

5-1939

The Nation's Greatest Army Air Base

Near the end of 1938 and beginning of 1939, and prior to Kelsey's record attempting adventure in the XP-38 in February, congress appropriated \$1,900,000 to purchase 172 acres around Mitchel Field, through the use of eminent domain.

The move highlighted the War Department's intent to convert "Mitchel Field into the nation's greatest Army Air Base. Should war come, the field... would shoulder the air defense of the Atlantic seaboard. If enemy fleets approached our Eastern Shore- if foreign bombers were flying to drop their explosives on New York, Boston, or other key Eastern centers, it would be Mitchel Field's duty to supply the air fleet which would meet the enemy at sea or engage them over land." (BDE, January 1, 1939)

Federal Judge Matthew T Abruzzo appointed three commissioners to handle the land condemnation proceedings: Ferdinand I. Haber, Albert Hutton, and Cornelius G. DeLoca. Patrick S. MacDwyer was selected Assistant US Attorney for the proceedings. Site inspections and property owners' arguments preceded the court's rulings determining fair and equitable financial compensation for the land holders.



Expansion parcel outlined in white along bottom of photo. Courtesy BDE

The condemned property containing homes, industrial plants and railroad tracks and sidings, expanded the southwestern boundary of the field to Arthur Street on the west and Fulton Avenue (Hempstead Turnpike) on the south. 1,500 WPA workers demolished older buildings and cleared and leveled land for the new construction. The three-year expansion program included modern machine shops and barracks, training schools, and a modern

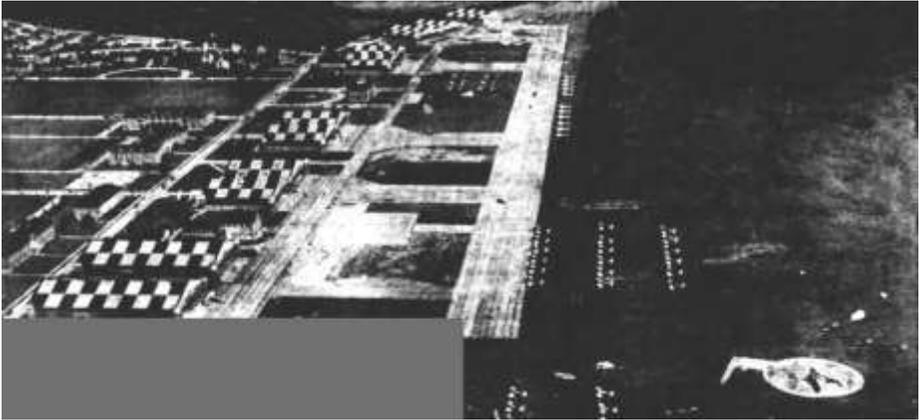
communications system for "monster bombers and speedy pursuit and combat planes." Several new runways of over a mile in length were planned, "permitting the nation's flying fortresses to take off with ease" (BDE, January 1, 1939)

A dispute arose February 1 in Brooklyn Federal Court during the proceedings. Irving Brodsky, representing The Park Avenue Building Corporation of Long Beach, claimed his client's 118 Marvin Manor home lots value at \$531,000, based on "constructive" appraisals; the value of 59 houses already under construction on the properties. The July 1, 1939 act of congress only authorized \$500,000 for the entire 342 condemned acres. Federal assistant attorney general, Mason L. Goldstein, fervently charged that construction began after the condemnation plans were announced. Brodsky refuted that charge, citing two, two story farm buildings, and a concrete foundation and second foundation framing on one parcel east of Uniondale Avenue, and another three-partly constructed frame houses on the west side. Brodsky cited "Constructive" appraisal precedent made during the World's Fair condemnation proceedings several years earlier.

Goldstein made no decision on the Park Avenue Building Corporation case and ordered adjournment while he travelled to Washington for consultation and "conference with the attorney general on this matter. The points of law involved are very fundamental questions." Goldstein said. (BDE, February 8, 1939)

The court moved on to consider several other claims presented by residents as the hearings continued. The Nassau-Suffolk Lighting Company submitted a claim of \$1200.00 on February 4 for gas mains already laid in the expansion property. Company representative, Louis A. Evarts, submitted documentation for the loss 936 feet of 6-inch steel pipe, more expensive to dig up, than to leave in the ground. Rosalvito Tavalora claimed \$2000.00 for his newly purchased home lot. When pressed by Goldstein about his new home purchase in Marvin Manor, for speculation when he already owned a home in Inwood, Tavalora exclaimed excitedly "Why shouldn't I want another house? I've got 11 Children!" (BDE, February 9, 1939) Goldstein stood down. Edward Jennings claimed \$1000.00 for two lots on the east side of Fenthel Avenue and Santo Porporici claimed \$3500.00 for a corner lot on Lerner and Mersel Avenues.

The land commendation proceedings continued in Brooklyn with direct testimony by claimants concluding at the end of February. Cross-examinations by US Attorney General Goldstein began in March. Charles E. L. Clark's testimony valued business property fronting Fulton Avenue at \$.80-1.00 a square foot and residential property not fronting the avenue at 30 cents a square foot.



All of the proposed land acquisitions demonstrated the War Departments overall plan to grow the air force through airfield construction and expansion. A second goal was aircraft production and personnel recruitment, disclosed by a \$552,000,000 arms program announced by Washington, “stepping up to almost wartime speed its production of planes and training of pilots.” (NYT, March 19, 1939)



The radio range beacon building (Building 76) in North Bellmore. Top circa 1950s. Bottom present day. Top photo courtesy COAM.

A 28-acre parcel in North Bellmore at the corner of North Jerusalem and Bellmore Roads, formerly the Ogden Phipps estate, was also acquired for a powerful radio beacon. The station and 125-foot-tall tower “will send radio beams in a direct line with the bases runways, permitting blind landings, not only on foggy nights, but on nights when for military reasons the field must remain in darkness.” (BDE, January 1, 1939) The clearing of brush and trees from the site was scheduled to begin in the spring or summer, with

construction of the radio center and towers to follow. The contract was awarded to the Guthy Construction Corporation of Lynbrook.



A 1950s photo of radio building interior and a 1966 aerial view showing the tower field and building 76 (Circled) Courtesy COAM and Historicaerials.com



A 1966 aerial showing the radio tower facility aligned with the runways at Mitchel. Photo courtesy Historicaerials.com