

Solano's base grows up quickly during war

By Kristin Delaplane

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This is the second of two parts on the beginnings of Travis Air Force Base, one of America's largest military bases. Information for this article came from Travis Air Force Base library, The Reporter and Tailwind newspaper.

(To recap last week's article: Fairfield-Suisun was recommended as a defense bomber base site after the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941. This was a training base for Army and Navy fighter planes. Plans for a bomber base were canceled and the site was assigned to Air Transport Command as an aerial port and supply transfer point.

(The base's prime wartime mission was preparing tactical bombers and aircrews for overseas deployment and combat and to fly military cargo and replacement troops to the Pacific war zones. Western Airlines set up pilot and cargo operation schools. Consairways moved in to fly twice-weekly air transport missions to the battle zones.)

By 1944 the base was humming. A chapel was opened Feb. 11, 1944. As a part of the dedication ceremonies, decorations for bravery were handed out. Screen personality Irene Maming (who?) sang "Bless This House" and "Ave Maria," and the Junior Choir from the Vacaville Community Church proudly added their voices.

On Feb. 10, 1944, members of the Pacific Wing's first black unit began arriving, totaling 328 troops by September. The base had a medical detachment of 22 medical officers, 10 nurses and 101 enlisted personnel. They operated a 125-bed hospital.

There was a base publication being distributed; in June 1944, quotes for a story in The Reporter were picked up from the base newsmagazine, "Front & Center." By the fall of '44 the base had grown to over 2,000 enlisted men and 173 officers.

From the time of the base's official opening, on- and off-base housing was scarce and was to be one of the biggest problems. With the arrival of at least 800 Consairway employees, many with their families, the population in Fairfield, a small country town with a reported citizenry of 1,500, doubled overnight. There were no apartment buildings and only one hotel along the highway.

Solving this problem was difficult as rationing was in full swing, causing a virtual moratorium on any building unless federally approved. In response to the severe housing crunch in this area, in 1943, federal housing erected 150 family units and 100

dormitory spaces in Fairfield and 140 apartments in Suisun.

Meanwhile, the Consairway group was housed in the wartime housing project, Waterman Park. Waterman Park was, in fact, a mini-village. Part of the project included a cafeteria, a soda fountain and a dining hall. Fairfield's mayor, Bud Huck, was a familiar figure at Waterman Park as he delivered ice for the iceboxes.

Another development of 170 units sprang up in Fairfield by fall of '44, as did a 35-unit housing project, Vaca Valley Acres, encompassing 10 acres of land that had been part of the Frank Buck Estate. The name was chosen through a contest, the prize being \$18.75 in war stamps.

Still, demand outstripped supply. Many commuted from as far as San Francisco, which was a two- to three-hour drive. Others drove from Sacramento. Some people managed to find rooms to rent in the homes of local farmers and merchants. A few were reduced to living in their cars.

The opening of a C-54 Skymaster training school in January 1945 didn't help the overcrowded housing predicament. Another complication that Chet Snow, the air base historian in the '80s noted, was: "There was no place for a sweetheart to stay while visiting her boyfriend in the service."

In the beginning, there was the odd room for rent. The Reporter carried an ad for Mrs. Ida Meidrum, who had a room at 119 Vine Ave. Later on, Mrs. Trimble on North Parker had a room with an outside entrance. But these were evidently quickly picked up, and one or two rooms did not begin to solve the increasing problem.

The situation reached the critical stage, and so in February 1945 Col. Stephenson issued an emergency request with an immediate need for 200 rooms: "Residents of the area are urged to rent every room they can spare for military personnel. Residents in Fairfield, Suisun, Vacaville Dixon and other nearby communities must answer this appeal so that our mission may be fully accomplished. I am confident that patriotic households will realize the urgency and make available every room that can possibly be spared."

Records on the exact timing differ, but it was either in '42 or '43 that a group of civic leaders and fraternal organizations in Fairfield helped organize a local branch of the USO: The Firemen's Hall on Texas Street was donated for weekly dances and was equipped with pool tables, card tables, a radio, magazines and newspapers. The Lion's Club received much praise as always being helpful in assisting newly arrived servicemen. Vacaville residents helped establish a hospitality house for incoming servicemen and their families; this at a time when the base was still called Ragsdale

Field.

Mac's Bar in Fairfield was a favorite hangout, the days when the drink of the day was Acmebeer. The movie theater, at 15 cents, was frequented, the servicemen seeing the latest hit films such as "My Gal Sal" with Rita Hayworth and "The Flying Tigers" featuring John Wayne. The circus came to town in those days; two shows a day with the adult fare 50 cents and the children's fare at 25 cents. If a weekend in San Francisco were possible, the Palace Hotel on Market Street offered the serviceman a 25 percent discount off its regular double rate of \$5.

In September '44, the Army Air Corps authorized a \$3.5 million expansion program. Runways were widened. Parking aprons were built. Streets paved. Hangars and warehouses were constructed. The construction also included facilities for transient crews, operations buildings and dining halls.

The effect turned the base into "one of the outstanding ATC bases on the entire West Coast," and it was proudly displayed for an official press tour. (The pages of history state that the tarpaper barracks were still being occupied. More comfortable quarters were not to be provided until after the war when building materials were no longer rationed.)

In November '44, the War Department signified the spruced-up base as a port of Aerial Embarkation for the Pacific Theater. The hospital was officially declared a center for wounded air evacuees from the war zone. Thus, a new chapter in the base's history was marked.

Base operations moved into a new building of composition board construction. Within weeks, the base became the ATC's largest air freight terminal on the West Coast and a quote from the base history notes the mood of the day: "Slowly but definitely we are learning to become professionals at war."

With Col. Stephenson's departure, in March 1945, the Fairfield-Suisun Army Base was recognized as the West Coast's largest aerial port. Base personnel totaled 3,272 enlisted troops, 661 officers, 204 civil servants and 829 Consairway civilians. The War Department announced that the Fairfield-Suisun Army Air Base would remain a permanent installation even after victory and authorized a \$19.6 million expansion and construction program. With the acquisition of more acreage, the land total for the base came to 3,402 acres.

Aug. 3, 1945, the air base held an open house, which drew many residents from the surrounding area to see firsthand the functions of the gigantic air base in their midst. The tour was arranged by Col. Curtis A. Keen, the commanding officer. WAC guides

conducted the guests through the exhibit area explaining the functions of the B-29 Superfortress and the C-54 Skymaster hospital plane and were given a demonstration on evacuation of the sick and wounded by air. Also on display were booby traps, bazookas, airborne artillery, airborne tank and anti-aircraft equipment.

Aug. 14, 1945 the Japanese surrendered - V-J Day. The base, however, found its responsibilities expanded with the peace. For one, airlifting of troops and supplies to occupied Japan and the processing of war-weary returning GIs was to become a primary mission.

The impact of the base on Fairfield and the surrounding towns was staggering. Fairfield was no longer a small country town. People from all over, all races and nationalities now called this and the surrounding towns home. Many professional people, who came as part of the war effort, remained. This remote farming area had been totally turned around from its prewar days into a hub of activity and growth.

On Sept. 10, 1947, President Harry S. Truman created the U.S. Air Force as a separate military service, and the Fairfield-Suisun Army Air Base became Fairfield-Suisun Air Force Base.

On Aug. 5, 1950, shortly after the outbreak of the, Korean War when nighttime training missions were increased at the base, the base's commanding general, Brig. Gen. Robert Falligant Travis, was killed when the B-29 he was co-piloting for such a mission crashed on takeoff. The explosion of the aircraft's full bomb bay lighted up the nighttime sky and "sounded as if the base were under atomic attack."

A total of 16 Air Force personnel perished. It was the worst tragedy in the base's history. On Oct. 20 that year, by special order, the Fairfield-Suisun Air Force Base was re-designated Travis Air Force Base in memory of the general.

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