

# Namesakes



USAF KC-135R Stratotankers, 186th ARW, taxi on Key Field in 2014.

Photo: TSgt. Richard Smith

## KEY FIELD ANGB



ALGENE EARL KEY



FREDERICK MAURICE KEY



Fred Key does an in-flight repair on the engine of the Curtiss Robin.

Photo: Meridian Regional Airport

# KEY

## Flight of Ole Miss

Today, Key Field, Miss., can't be considered a famous Air Force base. Yet for a brief period it was in fact at the center of the aviation universe. For 39,214 minutes, to be exact.

At 12:32 p.m. on June 4, 1935, a Curtiss Robin flown by Algene and Frederick Key took off from Meridian City Airport. The brothers remained aloft until landing at the same spot at 6:06 p.m. on July 1. Their 27-day flight crushed the world endurance record and made global headlines.

The airport was instantly renamed Key Field in honor of the town's world-famous citizens.

In 1935, Depression-minded town leaders proposed closing that town's airport. Faced with unemployment, the brothers acted to save the day with a pure publicity stunt: They would break the world flight endurance record of 23 days and thereby bring glory to Meridian.

The brothers borrowed a Robin J-1 Deluxe, which they named Ole Miss, and modified it. They built a catwalk to allow in-flight engine service. They added a big new fuel tank, sliding top hatch for in-flight deliveries, and advanced VHF radio outfit.

Air-to-air refueling was still new and dangerous, but the brothers and a local mechanic, A. D. Hunter, invented a spill-

free system, featuring a valve that would prevent fuel from flowing unless a probe was firmly inserted into the receiving tank.

The "Flying Keys" took off and for 27 days flew Ole Miss in circles above Meridian. Several times a day, the crew of another plane would lower food and supplies via rope and ship fuel via a long tube. They survived storms and even an onboard fire.

They stayed aloft 653 hours and 34 minutes. Their estimated ground track was 52,320 miles. When they finally landed, the Keys were greeted by 35,000 wildly cheering spectators. The idea of closing the airport was forgotten.

Both Al and Fred served as heavy bomber pilots in World War II. Fred flew 100 missions and logged 500 combat hours in the Pacific. Al had 200 combat hours in the Pacific and a like number in Europe. Fred came home in 1945 to run the family flying school. Al retired from USAF in 1960. He then became mayor of Meridian.

The Keys' valve system was adopted by the Army Air Corps; somewhat modified, it remains in use. Ole Miss is on display at the National Air and Space Museum, its record still unbroken by a conventional aircraft. It was finally bested in 1973 by the spaceflight of Skylab II, which lasted for 28 days.

In World War II, the Air Corps began using Key Field for flight training. Later years saw the establishment of Key Field Air National Guard Base, co-located with Meridian Regional Airport. It is the home of the 186th Air Refueling Wing, a KC-135 tanker unit of the Mississippi Air National Guard.

## ALGENE EARL KEY

**Born:** Feb. 8, 1905, Kemper County, Miss.

**Died:** July 17, 1976, Meridian, Miss.

**Education:** Mississippi A&M College; Nicholas-Beazley Flying School

**Service:** Air National Guard, US Army Air Forces, USAF

**Occupation:** US military officer, businessman, politician

**Main Era:** World War II

**Years Active:** 1939-60

**Combat:** Pacific Theater, European Theater

**Final Grade:** Colonel

**Honors:** Distinguished Service Cross, Distinguished Flying Cross, Bronze Star Medal (7)

## FREDERICK MAURICE KEY

**Born:** April 28, 1909, Kemper County, Miss.

**Died:** Sept. 15, 1971, Meridian, Miss.

**Education:** Nicholas-Beazley Flying School

**Service:** Air National Guard, US Army Air Forces

**Occupation:** US military officer, businessman

**Main Era:** World War II

**Years Active:** 1939-45

**Combat:** Pacific Theater

**Final Grade:** Major

**Honors:** Distinguished Flying Cross

## KEY FIELD AIR NATIONAL GUARD BASE

**State:** Mississippi

**Nearest City:** Meridian

**Area:** 1.6 sq mi / 1,000 acres

**Status:** Open, operational

**Opened:** (Meridian Municipal Arprt.) November 1930

**Renamed:** (Key Field) July 1, 1935

**Renamed:** (Key Field Army Airfield) 1941

**Renamed:** (Key Field ANGB) Sept. 18, 1947

**Current Owner:** Air National Guard

**Former Owner:** Third Air Force

**Home Of:** 186th Air Refueling Wing