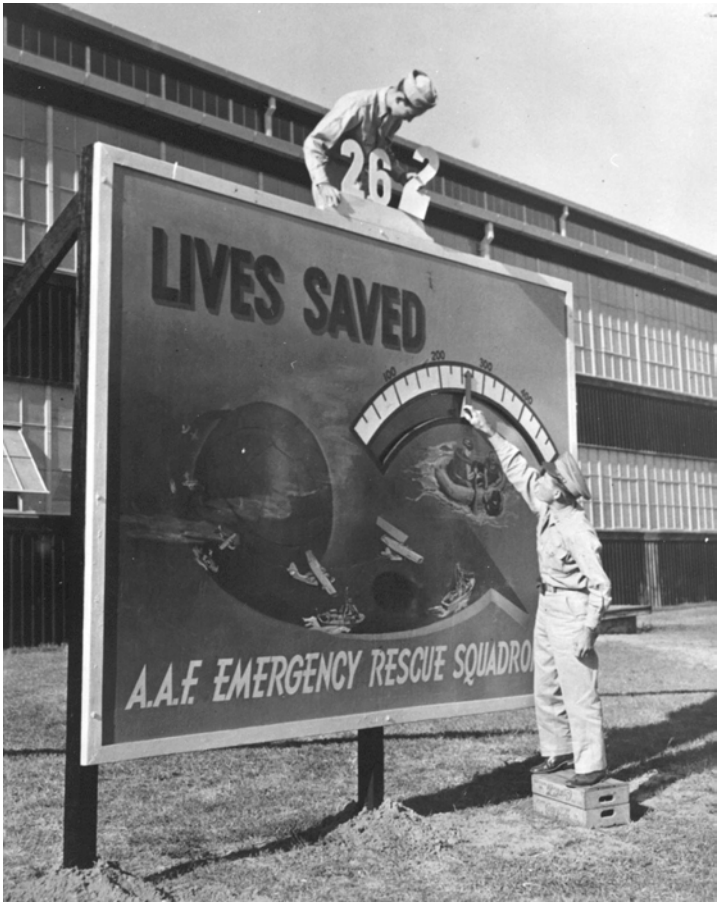
Specialized Flight Training

Keesler continued to focus on specialized training in B-24 maintenance until mid-1944. Thereafter, the base was directed to expand its mechanics training curriculum to include other aircraft. In addition to the B-24, students learned how to repair and maintain the B-25, B-26, and B-32 bombers; A-20 and A-26 attack planes; and the C-46, C-47, and C-54 transports. Changing requirements forced the consolidation of all air-rescue training at Keesler in early 1945, however, and many of these programs had to be moved elsewhere due to lack of space.

The rapid build-up of heavy bomber units overseas demanded additional aircrew, and Keesler was tasked to assist in the spring of 1944. A B-24 co-pilot school began operation in July, and its curriculum was expanded to include B-32 co-pilot training in October. Procured in small numbers as a back-up aircraft design for the B-29 strategic bomber program, the B-32 Terminator was plagued with mechanical problems and production delays. Its contribution to the war effort was limited and, subsequently, B-32 aircrew training ceased in January 1945. The need for B-24 crews had also diminished and Keesler stopped training B-24 co-pilots two months later.



B-24 maintenance training was taught at Keesler's Airplane and Engine Mechanics School until 1945.



In late July 1944, the Army Air Forces (AAF) consolidated all air-sea rescue training at Keesler. The Emergency Rescue School (ERS) taught aircrews how to best conduct rescue operations; it also evaluated new techniques and equipment. The addition of another major program imposed a significant space problem as Keesler's academic and maintenance facilities were already stretched to capacity—as were its student housing and other support functions. The situation worsened on 4 January 1945, when the AAF Training Command ordered Keesler to give first priority to air-sea rescue training. The Airplane and Engine Mechanics School was forced to give up even more of its training space as a result—although short-lived since the Emergency Rescue School was disbanded in April 1946. Thereafter, air sea rescue training transferred to the Air Transport Command's newly established Air Rescue Service.

Post World War II Era

With victory achieved and peace restored, the United States began a massive demobilization effort. Paradoxically, the war's end brought about an increase in Keesler's student population. The base lost its Basic Training Center and Emergency Rescue School in 1946, but Army Air Force personnel continued to arrive in large numbers since other bases had curtailed their operations and relocated students to Keesler. For instance, when Amarillo Army Airfield closed, most of its airplane and engine mechanic students transferred to Keesler, which increased the student body by almost 50 percent. Keesler also gained five other schools in 1946: Supply Officers, Military Police, Air Chemical, Pre-Meteorology, and Cooks. In addition, Keesler absorbed the rotary wing or helicopter mechanic course previously taught at Sheppard Field, Texas. The net result of these changes were that Keesler continued to be the AAF Technical Training Command's largest installation—an honor held since its inception.

In late May 1947, the AAF announced plans to relocate its Radar School from Boca Raton, Florida, to Keesler. In preparation, base workers converted 32 barracks into classrooms for the radar fundamentals course and one hangar into classrooms and laboratories for the electronics course. The Radar School officially opened on 14 November 1947, making Keesler responsible for operating the two largest military technical schools in the United States. Slashed budgets forced the base to reduce its operating costs, and as a result, the Airplane and Engine Mechanics School and the Radar School consolidated on 1 April 1948. Meanwhile, on 18 September 1947, the United States Air Force became an independent branch of the armed services. As a result, Keesler Field was officially redesignated as an Air Force base on 13 January 1948.

In early 1949, Air Training Command decided Keesler should focus its efforts on teaching radar, radio, and electronics maintenance and repair. To make room, the airplane and engine mechanics courses had to be moved elsewhere—especially since the Air Force also planned to transfer the Radio Operations School to Keesler from Scott AFB, Illinois. In addition to training radio operators, Keesler began teaching air traffic service technicians; aircraft approach controllers, ground radar mechanics, and radar repairman-ground controlled approach specialists. The last mechanics training courses had moved to Sheppard AFB, Texas, by November and it was at that point in the base's history that Keesler became known as the “electronics training center of the Air Force.”

The Korean War and the 1950s

Previously home to the largest airplane and engine mechanics school in the United States, Keesler entered a new decade determined to develop the best radar and communications training program in the world—an important goal as the deepening tensions between the democratic West and the communist East came to be called the Cold War. To attain this goal, Keesler sought funding for new and expanded classrooms and student dormitories needed to replace the "temporary" facilities it had worked in and lived with for over nine years. Those plans were abruptly set aside when the Cold War suddenly turned hot in a small Asian country called Korea.

The North Korean People's Army moved swiftly into South Korea in June 1950; defending U.S. forces were taken by surprise, and for a brief time the aggressors threatened to push them into the sea. Within days, the Air Force had assumed a virtual wartime operating tempo and by mid-July, Keesler's technical school had adopted a six-day work schedule to graduate the additional radio and electronics technicians needed in the Far East. Shortages of trained manpower impacted other USAF skill specialties as well, and Keesler again began to provide basic training to incoming recruits. In late 1951, Air Training Command opened two new basic training centers—one at Sampson AFB, New York, and the other at Parks AFB, California—thereby downsizing that facet of Keesler's mission. Even so, Keesler still did not have the suitable facilities to accommodate its increased population.

In August 1950, Keesler embarked on a major rebuilding program to upgrade its facilities across the board. The first phase of the project called for the construction of a new electronics laboratory, barracks, and a dining hall at a cost of $14 million. In 1951, Congress appropriated an additional $44 million to complete Keesler's reconstruction. Plans included four two-story academic buildings (later named Allee, Dolan, Thomson, and Wolfe Halls), a 352-bed hospital, modern family housing units, and a high-rise dormitory complex dubbed "the triangle" because of its distinctive layout.

The 1950s also meant organizational change for Keesler. Since August 1948, the 3380th Technical Training Wing had controlled all base activities. Under it were four subordinate units: the 3380th Technical Training Group, which operated the school; the 3380th Maintenance and Supply Group; the 3380th Air Base Group; and the 3380th Medical Group. In 1955, a fifth group was added—the 3380th Installations Group. That arrangement continued until 1 January 1959, when Air Training Command redesignated the wing as Headquarters, Keesler Technical Training Center (KTTC). At the same time, the training group was redesignated the 3380th Technical School, USAF, and all of its subordinate student squadrons were renamed school squadrons.

Technical Training

Keesler's modernization required more than expanded facilities. The base also faced a severe shortage of qualified instructors. This encouraged the faculty to explore some innovative remedies. For example, Keesler began using television instruction methods as early as June 1953. The radar and communications curricula also underwent many changes, reflecting the constantly increasing importance and complexity of electronics technologies. In 1950, Keesler offered only 14 generalized courses, but by December 1959 that number had grown to 116, including vital USAF programs such as the aircraft warning and control system. Deploying that single system required 25,000 new radar technicians alone—further proof of Keesler's importance to national defense.

In early 1956, Keesler entered the missile age by opening a ground support training program for the SM-65 Atlas Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM). In addition, school personnel were developing training methods for the newly adopted semi-automatic ground environment (SAGE) system, an integrated defense net intended to protect the United States from Soviet air attack. It was SAGE that first introduced Keesler personnel to the complexities of the digital computer. The base gained even more responsibility in 1958, when the Air Force announced that Scott AFB would relinquish its training mission. As a result, all control tower operator, radio maintenance, and general radio operator courses came under Keesler's already broad technical training umbrella.

The 1960s

By 1960, the schools at Keesler had earned a solid reputation for high technology training that offered courses in radar, communications, and electronics. No longer was the base associated with wrench-wielding student mechanics in greasy coveralls. Instead, Keesler officials devoted their energies to newly-fielded electronic weapon systems and the revolutionary technical developments emerging from the space race. These new technologies required complex, environmentally sensitive computers, simulators, and training devices—meaning that Keesler needed modern, updated and air-conditioned facilities. Builders tore down many of the base's small World War II-era structures and replaced them with spacious, multistory schoolhouses, such as Bryan, Jones, Hewes, Maltby, and Cody Halls. To maximize televised instruction, a closed-circuit audiovisual system was designed to teach electronics principles and was completed in 1962.

During the early l960s, Keesler lost many of its airborne training courses and the aircraft they required. The TC-54s assigned to electronic warfare officer training departed to Mather AFB, California, in April 1961. In December 1962, the Air Ground Operations School and its T-33s transferred to Eglin AFB, Florida; and the last C-47 used for ground approach radar training left in 1966, when it was replaced by an earth bound simulator.

By the mid-1960s, the United States was beginning to deploy substantial forces to Southeast Asia. The Vietnam War buildup caused base-wide shortages of everything from uniforms to post office boxes, but it also returned pilot training to Keesler for the first time since 1953. On 15 January 1967, the 3389th Pilot Training Squadron was activated and equipped with T-28 Trojans. Its mission was to teach Military Assistance Program (MAP) students how to fly. The squadron hosted personnel from many countries, including Iran, Mexico, and Peru, but especially from South Vietnam. Of the 908 pilots who graduated before the squadron inactivated in 1973, 743 were from that beleaguered country. Advances in evolving technology rapidly led to changes in Keesler's training and infrastructure.

Meanwhile, all Air Force basic training at Keesler ceased in 1966, when Air Training Command assigned that responsibility solely to Lackland AFB, Texas.

Advances in evolving technology rapidly led to changes in Keesler's training and infrastructure.

A milestone was attained on 11 June 1968, when Keesler graduated its one millionth student. A month later, the school absorbed both personnel and administrative functions that increased Keesler's student population by almost 20 percent.

Technology Expands

Keesler remained the largest training base within ATC throughout the 1970s and continued to stay on the cutting edge of electronics technology, instructing students in new systems such as the worldwide military command and control system and the 407L radar system. The school was the country's main supplier of electronics technicians. Unfortunately, the traditional division between academic and technical studies meant that Keesler's graduates could not receive college credit for their efforts.

On 31 May 1972, Air Training Command redesignated the 3380th Technical School as the USAF School of Applied Aerospace Sciences. Soon after on 13 December, the school received institutional accreditation from the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. As a result, Airmen trained at Keesler received a Career Educational Certificate from the newly established Community College of the Air Force. This opportunity was further expanded in April 1977, when Keesler graduates became eligible to apply their technical training towards an Associate of Arts degree.

Keesler's student population dropped to an all-time low after the Vietnam War ended, and Air Force officials responded to changing social conditions by examining the school's teaching functions. What evolved was a new, more efficient organization that placed greater emphasis on the military role of the students and the school. As a result, Air Training Command inactivated the USAF School of Applied Aerospace Sciences on 1 April 1977 and replaced it with the 3300th Technical Training Wing, which activated the same day.

Tenant Support

As the Vietnam War began winding down, so too did the need to train Vietnamese pilots. The MAP foreign pilot training program ended in 1973, again leaving Keesler without a flying mission. That situation did not last long as several flying units were reassigned to Keesler during the 1970s. On 16 April 1973, the Department of Defense announced that Military Airlift Command (MAC) would transfer two squadrons to Keesler: the 1st Aerospace Cartographic and Geodetic Squadron from Forbes AFB, Kansas, and the 53d Weather Reconnaissance Squadron from Ramey AFB, Puerto Rico. The 1st Aerospace Cartographic and Geodetic Squadron used its RC-130s to conduct photomapping assignments worldwide, while the 53d went "hurricane hunting" throughout the Caribbean with its WC-130s.

These squadrons were tenant units at Keesler, meaning they relied on various base organizations for support but were not otherwise a part of Keesler's command structure. Both units were in place by 31 July 1973. In addition to the units belonging to Military Airlift Command, Keesler also gained an Air Force Reserve tenant in April 1973 when the 920th Tactical Airlift Group activated. This unit flew C-130 Hercules turboprop transport aircraft.

The increased number of large aircraft underscored the need for airfield improvements. Starting in January 1974, engineers began extending the runway and converting two hangars into aircraft maintenance shops. Even before these projects could be completed, however, the Air Force proposed transferring yet another unit to Keesler—the 7th Airborne Command and Control Squadron, which had previously been assigned to Pacific Air Forces and stationed in Southeast Asia. U.S. involvement ended in Vietnam and the 7th was no longer needed in the Far East. Keesler was selected as the new home for the 7th's EC-130 airborne command and control aircraft, and the squadron arrived in August 1975, as a base tenant unit reporting directly to Tactical Air Command (TAC).

The End of the Cold War and Beyond

Two weapon system training programs gained attention during the early l980s; the airborne warning and control system (employed aboard the E-3A Sentry aircraft) and the BGM-109 ground-launched cruise missile. Keesler's air traffic control program also garnered its share of publicity especially after the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization walked off the job in August 1981. When President Ronald W. Reagan fired the strikers, it was Keesler-trained military air traffic controllers who stepped in to keep the nation's airways operational.

Beginning in 1984, school officials worked with Air Force Communications Command's 1872d School Squadron to develop prototype training programs using interactive videodisc (IVD) technology, which soon supported a variety of Keesler course offerings. Since then, the use of IVD had become widespread elsewhere in government and throughout industry.

Significant as these changes were, they were dwarfed in importance by the political upheavals of the late 1980s and early 1990s as the Soviet empire abruptly collapsed and its former member states began to fashion new destinies for themselves. The Cold War was over and after more than four decades of being prepared to fight a global nuclear conflict, the Air Force suddenly found itself in a time of great uncertainty. Issues that had seemed well settled—from strategic doctrine to unit emblems and uniforms—were subjected to scrutiny and challenge, and for a time, change seemed to be the only constant. Driven by deep defense budget cuts, the congressionally mandated base realignment and closure process culminated in a major downsizing effort, significantly impacting Keesler's training mission. With base closure forcing an end to technical training at Chanute AFB, Illinois, and Lowry AFB, Colorado, Keesler's growing importance as a technical university would become even more firmly fixed. The first additions arrived in 1990 as Keesler acquired Chanute's weather forecasting courses. Lowry's metrology and precision maintenance electronics laboratory training program followed in 1992-1993.

The Air Force's 1992 "Year of Training" initiative was a top to bottom evaluation of the process by which USAF technicians acquired and honed their skills. One initiative proposed a drawdown of USAF field training detachments (FTD). These detachments were the mechanism by which USAF maintainers had traditionally gained their specialized knowledge of complex weapon systems, and the Major Commands were understandably determined this training should continue undisturbed. Still in the planning stages in 1995, the FTD drawdown initiative divided weapon systems training among Major Commands and technical training centers, and Keesler stood to inherit many new course responsibilities once the drawdown plan went into effect.

Those restructuring efforts similarly affected units assigned to Keesler Technical Training Center. In February 1992, Air Training Command redesignated the base’s host unit as Keesler Training Center (KTC). The 3300th Technical Training Wing downsized and became a group, and its component technical training groups became squadrons. The 3305th Student Group also inactivated along with its subordinate squadrons. In mid-September all of the 3380th numbered units assumed the 393d designation, as the base further realigned itself to conform to the Air Force's objective wing structure. In addition, the technical training group assumed the 393d

designation and its nine technical training and training support squadrons were renumbered to better reflect the new, simplified organizational arrangement.

Yet another major change occurred on 1 July 1993, when Keesler Training Center inactivated and its lineage and honors retired. On the same day, the 81st Tactical Fighter Wing, formerly located at RAF Bentwaters, United Kingdom, was redesignated the 81st Training Wing and concurrently activated to serve as Keesler's host organization. At the same time, HQ USAF redesignated Air Training Command as Air Education and Training Command (AETC) and activated Second Air Force at Keesler. Its mission was to oversee all technical training conducted within AETC. Another "Year of Training" initiative resulted in the return of flight training to Keesler for the first time since 1973. Tasked with providing operational airlift support training to pilots in C-12C/F Huron and C-21A Learjet aircraft, the 45th Airlift Squadron was assigned to the 81st Training Group. It began operations in July 1994.

Meanwhile, the massive restructuring of the Air Force in the early 1990s also meant several changes for Keesler's tenant units. The first occurred when the 53d Weather Reconnaissance Squadron (known throughout the Gulf Coast as the "Hurricane Hunters") inactivated on 30 June 1991. Its important storm-tracking mission transferred to a component of the 403d Airlift Wing, Keesler's resident Air Force Reserve unit. Another base tenant change occurred when the 7th Airborne Command and Control Squadron and its EC-130 "flying command post" aircraft relocated to Davis-Monthan AFB, Arizona, in September 1994.

The 21st Century

The end of the Cold War and the subsequent drawdown that followed caused the armed services to refocus on a long dormant issue, namely Interservice Training Review Organization (ITRO) participation—a review of military programs in order to eliminate training duplication and reduce training costs through consolidation. The first results of ITRO occurred at Keesler in 1995, when the ITRO Executive Board determined that all DoD Calibration training would be consolidated at Keesler. The first contingent of students arrived in 1996, as the Navy closed offices and moved equipment from San Diego, California, and Norfolk, Virginia, to Keesler. The Marine Corps followed in 1997, as they transferred equipment and students from the Marine Corps Logistics Base (MCLB) in Albany, Georgia, to Keesler. The course load

and population increase expected from the FTD drawdown dissipated in 1996, as USAF leaders determined that centralization of training under the FTD would be unrealistic.

On 4 October 1996, Keesler officially implemented “Triangle Vision,” an ambitious five-year, $23 million building project designed to modernize the base’s 1950s era technical training dormitories and dining facilities. The first phase of the project called for the selective short-term

Keesler AFB’s premier "Triangle Vision.”

repair of existing facilities, including the renovation of restrooms and the removal of hazardous material. The second phase replaced dormitories with seven new facilities, a new training support squadron (currently at Garrard Hall) and the construction of an additional dining hall.

Hurricane Katrina

Hurricane Katrina ranked as one of the costliest and deadliest hurricanes in U.S. history. It was the eleventh named storm, fifth hurricane, second Category 5 hurricane of the 2005 Atlantic hurricane season, and the sixth strongest Atlantic hurricane ever recorded, to date.

Tropical Depression Twelve formed over the southeastern Bahamas at 4:00 p.m. Central Daylight Time (CDT) on August 23, 2005 partially from the remains of Tropical Depression Ten. The system was upgraded to Tropical Storm Katrina on the morning of August 24, and became a hurricane only two hours before it made landfall on August 25, between Hallandale Beach and Aventura, Florida.

Katrina had a well-defined eye on Doppler radar that remained intact throughout its passage over the state of Florida. It had weakened to a tropical storm as it passed over land, but quickly regained strength and hurricane status approximately one hour after entering the Gulf of Mexico. Rapid intensification occurred during the first 24-hours after entering the Gulf, due in part to the storm's movement over the warm sea surface temperatures of the Loop Current—a large flow of warm water that flows clockwise and dominates circulation within the eastern Gulf of Mexico. On August 25, the storm reached Category 3 intensity on the Saffir-Simpson Hurricane Scale, and became the third major hurricane of the season. President George W. Bush declared a state of emergency in Louisiana, Alabama and Mississippi two days before the hurricane made a second landfall.

At 8:00 a.m. (CDT), on the morning of August 27, the 81st Training Wing commander's Crises Action Team (CAT) assembled and declared Hurricane Condition (HURCON) 3. The decision was made to evacuate over 10,000 personnel and begin preparations to shelter the remaining 6,000. Katrina continued to intensify and reached Category 5 status on August 28, with maximum sustained winds of 175 mph and a central pressure of 902 millibar (mbar). The CAT reassembled at 8:00 a.m. on Sunday morning, August 28, and declared HURCON 2. Base shelters opened that afternoon at 5:00 p.m., and the 45th Airlift Squadron and 403d Wing deployed their aircraft to safe zones. The CAT reconvened that afternoon and initiated HURCON 1—the outer bands of Hurricane Katrina were already being felt by Sunday evening.

Just after midnight on August 29, although the hurricane was still six hours away from a second landfall, the storm was so large that some areas of the Gulf Coast were already experiencing tropical storm-force winds. Overnight, the system entered an eye-wall

replacement cycle and although its maximum sustained winds had slightly weakened, the storm grew even larger. Katrina made a second landfall at 6:10 a.m. on August 29, near Buras-Triumph, Louisiana (approximately 150 miles west of Keesler AFB), as a Category 3 hurricane with sustained winds of 125 mph.

A few hours later, Katrina made a third and final landfall near the Louisiana/Mississippi border with 120 mph sustained winds—still a Category 3 hurricane. Record storm surge came ashore along the entire Mississippi Gulf Coast and into Alabama, peaking at 34 feet in Bay St Louis, Mississippi, and reaching 13 feet as far away as Mobile, Alabama. Moving at 15 mph, Katrina's eye passed 43 miles to the west of Keesler. With the base battened down and all conceivable preparations completed, personnel waited for the storm to pass. Scattered across the installation in six, 1,000-person shelters (medical center and training buildings) 6,006 people hunkered down as the base was pummeled for nearly 12-hours.

Katrina's Wake

The water from Biloxi's Back Bay swamped Keesler's northernmost thoroughfare, Polesti Drive. The main road running north and south, Larcher Boulevard—along with 50 percent of the base—became submerged. The BX and Commissary was inundated under more than five feet of water; Keesler Medical Center received massive basement flooding, along with countless other facilities. The shelters were battered and took on some floodwater, but remained intact. When the storm surge receded and the winds calmed down, Katrina's devastating blow to Keesler was estimated at $950 million with 95 percent of the base damaged to some extent.

The BX and Commissary under five feet of water.

Personnel and resources from around the Air Force quickly converged on the installation and the extraordinary reconstruction effort, dubbed Operation DRAGON COMEBACK, began in earnest.

Although Keesler's training mission was temporarily halted, within days several squadrons resumed training for students who were within 7-10 days of graduating from their respective courses. The rapid recovery and repair of training facilities and the remarkable efforts of instructors allowed additional courses to be quickly brought back on line. By October 20, all enlisted initial skill courses were approved to be taught, although some at less than 100 percent capacity; by November 1, there were 1,762 students in training at Keesler; and by years end almost all training facilities, dining halls, and student dorms that had sustained damage became fully operational. The tremendous efforts of the military and civilians assigned to the 81st Training Wing enabled Keesler's mission to resume much sooner than anyone originally anticipated, and the remarkable pace of rebuilding the base continues.

In just over a half a century, Keesler had graduated over two million students in numerous technical specialties, and it continues to be at the forefront of America's military training institutions. Through more than 65 years of constant change, Keesler's mission has remained essentially the same: to provide the very finest technical and specialized training to every student who passes through its gates.

History of the 81st Training Wing

Emblem: Approved 2 Mar 1943, for use by the 81st Fighter Group; approved14 May 1956 for use by the 81st Training Wing.

Description: Or, a dragon salient wings displayed addorsed azure, armed and langued gules, incensed proper, holding in its dexter claw a stylized boll weevil sable.

Significance: The wing's mission is symbolized by the fabled fiery dragon, a creature adopted in medieval times with the thought of intimidating enemies. The dragon's breath of fire renders all opposition useless, while the stylized boll weevil clutched in the dragon's claw is suggestive of the enemy.

Motto: Le Nom-Les Armes-La Louaute (The Name, The Arms, and Loyalty)

Although not established until 1948, the 81st Tactical Fighter Wing's bestowed history dates back to World War II, when the 81st Pursuit Group (Interceptor) was activated in February 1942, at Morris Field, North Carolina. In May 1942, the unit was redesignated the 81st Fighter Group and began training with P-39 aircraft. Later that year, the group's ground echelon arrived in French Morocco with the force that invaded North Africa on 8 November 1942. Its air echelon, which had trained in England, arrived in North Africa in December 1942, was assigned to Twelfth Air Force and supported Allied ground operations against the axis forces in Tunisia. Afterward, the 81st patrolled the coast of Africa and protected allied shipping lanes in the Mediterranean Sea. The group also provided cover for ship convoys that landed troops on the islands of Pantelleria, Sicily, and at Anzio, Italy.

In February 1944, the 81st transferred to India and began training with P-40 Warhawk and P-47 Thunderbolt aircraft. It moved to China in May and became part of Fourteenth Air Force. The group continued training until January 1945, when it returned to combat duty. There, the 81st attacked enemy airfields and installations and aided Chinese ground forces by attacking Japanese troop concentrations, ammunition depots, communication lines, and other strategic targets. The group inactivated in China on 27 December 1945.

The 81st Fighter Group reactivated on 15 October 1946, at Wheeler Field, Hawaii, and was outfitted with P-51 Mustangs. On 1 May 1948, the 81st Fighter Wing also activated at Wheeler Field, and the 81st Fighter Group became its primary operational component. (The group inactivated in February 1955). Although the wing's Mustang fighters were replaced with P-47N Thunderbolt aircraft, the wing continued to defend Hawaiian airspace until mid-1949. In June of that year, the 81st moved to Kirtland AFB, Albuquerque, New Mexico, where it began flying F-80C Shooting Star jet fighters. On 20 January 1950, the wing was redesignated the 81st Fighter-Intercepter Wing. Outfitted with the new F-86A Sabre fighter jet, it moved to Moses Lake (later Larson) AFB, Washington, a few months later. Upon arrival, the 81st was assigned to the Western Air Defense Force and given a new mission—air defense of the Pacific Northwest.

Just 14 months later, in August 1951, 81st personnel found themselves packing again—this time moving to RAF Bentwaters in England. As part of Third Air Force, the 81st was the first F-86 Sabre unit to be based in Europe where it played a major role in the peacetime air defense of Great Britain. In 1954 the wing converted to the F-84F Thunderstreak, and on 1 April of that year, the unit was redesignated the 81st Fighter-Bomber Wing to reflect its nuclear strike capability. Thereafter, the 81st was charged with tactical operations for the United States Air Forces in Europe in support of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), with air defense as a secondary mission. The wing upgraded to the faster, longer-ranged F-101A Voodoo in early 1958.

On 8 July 1958, two significant events occurred. First, the wing again redesignated, this time as the 81st Tactical Fighter Wing (81 TFW). Second, a nearby installation, RAF Woodbridge, transferred to the 81 TFW. Along with RAF Bentwaters, the two locations would be known as the wing's twin base of operations for 35 years.

Seventeenth Air Force became headquarters to the 81 TFW in 1961, but in September 1963, the wing once again found itself under the command of Third Air Force. In 1965, the 81st converted to the F-4C Phantom II, and then in turn to the F-4D beginning in 1969. The 81st traded in its high-speed, high-altitude F-4s for the slow-flying A-10A Thunderbolt II ground attack aircraft in 1979, and for a time the wing was the Air Force’s largest operator of this nimble, tank-hunting aircraft, affectionally called Warthog by its pilots and ground crews. In the late 1980s, the wing's 527th Aggressor Squadron flew the F-16 Fighting Falcon.

Throughout the 1980s, the 81 TFW mission was to provide close air support and battlefield interdiction in support of NATO ground forces. The wing participated in rotational deployments to air bases in Germany, and it conducted joint training operations with U.S. and British ground forces. Following Operation Desert Storm, the 81st logged over 10,000 flying hours while patrolling "no-fly zones" over northern and southern Iraq enforcing UN sanctions against the rogue nation.

On 1 July 1993, the 81st Tactical Fighter Wing inactivated at RAF Bentwaters. That same day, HQ USAF redesignated the wing as the 81st Training Wing (81 TRW), activated it at Keesler and assigned it to Second Air Force (2AF). Although its name and mission have changed, the wing’s illustrious heritage continues unbroken.

Keesler's Host Unit Commander's

Keesler Army Air Field:

Col Arthur W. Brock, Jr.	17 Jul 41
Col Robert E.M. Goolrick	15 Apr 42

3704th Army Air Force Base Unit:

Col Robert E.M. Goolrick	1 May 44
Col Thomas S. Voss	1 May 45
Col John R. Morgan	6 Oct 45
Brig Gen Hugo P. Rush	8 Feb 46
Brig Gen Edward W. Anderson	15 Apr 47
Maj Gen Charles W. Lawrence	5 Apr 48

3380th Technical Training Wing:

Maj Gen Charles W. Lawrence	26 Aug 48
Maj Gen James F. Powell	18 May 49
Maj Gen Harlan C. Parks	20 Aug 53
Brig Gen James H. Davies	2 Apr 55
Maj Gen Fay R. Upthegrove	1 Sep 55
Maj Gen John R. Sutherland	3 Sep 57

Keesler Technical Training Center:

Maj Gen John R. Sutherland	1 Jan 59
Maj Gen John S. Hardy	12 Jul 60
Maj Gen Romulus W. Puryear	27 Jul 64
Maj Gen James C. McGehee	1 Aug 67
Maj Gen Thomas E. Moore	1 Aug 69
Maj Gen Frank M. Madsen, Jr.	29 Nov 69
Maj Gen Bryan M. Shotts	26 Feb 73
Maj Gen Winfield W. Scott, Jr.	1 Aug 75
Maj Gen John S. Pustay	29 Jul 77
Maj Gen Don H. Payne	24 May 79
Maj Gen Thomas C. Richards	8 May 82
Maj Gen Thomas J. Hickey	26 Sep 83
Maj Gen James G. Jones	18 Aug 86
Maj Gen Paul A. Harvey	22 Jun 88
Brig Gen Paul E. Stein	30 Aug 91

Keesler Training Center:

Brig Gen Paul E. Stein	14 Feb 92
Maj Gen John C. Griffith	30 Apr 92

81st Training Wing:

Brig Gen Karen S. Rankin	1 Jul 93
Brig Gen Andrew J. Pelak, Jr.	7 Nov 95
Brig Gen John M. Spiegel	4 Aug 97
Brig Gen Elizabeth A. Harrell	14 Jul 99
Brig Gen Roosevelt Mercer, Jr.	5 Sept 00
Brig Gen Michael W. Peterson	3 May 02
Brig Gen William T. Lord	20 Apr 04
Brig Gen Paul F. Capasso	15 Nov 05
Col Gregory J. Touhill	2 Oct 07

81st Wing Commander's

81st Fighter Wing:

Col Thomas W. Blackburn	1 May 48
Lt Col Francis R. Royal	21 May 49
Col Thomas W. Blackburn	28 Jun 49

81st Fighter-Interceptor Wing:

Col Thomas W. Blackburn	20 Jan 50
Col Gladwyn E. Pinkston	28 Apr 50

81st Fighter-Bomber Wing:

Col Gladwyn E. Pinkston	1 Apr 54
Col Harold N. Holt	2 Jun 54
Col Ivan W. McElroy	10 Jun 55
Col Lester L. Krause, Jr.	18 Jun 57
Col Henry L. Crouch, Jr.	8 Jul 57

81st Tactical Fighter Wing:

Col Henry L. Crouch, Jr.	8 Jul 58
Col James R. Dubose, Jr.	6 May 60
Col Eugene L. Strickland	9 Jul 60
Col William C. Clark	9 Jul 62
Col Robin Olds	9 Aug 63
Brig Gen Dewitt R. Searles	26 Jul 65
Col Ramon R. Melton	28 Jul 67
Col George S. Dorman	5 Jul 68
Col Devol Brett	25 Sep 68
Col David J. Schmerbeck	29 Aug 69
Col John C. Bartholf	6 Mar 70
Col James W. Enos	4 Sep 70

Col Dwaine L. Weatherwax	22 Jun 71
Brig Gen Charles E. Word	16 Aug 72
Col John R. Paulk	19 Apr 74
Brig Gen Clyde H. Garner	14 May 75
Col Gerald D. Larson	11 Feb 76
Col Rudolph F. Wacker	6 May 77
Col Gorden E. Williams	7 Aug 79
Col Richard M. Pascoe	24 Apr 81
Col Dale C. Tabor	20 Aug 82
Col Lester P. Brown, Jr.	20 Mar 84
Col William A. Studer	26 Mar 86
Col Harold H. Rhoden	30 Jul 87
Col Tad J. Oelstrom	5 Aug 88
Col Roger R. Radcliff	12 Jul 91

81st Training Wing:

Brig Gen Karen S. Rankin	1 Jul 93
Brig Gen Andrew J. Pelak, Jr.	7 Nov 95
Brig Gen John M. Speigel	4 Aug 97
Brig Gen Elizabeth A. Harrell	14 Jul 99
Brig Gen Roosevelt Mercer, Jr.	5 Sept 00
Brig Gen Michael W. Peterson	3 May 02
Brig Gen William T. Lord	20 Apr 04
Brig Gen Paul F. Capasso	15 Nov 05
Col Gregory J. Touhill	2 Oct 07

Keesler Senior Enlisted Advisor's

Keesler Technical Training Center:

CMSgt Thomas R. Silk	Feb 73 – Mar 74
CMSgt Tommy J. Adkins	Mar 74 – Aug 74
CMSgt James J. Blevins	Aug 74 – Sep 75
CMSgt Tommy J. Adkins	Sep 75 – May 78
CMSgt Alfred R. Smith	May 78 – Nov 78
CMSgt Robert G. Cornelius	Nov 78 – Jun 82
CMSgt Billy W. Carter	Jun 82 – Mar 84
CMSgt James J. Vollmuth	Mar 84 – Jun 87

Keesler Training Center:

CMSgt Thomas E. York	Jun 87 – Sep 92
CMSgt Charles Taylor	Sep 92 – Sep 93

81st Training Wing:

CMSgt Steven T. Wyrick	Sep 93 – Aug 95
CMSgt Janice S. McCuiston	Aug 95 – May 97

Command Chief Master Sergeant's

81st Training Wing:

CMSgt Edward A. Walden	May 97 – Sep 99
CMSgt Michael McCann	Sep 99 – Nov 01
CMSgt Robert Tappana	Nov 01 – Aug 03
CMSgt Thomas M. Golden	Aug 03 – Aug 04
CMSgt Aliquippa Allen	Aug 04 – Nov 06
CMSgt Ronald S. Owens	Nov 06 – Present

Lineage

15 Apr 48: Established as 81st Fighter Wing.
1 May 48: Activated.
20 Jan 50: Redesignated as 81st Fighter-Interceptor Wing.
1 Apr 54: Redesignated as 81st Fighter-Bomber Wing.
8 Jul 58: Redesignated as 81st Tactical Fighter Wing.
1 Jul 93: Inactivated.
1 Jul 93: Redesignated as 81st Training Wing and reactivated.

Honors

Air Force Outstanding Unit Awards
(Awarded to the 81st Fighter Wing)

28 Mar 59 - 30 Jun 61
1 Jul 61 - 30 Jun 63
1 Jun 66 - 31 May 68
1 Jul 68 - 30 Jun 70
1 Jul 76 - 30 Jun 78
1 Jul 79 - 30 Jun 81
1 Jul 81 - 30 Jun 83
1 Jun 89 - 31 May 91
1 Jun 91 - 30 Jun 93

(Awarded to the 81st Training Wing)
1 Jul 99 - 30 Jun 01
1 Jul 01 - 30 Jun 02
1 Jun 05 - 30 Jun 06

Bestowed Honors

(Awarded to the 81st Fighter Group prior to 1 May 48.)
Campaign Streamers (World War II)
Air Combat, European-African-Middle Eastern Theater
Algeria-French Morocco

Anzio
Naples-Foggia
Rome-Arno
China Offensive
China Defensive
Tunisia

Aircraft Assigned

81st Training Wing:*

F-47	1948-1949
F-80	1949
F-86	1949-1955
F-51	1951
F-84	1954-1959
F-101	1958-1966
F-4	1965-1979
F-16	1988-1990
A-10	1979-1993

*Includes aircraft assigned to 81st Fighter Wing, 1948-1950; 81st Fighter-Interceptor Wing, 1950-1954; 81st Fighter-Bomber Wing, 1954-1958; 81st Tactical Fighter Wing, 1958-1993; and 81st Training Wing, 1993-Present. The 81st Fighter Group was a component of the wing from 1 May 1948 to 8 February 1955.

Chronology

1941

6 Mar	The War Department announced that the Army Air Corps would establish a technical school at Biloxi.
12 Jun	The War Department activated Army Air Corps Station No. 8, Aviation Mechanics School, Biloxi, Mississippi, and assigned it to Technical Training Command.
25 Jul	The base opened its first facility, a medical dispensary, in the Naval Reserve Park.
21 Aug	The first group of recruits arrived for basic training.
25 Aug	The War Department designated Army Air Corps Station No. 8 as Keesler Army Airfield.
8 Sep	The 310th Technical School Squadron, a basic training unit, was the first squadron to move from tent city to new barracks.
20 Sep	The Army Air Corps Replacement Training Center (Technician) was activated to train new recruits.
29 Sep	The Airplane and Engine Mechanics School began operation.
1 Dec	The Post Exchange (PX) opened its first full service store on Keesler Field.

1942

27 Feb	The first airplane mechanics class graduated.
7 Mar	Keesler Field opened its first hospital and the facility admitted 92 patients during its first day of operation.

1943

9 Mar	The 1002d Quartermaster Company, Keesler's first boat rescue unit, was activated and headquartered at the Biloxi Yacht Club.
10 May	The first women's unit, Detachment, Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC), activated. About two weeks later, the unit was redesignated as the 749th WAAC Post Headquarters Company.
1 Jun	Workers built a 10,000 seat outdoor theater adjacent to the Officers Club.
1 Jul	The War Department leased Horn Island for chemical warfare studies.
29 Nov	The Airplane and Engine Mechanics School received its first foreign students—13 Chinese officers.
13 Dec	Signal Corps Technical Training School opened. It was discontinued in February 1944.
27 Dec	The first bank, Keesler Field Bank, opened.

1944

1 May	The 3704th Army Air Forces Base Unit (Technical School and Basic Training Center) activated as Keesler's host unit.
1 Jul	The B-24 Co-Pilot School opened. The school added B-32 co-pilot training in October, but it was discontinued in January 1945. The B-24 Co-Pilot School ceased operations in March 1945.
25 Jul	Keesler officials opened recreation facilities on Ship Island.
31 Jul	The War Department assigned its only emergency rescue school to Keesler. As a result, the 3704th Army Air Forces Base Unit (Technical School and Basic Training Center) was redesignated as the 3704th Army Air Forces Base Unit (Technical School, Basic Training Center, and Emergency Rescue School).

Army Air Forces Base Unit (Technical School and Basic Training Center) was redesignated as the 3704th Army Air Forces Base Unit (Technical School, Basic Training Center, and Emergency Rescue School).

1945

1 Sep 45	Civil Service employees resumed a five-day, 40-hour work week.

1946

Apr-Jun	The War Department inactivated all Army Air Forces airplane mechanics schools with the exception of Keesler.
23 Apr	Keesler disbanded its Emergency Rescue School and redesignated the 3704th Army Air Forces Base Unit (Technical School, Basic Training Center, and Emergency Rescue School) as the 3704th Army Air Forces Base Unit (Technical School and Basic Training Center).
30 Jun	Basic training ended at Keesler. As a result, the 3704th again changed its name, becoming the 3704th Army Air Forces Base Unit (Technical School).
1 Jul	The Air Chemical School opened.
14 Dec	Keesler Women's Army Corps detachment inactivated.

1947

1 May	Officials in Washington announced that the radar school at Boca Raton, Florida, would move to Keesler.
Jul-Sep	Keesler Federal Credit Union was chartered. The membership fee was 25 cents.

18 Sep	The worst hurricane to strike the Gulf Coast since 1915 made landfall south of New Orleans. (The practice of naming hurricanes did not begin until 1953.) The Biloxi area recorded winds in excess of 100 miles per hour and storm surge of 15 feet or more. Beach front buildings and seafood processing facilities sustained heavy damage. Keesler personnel conducted anti-looting patrols, rescued stranded storm victims, and made emergency repairs.
14 Nov	The Air Force officially transferred its Boca Raton radar school to Keesler; classes began in January 1948.

1948

13 Jan	Keesler Field became Keesler Air Force Base.
26 Aug	Keesler became an Air Training Command installation.
	Keesler replaced its base unit (3704th Air Force Base Unit)-type organization with a wing base plan when Air Training Command designated and organized the 3380th Technical Training Wing. Also on this date, designated, organized, and assigned to the wing were the 3380th Medical Squadron (station hospital), the 3380th Air Base Group, the 3380th Technical Training Group, and the 3380th Maintenance and Supply Group.
28 Aug	Air Training Command discontinued the 3704th Air Force Base Unit (Technical School).
1 Nov	The 3380th Medical Squadron was redesignated as the 3380th Station Medical Squadron.

1949

1 Mar	The Air Force announced that the Airplane and Engine Mechanics Department at Keesler would transfer to Sheppard AFB, Texas, beginning in April.

1 Jun	The Radio Operations School moved from Scott Air Force Base, Illinois, to Keesler. The first course began on 15 June. Nine of the students were Air Force women. This was the first time Keesler had operated a coeducational technical course.
Summer	The Air Chemical School transferred to Lowry AFB, Colorado.
9 Nov	Airplane and engine mechanics training ended.

1950

27 Jun	The 3380th Station Medical Squadron was redesignated as the 3380th Medical Group.

1951

Jul-Sep	Keesler's hospital became the first in the Air Force to establish an appointment system for its outpatient clinics.

1953

Jan-Jun	Airmen began occupying new dormitory style barracks in the area nicknamed the Triangle.
16 Oct	The 3380th Medical Group was redesignated as the 3380th USAF Hospital.
1 Dec	Contractors began clearing the site for a new $5.5 million base hospital.

1957

8 Feb	Tactical Air Command's Air-Ground Operations School arrived from Southern Pines, North Carolina. Its T-33s were the first jets assigned to Keesler.

1958

1 Jul	Scott Air Force Base began transferring its control tower operator and radio operator general courses to Keesler; the process was completed by June 1959.
	The 3380th USAF Hospital was redesignated as the USAF Hospital Keesler.

1959

1 Jan	Air Training Command redesignated the 3380th Technical Training Wing as the Keesler Technical Training Center and the 3380th Technical Training Group became the 3380th Technical School, USAF. All student squadrons became school squadrons.
20 May	The SM-65 Atlas Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) ground training courses began.

1961

1 Dec	Keesler built a closed circuit television studio to teach electronics principles. The studio was placed in Building 409, a former bowling alley.

1962

30 Jun	The base closed its recreational facilities on Ship Island.

1964

24 Mar	Officials dedicated a new NCO Club, bldg 2221.

1965

9 Sep	Hurricane Betsy lashed the Gulf Coast with winds over 100 miles per hour and storm surge as high as 15 feet above normal. Downtown Biloxi suffered heavy flooding and wind damage. Keesler personnel assisted with rescue efforts, storm clean-up, and emergency repairs.

1 Apr	The last C-47 left Keesler. These aircraft had been used for ground approach radar training, but the adoption of less expensive simulators made their use unnecessary.

1967

15 Jan	The command activated the 3389th Pilot Training Squadron at Keesler. This unit trained foreign pilots under the Military Assistance Program (MAP) using the T-28 aircraft; classes began on 23 January 1967.

1968

11 Jun	Keesler’s technical school graduated its one-millionth student.
1 Jul	With Amarillo AFB, Texas, closing, Air Training Command moved its personnel and administration courses to Keesler. The transfer increased Keesler's student load by 20 percent.

1969

1 Jul	Keesler’s student load peaked at 14,000 during the Vietnam War. Air Training Command (ATC) redesignated the USAF Hospital Keesler as the USAF Medical Center, Keesler. At the same time, the facility became one of six regional medical centers in the Air Force hospital system.

18 Aug	Hurricane Camille made landfall at Waveland, Mississippi, clocking wind gusts of over 200 miles per hour and pushing water surges as high as 35 feet above normal. More than 260 people were killed, and communities in five states were devastated. Keesler officials estimated on base damage at $3.5 million. During a subsequent inspection visit, President Richard Nixon praised the base's heroic rescue and community assistance efforts.

1970

15 May	Ground breaking ceremonies were held for the new Base Exchange (BX) shopping center.

1971

4 Jan	Keesler reorganized under the multi-deputy system, and the air base group commander became the base commander.
1 Mar	Air Training Command (ATC) activated the 3380th Student Group and assigned it 18 student squadrons.
1 Jul	Kitchen Patrol, or KP, ended at the base when civilian contractors assumed responsibility for food preparation.
6 Oct	Base officials held a ground-breaking ceremony for the new Commissary.

1972

1 Aug	Air Training Command (ATC) inactivated the 3380th Technical School at Keesler and, on the same date, activated the USAF School of Applied Aerospace Sciences, Keesler, and assigned it to the Keesler Technical Training Center.

1973

25 Apr	The Air Force Reserve activated the 920th Tactical Airlift Group at Keesler and equipped it with C-130s.
4 May	The T-28 pilot training program ended after graduating 908 foreign students—the majority from South Vietnam.
18 Jun	The 53d Weather Reconnaissance Squadron, a Military Airlift Command (MAC) unit, moved from Ramey AFB, Puerto Rico, to Keesler.
21 Dec	Keesler became the prime technical training center for the airborne warning and control system (AWACS).

1974

10 Jun	Blake Fitness Center opened.

1975

18 Aug	The first of seven EC-130 aircraft belonging to the 7th Airborne Command and Control Squadron arrived at Keesler.

1976

1 Jan	A $31.6 million Composite Medical Facility was built to give the medical center a separate clinical research laboratory.
	Biloxi city officials obtained government approval for an access bridge which would connect Keesler with Interstate 110.
	Workers began constructing a $3.6 million facility to house a reception center, as well as personnel, finance, and traffic management offices. In 1978 the building was renamed the Sablich Center.

Summer	The City of Biloxi began acquiring right of way acquisition along Pass Christian Road between the base and Debuys Road so that it could be widened to four lanes. The Department of Defense would pay for 90 percent of the $3 million project.
30 Dec	Student load fell below 5,000.

1977

1 Apr	HQ ATC inactivated the USAF School of Applied Aerospace Sciences, Keesler, and activated the 3300th Technical Training Wing and assigned it to the Keesler Technical Training Center. Air Training Command (ATC) established the USAF Technical Training School, Keesler, and assigned it to the 3300th Technical Training Wing.

1978

1 Jan	The USAF Technical Training School, Keesler, transferred from the 3300th Technical Training Wing to Keesler Technical Training Center. Air Training Command (ATC) inactivated the 3300th Technical Training Wing.

1979

1 Jan	Construction began on a new logistics/materiel complex, which would later be dedicated as the Taylor Logistics Center.
13 Sep	Hurricane Frederick struck, causing about $11 million in property damage on the base. In addition to base clean up, many Air Force personnel assisted with recovery efforts in several communities along the Gulf Coast.

1 Nov — Air Training Command designated and activated the 3300th Technical Training Wing. Air Training Command reassigned the USAF Technical Training School, Keesler, from Keesler Technical Training Center to the 3300th Technical Training Wing.

1980

4 Apr — Base officials dedicated a new control tower. It replaced a tower that had been in use since 1941.

31 Dec — Student load climbed to 6,891.

1981

13 Mar — Base officials dedicated the new child care and dependent-care centers.

27 Apr — The USAF Medical Center opened a new $45.3 million clinic addition.

1 Aug — As a result of the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization strike, the 3300th Technical Training Wing had to increase its production of air traffic controllers.

1982

24 Apr — Keesler Air Force Base hosted the first Special Olympics for the mentally challenged. The event drew 350 participants.

4 May — The new Medical Food Inspection Facility, which also housed the base's new veterinary clinic, began operation.

1 Jun — Keesler lost its postal training courses when the Department of Defense consolidated all training at Fort Benjamin Harrison, Indiana.

1983

4 Oct — Through the efforts of the John C. Stennis Chapter of the Air Force Association, a Boulevard of Flags was established on Larcher Boulevard.

1 Jan	Surgeons at the medical center began performing cardiovascular surgery.
1 Nov	Keesler's Air Force Reserve unit, the 920th Tactical Airlift Group, inactivated. Its personnel and equipment were absorbed by the reserve's newly-activated 403d Rescue and Reconnaissance Wing.

1984

10 Aug	The base dedicated a new $4.7 million civil engineering complex.

1985

2 Sep	Hurricane Elena struck the coast, causing $5 million damage to Keesler.

1986

1 Oct	Morse code systems radio operator training moved to Fort Devens, Massachusetts. This training had been at Keesler since 1949, when the general radio operator course moved from Scott.

1987

15 Mar	Volunteers completed two super playgrounds on the base using the previous year's energy savings plus money donated by on and off base personnel.
2 Jun	A new $7 million computer training facility opened.

1988

1 Mar	The Family Support Center was established and located in the Sablich Center.
30 Sep	Average daily student load was 3,026—the lowest in the history of the technical school to date.

1989

1 Feb — Builders began working on a new operations facility for the 3380th Security Police Squadron. It would replace the converted World War II barracks that the squadron used as a headquarters.

Contractors began building a new squadron operations center that would also house three tenant organizations: the 7th Airborne Command and Control Squadron, the 53d Weather Reconnaissance Squadron, and the 24th Weather Squadron.

1990

28 Aug — Members of the 7th Airborne Command and Control Squadron deployed to Southwest Asia in support of Operation Desert Shield.

1991

22 Jan — Over 260 Keesler medical personnel deployed to various locations in support of Operation Desert Storm.

30 Jun — Military Airlift Command inactivated the 53d Weather Reconnaissance Squadron. The 53d's hurricane hunter mission transferred to the 403d Airlift Wing, Keesler's Air Force Reserve unit.

12 Jul — Keesler AFB celebrated its 50th anniversary.

1992

14 Feb — Air Training Command (ATC) redesignated the technical training center as Keesler Training Center, the 3300th Technical Training Wing became a

group, and all technical training groups became squadrons. At the same time, Air Training Command inactivated the 3305th Student Group and its subordinate units. Also in line with this reorganization, the command redesignated the Keesler Technical Training Center Medical Center as the Keesler Medical Center.

6 Apr — The Department of the Navy assumed control of the base printing plant.

15 Sep — All 3380th-designated units were redesignated as 393d units.

1 Dec — All Air Force weather courses transferred from Chanute AFB, Illinois, to Keesler. Classes were temporarily held in Allee and Wolfe Halls while new facilities were under construction.

1993

16 Feb — Fisher House was dedicated. It provided temporary quarters for families of seriously ill patients at Keesler Medical Center.

29 Apr — A new two-story 87,000-square foot weather training complex was officially dedicated.

1 Jul — HQ USAF redesignated Air Training Command (ATC), headquartered at Randolph AFB, Texas, as Air Education and Training Command (AETC).

HQ AETC activated Second Air Force at Keesler and made the Numbered Air Force responsible for all technical training in the command.

The command inactivated Keesler Training Center and all of its subordinate organizations, with the exception of the 393d Technical Training Group, which was redesignated as the 81st Technical Training Group.

HQ AETC activated the 81st Training Wing and assigned it to Second Air Force. The wing assumed the old center mission. Major components of the wing included the 81st Technical Training, 81st Support, 81st Logistics, and 81st Medical Groups.

HQ Keesler Medical Center inactivated, and HQ AETC activated the 81st Medical Group to operate the base hospital, which was still known as Keesler Medical Center.

1 Jul — The First Sergeants Academy moved to Maxwell AFB, Alabama. At the same time, HQ AETC reassigned the academy to Air University.

The paralegal service specialist and chapel management courses moved to Maxwell, falling under the purview of Air University.

1994

15 Apr — Keesler's new Officer's Club was dedicated. The old club closed, which had been one of three original buildings on the Keesler property.

1 Jul — The 45th Airlift Squadron was activated and assigned to the 81st Training Group. Equipped with C-12C/F Huron and C-21A Learjet aircraft, it brought flying training back to Keesler for the first time since 1973.

10 Jul — Members of the 81st Security Police Squadron went to Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, in support of Operation Sea Signal, the resettlement of Haitian refugees.

25 Aug — The 81st Medical Group's functions were divided among four newly-activated units: the 81st Medical Operations, 81st Aerospace Medicine, 81st Dental, and 81st Medical Support Squadrons.

24 Sep — Crotwell Theater closed its movie-showing function. However, movies still continued to be shown at Welch Theater in the Triangle area.

30 Sep — The 7th Airborne Command and Control Squadron, a base-tenant reporting to Air Combat Command, was reassigned to Davis-Monthan AFB, Arizona.

1995

31 Jan — Keesler's Aero Club closed its doors after more than 40 years of operation. The Aero Club was established in November 1954.

1996

25 Jun — Terrorists detonated a massive car bomb near the Khobar towers in Dharan, Saudi Arabia. Eleven Keesler personnel were deployed to the Air Base, including Staff Sergeant Rondal Burns of the 333 TRS who was seriously injured and subsequently awarded the Purple Heart, and SrA Martie Capoeman of the Wing's Public Affairs office who received an AF Achievement Medal with 'V' (for valor) device for her performance in providing emergency medical care.

4 Oct — The demolition of Cole Manor (Bldg. 7401) signaled the beginning of "Triangle Vision," a $123 million project to replace the ten early 1950s era dormitories by the year 2002.

1997

19 Feb — In a ceremony attended by hundreds, Keesler officials raised the USAF 50th Anniversary Flag on the base flagpole adjacent to the Wing Headquarters building. The ceremony marked the first in a yearlong series of events intended to recognize the Air Force's founding on 18 Sep 47.

24 Feb	Lieutenant General John C. Griffith, AETC Vice Commander, led an official party in breaking ground for the first construction phase of Triangle Vision.
1 Jul	Mirroring an Air Force-wide change, the 81st Security Police Squadron was redesignated as the 81st Security Forces Squadron.
18 Sep	Keesler capped off the year's 50th Air Force Birthday celebration by burying a time capsule at the foot of the base flag pole and a parade on Governors' Field.
16 Oct	The 338th Training Squadron graduated the last class of students to attend the Satellite and Wideband Communications Course at Keesler. Thereafter, the U.S. Army Signal Center at Fort Gordon, Georgia would be responsible for conducting all DoD 'Satwide' training under a consolidation ordered in 1994 by the Interservice Training Review Organization (ITRO).

1998

9 Mar	Keesler's newest facility opened, a 6,000 square foot Marina Recreation Center (Bldg. 6726). The $1 million center hosted fishing, boating, and sailing activities, as well as other outdoor programs.
26-28 Sep	Hurricane Georges, one of the most destructive storms in history to date, slammed into the Mississippi Gulf Coast, causing major damage to Keesler and the surrounding community. The Category IV hurricane swept into Keesler with sustained winds of 142 miles per hour and gusts to 179 miles per hour, flooding over 100 family houses, downing hundreds of trees and power lines, and the loss of power to major pockets of the base. While Keesler suffered no fatalities during the storm, elsewhere over 400 people were killed, including 201 people in the Dominican Republic.

1999

17-18 Feb	The 403d Wing, Keesler's Reserve tenant unit, received the first of the new C-130J trainer aircraft. The "J" model aircraft replaces the 1960s era aircraft, lowering operating costs and enhancing performance and capabilities of the unit's weather reconnaissance mission.

2002

15 Jan	The 403d Wing replaced its older WC-130H aircraft for the newer C-130J models.
10 Dec	Keesler AFB's "giant voice" project was completed. The system enabled the command post to broadcast weather/emergency notifications across the entire base through pre-positioned speakers.

2003

26 Aug	Building 2603 was named Lott Hall, in honor of Mississippi Senator Trent Lott. The 42,000 square foot facility contained a C-130J full motion flight training simulator, and the 45th Airlift Squadron staff offices.

2004

31 Mar	Detachment 4, Air Mobility Command (AMC) Air Operations Squadron inactivated at Keesler.
31 Dec	Keesler's Defense Reutilization and Marketing Office (DRMO) transferred their incoming property operations to Eglin AFB, Florida.

2005

3 Jan	A 23,000 square foot mini-mall, that included a shoppette, concessions, and food court, opened for business in the "Triangle" area.

2 Feb	Keesler AFB's runaway and drainage system underwent a $2.9 million renovation—the fist major revamp since 1986.
13 May	The 2005 Base Realignment and Closure commission recommended Keesler Medical Center for realignment.
13 Jun	The first Sexual Assault Response Coordinator stood up an office at Keesler.
29 Aug	Hurricane Katrina made landfall near the Louisiana/ Mississippi border as a Category 3 hurricane with sustained winds of 120 mph. Record storm surge peaked at 34 feet and came ashore along the entire Gulf Coast and into Alabama. The local community lay in ruin and Keesler AFB's damage was estimated at $950 million. Fortunately, no on-base deaths or injuries were reported.

2006

28 Mar	Keesler's newest technical training facility, Cody Hall, was dedicated in honor of Captain Howard Cody. The new 193,000-square foot facility was built using concrete, steel and brick at a cost of $23.5 million.
1 Jun	The Pecan Dining facility closed as part of an AETC cost-cutting requirement, after serving Keesler customers for 55 years.
22 Sep	Keesler's military family housing construction project moved forward with the award of a $287.8 million contract for constructing 1,067 new homes. The massive construction project by Hunt Building Company was driven by Hurricane Katrina which destroyed or damaged a large inventory of houses.
19 Dec	Ten Keesler students graduated from the last 1A3 airborne mission specialist course in the 332d Training Squadron, as part of the enlisted aircrew training transition to the Career Enlisted Aviator Center of Excellence at Lackland AFB, Texas.

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Keesler Air Force Base, Mississippi
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