Air Base originally meant to house bombers

By Kristin Delaplane

Sunday, February 05, 1995

This is the first of two columns on the beginnings of one of the largest U.S. military bases. The information comes from the Travis Air Force Base library, The Reporter and Tailwind newspapers.

Travis Air Force Base is home to the largest airlift organization in the Air Force, but that's not how it started out.

Shortly after the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941, the Fourth Air Force, charged with improving air defenses along the Pacific Coast, recommended the Fairfield-Suisun site as a bomber base.

It was touted as inexpensive flat land with good flying weather, favorable drainage and nearby rail and water transportation.

On April 22, 1942, the Office of the Chief of Engineers in Washington, D.C., authorized spending $998,000 (one measly million dollars!) for the construction of two runways and some temporary buildings on 945.13 acres. The project received top wartime priority.

The land was purchased from local ranchers and farmers at an average cost of $50 per acre.

(An additional 1,312.05 acres were acquired by eminent domain proceedings in early '43. Just before war's end, on June 30, 1945, another 1,145.02 acres were added. Today the base totals 6,258 acres.)

The bulldozers moved in July 6 and by September the building of two runways had been completed in the middle of this isolated, windswept prairie. A few tarpaper barracks and maintenance hangars set the horizon.

For the next few months, Army and Navy fighter planes used the runways for takeoff and landing training.

Oh yes, the winds! The outline of an aircraft carrier's deck was painted on one runway for landing practice by Navy pilots: The strong winds duplicated those at sea.

Mary Rose Enos, a local farmer’s wife, said life was pretty quiet in her corner of the world until 1942, when the military arrived.

The Enos family was one of the first to sell land to the Army, 42 acres along the northeast corner. The land they sold was marked by a grove of eucalyptus trees, and that area would be referred to as “Camp Enos” for some time to come.

Mary recalled: “When they wanted to cross our land with pipelines and power lines, we let them. Being so close, they let us connect on, so our place had electricity long before the others around here. The airmen even helped drive our sheep through the middle of the base so that we could get them to market.”

In return, Mary often supplied the base families with eggs and fresh vegetables.

Mary was to remain a prominent figure at the base and died a legend - “Mother Travis.”

The War Department ended up canceling the original plans for a bomber base, when its significant potential as a major aerial port and supply transfer point for the Pacific War Zone was fully appreciated.

The Air Transport Command (ATC) was assigned the field on Oct. 13, 1942; the actual transfer date was Feb. 8, 1943, when it was officially assigned to the West Coast Sector of the Pacific Wing, at Hamilton Field in Marin County.

The command of the base fell to Hamilton’s Lt Col. Henry J. Weltmer, who drove a staff car to Fairfield when his presence was required. The only on-site residents were a number of civilian construction workers who occupied two barracks nestled in the eucalyptus grove.

On May 10, 1943, the first Army unit took up residence: supply and food service workers amounting to 10 enlisted men and one officer.

On May 29, Lt. Col. selectee Arthur W. Stephenson Jr. arrived with a small advance party and assumed command. The rest of the 23rd Ferrying Group, a handful of men, arrived May 31.

The base’s official opening was June 1, 1943, and it was designated the Fairfield-Suisun Army Air Base.

Only a few people, as years passed, recalled the field being called Ragsdale Field. However, unofficially, from the beginning until the end of ‘43 it was known by that

name.

A PG&E switching map dated May 2, 1942, shows the base location as “Ragsdale Field U.S., Army Air Transport Command,” A letter dated November ‘43 from Lelia McKevitt, Vacaville’s noted citizen and chairman of the Vacaville Red Cross Chapter, refers to Ragsdale Field.

It appears the name came about to venerate a Capt. or Lt. Ragsdale (he was never stationed at the Fairfield site) as the first Army pilot to die in the Pacific War Zone. He was credited with heroically transferring 30 women and children to safety from enemy-infested New Guinea. During this flight he was wounded when they were attacked by 12 Japanese Zero fighter planes, five of which he shot down. Shortly after, he died of his wounds.

Col. Stephenson announced that Ragsdale would become the official designation; however, he was ultimately overruled by the War Department. At that time, it is said, the department had a policy of not naming bases after personalities.

Ragsdale was finally recognized with the first street on the base being named in his honor.

The mission at the base was to prepare tactical bombers and air crews for overseas deployment and combat. Also, it was to serve air transport crews flying military cargo and replacement troops for the Pacific Theater.

The base was soon to become the West Coast’s major jumping-off point for the thousands of aircraft being cranked off the assembly lines.

Between July 1943 and January 1945, base personnel prepared more than 2,000 aircraft, of which approximately half were the B-24 Liberator bomber and variants.

Civilians occupied the base as well. Western Airlines arrived September 1943 to set up schools for C-46 pilots and cargo operations. Consairways moved in with about 800 employees to fly twice-weekly air transport missions to such battle zones as Tarawa, Biak, Truk, and New Guinea.

Consairways pilots, being civilian, could fly longer periods of time than Army Air Corps regulations allowed. This at a time when flying to Australia took three days 23 hours, 20 minutes.

Also, the civilian pilots could fly in weather that would ground Army Air Corps aircraft.

Consairways' manager, 33 year old Dick Mitchell's theory, according to former pilot Leo Domey, was that no matter what the weather forecast, you go out and take a good look. If you're concerned, return.

As Leo recalled, "We flew in a helluva lot of bad weather, but that airplane (LB-30) could take it. It was built like a bridge."

The first Women's Army Corps (WAC) personnel arrived Aug. 22, 1943, and numbered 200 within a year.

The WACS were primarily assigned clerical duties.

Pvt. Charles Larkin was a guard at "Ragsdale Airfield" when he met his wife, Ellen, a WAC.

When Charles arrived in 1942, his recollection was, the only officers were a quartermaster, three sergeants and a major.

You may recall that in May 1994, Charles A. Larkin's wallet was found in a wall of Vacaville's Veterans Memorial Building during some reconstruction work. Among other Items in the wallet, which he says was lost or stolen back in '42 or '43, were some 8-cent airmail stamps and a $4.22 receipt from the San Francisco Floral Co. for some carnations he sent his mom.

(Next week we will follow the increased wartime activities at the base and the impact the growing base had on the surrounding towns.)

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