

# Conversations with...

## LARRY GREGORY, PRESIDENT OF THE LONE STAR FLIGHT MUSEUM

The Lone Star Flight Museum (LSFM) first opened in 1990 in a newly constructed, 50,000 sq. ft. hanger at Scholes International Airport at Galveston (Scholes Field). The original collection of historic aircraft grew rapidly and, in 1991, the Museum opened an additional hanger to house its new acquisitions. In November 1999, the Museum became the home of the Texas Aviation Hall of Fame, which was established by the Texas Legislature and then Governor George W. Bush, to honor the contributions of Texans in aviation. Within a few years, the Lone Star Flight Museum achieved an international reputation as one of the foremost flying museums in the country. The Museum's collection had grown to over 1,500 artifacts and some forty historic aircraft, many of which were maintained in flying condition and took part in air shows across the country. One of these aircraft, a P-47 Thunderbolt, flies regularly as part of the U.S. Air Force "Heritage Flight" program, which brings historic aircraft and modern jet fighters to aviation events across the country. The following "Conversation" is based on William H. Kellar's interview with Larry Gregory, President of the Lone Star Flight Museum, on November 11, 2008. This interview originally was scheduled for late September, but was postponed because of the extensive damage to the Museum and to Galveston from Hurricane Ike in September 2008. Gregory, a native Texan, graduated from Texas A&M University in 1989 with a degree in meteorol-

ogy. He became interested in historic aircraft when his father began flying an old Stearman (biplane) during the mid-1970s. In 1994, he began volunteering at the Lone Star Flight Museum and accepted a job there in 2002. He has been president of the Museum since 2006.



**LARRY GREGORY (LG):** My interest in historic aircraft came at a young age. My dad and another gentleman in LaMarque purchased a Stearman back in 1974 or 1975. I was seven or eight years old when they got it. They owned that plane for ten or twelve years, and both of them began flying in the Commemorative Air Force's "Tora! Tora! Tora!" routine in the late 1970s. I was at a lot of air shows with them and always enjoyed the "round motors," the older aircraft, and also enjoyed meeting some of the figures from World War II.

*All photos are courtesy of the Lone Star Flight Museum unless otherwise noted.*

One of the most memorable days in doing that at an air show was one in Harlingen in the late 1970s; sitting at a table, I first met General Doolittle, Tex Hill, Ensign George Gay and Pappy Boyington, all right there. My dad said... "Come on boy, you have got to meet these guys." As a nine-year-old, it was pretty neat to meet those heroes. I did not realize what they did until later on, but being able to say that I actually shook these guys' hands means a lot today. And coming full circle on the Doolittle front, the Museum repainted our B-25 in the colors of the Doolittle Raiders in 2007. I had become acquainted with Dick Cole who was Doolittle's copilot on the historic mission and talked to him about painting our B-25 as a flying tribute to the Raiders. The concept was well received and I eventually worked with the Doolittle Raiders Association for permission to use their emblem as part of the nose art. We wanted the airplane to serve as a tribute to all 80 men who flew the mission, and their emblem is a symbol that links them all together. We are honored to have the only civilian aircraft adorned with their

emblem and is recognized as the official B-25 of the Doolittle Raiders Association.

So, it is something that we are very proud of and, on a personal note for me, it is one of the most rewarding things that I have been associated with at the Museum. Having met General Doolittle, and now a lot of the surviving Raiders and their families, has certainly been a thrill. We debuted the aircraft at the 65th Doolittle Raider Reunion on April 18, 2007 in San Antonio. We departed for San Antonio about 8:00 A.M., sixty-five years to the day [of the Doolittle raid on Tokyo, April 18, 1942], almost to the hour and met seven of the surviving Raiders and many family members. The Raiders now refer to it as "their airplane," which makes me very proud for our museum.

**WILLIAM KELLAR (WHK):** How did the Museum get started?

**LG:** The Museum was founded by Houston business man Robert Waltrip in the mid-1980s. In fact, the first airplane he purchased





*B-25 painted in Doolittle Raiders colors.*

was our B-25 in 1984. He was rapidly acquiring aircraft through the 1980s and the early to mid-1990s, building the airplane collection, and looking for a home for the Museum. Galveston turned out to be the place they selected after doing some study and negotiations elsewhere. Galveston was the location that wanted us, it was a good tourist destination with the opportunity to attract a lot of visitors. So, we built here, opened the building in November of 1990 and have been here ever since. The collection has changed through the years, but the main core of the Museum collection has been pretty stable for the last eight to ten years.

I would say that the queen of the fleet is the B-17. Mr. Waltrip purchased that back in 1987 in England. We had a crew fly it across the Atlantic shortly thereafter to Hobby Airport where it underwent a three-to-four-year restoration. It is one of the finest flying B-17s around and is very complete on the inside. We are very, very fortunate to have it. Only thirteen B-17s are flyable at this time. Almost 13,000 were built, so, it is not a real good percentage. And, of course, the B-25 now has significantly more meaning with its current paint scheme.

Our P-47 is very active in the Air Force Heritage Flight Program and is seen at many air shows across the country during the year. And, of course, the Corsair and the Hellcat and the SBD [Douglas SBD Dauntless—World War II Naval Dive Bomber] are some of the rare Navy airplanes that we have. Only three Hellcats and SBDs are currently flying to my knowledge. Both are historically significant as well with the SBD making its mark at Midway and the Hellcats impressive combat record. Hellcats destroyed more enemy aircraft than any other American fighter.

And, of course, we have some other airplanes that we fly quite a bit — a Stearman and a T-6 Texan and those kinds of things. You have got to have some trainers in the mix.

Our T-6 is just out of the paint shop. It is in the colors of the 111th Fighter Squadron of the Texas Air National Guard based at Ellington back in the 1950s. We wanted to do that as a tribute to the 111th for their ninety-plus years of service here on the Gulf Coast. They recently have lost their fighter mission, and are now in the reconnaissance role flying Predators, remote-controlled, unmanned airplanes. So, we felt that that was a worthy tribute.

**WHK:** How do you go about finding aircraft and then preserving them?

**LG:** Well, finding a derelict airplane just sitting out at an airport—that is hard to do. Now, people are recovering them from crash sites and restoring them. Our Hurricane is an example of an aircraft restored from a wartime crash. The airplane crashed next to a little fresh water bog in Newfoundland back in 1944 and sat there until 1972. Once recovered, it passed through a few hands until we purchased the airplane and started a restoration. It took more than fifteen years to restore it! Another aircraft, Glacier Girl, a P-38 that was found under the ice in Greenland is probably the most famous example of a recovered aircraft flying today. They had to tunnel under the ice more than 200 feet and bring the airplane up. It took a monumental effort and millions of dollars to accomplish, but that is how it is done. Technology has enabled more aircraft to be restored that were previously thought to be impossible. It is very tough and highly expensive to restore a fighter or a bomber that has been sitting for many years.

Just keeping them flying is very difficult. Parts are in short supply and some items are nonexistent. You cannot buy a new tail wheel tire for the B-17. It is impossible. All of the molds were destroyed fifteen to twenty years ago. In order to keep the airplane flying, we had to work with an engineer to design



*B-17 in flight over Galveston Island*

a new wheel that will accept a tire that is readily available. In fact, had we not had the hurricane [Hurricane Ike], we would have already had one cut. Otherwise, we will ground the airplane because of a tire. So, those are a few of the obstacles that we are looking at.

And then, of course, there are insurance and regulatory issues from the FAA and TSA. We are up against a lot of that now, especially with some proposed rulings that may come into effect which will greatly restrict our ability to fly these airplanes. So, it is a constant struggle. I think that we have the ability to keep flying the airplanes for another two, three, maybe even four decades. But, I think we will be done well before that due to outside issues.

**WHK:** How hard is it to find people qualified to fly these old planes?

**LG:** Well, that would seem to be a huge concern because obviously people think the only people who qualify to fly these airplanes are the ones who flew them in the war. You have 22-year-old, 23-year-old pilots flying copilot at a regional airline or a charter outfit or whatever — it is all training. You have to build up a set of skills flying a certain set of airplanes to be able to transition into some of these airplanes that we have here in the hangar. A person with 2,000 hours in a [Cessna] 172 does absolutely nothing for me because it has few characteristics that most of our airplanes possess. Whereas a person with a couple hundred hours of Stearman and T-6 time along with some Twin Beech time for a radial engine, multiengine type airplane would be a good candidate to progress into some of our airplanes. Obviously, flying tailwheel type aircraft is key.

Fortunately, we have about twenty-five folks who fly our airplanes, and I would say the average age is probably around fifty-three. And other organizations have some pretty young guys flying a lot of their stuff, which is great.

**WHK:** Are you a pilot?

**LG:** Yes. My dad had that Stearman when I was a kid and I always had an interest. I kind of delayed it a little bit and really got busy in the mid 1990s and earned my ratings to start building

some time. I wanted to do the airline gig, but 9/11 disrupted the interview that I had scheduled eight or ten days later. And so, I just started building more experience in other airplanes and was fortunate to fly a few of the planes here.

Right now, I am a copilot on the B-17 and the B-25 and fly our Twin Beech, the Stearman, the T-6 and the DC-3 when it was flying a little bit. I am not the senior guy by any means as far as experience. I am still very much in the learning mode, but it is very rewarding and an honor to be able to fly some of these airplanes. It is the dream that I had playing with little airplanes as a kid growing up. I cannot believe that I am actually allowed to do this. It is beyond words....

But, like I mentioned before with the Raiders, meeting the families and being accepted by them means a lot, obviously. And with our ride program now, a lot of folks will buy a ride for their dad who flew as a B-17 gunner in the war or B-25 pilot, or whatever. It is different circumstances but the story is the same. They go on a flight and experience the airplane with their loved ones. Like this one gentleman we flew a few months ago — more than thirty relatives were on hand to watch him go for a ride in a B-17. And when he got back, they were all rushing to him with hugs and congratulations. It was very emotional for everybody as four generations saw him fly in the airplane he flew in combat. Just being able to have a process to allow them to make that memory with the man's great-grandkids is pretty special. There will be a day when we will not have that ability and unfortunately, it is probably coming too soon. But, to be able to let them see that someone appreciates what they did is pretty rewarding. I hope that we display the airplanes in a manner fitting for what they all did for us.

We have flown some folks who never met their father because he was killed in a B-17 before they were born. They can experience all the sounds, sights and smells of the airplane at or next to his crew station. It means a lot in a way I'll never know. That makes all the hard work, sweat and expense worth it whenever people can have an meaningful and enjoyable experience.



*Flooded aircraft and storm debris after Hurricane Ike.*



**WHK:** Well, you have a real living history museum here. Let me ask you a couple of hurricane questions. Before Hurricane Ike, what was your plan if you got word that there was a hurricane in the Gulf that was coming this way?

**LG:** Well, that is one thing that we talked about throughout hurricane season. One of the things that we have done on the airplanes is to change some of our maintenance schedules so we do not have an airplane on jacks for an extended period of time during hurricane season. It is one thing to check the weather and say, O.K., there is nothing out there and I have three or four

days to change some tires that just so happen to need changing at this time. That is one thing. Having an airplane on jacks for an involved two- or three-week process, that is done in the winter time. We have also moved some of our airplane inspection intervals out of hurricane season. That is just kind of ground work ahead of time. It does not always work that way but that is the big picture. Obviously, we have protocols for how we are going to prepare some of the artifacts, the airplane maintenance manuals, and a lot of the other stuff.

With Ike, we were watching the storm obviously before it hit Cuba. About one week before the storm, we had some

involved maintenance on the B-17, B-25 and P-47. We made the call to start putting one of those airplanes back together over the weekend. The Saturday weekend warriors addressed that on the B-17 and made some headway on the B-25 as well. Monday and Tuesday, we finished the other two airplanes, which gave us some of Tuesday and all of Wednesday to prepare some of the other airplanes to get ready to go.

**WHK:** And the weather bureau was still thinking that Ike was headed towards Corpus Christi...

**LG:** Right. But, most of the time when there is an error on the storm tracks in the Gulf, it is to the right, which would mean towards Galveston. I was not very confident with the storm com-

ing off of Cuba that it was going to go south of us. So, we were a little more proactive, I think, and that allowed us to evacuate a few airplanes that had not flown in a while. Over the weekend... I had already sent e-mails out to all of our pilots. We were going to need help and I was laying the ground work to get the most pilots here as possible. On Wednesday, it was finalized—we are leaving Thursday and we are flying to Midland—far enough inland and no big concerns with the storm there. Plus, Midland had their air show the next weekend or two weeks later. That would be a good deal.

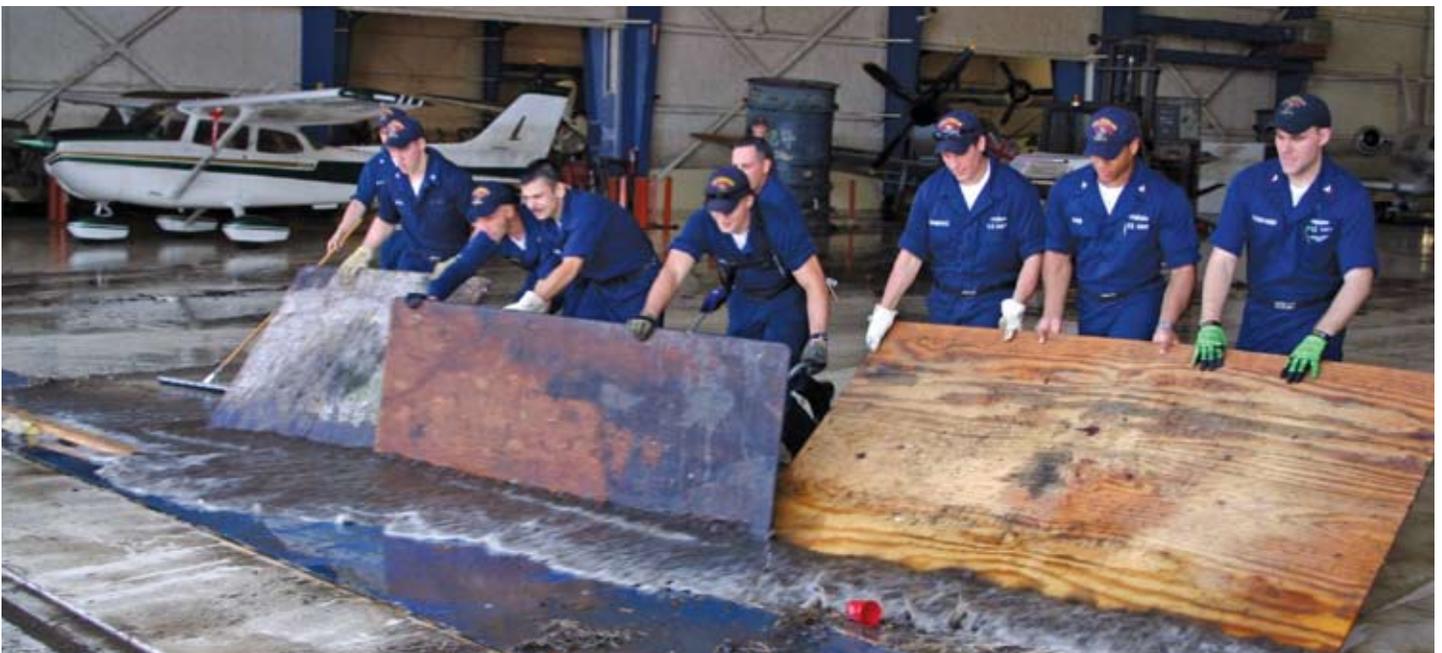
We got here Thursday [September 11] morning—I had pilots on the way down and, of course, the logistics of just getting people here are immense. I could not rely on a lot of my Houston area pilots because they were protecting their own property [in advance of the hurricane]. I have a lot of folks in Dallas, so a lot of those guys were coming down. One guy was coming from New Mexico. One of my guys started the day in Oslo, Norway, on a corporate trip and flew back to Houston, landed, came down, and flew two airplanes out. I mean, the whole thing was very challenging.

The main thing this time that really hurt us was that a lot of our pilots were at the Reno Air Races. I was down several folks and we had challenges all around. Well, Thursday morning, we checked the weather at Midland. The one day that Midland is IFR— meaning low clouds, rain, bad weather — was Thursday. So, at 9 o'clock Thursday morning, I began looking for places to send ten airplanes. We had a



*Above: Texas Aviation Hall of Fame before Hurricane Ike, and, below, devastation after the storm.*





*Seabees and Crew from USS Nassau helping with cleanup.*

lot of folks come together. We arranged to take a couple of airplanes down to a private ranch in South Texas. We also took a few of the airplanes to a hangar at Hobby owned by the same family. We sent an airplane to Ellington and three airplanes went to Sherman. So, we really had airplanes spread out all over the state but we got them out.

The heroic aspect of this event occurred on Friday morning. We were unable to evacuate the DC-3 Thursday evening due to traffic issues at Hobby Airport. We had arranged for hangar space, but we could not get there. A couple of our pilots asked if they could attempt to evacuate it Friday morning. We agreed to give it a shot and they flew a small Cessna to Galveston around 9:00 A.M. One runway was under water and the other runway had water at the edge. One of our pilots in Galveston pulled the DC-3 out of the hangar before they arrived to make for a quick escape. Water was quickly covering the ramp and the DC-3 taxied out in the water. When they took the runway, only the middle part of the runway near the centerline was dry. Another thirty

minutes would have been too late. It was just like a movie when the hero escapes to safety; minus all the explosions. And in the six hours after they left, the water rose six feet.

I saw the DC-3 fly over my house while I was covering the last window. I was jumping up and down, as you can imagine. I was very elated and sent a quick e-mail to our volunteer e-group. After I finished securing my house, I evacuated to my brother's house in Magnolia and rode it out there.

We helicoptered down on Monday after the storm. It was pretty devastating to walk into the Museum. My family had been a part of this place for fifteen years and invested a lot of time and energy, not to mention all the other volunteers who had devoted so much time to further the museum. To see the shape that it was in was just heartbreaking. I remember looking at my brother after being inside about five minutes and saying, "This is all meaningless." The destruction had no meaning because it was just so complete. It was very disheartening, very daunting. Where do you even begin? We were standing in the middle of all this debris and did not even

know where to start. That was pretty tough.

And then, we walked into the Hall of Fame and just about cried... You know, I can handle an airplane getting wet. It is what it is. In the Hall of Fame are a lot of artifacts from people of what they accomplished, and some were one-of-a-kind objects. There is a lot of loss in there that affects people on a personal level. It was such a wonderful facility with all the exhibits and artwork, and to see it devastated was very difficult. That, to me, has been the worst result of the storm. The exhibits represented so much, not just to our state, but to our country, and obviously to the families. It was such a source of pride for the families of our inductees that had their loved ones enshrined in the Hall of Fame. So, that has been very difficult.

**WHK:** How did you go about starting your recovery process?

**LG:** Well, the difficult thing about it is that we could not start right away. Galveston was closed, but I was able drive down on Friday and arrange some logistics to get our staff and volunteers on the island. Top priority was to get airplanes out of the hangar and flushed with fresh water. Well, Galveston did not have any water so we worked with some folks at the BP plant in Texas City. They arranged for Evergreen Industrial to deliver a tanker of fresh water on Saturday, one week after the storm. I was at the museum all day that Saturday to meet equipment in order to begin removing debris on Sunday.

While I was here on Saturday, I met some folks from the U.S. Navy that were in Galveston to assist with the recovery efforts. The Seabees from Amphibious Construction Battalion 2 volunteered to help remove debris. That was the best news yet. They indicated that they could enlist some support from the sailors of the USS Nassau as well. Even better news. So, Sunday, about fifteen of our staff and volunteers joined twenty Seabees and forty sailors from the USS Nassau to start the process. Over a two day period, we removed over 500 cubic yards of debris from the museum. The best advice I can give about working with the Seabees is to get out of the

way because they can handle any and every situation. It was amazing to be a part of working with these young men and women. Our military has some of the finest young people you could ever meet.

The CO of the ship told me that everyone wanted to participate. A young sailor from the Nassau gave me a Nassau T-shirt and a handshake and said, “Sir, thank you for letting me be a part of this.” I about lost it. This young “kid” is busting his tail and covered in sweat, sea water and other stuff washed into the museum by the Gulf of Mexico, and is thanking me for allowing him to do this. Thank you has never seemed so inadequate. I do not think I will ever forget it. These sailors saved the museum. I hope they realize what they did for not only the museum, but everywhere they worked in Galveston.

In the days following, we took steps to save the airplanes and recover some of the artifacts from the Hall of Fame and other areas of the Museum, and tried to do our best to preserve what we had left... We would pull out a pile of debris with a front-end loader and have about four guys go through it with a pitch fork looking for stuff— looking for prop tools, looking for anything rare that we needed to work on an airplane that came from the shop. It was very disheartening. You are reduced to digging through a bunch of wet, nasty, gooey junk looking for a nugget here or there. That is the way it is.

The amount of work that has been done in two months is astounding, in my opinion. I did not think we would be anywhere near this. We are on a pace where we might even be able to open by Christmas—part of the facility, not the whole thing. I did not think that that day would come for a long time. All the siding around the perimeter of the building has been cut away from twelve feet down and replaced. We have had a lot of electrical work done obviously. The place is basically all sheet rocked now. The gift shop area is taped and floated and primed; getting ready to do paint in there today or tomorrow.



*Exterior of building sporting new metal siding.*

We are making tremendous strides to bring the airplanes home. In fact, our B-17 is in the hangar. We will have a couple of other airplanes home by the end of the week, maybe even all of them home by Sunday. So, that is a welcome sight, to look out and see the B-17 sitting in the hangar, knowing that in less than one week, there will be six, seven, or eight more. One day at a time. And the thing that I have been saying is that this is not a week or two length project. This is a couple of years. We cannot tackle it all right now. And that is kind of how we went about it. We have done a pretty good job, I think. We made some mistakes here and there, I'm sure, but you just do what you can.

Obviously, we are going to evaluate a lot of things that we do with the Hall of Fame and I am not sure of a time table on that, to be honest with you. We have so many pressing needs that we have to do right now just to survive. I have to get the airplanes flying again so we can try to generate some revenue through our ride program. Without that, then the Hall of Fame, whatever my plan is with that, is meaningless. We have got to start generating some revenue. So, that is our focus. All the artifacts in the Hall of Fame are being cataloged and steps taken to mitigate the damage done and to rehabilitate them to the best extent possible. So, that will continue. It will be a long process. As far as making new exhibits and turning that place back into the Hall, I am a year out before I can even have a good handle on what and how we are going to go about it. It took ten years to build, and just to rebuild the exhibits, the media and everything in there is going to cost several hundred thousand dollars. So, that is going to have to wait.



PHOTO: WILLIAM H. KELLAR.

*P-47 returned "home" to LSFM, Scholes Field, November 11, 2008. L to R: Volunteers: Bill Reid, Mechanic; Dan Blanchard, Pilot, and LSFM President, Larry Gregory. Photo: William H. Kellar.*

**WHK:** What do you need most here? What kind of things could people do that can help you the most?

**LG:** Actually, I need some folks who are interested in this stuff, or who have some time and want to start doing something new, to come down and volunteer and help us. We definitely need manpower. Of course, I need financial commitments. We need various tooling, various equipment needs that will be ongoing for quite a while. There are a lot of ways folks can help. Come by and ride in one of the airplanes. You help us and you get a great experience in return... You do not have to be a craftsman to come down here and help. We have a lot of things in the curatorial side of the house from record keeping to cataloging some



*Aircraft back home at the Lone Star Flight Museum Hangar.*

of the items in the Hall of Fame and storage areas—sweeping a broom—it can be very non-technical type stuff. But it is all equally important. Sweeping up an area is just as important as working on an airplane because without having that place clean, we cannot put anything there. So, yes, it all leads to the combined effort to get it up and running again... And the other thing we need is for people to come down and see us... Galveston is open. The new part of the Causeway is open and you can get here. When we re-open, we need people to come visit. That is the only way that we are going to survive.

I think that the Museum has come through the storm very well so far. We saved a significant portion of the airplanes and the airplanes that were damaged are in the process of being rehabili-tated... We are working very hard to get this place back up and running. It is important for us to come back and it is important for our airplanes to be flying over the island again. It has been difficult on my staff and my volunteers. It wears on you. Yesterday, when we pushed this B-17 in, that was huge! Two months ago, the airplane was out of here. It left almost two months ago, and today it is on Galveston soil, under our roof. That is amazing! The day the lights came on in the hangar — that was a big deal. So, it all adds up. We will have a few

setbacks between now and when we are fully recovered, but we are going to have some victories, too. As I have told our folks, it's a big elephant to eat and we're going to be chewing for quite some time.

• **William H. Kellar**, Ph.D. is a Houston historian and frequent contributor to *Houston History*. He retired from UH in 2008 and presently is working as a freelance writer and president of HistoryConsultants.Net.

The Texas Aviation Hall of Fame-Lone Star Flight Museum complex is located next to Moody Gardens and the Schlitterbahn Waterpark at the Galveston International Airport at Scholes Field in Galveston, Texas, 2002 Terminal Dr., Galveston, TX 77554.

For more information about the Museum, including opportunities for volunteer work and contributions, call 409-740-7722 or 1-888-FLY-LSFM (359-5736) or visit the LSFM Website at: <http://www.lsfm.org/>

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