

JCHC JOURNAL

J E F F E R S O N C O U N T Y H I S T O R I C A L C O M M I S S I O N

DIVE BOMBERS IN JEFFERSON COUNTY

PAUL PROSPERIE

UPCOMING MEETINGS

- May 18, 2022
3:00pm
- July 20, 2022
3:00pm
- September 21, 2022 3:00pm
- November 16, 2022 3:00pm

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It was fall 1944, and the war was still raging on both fronts. Like most periodicals across our nation, local SETX newspapers centered on the liberation of Belgium and the European theatre. The heavy fighting on Peleliu and throughout the Pacific were occasionally mentioned, but these events seemed to take a back seat to the success in Europe. It would be at this theatre that Marine Aircraft Group 93 (MAG-93) would train its pilots for battle. MAG-93 began in April 1944 at Cherry Point, North Carolina. Its first squadron was commissioned on April 15th under the command of Major John L. Dexter and was known as Marine Scout Bomber Squadron 931. Other squadrons, such as VMSB-932, would also be commissioned into MAG-93 and would spend countless hours (round the clock, for a brief time) in training centered at Jefferson County

Airport. However, the Marine Scout Bombing Squadron (VMSB-931) will be our main focus in this article.



Patch Worn By VMSB-931

In May, VMSB-931 was transferred to Eagle Mountain Lake, Texas (near Ft. Worth) to begin their operational training. It also became attached to Marine Aircraft Group 33 (MAG-33). The squadron consisted of 18 SBD-5 (Dauntless)-type aircraft with 37 commissioned officers and 160 enlisted men. Records show that only one operational accident occurred during this period, which resulted

in the damage and loss of an SBD-5. Fortunately, there was no loss of life, and the squadron continued their training through July, attaining a 43.1% readiness for combat rating by their superior.

By August, it was time for the squadron to begin the second phase of their training; thus, the VMSB-931 were temporarily detached to the U.S. Naval Section Base in Sabine Pass, Texas "for duty in connection with the basing of tactical squadrons of Marine Aircraft Group 33 at Jefferson County Airport, Beaumont, Texas. This duty includes gunnery, dive-bombing, and overwater navigation training," wrote Commander John L. Dexter in the squadron's war diary on the first of August.

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DIVE BOMBERS IN JEFFERSON COUNTY (CONTINUED)

The next week would consist of setting up operations at their new location and finally beginning their overwater flight training on August 8th.

As most of us know, the Gulf can be very unpredictable in September, and 1944 was no exception. On September 9th, a tropical storm formed about 170 miles southeast of Matamoros, Mexico, and began to move north. All planes were evacuated out of the area to where I would assume was back to Eagle Mountain Lake. Their absence would not last long, however, because Tropical Storm Six would move northeast and make landfall at the Mississippi River Delta on the 10th with top winds of 65 mph. Needless to say, all planes were back on September 11th. Training resumed the next day, and here is where our story takes a deadly turn.

During overwater flight training off the coast of the Sabine Pass, 2nd Lieutenant Marion M. Puliz attempted to rendezvous from below the lead plane flown by 2nd Lieutenant Richard L. Savoie, resulting in a mid-air collision. Both planes crashed into the Gulf and sank in 35 feet of water. Both pilots and the two gunners, Corporal Richard R. Stoddard and Private First Class William C. Bathurst, were killed. 2nd Lieutenant Puliz's body was the only one recovered out of the four.

More tragedy hit 931 eight days later when 2nd Lieutenant William G. Duvall "attempted a slow roll at low altitude. He lost control and went into a progressive stall, hitting the water on the left wing. Plane was observed to explode and sink immediately upon striking the water," wrote Commander Dexter. Both the pilot and the gunner, Private First Class Albert W. Bitner, perished in the crash, and neither body was recovered.

Amazingly, there are a few newspaper accounts of these tragedies; however, few of them offer details of the actual crashes. For instance, the Port Arthur News reports consisted of the identities of the victims and, oddly enough, a few mentions of sightings of a body a few weeks later off the coast of High Island. A search for the bod-

ies after each accident occurred was conducted by the Coast Guard, but no remains were found.

An article dated September 27 reported that a swimmer informed the Coast Guard that he had brushed against a body while swimming just off the coast of High Island. A search ensued that lasted until 2 a.m. but was deemed "fruitless" by Coast Guard officials who, in their statement, said that the swimmer "had been mistaken."

The following day, the Port Arthur News reported, "Louis Welch of Sabine Pass, county commissioner of Precinct 3, also reported seeing the body to

Marine Dive Bombers to Hound Tojo's Shade Being Groomed In Jefferson County



Marine Dive Bombers

Photo by Beaumont Enterprise August 20, 1944

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Coast Guard officials. According to Welch, he sighted the body floating in the Gulf water about one mile east of the Chambers and Jefferson Counties boundary line." Welch tried to "tow it ashore," but a wave swept the body away. The search for the body was resumed, but it was never recovered.

Operational training ended September 21st for the VMSB-931, and the squadron returned to Eagle Mountain Lake a few days later. But this was not the end of the Marine Aircraft Group's training facilities here in Jefferson County, as the 932 (VMSB-932) would arrive at Jefferson County Airport on September 26th to begin their operational training as well. I am unsure where these brave young men ended up after their training, but I can only guess that a few would have participated in ending this long, drawn-out war. I researched further, but there are thousands upon thousands of war diary documents to sift through and many more rabbit holes that I find myself not capable of going down in a relatively short amount of time. One day, if time permits, I would like to continue on the trail of the 931, but plenty more tales are coming soon.

HISTORIC RESOURCES SURVEY UPDATE

The Jefferson County Historical Commission is undertaking a project to document the architecture, history, and culture of the county.

On April 12, 2022 a public meeting was held with Emily Payne of the firm HHM & Associates, based in Austin, TX. HHM is the contractor that is performing the field-work and research for the Historic Resources Survey. Members of the JCHC and the public were present at the April 12th meeting. Emily shared with the group the methodology that will be used for the survey, as well

as an overview of how the data can be used. HHM's surveyors will photograph and map buildings, structures, objects, and sites that were built at least 45 years ago. The survey boundaries will encompass most of the County, excluding the city limits of Beaumont and Port Arthur. A Preservation Plan will be created based on the data reported by the survey. The preservation plan will include suggestions as to

which resources are at the highest risk of being lost. This project is projected to be completed in May, 2024. To receive updates, please fill out the participation form, found here: •<https://forms.gle/YKiMGoE6bvy3Zd4D7> Interested parties may also contact Jennifer Trenbeath in the JCHC office to be added to the contact list.

FREE HISTORIC SITES DAY

PRESENTED BY THE TEXAS HISTORICAL COMMISSION



In celebration of National Preservation Month and National Travel and Tourism Week, the Texas Historical Commission (THC) will offer free admission to participating state historic sites on Saturday, May 7. See a full list of participating historic sites below.

Acton	place	Fulton Mansion
Barrington Plantation	Fannin Battleground	Goodnight Ranch
Caddo Mounds	Fanthorp Inn	Kreische Brewery
Casa Navarro	Fort Griffin	Landmark Inn
Confederate Reunion Grounds	Fort Lancaster	Levi Jordan Plantation
Eisenhower Birth-	Fort McKavett	
	French Legation	

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FREE HISTORIC SITES DAY (CONTINUED)

Lipantitlan
Magoffin Home
Mission Dolores
Monument Hill
Old Socorro Mission
Palmito Ranch Battleground
Port Isabel Lighthouse (discounted entry)
Sabine Pass Battleground
Sam Bell Maxey House
Sam Rayburn House
San Felipe de Austin
San Jacinto Battleground



*Sabine Pass Battleground
Photo from JCHC Files*

HISTORICAL MARKER SPOTLIGHT

FRANCIS JOHN (FRANK) TROST
LOCATED AT 747 PROCTER STREET
PORT ARTHUR, TX

Marker Text: Francis John (Frank) Trost (June 24, 1868 - August 4, 1944) Frank Trost, the photographer of record on the day the Lucas Gusher erupted in the Spindletop Oil Field, came to Port Arthur in 1895 from Kansas City, Missouri, where he had been involved in real estate. He opened a photography studio at this site and turned his hobby into a successful business. On January 10, 1901, Trost was notified of the events at Spindletop, just south of Beaumont. With his unwieldy camera equipment in tow, he managed to take at least one photograph of the gushing oil before sundown. Photographic methods were still in their infancy, so the image was created with a glass negative Trost manufactured in his studio. The photo appeared in newspapers all over the United States and in some foreign countries. It was in such demand that Trost made as many as 250 prints per day and sold them as quickly as they were printed. Aside from his significance as a recorder of this momentous moment in Texas history, Frank Trost also served his adopted hometown as a city alderman, city commissioner and fire chief. Trost died at home in 1944 and is buried in a local cemetery. He was survived by his wife, Katherine, and two daughters who continued his work at the Trost Studio. (2002)



While Frank Trost is best known for capturing the historic Lucas Gusher on Jan. 10, 1901, he also left a legacy with photographs that display Beaumont's post-Spindletop era. This photo from the Tyrrell Historical Library is captioned on the back "Brokers in front of Crosby House 1902".

DISASTER PREPAREDNESS AND HISTORIC PRESERVATION

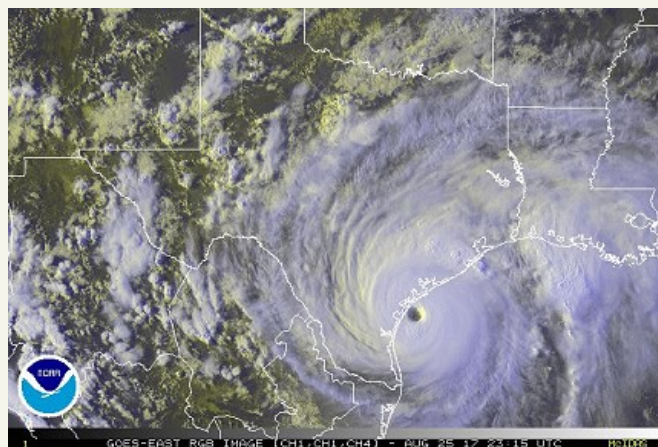
JENNIFER TRENBEATH

May has the distinction of being both National Historic Preservation Month as well as National Disaster Preparedness Month. In our area, we are all too aware of how natural disasters have the ability to wreck our preservation goals. Nature doesn't care whether a building or collection has been carefully restored, curated and doted on— it will destroy indiscriminately. Rather than throwing our hands up in defeat, there are steps we can take to reduce the severity of potential disaster damage.

I was fortunate to attend a hands-on workshop hosted by THRAB (Texas Historical Records Advisory Board) on April 13. The workshop was led by Rebecca Elder, who also led an online training in 2019 that many JCHC members attended. The first half of the workshop focused on what to do before and immediately after a disaster hits. The second half was an exercise in disaster response geared toward preservation. After being divided into two teams, we were led to an area with books, documents, photos and records that had been completely submerged in "flood water". We were left alone to develop team roles and a strategy and to then enact that strategy. For those who have never held a waterlogged, leather-bound book—it's quite the experience! I'm proud to say that my team worked well together; we were able to draw on the expertise of a team member who was part of the response after Hurricane Harvey damaged the Tyrrell Historical Library, and we did well at prioritizing the space we had to save the most irreplaceable and valuable items.

Disaster response is completely different from organization to organization and disaster to disaster. It was very interesting to see how differently we all responded to certain items and situations based on our individual roles and experiences. I've shared many of the details and takeaways from the workshop, but it's important to note that every organization and group should have a response plan tailored to their collection and their staff or volunteers. No one knows as well as we do exactly what is in our archive or collection, so to create a custom plan before a disaster ever strikes will save time, cost and man-power when (not if) a disaster happens.

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*Hurricane Harvey Satellite Image
Photo from NOAA*

BEFORE THE DISASTER

- **Be certain that your tetanus and Hepatitis A & B vaccines are current**
- **Keep emergency response supplies on hand.**

- ◇ A disaster salvage wheel
- ◇ Respirator or masks
- ◇ Gloves
- ◇ Paper towels
- ◇ Lab suits or other protective clothing
- ◇ Safety glasses
- ◇ Large garbage cans
- ◇ Contractor's garbage bags
- ◇ Hard hats

- ◇ Mylar sheeting
- ◇ Freezer paper
- ◇ Twine or fishing line
- ◇ Clothespins
- ◇ Flashlights
- ◇ Hand tools
- ◇ Batteries or solar charging packs
- ◇ Clipboard
- ◇ Pencils etc.
- ◇ Sunscreen
- ◇ Drinking water
- ◇ Insect repellent
- ◇ Snacks
- ◇ Soap or hand sanitizer (running water isn't a guarantee!)

CLEANUP AND SALVAGE

Safety First! Do not work alone and do wear PPE. Take breaks and be aware of your surroundings.

• **Assess the Damage**

1. How much material has been affected?
2. What kind of damage has occurred?
3. What kind of material has been affected?

• **Stabilize the Environment**

1. Identify and repair structural hazards
2. Reduce the temperature and relative humidity. Ideally less than 70° and 45%RH. Using dehumidifiers, fans and damp-rid are all good suggestions.

• **Salvage**

1. Remember that this won't make everything better, but it will make it safe.
2. Prioritize items based on your disaster plan. Space will be limited so you may not be able to save everything.
3. Freeze as much as possible within 48hrs. This is useful for papers, books, some photos and textiles. DO NOT FREEZE ceramic, glass, stone, wood and other items that might be damaged when they expand in the freezer. Remember

that the items will be in the same condition that they were frozen in after they thaw. Freezing buys time but does not repair damage.

4. Air dry as your space allows. You can make more space by hanging twine or fishing line and hanging documents and photos by clothespins
5. Interleave books with paper towels and wrap books in freezer paper before freezing.
6. Remove framed photos and documents from frames unless the item is stuck to glass. Talk to a conservator before freezing photos. Not all photos can be frozen.

- Consult the National Heritage Responders at NHRpublichelpline@culturalheritage.org

- *Your goal is to keep things from growing mold so they can be conserved or digitized later.*

NOTABLE PLACES
FROM THE FILES OF LES MCMAHEN



**FORMER SOUTHERN PACIFIC RAIL-
ROAD DEPOT— CURRENTLY A PRI-
VATE RESIDENCE**

**BROADWAY STREET AT W. RAIL-
ROAD STREET, ABOUT ONE BLOCK
NORTH OF THE
UNION PACIFIC TRACKS CHINA,**

Former baggage/freight room



The trackside face that would have been next to the tracks. The part jutting out would have been the agent's operators area, and the right end would have been the baggage/freight room.



The back side of the former depot is the most modified, with the addition of a bathroom to the right.

UPCOMING EVENTS

May 5th– Music in the Gardens: Daisies and Dulcimers. The McFaddin-Ward House invites the community to enjoy its beautiful grounds while enjoying live music with its free springtime Music in the Garden series. Event begins at 5pm. For more information visit www.mcfaddin-ward.org/events

May 7th– Beaumont Main Street Gala– Annual fundraiser for Beaumont Main Street. For more information, visit www.beaumontmainstreet.org/gala

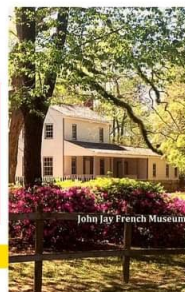
May 7th– Classic Car Tour of historic Spindletop– In conjunction with the Beaumont Main Street Gala, there will be a tour of classic cars beginning at Spindletop-Gladys City Boomtown. For more information visit the Spindletop-Gladys City Boomtown Facebook page at www.facebook.com/SpindletopGC/.

May 12th– Ken Farmer: “What do I do with that? Conserving your treasures”. Ken Farmer will be giving a lecture at the McFaddin Ward House Visitor Center beginning at 6:30pm. For more information visit www.mcfaddin-ward.org/events

May 19th– Members Only Heritage Happy Hour at the John Jay French Museum. Hosted by the Beaumont Heritage Society. Please visit <https://beaumontheritage.org/> to join.

HERITAGE HAPPY HOUR – MEMBERS ONLY!

Annual Meeting - John J. French Museum



May 19th, 2022 | 5:30 - 7:30 p.m.

GET IN TOUCH

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409-835-8701

www.facebook.com/FRIENDSofJCHC