

IN MEMORY OF
LT WILMER ESLER
1916-1944

As an officer-pilot of the U.S. Army, he was involved in the construction of the Army-Air installation begun here at Camp Beauregard in 1940. He was killed in an accidental air crash on April 11, 1941, and upon recommendation of his commanding officer the War Department authorized the naming of this field in his honor and memory.

Esler Regional Airport is a public use airport located 10 nautical miles (19 km) northeast of the central business district of Alexandria, a city in Rapides Parish, Louisiana, United States. It is owned by the Louisiana National Guard. The airport serves the general aviation community along with the Louisiana National Guard. It has no scheduled commercial airline service.

History

World War II

After World War I in 1919 the Army had abandoned Camp Beauregard and turned the property over to the state of Louisiana, which returned it to the United States; however interest in the military utilization of Camp Beauregard increased significantly in 1939 when war began in Europe. The United States needed a training ground for American troops. In 1940 the land was returned to the War Department for use as a World War II training area. That area included the now-abandoned Camps Claiborne and Livingston and what has become Esler Regional Airport.

Construction of the airport, originally called **Camp Beauregard Army Field**, for the United States Army Air Corps began in 1940. In the summer of 1940 and throughout 1941 the area was used for the "Louisiana Maneuvers" and the Air Corps used the airfield extensively during the maneuvers, with the 67th Observation Group stationing the 107th Observation Squadron at the airfield between 28 October 1940 and 14 December 1941. In addition, the 109th Observation Squadron used the airport from 27 February 1941 until 18 December 1942 flying light observation planes.

The airfield was renamed **Esler Army Airfield** in 1941 to honor LT Wilmer Esler, a pilot who became the first casualty of the airfield when his plane crashed on April 11, 1941. Esler AAF was assigned to Third Air Force, III Air Support Command. The **333d Air Base Group** was the host unit at the airfield, being activated on 1 February 1942.

The first unit assigned for training at Esler was the 12th Bombardment Group, arriving for B-25 Mitchell training on 21 February 1942. The unit remained at Esler until July until being deployed to the Middle East and being assigned to Ninth Air Force.

In December 1942, the mission was changed to training Reconnaissance units, and Esler was reassigned directly to Third Air Force. The 347th Army Air Force Base Unit became the host unit at the station. Reconnaissance groups receiving training at the airfield were:

- 74th Reconnaissance Group, 13-28 Dec 1942
- 71st Reconnaissance Group, 24 Jan-31 Mar 1943
- 69th Reconnaissance Group, Mar-Dec 1943
- 77th Reconnaissance Group, 13 Sep-14 Nov 1943

In late 1943, Esler was again reassigned within Third Air Force, to the I Tactical Air Division, to become a close air support training field. The Division moved its headquarters to the field in April 1944. The P-40 Warhawk-equipped 372d Fighter Group trained at Esler in March and April 1944.

With the departure of the 372d, the 353d Army Air Force Base Unit took over training for replacement pilots, and unit training ended. On 20 April 1945, the 353d BU was redesignated as the 353d AAF BU (Maneuver Station), and Esler supported various training maneuvers at Fort Polk, providing simulated tactical air support to Army units.

On 1 Aug 1945, the airfield was again reassigned directly to Third Air Force. With the end of the war, inactivation of Esler Field began on 7 September 1945. However, the Air Force's inactivation was quite slow, with the airfield being put on standby status 31 January 1946. The 353d was redesignated as a Standby Unit, but not inactivated, keeping a skeleton force of 6 officers and 50 civilians assigned to the base until 31 May 1946 when the base was finally closed. The airfield remained Federal property until the 1950s when it was finally ceded to the Police Jury as surplus property, a small civilian airport opened after return to civil control.

Recent history

In the early '90s, Esler Regional Airport became lifeless and quiet with an uncertain future after airport services for Central Louisiana were moved to the England Industrial Airpark and Community, the location of the defunct England Air Force Base.

But the abandoned Esler presented the Louisiana National Guard with a golden opportunity to expand the area available to conduct its training. On June 1, 2001, the Rapides Parish Police Jury transferred the airport's management to the Guard in a 99-year lease. Today, Esler is the site of numerous training exercises.

While Alexandria International Airport is Central Louisiana's primary airport and the leader of aviation services in the area, Esler is the area's secondary airport. The airport's runways can handle the heavy weight of most airline traffic, such as 137-passenger-capacity Boeing 737s, 224-passenger-capacity Boeing 757s and the C-17 Globemasters that are the primary cargo plane of the Air Force and weigh 169,000 pounds each.