

Looking back on the birth of the Air Force

By Nancy Dingler

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In 1942, Fairfield was a sleepy agricultural dot on the landscape. Ragsdale airfield, as it first was known, was originally planned to be temporary. However, the mission changed as things do in wartime and the airfield became the Fairfield-Suisun Army Air Base.

The need for additional acreage exploded, along with the population. A huge city within a city was constructed in Fairfield, named Waterman Park, to house the hundreds of civilians needed to construct and support the air base.

When Americas Pacific naval fleet was attacked by the Japanese on Dec. 7, 1941, it was assumed, by many, that the next target would be the West Coast of the United States.

To protect the coast and to send out surveillance aircraft, the Army needed an ideal location. The natural flyway for birds runs through Solano County, as do the winds.

The natives called these prevailing winds 'Suisun' and the name became attached to the peoples who lived around the Suisun marshes and Rockville Park.

The 4th Air Force was charged with improving air defense along the Pacific coast. A site board investigated the area and approved the location early in 1942. Inexpensive flat land, good flying weather (most of the time), favorable drainage, and nearby rail and water transportation contributed to the favorable recommendation.

Thus, on April 22, 1942, the Office of the Chief of Engineers authorized spending \$998,000 for the construction of two runways and a few temporary buildings on a 945-acre site. The project received a top wartime priority. Land was purchased from local ranchers at an average cost of \$50 per acre.

An airfield, in the middle of nowhere, sprung up virtually overnight. On July 6, 1942, bulldozers began carving out the base and by September runways and operations buildings were completed. That was 65 years ago.

The fledgling goal of the Fairfield-Suisun Army Air Base was soon changed to that of being a major aerial port and supply transfer point for the Pacific War Zone.

When the 4th Air Force was put in charge with improving defense, it was intended that

medium-attack bombers would be stationed at the new air base, and in the autumn of 1942, some of the aircraft used the runways for practice landings.

During this period, Navy planes also practiced maneuvers at the same field.

For a few months, the outline of an aircraft carriers deck was painted on one runway. This helped newly-commissioned Navy pilots practice carrier landings and takeoffs with Hellcats and Helldivers before they were assigned to the Pacific Fleet. The strong prevailing winds were similar to conditions at sea.

The Army-Air Force felt it was imperative to expand its real estate holdings. In 1943, 1,312 more acres were acquired through eminent domain proceedings through the Federal District Court of San Francisco. In June of 1945, another 1,145 acres were added.

Subsequent expansion in the 1950s and 60s, were acquired for additional base housing areas and lengthening the runways to accommodate jet aircraft, bringing the total acreage to more than 6,000 acres.

The first Army unit to take up permanent residence was a group of 10 enlisted men and one officer from 914th Quartermaster Division at Hamilton Field. These supply and food service workers arrived on May 10, 1943, to prepare the base for the arrived, in turn of the first ATC personnel.

One week later, on May 17, ATC officially activated Fairfield-Suisun Army Air Base.

Lt. Col. Arthur 'Steve' W. Stephenson Jr. arrived and an advance part of the men from the 23rd Ferrying (later transport) Group on May 29.

On arrival, Stephenson assumed command as the first permanent base commander. The rest of the 23rd Group followed on May 31 and the base officially opened on June 1, 1943.

In 1947, under presidential order, a separate branch of the military was created, the Air Force. It is this 60-year anniversary that is being noted.

During the Korean War, Brig. Gen. Robert F. Travis commanded a squadron of bombers loaded with atomic bombs. The general's plane crashed outside the base's main gate on take-off. The general died of his injuries. To honor him, the base was renamed Travis Air Force Base in 1951.

It has been a remarkable 60 years-plus. The symbiotic relationship between the city of

Fairfield and the Air Force has, by-in-large, benefited both.

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