A History of the Harlingen Army Airfield
and
Harlingen Air Force Base

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Harlingen Historical and Preservation Society
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Summary

With the depressed U. S. economy still lingering into the late 1930s, the city fathers of Harlingen, Texas sought to attract federal funds to the area in 1938. By 1940, and with war on the horizon in 1941, defense concerns escalated. On May 6, 1941 the War Department then accepted Harlingen’s invitation to establish a military airfield on the 960 acres being offered. The following month on 2 June 1941 the lease was approved, and authorization was made for construction of a flexible gunnery school at the field. The initial allocation for the project was $3,770,295. Construction began in July. The facility would reach nearly 1,600 acres in size by 1944. On 1 August 1941 Col. John R. Morgan assumed command, and this became the official date for the existence of the Harlingen Army Air Field.

The facility eventually accommodated 6,500 trainees, and at peak operation could carry a maximum load of 9,000. As the HAGS Howl base newspaper put it on 7/31/43, this is "where gunner Sergeants, navigators, bombardiers, radiomen, and co-pilots learn the manly art of self-defense with cal. .50 machine guns."

The Harlingen Army Gunnery School received its first assigned cadre in August 1941. Its primary mission, with an initial student load of 600, was that of training aerial gunnery students in a five-week (extended to six weeks in 1943 when it was officially designated a B24 school) training program. 120 students were to graduate weekly, but in less than a year the student load had increased to 1,930. Early in October 1941 the War Department named the five School Squadrons and the Air Base Group to be sent to HAAF. When the first students arrived Major William L. Kennedy, who was in charge of Aerial Gunnery Training said "We are going to use everything from BB guns to 37 millimeter cannons in training our gunners." On August 10, 1942 the first pair of Gunner Wings was awarded to T/Sgts. Robert T. Golay and Eldred Scott. Golay was a hero of the Fourth of July raid on Nazi-held Holland and Scott was gunner-engineer on Doolittle's Tokyo raid. Medal of Honor recipient to be Sgt. Maynard H. Smith was graduated from HAAF on November 9, 1942.

The base newspaper, the HAGS Howl, in 1943 was under Special Services headed by Capt. Richard J. Weiss. Its editor was Cpl. T. D. Hazelwood and its assistant editor was Cpl. S. D. Babbitt, Jr., an accomplished cartoonist who had earlier compiled a 43 page cartoon booklet on the base's activities and published it as Hup! Hoop! Heep! Haw!

In early August 1943 Sgt. Edward H. Behrendth returned from Camp Robinson, Nebraska with four military police dogs to be used to patrol the field's perimeter. By 1 July 1944 the airfield had trained 33, 058 gunners for combat. The peak number operating the field occurred 9/45 when it housed 623 officers, 4,230 enlisted men, and 785 student officers. Over 48,000 soldiers were trained until the school closed in 1945. It was officially deactivated 16 October 1945. It was one of three such types in the country, others being at Las Vegas, Nevada having sub-facilities at Yuma and Kingman, Arizona,
and Laredo, Texas. Tyndall Field near Panama City, Florida and the instructors' school was at Buckingham Field near Fort Meyers, Florida were associated gunnery school facilities. During its existence, expansion of its facilities, such as barracks and technical installations, regularly continued. Graduates served on B17s, B24s, B25s, and B29s among other aircraft.

Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP) played an important role at the field. They flew B26 aircraft which towed a target on which B24 gunners would practice over the Gulf. They also ferried aircraft to and from the field as well as some personnel.

Upon the closure of the field numerous surplus buildings were sold and then transported to other parts of the Valley to be put to good use by civilians.

The initiation of the Korean War in June 1950 brought new priorities to the military. By April 1, 1952 the field was re-activated to serve the U.S. Air Force. The primary mission of the now Harlingen Air Force Base was to train navigators. Course time was initially 28 weeks, later extended to 32 weeks, and finally in 1960 to 38 weeks for Aviation Cadets.

On 3/30/61 it was announced that the Base with its 245 buildings would be closed and phased out by the end of 1962. By the time of the last graduating class in June 1962, 13,355 students had been graduated by the Navigation School.

The impact of the military installations on Harlingen’s economy is told by the statistics. From a city with a population of 13,235 in 1941 it had grown to 41,000 by 1960. At this point the Base had 2,300 military personnel and 801 civilian employees. The payroll was approximately $25 million a year, and a total expenditure of $15 million more being made in the lower Rio Grande Valley.

The loss of the Base severely impacted Harlingen. By 1972 its population had dipped to 33,603. The sale of 1,400 houses in 1963 depressed the real estate market for years to follow. It took a period of years before the former Base’s facilities were fully utilized by an industrial air park, Valley International Airport, Texas State Technical Institute, the Marine Military Academy, and other uses.

In a little over 14 combined years that the military facilities were in operation, they were a source of pride and joy to the city of Harlingen. The interaction between the military and the citizens of the area was one of mutual admiration and regard. All deserve to be remembered.

The History

During World War II and the Korean Conflict, the sixty five military air bases in Texas played a significant role. The air base in Harlingen, Texas was no exception. As the poor economy wrought by the early 1930s depression persisted to the end of the decade, Harlingen suffered along with the rest of the nation. When wars in Europe and the Far East commenced at this time, the city fathers expedited their efforts, which had begun in 1938, to improve the area’s economic climate. U. S. defense concerns by 1940 made the location of a military training facility at Harlingen a real option. The relatively flat terrain was not suitable for armor and cavalry units but would be ideal for air training.

The story of what transpired at the field’s formation and subsequently is best told by Harlingen’s unofficial historian emeritus, Verna Jackson McKenna, as she relates it in the
Mrs. McKenna was intimately involved with the Harlingen Army Airfield, since she served as librarian at the field from 1943 to 1946. See a short biography of her in Appendix 3. Her exposition, which should be read at this point, forms a detailed chronicle of the military operations at the airfield, and later Base, in the years 1940 through early 1960. The following information is both complementary to and supplementary to Mrs. McKenna’s history.

With the outbreak of World War II in Europe in September 1940, the U.S. Government saw the need to expedite military readiness. It would create a military airfield in Harlingen. The city voted a $105,000 bond issue to acquire 960 acres to be leased to the War Department for twenty-four years and upon which the field would be constructed. Fifteen farmhouses and buildings on the site were removed but one building was left in place to become the field office. General Gerald C. Brant, the commander of Central Flying Command who first visited Harlingen in early 1941, also ordered that two existing palm groves and orange trees be retained. On 6/30/41 a contract is let for Morgan and Zachary, El Paso and Laredo, builders to start the military airfield construction.

By mid-September 1941 the airfield and base at Harlingen was 30% complete. By mid-October the work was half completed, but the field itself was almost complete. In November the steel water tower which would loom over the base for many years was swung into place. By December the steel work on two hangars and control towers were well under way. Another early and important structure to come up was Post Chapel No. 1. This was dedicated 1/26/42 by three chaplains who had arrived three days earlier.

The Harlingen Army Gunny School received its first assigned cadre in August 1941. Its primary mission, with an initial student load of 600, was that of training aerial gunny students in a five week (extended to six weeks in 1943) training program. Over 48,000 soldiers were trained until the school, one of three such types in the country, closed in 1945. During its existence, expansion of its facilities, such as barracks and technical installations, regularly continued. Graduates served on B17s, B24s, B25s, and B29s among other aircraft.

The Army Air Corps became the Army Air Forces on 20 June 1941 and obtained quasi autonomy in March 1942. Its bases were designated as army airfields, but later usage termed them air fields, two words rather than one.

Early in the base’s creation individuals assigned to it often referred to the facility as the B26 Flexible Gunny School. In 1993 documents of the Department of Army Southwest Division Corps of Engineers relating to the closure and remediation of the Base, the physical plant and nature of some of the training activities are spelled out.

The War Department acquired 992.52 leased acres from the City of Harlingen in 1941 and an acquisition of 583.80 acres fee during 1943 and 1944. To quote from the document:

The Harlingen Army Airfield was used for gunny training in World War II. Students learned to fire the .30-caliber machine gun. This weapon was hand-held and fired by the student from the rear cockpit of an AT-6 aircraft (See picture of this aircraft in Appendix 4). The base later received B-34 aircraft. This twin engine plane, known as the Ventura, was generally utilized for bombardment training and patrol duty. With its arrival students will be taught to fire the twin .30 caliber machine gun from the turret mount on the plane.
Gunnery practice was carried out by having the student fire at a sleeve target which was towed by an AT-6. Students were also taught strafing techniques. A series of shop silhouettes were installed offshore near South Padre Island, and students fired at these water targets from B-34 and AT-6 aircraft.

Former cotton and grain sorghum fields on the Harlingen clay soil series with its relatively flat terrain were gradually transformed into a major airstrip facility. By 1943 the base had five runways, the longest of which was 6,000 feet or over one mile in length. (See some overall base photographs in Appendix 5). As part of the logistical support for the facility there were twelve underground storage tanks (UST). Six had 25,000 gallon capacities, five 2,000 gallons and one 5,000 gallons. In addition there was one 6,500 steel UST for gasoline as well as a 2,000 gallon above-ground one.

One of the field’s earliest contractors was Ready Mix Concrete, which was to grow greatly from its modest July 1941 sales. At that time, founder Hill Cocke was furnishing the base using two small mixer trucks with a total capacity of less than 100 cubic yards a day.

In the WWII period the planes utilized for training and transportation at the Harlingen Army Airfield were the Vultee BT-13 Valiant, Bell P-39 Airacobra, Bell P-63 Kingcobra, Beech C-45H Expeditor, Lockheed A-29 Hudson, Lockheed B-34 Ventura, Martin B26 Marauder, North American B25 Mitchell, Douglas C-47 Skytrain, North American AT-6 Texan Trainer, and Consolidated B24 Liberator. Photos and specifications for these planes are presented in Appendix 6.

Crews on B17 Flying Fortress and B24 Liberator aircraft consisted of ten crewmen. These were pilot, co-pilot, navigator, bombardier, and radio man. From the gunnery schools came tail, nose, ball, waist, and top gunners, some operating in turrets. Initially gunners practiced in-flight marksmanship from the A-6 Texans on mesh targets pulled by the twin-engined medium bomber B26s. A few Hudson medium bombers were also utilized. By 1943 the faster Airacobra and Grummann Helldivers were being used in pursuit training versus the B24s because they were faster and more closely resembled the enemy pursuit fighters than did the A-6s. Seven WASP pilots who flew the Marauders had arrived in Harlingen late in 1943. Others were to follow.

By mid-1944 the training had evolved to reflect better technology. Introduced were position firing, the use of tactical aircraft and interphone equipment, and the teaching of burst-control firing. The former is based on "the path of pursuit" to which pursuit fighters are bound when attacking from certain angles. Special firing cameras harmonized with pursuit craft swooping in to attack. The B24 Liberators now being employed offered the gunners the opportunities to fire from every gun position as well as exposing the gun crew to high altitudes thereby simulating actual combat missions. The plane had a Sperry ball turret and Martin upper turrets. In the fifth of the extended seven week course, students practiced burst-control range. The goal for each student was now to put a 12-round burst into a 10 inch circle at 1000 inches. This was conducted at the Laguna Madre sub-base. In addition the fledgling gunners became well acquainted with the mechanisms of the .50-caliber machine gun. Finally the program called for two strafing missions, a gun mission at high altitude, another at low altitude, and a preventative maintenance mission.

In case of an emergency ocean landing or crash in the sea of participating aircraft, the HAAF had eight crash boats standing by and operating out of Port Isabel.
An additional part of the gunner course was Synthetic Training in the Waller Training Class. In a specially built facility a 20' by 40' concave screen had projected upon it movies of attacking fighter aircraft. Set back in the room were four simulated guns from which the students could practice shooting fire bursts at the projected images. The guns of .50-caliber even had built–in vibrations to emulate the actual firing of real guns. Early in 1944 the HAAF also set up a co-pilots' school to train co-pilots for combat flying in the B24s. Capt. George E. Elliott was in charge of flying supervision and Lt. Laurence R. Elliott the ground school.
The HAAF had a G.I. newspaper which publicized base activities. It was the HAGS Howl which began publication in April 1943. The Valley Morning Star published its 5,000 copies distributed every Thursday. The Special Services Department initially headed by Capt. Forrest C. Bilings was responsible for the paper as well as three theaters (two at the main base and one at the sub-base), two libraries which stocked 6,000 books, and the Service Club.
In August 1943 the Army Medical Corps at the field had added to its facility "a combination Hotel, Theater, Club Room, Recreation Hall, Rumpus Room and what have you." Its purpose was to speed up the revitalization period of hospitalized soldiers and have them learn while in the hospital.
In February 1942 the base had opened a post office for incoming mail distribution. It was under O.R. Couch. In June of 1943 the Post Office was upgraded and took over with its own cancellation machine. Arthur E. Hentz became superintendent of the Army Post Office. Previously he had worked 16 years at the Harlingen Post Office.
It was by 3/1/44 that the Laguna Madre sub-base has a cantonment area to house and feed several thousand men. By July 1944 the Laguna Madre sub-base has developed into a full-sized post with complete facilities for training, flying, and recreation. Once there students fired from 14 ranges as well as being trained on two moving-base skeet fields. Caliber .30 machine guns were used as well as the .50s. At this time Major Wallace A. Stohl was commander of the Laguna Madre sub-base.
One first-hand account of the training comes from gunnery school graduate Forrest S. Clark. It was related in a Justin Family website with family biographies. Clark who went on to attain a rate of T/Sgt, 67th Squadron 44th Bomb Group, 8th Air Force, participated as tail gunner in a B24 combat crew in England in 1944 and 1945. He tells us:

I went to gunnery school at Harlingen, Texas in early 1943, and we used AT-6 for gunnery practice over the Gulf of Mexico. A few times I got into trouble firing, but most of the time we were so taken with the skeet shooting which was a standard part of practice. We used old rattler infested trap holes to fire the targets, and many times we would flush out rattlers before we got into the holes. We took turns releasing the target pigeons.
I also remember my first practice flight. The pilot took me on a stunt maneuver, and I nearly got dumped out of the rear when he went into a power dive. I went to back Harlingen after returning from Europe in 1945 and was a gunnery and flight director assistant.

Harlingen in 1943 was also the station for Francis “Frank” E. Tucher, who rose to T/Sgt. He was a Martin upper turret gunner. After 18 weeks of Airplane Mechanics School at Keesler Field, Biloxi, Mississippi where he learned to maintain B24s, he relates:

“From there to Harlingen, Texas for Aerial Gunnery School – we practiced shooting moving targets from the cockpit of an AT-6, first plane I was ever in, in my life. That’s when I got my silver wings as a gunner and my Buck Sgt. Stripes.”

This Indiana native went on to participate in 46 B24 missions in the South Pacific and was awarded seven battle stars.
Edward Markowsky, now of La Feria, Texas, gave me a first hand account (12/02) of his experience at the field. He was in the army by 12/30/41. After a shortened period of basic training he was assigned in March of 1942 to the field in Harlingen, his hometown. He was greatly disappointed at this turn of events. His duties over an eleven month period here included flying in the rear seat of an AT-6 Texan. It had a swivel seat. His job was to release the cable-pulled target at which the students of the Harlingen Flexible Gunnery School practiced their marksmanship. The targets were of two types. One was simply a sleeve and the second was a pipe from which hung a fine wire mesh. This latter was termed a barn door or screen door. Although the cable extended 750 feet behind the AT-6 and the missiles were only plastic ones, Markowsky often felt that the shells were coming much too close to his craft for comfort.

Toward the end of the war the P-63E Kingcobra was developed from the P-39. It was not used by U. S. forces in combat, but its RP-63A and RP-63C versions were used in gunnery training. One hundred were produced for this specific use. To quote from the US Air Force Museum information available on the internet: “These manned target aircraft were fired upon by aerial gunnery students using .30 caliber lead and plastic frangible bullets which disintegrated harmlessly against the target’s extreme skin of Duralumin armor plating. Special instruments sent impulses to red lights in the nose of the “pinball” aircraft causing them to blink when bullets struck the plane.”

Gerald Menegay, a retiree in Harlingen, was a pilot at the field in 1943 and until his transfer in October 1945. He flew P-39s and P-63s. He recalls the latter plane seldom being hit by gunnery trainees.

The first WACS arrived 5/3/43 and three weeks later had reached fifty-one in number. By the end of the year their number had risen to ninety. They performed 21 jobs on the base. Crews on B17 Flying Fortress and B24 Liberator aircraft consisted of ten crewmen. These were pilot, co-pilot, navigator, bombardier, and radio man. From the gunnery schools came tail, nose, ball, waist, and top gunners, some operating in turrets.

The casualty rates sustained by these airmen in the years 1943 until 1945 provide horrendous statistics. One out of three B17s built was lost, 4,750 aircraft all told. In the European Theater of war 340,000 persons were in the 8th Air Force of whom 135,000 were combat crewmen. Of this 135,000, 26,000 were killed and 28,000 became prisoners of war, a loss ratio of 40%. If we extrapolate these figures to the more than 48,000 gunnery school graduates who walked, played and laughed on these very grounds, upwards of 9,200 may have been killed in action and 10,000 could have become POWs.

Two Harlingen Gunnery School graduates especially distinguished themselves and were awarded our nation's highest military honor, the (Congressional) Medal of Honor. The first was Maynard Harrison "Snuffy" Smith. As a 5'6", 130 lb. ball gunner in the belly of a B17, Smith became the first enlisted airman ever to receive the Congressional Medal of Honor, from Secretary of War Stinson no less. He was a native of Caro, Michigan. His action occurred over Nazi-occupied Southern France at St. Naizance where a Nazi sub base was being bombed before his B-17 was engaged by a flight of German Focke-wulf190s.

Thanks to war correspondent Andy Rooney, Smith received considerable publicity for his heroics. His citation reads as follows:

For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity in action above and beyond the call of duty. The aircraft of which Sgt. Smith was a gunner was subjected to intense enemy antiaircraft fire and determined fighter
airplane attacks while returning from a mission over enemy-occupied continental Europe on 1 May 1943. The airplane was hit several times by antiaircraft fire and cannon shells of the fighter airplanes. Two of the crew were seriously wounded, the aircraft's oxygen system shot out, and several vital control cables severed when intense fires were ignited simultaneously in the radio compartment and waist sections. The situation became so acute that three of the crew bailed out into the comparative safety of the sea. Sgt. Smith, then on his first combat mission, elected to fight the fire by himself, administered first aid to the wounded tail gunner, manned waist guns, and fought the intense flames alternately. The escaping oxygen fanned the fire to such intense heat that the ammunition in the radio compartment began to explode, the radio, gun mount, and camera were melted, and the compartment completely gutted. Sgt. Smith threw the exploding ammunition overboard, fought the fire until all the firefighting aids were exhausted, manned the workable guns until the enemy fighters were driven away, further administered first aid to a wounded comrade, and then by wrapping himself in protecting cloth, completely extinguished the fire by hand. This soldier's gallantry in action, undaunted bravery, and loyalty to his aircraft and fellow crewmembers, without regard for his own personal safety, is an inspiration to the U.S. Armed Forces.

From this action in southern France, the plane managed to limp back to the nearest landing strip in England whereupon it split in two after setting down. Smith had fought the flames with extinguishers, drinking water, and finally urine in collection containers. Smith's heroic efforts had saved the crew as well as himself. He flew four more missions before experiencing combat fatigue, a condition which resulted in his being demoted to the rank of private.

Another distinguished gunnery school graduate was Technical Sergeant Forrest L. Vosler. The Harlingen Army Gunnery School was his first unit. He too received a Congressional Medal of Honor citation for action occurring in the European Theater. The citation is so dramatic and moving I quote it in its entirety:

For conspicuous gallantry in action against the enemy above and beyond the call of duty while serving in a mission over Bremen, Germany, on 20 December 1943. After bombing the target, the aircraft in which Sergeant Vosler was serving was severely damaged by antiaircraft fire, forced out of formation, and immediately subjected to repeated vicious attacks by enemy fighters. Early in the engagement a 20-mm cannon shell exploded in the radio compartment, painfully wounding Sergeant Vosler in the legs and thighs. At about the same time a direct hit on the tail of the ship seriously wounded the tail gunner and rendered the tail guns inoperative. Realizing the great need for firepower in protecting the vulnerable tail of the ship, Sergeant Vosler, with grim determination, kept up a steady stream of deadly fire. Shortly thereafter another 20-mm enemy shell exploded, wounding Sergeant Vosler in the chest and about his face. Pieces of metal lodged in both eyes, impairing his vision to such an extent that he could only distinguish blurred shape. Displaying remarkable tenacity and courage, he kept firing his guns and declined to take first-aid treatment. The radio equipment had been rendered inoperative during the battle, and when the pilot announced that he would have to ditch, although unable to see, Sergeant Vosler finally got the set operating and sent out distress signals despite several lapses into unconsciousness. When the ship ditched, Sergeant Vosler managed to get out on the wing by himself and hold the wounded tail gunner from slipping off until other crew members could help them into a dinghy. Sergeant Vosler’s actions on this occasion were an inspiration to all serving with him. The extraordinary courage, coolness, and skill he displayed in the face of great odds, when handicapped by injuries that would have incapacitated the average crew member, were outstanding.

The Air Force in May 1984 established a Professional Military Education Center for non-commissioned officers. The facility at the Peterson Air Force Base, Colorado Springs, Colorado is named the Forrest L. Vosler NCO Academy. The Academy has a heraldic shield. On its right upper half is a purple background symbolic of Vosler’s first unit, the Harlingen Army Gunnery School. Vosler and Smith were among the "Bravest of the Brave."

The former HAAF training director, Col. W.L. Kennedy who had come to Harlingen in October 1941, was to become a German prisoner of war before mid-1944. His motto while at the Harlingen field was "Get it done yesterday."
We know there must be thousands of other dramatic episodes experienced by the gunnery school graduates; their many stories will be lost with age and the passage of time.

The field was serviced by the 623rd Army Air Force Band. Its first four members arrived in February 1942 and by May its numbers had risen to twenty. By the end of July 1944 it was comprised of 28 musicians. They also organized into three dance orchestras. Edward A. Schirmer was one of the members of the band. He later rose to Chief Master Sgt. and was such an accomplished musician that the band hall at Scott Air Force Base, Illinois was named in his honor.

While men were in combat, support roles to release able bodied men for active participation were being conducted by patriotic women. They played a part by ferrying planes where and when needed. One famous WWII photograph was shot in Harlingen in 1943. It shows Elizabeth L. Gardner of Rockford, Illinois. She was a pilot of the WASP (Women’s Airforce Service Pilot organization). The photo of this beautiful spirited woman was shown around the world. Its caption, datelined Harlingen Army Airfield, reads “takes a look around before sending her plane streaking down the runway at the air base.” (See Appendix 7.) WASP pilots were qualified to fly B26s and often did so in training exercises over the Gulf of Mexico.

The work of the women was serious business as attested to by the sad incident that befell one of the WASP pilots servicing Harlingen. On June 29, 1944 Bonnie Jean Alloway Welz was en route to Laredo, Texas from Harlingen. She was piloting a fixed-wheel BT-13 with Major Robert B. Stringfellow as a passenger. When a captain at HAAF, Stringfellow had been responsible for the skeet shooting training of gunners. As the craft neared Randado, Texas, a small community about 30 miles east of Laredo but no longer mapped, the craft experienced problems of an unknown nature. She attempted to land in whatever clearing she could find in the mesquite-covered prairie. As the plane taxied one of its wheels may have struck a gopher hole causing the craft to flip and catch fire. The canopy was open, and the seriously injured passenger had been thrown clear about 50 yards from where the plane came to rest. Hearing the craft low in his neighborhood, a 19 year old man named Skaggs drove up in his truck and commenced to aid the officer as the major kept shouting about the pilot whom it was impossible to rescue from the flaming wreckage. Bonnie Jean perished. She left a small daughter without a mother.

In the Valley, additional fatalities of WASP pilots occurred, one each, at Brownsville and at Mission. In all, 38 WASP pilots died in service of their country.

Another woman serving with distinction at the gunnery school was Captain Helen Morris Deblinger. This Pawtucket, Rhode Island native was graduated as a certified registered nurse in 1933 then went on to obtain in 1936 a graduate degree in the teaching of nursing from the Catholic University of America, Washington, D. C. She joined the service in 1936. When the war commenced she applied to serve overseas, but her expertise was needed at home as instructor and chief of nurses. She oversaw four nurse officers at the airfield. After serving in Harlingen she went on to Maxwell Field, Montgomery, Alabama. In her honor, her son Jay L. Deblinger donated $100,000 to establish The Helen Morris Deblinger Scholarship Fund for student nurses attending CUA.

It was in 1943 that the Harlingen Chamber of Commerce published a small brochure titled “Brief Facts about Harlingen”. On its cover was the motto “Birth Place of Uncle
Sam’s Aerial Gunners.” Under the section titled Gunnery School Information we learn in a question and answer format:

What is the Harlingen Army Gunnery School? Answer: It is one of the Nation’s three main Aerial Gunnery Schools for training men who protect bombers with fire-power in the air.

What is the location of H A G S, as it is called? Answer: It is 3 1/2 miles northeast of the city on the Rio Hondo Road. Is there an auxiliary portion of the School? Answer: Yes. 22 miles east of the school itself, its ground range begins. It covers more than 30,000 acres. Students spend one week of their five week training period there, learning to fire various types of machine guns and turrets. It is bordered on the east by the Laguna Madre, across from which is Padre Island.

Why was Harlingen selected as the site for the school? Answer: Because of its year-round weather conditions that permit more than 300 days of flying each year. In fact, one motion picture company selected it as a “location” for January-February film work after visiting nearly every other air field in the south part of the country. Another film company made a complete feature picture, “Aerial Gunner” during October-November, and lost less than two days work because of cloudy weather.

Has the Air Base contributed to the National Fame of Harlingen? Answer: Very definitely. Scarcely no large newspaper in the country has not run several pictures and stories of its efforts, with full credit to its location. More than 35,000 landings and take-offs were accomplished in 1942 without a single fatality to a pilot or gunnery student.

What is the health record of the Gunnery School? Answer: The Harlingen Gunnery School holds the record of lowest percentage of diseases.

In early April 1961 members of the original cadre reunited in Harlingen. The Valley Morning Star issue of 4/6 interviewed some of the reunion participants. The information provided is of interest.

The official opening of the Harlingen Army Airfield was Christmas Eve 1941. Lt. Col. John L. Kottal, who had entered the army in July, was in 1942 stationed at the field as a senior gunnery instructor for the five week aerial gunnery course. He was one of a group of five enlisted men and five officers under Major W. L. Kennedy, now Major General.

He remembered helping to assemble the machine guns when the group worked seven days a week for two months. He also recalled gunnery practice along the Laguna Madre when the guns were mounted on sleds pulled by trucks. Also vivid in his mind was mounting guard at the base. Armed security guards walked posts around the outer perimeter of the field. His was near what in the 1950s became the Base hospital area but was then a grapefruit orchard. He remembered picking fruit and passing it on to another post sentry until around the whole field perimeter all guards had received all they could eat. Then came word to “Stop the flow.” At that point he knew it wouldn’t be long before his relief showed up. “This was one of the ways we passed the time and supplying each of the guards with grapefruit usually took about eight hours.”

Other memories recounted included the fact that Morgan Blvd. had yet to be constructed, and there was no direct route to town. A strict curfew was in place. Men had to be in their quarters by 11 p.m. On Saturday this was extended, but all had to off Harlingen streets by 1 a.m.

Those gathered stated that, initially, gunnery programs at Laredo, Las Vegas, and Harlingen differed until a standardized program was adopted.

During the last full year of its operations the HAAF had the following highlights in its activities:
1/7/45  HAAF places second in the National Gunners Meet held at the field but on 3/16
wins another National Meet held at Buckingham Field;
4/12/45  Mourns the death of Commander in Chief, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt;
4/13/45  Col. Louis R. Hughes named deputy commanding officer of the base;
5/11/45  Women's Army Corps (WAC) detachment celebrates 3rd anniversary of the
   corps;
5/21/45  The first B-29 gunnery training class starts at HAAF;
6/23/45  This class graduates 55 gunners;
6/25  The first full size class of 500 men start their B-29 gunnery training;
7/8/45  The second class of 175 gunner trainees is graduated;
8/1/45  HAAF celebrates its third birthday.  2,500 Valley residents visit the base in an
   open house;
9/2/45  With Japan's signing of an unconditional surrender document on the USS
   Missouri in Tokyo Bay, World War II was brought to a conclusion;
9/17/45  Col. Roy T. Wright, commanding officer of the base, receives overseas orders;
9/24/45  Col. Hughes succeeds him;
10/5/45  Col. John R. Morgan commanding officer of the 79th Flying Training Wing with
   headquarters at HAAF is ordered to assume command of Keesler Field, Mississippi;
10/12/45  HAAF becomes a temporary separation center for the men stationed here;
10/19/45  Col. Hughes announces that the gunnery training mission of training incoming
   basic soldiers is ended;
10/27/45  A reenlistment drive among personnel at the field is begun.

An Associated Press (AP) story of 1/5/46 stated that the HAAF would be declared
surplus. As such it would be the fourth and last of such bases in this area to be
deactivated. Moore Field, the Brownsville Army Air Base, and the Laguna Madre Sub-
Base of the HAAF had already been listed for deactivation. At his time HAAF has a total
of 5,000 men split almost evenly between trainees and permanent personnel.
On 2/5/46  HAAF is officially declared surplus property.
A human interest story probably worthy of Hollywood treatment took place at the HAAF
Laguna Madre Sub-Base. Written up by Valley Morning Star reporter Minnie Gilbert in
January 1946 the essence of her story is this: Mrs. Edmund T. (Dorothy) Carter lived at
the Laguna Madre Sub-Base of the HAAF, one woman among a post of 17,000 soldiers.
She went there in early 1943 where her husband was superintendent of construction. She
made her home on a reservation in the Eighth Corps Area. In her 40s this witty,
motherly, and entertaining lady immediately "adopted all the men at the sub-base." Not
only did she do their mending, write letters to their mothers, and listen to confidences, but
she brought pressure to bear to have a chaplain conduct religious services, to provide
transportation to and from the isolated base (other than when men were being assigned
and transferred), and inaugurated the custom of "birthday parties." These parties were
her own idea and were carried out regularly under her supervision until they were
incorporated into the program later introduced by the United Service Organization
(USO).
Mom was instrumental in staging the first wedding at the range July 25, 1943. She not
only arranged for the attendants, refreshments, and reception and altar decorations but,
when the bride arrived without the traditional white satin costume which the groom wished to see her wear, sat up to 3:30 am to complete the wedding gown. Because her trailer was so small and the boys taxed its small space, they built a small house nearby for her that served as a recreation center. Here a piano was placed, and Mom was busy much of the time as an accompanist, a role that she fills capably. She always had several pupils whom she taught piano. She organized amateur shows and obtained permission to take the boys to the nearby seacoast for outings and melon feasts. It was her custom to wear a range helmet and whenever a short, stubby figure topped by a helmet appeared about the camp, the boys said they knew "Mom" was around. She attended mail call with the boys and knew how they felt when there were no letters for them. She did KP (kitchen police—a term, which for the younger set,—means working in the kitchen washing dishes, pots and pans, peeling potatoes, and doing any other menial work the cooks assigned) and helped the baker. She was assistant to Chaplain Rex and later to Chaplain Fertz, and played the piano for chapel services. It was the latter who was to perform the marriage ceremony for her son Bruce and Miss Theda Edwards of Ohio.

Every Friday she received a detail of men instructed to help her prepare the chapel for the Sunday service. Every Saturday she brought delicacies and gifts for the boys from the Range who were in the HAAF hospital. Mrs. Carter stood in the chow line with the men. At first they ate under a big tent, being served food that was brought out from HAAF by truck. Only twelve buildings had been built when she first went to Laguna Madre; eight were under construction. The place was "like a wilderness" she recalls and still doesn't like the memory of the time she stepped from her trailer onto a snake. The coyotes would return to the reservation after dark and their howls are about the only music Mom has no enthusiasm for.

After leaving Laguna Madre, Mom Carter spent six months at Camp Swift (opening in June 1942, this was a completely new military site of 52,000 acres 28 miles due east of Austin in Bastrop County) where she immediately found herself in exactly the same role except there were many more men. Elected as "Queen Mother" by 6,500 men at Camp Swift, Mom Carter regards this as the peak of her career as a "service mother". Although the coronation was carried out in a mock ceremony, it was impressively done and provided a superb tribute from the camp personnel to Mrs. Carter. On July 26, 1943 she and her husband were to celebrate their 35th wedding anniversary. Many of the letters and autographed photos now treasured in her bungalow scrapbook are from men who later gave their lives to bring victory to the United States. Mr. and Mrs. Carter now live comfortably in a small house on N. Grimes Road. Son Bruce and his wife are building a cottage a few feet away. Bruce was in the army in WW II and shipped overseas with the 102nd (Ozark) Division Band and toured Germany with a circus troop. Another son Bob is employed as a city bus driver.

The combat of World War II ended in August 1945. The need for gunners no longer existed. By this time an estimated 48,000 men could call the gunnery school their alma mater. The school and field were soon phased out. Some of the well-constructed barracks were sold or donated. The Citrus Center of Texas A & I University acquired and moved some of them to its Weslaco campus in 1947. A one-story barracks was sold to the Hansen family in Weslaco and was transformed into their home at 801 Oklahoma Street. The Grace Lutheran Church of Harlingen took two of them and moved them to the corner
of Jackson and Tenth Streets. One became the sanctuary and the second one the parish hall. In 1948 one two-storied barracks was purchased by the Molder family who trucked it to North Business 77. Here it was transformed into the very popular Green Gables Restaurant and Lounge, famed for its steaks. After 18 years as a gathering place it became an antique store. The building is located at 1910 N. 77 Sunshine Strip. The Valley Baptist Academy secured a number of buildings and relocated them to its campus on East Harrison Street, Harlingen. They exist today but are hardly recognizable with their brick veneer.

Were it not for the availability and economic cost of the surplus buildings, the success story of John and Betty Rugaart might not have been written. A surveyor named Simpson purchased half of a two storied barracks, this being 70 feet in length. He moved it in 1956 to 2415 East Harrison, Harlingen at the intersection with 25th Street. It was purchased by the Rugaarts, who lived in the top floor with their family, then established a very needed service for the community, the Valley Rehabilitation and Treatment Center, Inc. In this period polio vaccinations had just been initiated; numerous victims of the disease still required physical therapy as did individuals with physical incapacities of a different nature. In late 1966 the Rugaarts purchased an adjacent one story former air force base building. This served as a facility for occupational therapy and speech. After over fifty years of use these two buildings were not yet ready to give up the ghost. The bottom floor of the two storied one and the one story building were both moved in the late 1990s to the town of Combes, immediately north of Harlingen.

In 1947 the War Department became the National Military Establishment. Two years later this name was amended to the Department of Defense. It was on 18 September 1947 that the United States Air Force was established as a separate service.

With the outbreak of the Korean War on 25 June 1950 the city fathers of Harlingen looked to utilize the mostly mothballed field facilities. The direction that the on-going “Cold War” would take was also unknown and of nagging concern. A comprehensive paper was drawn up for submission to Federal authorities. It was titled:

Physical Characteristics

Former Harlingen Army Air Field, Harlingen, Texas
Civic, Cultural, Commercial and Recreational Survey of Harlingen, Texas
City of Harlingen, Texas
Hugh Ramsey, Mayor

Chamber of Commerce, Harlingen, Texas
Roy Self, President

Its introduction read: “The enclosed data and information is submitted to the department of the Air Force in the interest of reactivating the Harlingen Army Air Field facility as an integral unit in support of the current National emergency.” The report then went on to describe what was available at the former base.

It notes that the Southern Pacific Railroad has a direct switch track alongside the brick fire-proof Air Corps Supply Building of 100 x 120 feet, with switch trackage to spot three cars.

Going on it states that the Main West Entrance is approached by concrete highway known as Air Base or Rio Hondo Road. Also a concrete county road parallels the south property line of the Air Field. All streets inside reservation paved with concrete, intact and in good condition.
Details of the Sewage Disposal Plant and Drainage infrastructure are provided. Under Geography it states “field is rectangular 1500 acre area of exceptionally level nature.” Also that “An auxiliary air field is the Auxiliary Laguna Madre Air Field [currently the Cameron County Airport] of approximately 13,000 acres including hangars and runway, located 24 air miles southeast of Harlingen.”, and that fee simple title to the 1500 acres of land is held by the city.

It was pointed out that the former Harlingen Army Air Field and facility was designed to accommodate 6,500 trainees and at peak operation carried a maximum load of 9,000 trainees. In addition 200 Federal Housing Units, all still intact and livable, had been constructed adjacent to the base’s main entrance.

The report went on to state that the field itself was equipped with five concrete runways, each over one mile in length. All were intact and in useable condition including runway lights as were the control tower, landing lights, three large hangar buildings and a machine shop building.

As for the recreational facilities still extant, these included two swimming pools, tennis courts, a theater building, baseball field, football field, polo grounds, outdoor patio, and beer garden.

Another selling point concerned gasoline and storage. Complete gasoline and storage distribution was furnished by Aqua Systems, Inc. These were located on a railroad siding complete with an eight tank car unloading capacity, 10 underground storage tanks of 23,000 gallons capacity each, together with four air craft lubricating oil storage tanks with a capacity of 10,000 gallons each. For fire protection there existed one fire station (crash) with two 500 gpm fire trucks manned 24 hour per day with personnel on duty.

The remainder of the booklet dealt with the city of Harlingen’s infrastructure, amenities businesses, transportation, schools, hospitals, social and club organizations, climate, etc.

When U.S. forces became fully engaged in the Korean War, the House Armed Services Committee, acting under the National Defense Program, appropriated $15 million for the reactivation of the Harlingen Air Field. Later a $12 million price tag was attached to the field’s rehabilitation. Work started in early 1952. By 1 April 1952 the Base was once more in service.

The Base was projected to have at its peak a complement of 3,500 military personnel, 600 civilians, and a payroll of $15 million annually. Students fell into two categories. One consisted of aviation cadets who would work to obtain their wings along with navigational skills. The second group consisted of student officers, those already commissioned who would be trained as navigators. In numbers the ratio of the former over the latter was about three to one.

Sun Lines, the Base newspaper, drew up a list of some of its top stories as it concluded its press run in 1962. The following information is gleaned from that story and other sources.

The first cadet to report for the twenty-eight week program was Edmund F. Nevirauskas. He, along with 34 others, was in the first class to be graduated on 22 January 1953.

By September 1952 the Base Exchange opened. One old timer who was at the Base relates this anecdote. “Back in the late 50s the Department of the Air Force was still attempting to enforce a strict dress code for civilians as well as military. A large sign over the door of the Harlingen Air Force Base Exchange displayed “Women will not enter this building wearing shorts.” Every time I saw it, I would think to myself, they are
foolish to think they know what women will do. However, they must have had some insight to the female intellect that I lacked. I never saw a woman inside the building wearing shorts.” In October 1952 the first of many Kiwanis Kids’ Day programs was conducted as part of the Base’s community relations efforts. In October the Service Club also opened its doors.

In January 1953, the training course was renamed the Basic Observer Navigator Training Program and was lengthened from 28 to 32 weeks. A $5 million expansion program was planned and contracts were let for the construction of more than 20 new buildings including the chapel, dental clinic, and nine barracks buildings. A truce in the Korean War came about on 7/27/53, and all belligerency ceased. In September of that year President Dwight D. Eisenhower toured both the Base and the Valley. This was the only time in a decade that a Commander-in-Chief had visited the area.

In February 1954 the NCO Academy was put into operation at the Base. June saw the first wedding ceremony in the new chapel. AFROTC Summer Encampments were conducted at the base. Later to be Chief Master Sgt. Major, Donald L. Harlow (the second such enlisted man in the Air Force ever to reach this highest rank) led detachments from Southern Methodist University while NCO in charge of cadet training July 1954 through May 1955.

By January 1955 Texas Southmost College offered the first on-base college courses. In September, Hurricane Hilda, with winds up to 125 mph, forced evacuation of all aircraft. It was in this month that the first training flights over the Caribbean took place. Also pleasing to personnel this month was the fact that they received a pay raise. Aviation cadets would also receive flying pay for the first time.

The new $1.3 million Base hospital would open in October 1955. Tragedy struck in March 1956 when the first fatal accident involving a Base aircraft occurred. Three crewmen were killed in a crash near Robbins Air Force Base, Georgia. In May of that year the Base hosted the largest crowd ever seen here for an Armed Forces Day when more than 35,000 people turned out for the annual event. As the year drew to a close, the NCO Club moved into the building formerly occupied by the old hospital. The cafeteria was remodeled at a cost of $12,000. The 5,000th student was graduated and the word “observer” was dropped from the course designation.

April 1957 saw the fifth anniversary of the Base for which an open house was held. It was also this month that saw an aviation cadet graduate his whole training program without a single gig. This was an achievement that was never equaled. In June of this year the golf driving range opened. More importantly KP (kitchen police) duty ended forever in July 1957.

The Base’s first commander, Col. James F. Olive Jr., retired in 1958. He was replaced by Col. Norman L. Callish. In September of this year twelve of the Base’s NCOs became the first to be promoted to the new super grades.

One necessary individual who served at the Base from July 1959 to September 1962 was Richard D. Edwards. This career officer retired as a colonel in January 1984. While assigned to the 3610th Maintenance and Supply Group at HAFB, he was officer-in-charge of various activities involving material control, supplies and logistics.

In 1959 the Base nursery opened; foot printing for all personnel on flying status was commenced; the hospital added a new wing; a credit union opened; and personnel
services opened a new recreation camp on the Arroyo Colorado. In July of this year Col. Callish was promoted to brigadier general, and the Base was selected to represent ATC in the Hennessy Trophy competition. This same month saw the arrival here of Col. James W. Newsome, who would later become Base CO.
The Base opened 1960 with the announcement of the third straight accident-free Operation Homesafe. In late January it had received a certificate of achievement for the participation rate in the suggestion awards program. The next month the Base was rated excellent by the ATC Standardization Board, and for the first time military personnel became eligible for cash awards in the suggestion program. It was in March of this year that the Base adopted a new motto—Where Aerospace Navigation Begins. The following month the first class to undergo 38 weeks of training (versus the previous 32 week program) commenced.
May 1960 saw the skeet range opened. The Base Exchange reopened in new quarters in July. The new gymnasium opened in November followed by the December opening of the consolidated arts and craft hobby shop. The Base hosted the Spitz Planetarium traveling show. Seventy performances of “The Star of David” were attended by 3,000 individuals.
As 1961 opened, the Base hosted a first-of-its-kind conference to revise training standards for the navigation training program. The 1/17-20/61 Course Training Standard and Syllabus Conference was attended by officers from the Strategic Air Command (SAC), Military Air Transport Service (MATS), Tactical Air Command (TAC), and the Air Training Command (ATC). Immediately thereafter, navigation electronics with advanced aerospace material was added to the 38 week program thereby lengthening it by six weeks.
In March 1961 the announcement was made concerning the Base’s deactivation and that the Arroyo Colorado recreation camp would close. Still the remodeled NCO Club opened in August 1961. That same month Aviation Cadet Roger Bauman became the first here to receive the Daughters of American Colonists silver bowl award. It was in this month that the Base hosted its last Explorer Boy Scout air encampment.
Hurricane Carla in September forced the precautionary evacuation of all aircraft from the Base. [The movement to Waco was a wise decision, for, as an indication of the storm’s ferocity, the Valley citrus industry suffered an estimated $1,183,000 in losses with an estimated 50% of the fruit lost] Things were back to normal when the Base hosted the second annual Spitz Planetarium show, “A Trip to the Moon and Back.” Ground safety officials opened 1962 on an optimistic note by announcing another accident-free Operation Homesafe. In February, motor pool operators passed the two million miles mark in accident-free miles, the management school was discontinued, and recognition was made of an accident-free year of aircraft operation in 1961.
In March the dining halls were consolidated as Base manning diminished, and the hospital announced its change to dispensary status. The Base hosted its last conference, a corrosion control meeting, in April as the gym, library, and clothing sales store closed their doors. In May the Harlingen civic clubs hosted an Armed Forces Day luncheon at the Casa del Sol with Maj. Gen. C.W. Childe, USAF Deputy Chief of Staff for Plans and Programming as principal speaker.
(Returning to my own narrative) The history of the Harlingen Air Force Base would not be complete without mention of the reactions of some Harlingen citizens upon learning
that the Base would be deactivated. In attempts to rationalize this decision, there soon arose a strong, but not provable, theory about what had transpired to bring about the closure. This theory has become a lasting part of Harlingen’s oral history. It revolves around Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson and his supposed vindictiveness toward the city.

The story is as follows: Texas Senator LBJ was campaigning in 1959 for the election of Texas democrats. The campaign was nearly concluded when LBJ flew into Harlingen with his wife Lady Bird on November 6, 1959. They landed at Harvey Richards Field, which is now the community of Palm Valley. A sizeable crowd of about 1500 people greeted him. Among them were an estimated 200 Republicans and “Democrats for Nixon.” These two contingents displayed placards which raised the controversial subject of LBJ’s 1948 narrow election margin, possibly abetted by vote fraud. The placards read, “Enjoy Yourself; Scratch Lyndon Twice”, “Free Cheese in Every Rat Trap”, “I Came Voluntarily, Did You?”, “Welcome??”, “Landslide Lyndon by 87 Votes”, “Double Trouble – Lyndon Twice”, and “L (lacks) B (best) J (judgment).” Several black boxes with “Box 13” lettered on each side were waved above the crowd. These referred to the purported stuffed precinct ballot boxes of the earlier LBJ election. The Anti-Johnson group had also brought in a hearse with this message lettered on both sides: “I died in 1938, voted in 1948, and may vote again in 1960.” The plan was to have six pallbearers remove the coffin from the hearse and march it around the airport tarmac. Local police, however, had got wind of this charade and nipped it in the bud. The anti-Johnsonites were ordered to drive the hearse off the airport grounds.

Johnson was well aware of the dissenters in the audience. He addressed the crowd with sarcastic remarks about his disgruntled opponents. When he concluded his remarks, and he and Lady Bird moved to the red convertible which was to transport them to the city, a 14 or 15 year old boy tagged closely alongside. He bore a placard reading “LBJ, Go Away.” This must have raised LBJ’s blood pressure and ire. LBJ and his wife then rode to Lon C. Hill Park where a crowd of 5,000 or so awaited him. He was warmly greeted at this gathering. In the November election, the Republicans carried Harlingen, the only city to go their way in South Texas. To add insult to injury, Texas had elected its first Republican U. S. Senator, John Tower, since reconstruction. To make matters worse, the Congressional Representative of the district was Joe M. Kilgore, a conservative McAllen Democrat and no favorite of LBJ.

In 1960 LBJ was nominated by the Democratic Party to run for Vice President as the running mate of John F. Kennedy. They were elected and took office in January 1961. Two months later on 3/30/61 the Base was ordered phased out along with five other Texas bases. JFK’s order characterized them as “unneeded facilities” as was the Port Isabel U.S. Naval Auxiliary Air Station.

LBJ critics attributed the reason for the Air Base closure to him, the result of retribution for Harlingen’s unfriendly treatment in his earlier visit to the city. Some anecdotal stories even carry the story further. They relate that when the printed closure list came across his desk, Harlingen’s name was not on it and that Johnson then wrote it in himself. Whether any of this is true or merely apocryphal will never be known, but nevertheless the stories have been incorporated into Harlingen folklore.

In its own press release, the Air Force announced that “Navigation training at Harlingen Air Force Base will be discontinued, starting early in 1962 and the base will be
deactivated by June 1962.” This announcement came three weeks after the school had graduated 170 students, the largest class in its nine-year history. The politicians then jumped in to assuage local concerns. Rep. Joe M. Kilgore said that 73 military installations were being closed as part of the administration’s program to revamp the country’s military services. He stated, perhaps erroneously, “Runways at Harlingen are not built with the stress to care for bombers of the Strategic Air Command, so its use is limited.” He added that he would ask for a re-evaluation of the “outstanding physical plant at Harlingen.” Joining in were Texas U. S. Senators William A. Blakley and Ralph Yarborough. Both requested re-approval of the decision by the Kennedy administration. At this point, the Base had 2,300 military personnel and 800 civilian employees. The pay-roll was approximately $25 million, and a total expenditure of $15 million more a year was being made in the Valley.

On 2 April 1961, the Valley Morning Star headlined “Kilgore Holds Little Hope Harlingen AFB Can Be Retained.” He denied the closing was political retaliation, although he had voted against the administration on certain measures in Congress. In addressing business leader, Kilgore told them that the Vice President told him personally of his great interest in the Valley area and of his sympathy if there is an economic impact from the government action. Shortly thereafter, Kilgore received word from Air Force Secretary Zackert that a grace period of six months would delay the closure until December 1962. This was not to be.

In the usual flurry of activity after such a significant and momentous decision, a government task force came to town on May 9th. Its mission was to find ways to alleviate the economic impact on the community. It failed to take any meaningful action.

In early May the HAFB announced the time table for closure. It stated the Base’s complement at 700 officers, 1500 airmen, 800 civilians and nearly 1000 students. By 12/31/61 the student load would be 600; by 3/31/62 it would shrink to 400; and all navigation training would end by June 1962. In the following three months the Base strength would drop to 200, and by 12/31/62 only 30 civilians would be on the Base manned by 60 airmen and eight officers. The Base’s mission would move to the James Connally Air Force Base, Waco, Texas.

Although the U. S. by now (May 1961) was pledging increased aid to Vietnam, Defense Agency spokesman Clyde Bothiner of the U. S. Department of Commerce said there was no military use for the HAFB. At this point the local citizenry was asked to write 5,000 letters seeking to have the Base retained. 500 letters per day for ten days were to be mailed in batches to Senators, Representatives, the President and Vice President. The task force of 25 from ten departments and agencies pledged aid to the city. The real property at the base was valued at $17,343,000, aircraft at $70,605,000, base supplies and tool fund $3,241,000, and equipment $8,389,000 for a total of $99,578,000. Local expenditures of all kinds amounted to $25,035,041 for 1961 and an estimated $12,755,130 for 1962. This helped to put Harlingen’s effective buying power at $49 million, 29.23% of which was from Base employees according to Realtor H. W. Bahnman. Frank Boggus, HCISD Chairman, noted that 1237 children of Base employees attended Harlingen schools and that $4 million had been spent in the last few years for new schools. Taxes had in fact been raised 20% to cover this cost. Van Snell of the Harlingen Housing Authority told the task force that Le Moyne Gardens (adjacent to the Base) with 208 units
was filled with Base personnel and a trailer park with 77 spaces had recently been installed. He indicated that it would be difficult for the city to keep these facilities open. Similar sad stories were offered regarding unemployment, water supply developments, airport expansion, expenditures for military entertainment, reduction in construction trades, etc.

The Air Force continued to offer excuses for the closure. In mid-June, it contended the principal reason for the closure was the decline in manned aircraft forces, navigator training requirements having dropped 60 percent since 1956 and pilot training by 75 percent. In the fiscal year 1956 3,000 navigators had been trained, in 1961 1700 and 1962 plans were for 1200. The high overhead to keep the Base up was also cited. With some foresight, investment banker Fred Flynn suggested (1) a campaign to publicize the city as a tourist center, and (2) construction of a bridge across the Rio Grande in the vicinity of Los Indios in order to get more business from Mexico-- both to offset Base closing losses.

Kilgore was still making an effort to reverse the decision to close the Base. In mid-July he requested that the Department of Defense come up with an economic and military justification for its decision to close the Base. A month later he admitted a reversal was unlikely despite the military build up over the confrontation in Germany with the Soviets. On 8/20/61 the last cadets registered for the class to graduate 6/21/62. At this time, the Base gave out a press release outlining the curriculum for the students. In the initial six weeks the trainee first completes preflight courses then becomes a full fledged Aviation Cadet. The first two weeks of this period is known as “The Green Tux” since the students’ daily dress is the green flying suit. He then receives a complete uniform issue and starts to become both an officer and a navigator. Before the bars of a 2nd Lieutenant are pinned on the student, he must have (1) flown 32 training missions in the T-29 flying classroom – approximately 160 hours in the air, (2) completed 555 hours of academic training subjects, and (3) completed 315 hours of officer’s training subjects.

A typical day consisted of reveille at 4:45 a.m.; 15 minutes of calisthenics, breakfast at 5:15, set aside 75 minutes for cleaning the barracks and cadet areas; pre-class inspection at 7:15. Academic and military classes then occupied the morning from 7:30 to 11:30. Following lunch, students returned to the classrooms until 4:30 p.m. Extra curricular activities included band and glee club practice, night classes, night study hall, and honor training. The day officially ended at 10 p.m. unless the student was scheduled for a night training mission. Upon commissioning, graduates might go on to advanced training, electronic warfare training or direct to SAC, TAC, MATS or ADC.

In late August rumors were afloat that the Base site would be considered for the NASA space laboratory. It ended up in Pasadena, south of Houston. In mid-September the Deputy Wing Commander Col. Travis Hoover, here since 1959, was reassigned to Command Group, Turkey. He had been a pilot in Doolittle’s famous raid over Tokyo. Hoover was only age 23 when he took part in the 4/18/42 raid at the controls of a B25. He was second to take off from the aircraft carrier Hornet. Later he piloted a B24 over the Ploesti oil fields in Romania and participated in the initial bombing over Rome. At the end of September the Base held its last open house. That had been a regular event over a period of years. Aided by Kiwanis members, the Base hosted 1600 children brought in 18 school buses among other conveyances.
At this time the HAFB sports programs came to an end. In the period 1954-57 the HAFB Hustlers baseball team had played in the Rio Grande Valley Semi-pro League. In 1959 through 1961 the team played in the military’s Southern District compiling a 37-21 record in 1961.

With faint glimmers of hope, rumors flew that the Base would be used by the Department of Defense for an Officers Candidate School. By mid-November, Kilgore had to squelch any such status for the facilities.

The city fathers soon established an advisory board to work politically on the disposition of the Base. Jack Skaggs, a Harlingen lawyer and Cameron County Democratic Party Chairman was appointed to head the Board. Its mission was “to enable it to establish and carry out a coordinated program for securing and insuring the continued use of the HAFB for military purposes and to advise and recommend to the Mayor and City Commissioners as to such action which may be expedient in effecting such purpose.”

Shortly thereafter Skaggs and City Manager Marshall Bingham were delegated to go to Washington to talk to Department of Defense people to get something going. Robert Steadman of D of D in turn urged the Chamber of Commerce to find non-military uses for the Base.

Both the Valley Baptist Hospital and the Seventh Day Adventist Church considered utilizing the Base hospital, the latter for a geriatrics center. Upon examination of the facility, however, it was discovered that half of the beds and some operating equipment, supposedly badly in need of repair, had been shipped out. The word “plundered” came to the minds of some, and the church and other groups questioned the freeze order placed on the remaining equipment. Despite this Valley Baptist officials remained interested.

As the first month of 1962 drew to a close the Base civilian publication Sun Lines which had been published for 10 years by the San Benito News, was to be discontinued. The office of public relations would continue to publish a smaller version in a different format until July. At this point, the Base manning was slightly under 450 students, 1500 military personnel, and 500 civilian employees.

Inexorably the wheels were grinding to a stop. April 29 saw the closure of the Base library and clothing store. A day later the two boats, Falcon Wun and Falcon Two, which had been operated out of Port Harlingen for off base fishing, were taken out of service.

On May 4 a C-124 Globemaster cargo aircraft arrived from Travis Air Force Base to transport Ground Controlled Approach (GCA) equipment to Schilling AFB, Kansas. There were at this time only four more classes to go. The manning had diminished to 172 officers, 523 enlisted men, 143 students, and 300 civilians. Of nearly 250 buildings, 100 had been closed with 15 more scheduled in the following two weeks. On May 31st the NCO (non-commissioned officers) Club was closed.

The community recognized that not only would the losses sustained be economical but also those in human terms. The Rev. D. Williams McClarken, rector of St. Alban’s Episcopal Church echoed the sentiments of the community when he stated, “The deactivation of the Base is a great loss to this community and to our church, quite apart from any economic considerations. The character, spirit, intelligence, and energy that Air Force personnel have contributed to us in this community have been a great inspiration to all of us and me personally.”

The worst tragedy in its history was to befall the Base on 16 May 1962. A T-29 with a crew of five plus four scanners had departed the Base on a search and rescue mission in
northern Mexico. A small Cessna plane piloted by an American had been reported missing. Contact was lost with the search craft during the day. A four engine SC 54 was sent to locate either missing plane. Other aircraft soon joined the search including five T-29s from Harlingen and four other planes from Corpus Christi and elsewhere.

At 10 p.m. on May 17th the Base Commander, Col. James E. Newcombe confirmed the worst fears. He made it official that their investigation had precluded the possibility of any survivors. Wreckage had been spotted in the remote central mountains of Mexico at Jalpan near Arroyo Seco, Queretaro State. Apparently experiencing engine trouble, the plane had circled once before attempting to land on a 600-foot long mesa atop a mountain. It lost power, clipped treetops, and failed to reach its intended destination 100 yards ahead. Peasants working in relays brought the bodies to the village of Rio Verde, the first area accessible by four-wheel drive vehicles.

On May 23rd, the community memorial service was conducted at the HAFB chapel. The sad irony of this whole episode was that the missing Cessna pilot, Marcus Hooks of Donna, had landed safely, had had his plane impounded by Mexico authorities, and was imprisoned on suspicion of smuggling. He had apparently soon escaped and made his way back to north of the border but without communicating his plight to U. S. authorities. On May 30 the Base’s three-year commander, Newcombe, was reassigned to the Departmental Command, Korea Base Command. At the same time, the Baptist Convention approved the purchase of 60 acres of land the building in the southwest corner of the Base for Valley Baptist Hospital use. The approved appropriation for $60,000 included the hospital building and thirty smaller buildings in the area. This initiative did not advance.

The solicitation was premature for any disposal would first have to go through the General Services Administration and in the case of the hospital, possibly through the Health, Education and Welfare Department as well.

In early May another interested group had voiced interest. This was the American Association of Emeriti. This organization of 12,000 retired college professors thought of establishing Emeriti Village at the site. They wished to reserve 120 acres, the old officers’ quarters, BOQ barracks, and the Base administration building. To move things along an outlay of $60,000 of local funds would be needed. This was soon underwritten by the non-profit Harlingen Senior Citizens organization. Nothing came of this overture although talks went on until August.

On 6 June 1962 the final two classes were graduated in a joint ceremony. The last cadet to receive his wings was Richard E. Young. His class included two Vietnamese Air Force officers. Over its ten year history the school had graduated about 50 foreign students from fourteen countries.

In all, 13,355 students had been graduated from the Navigation School. From June of 1952 when the first training began to March, 1960 when the 10,000th navigator was graduated the Base averaged 1,290 graduates per year. From March 1960 to June 1962 it graduated an average of 1,525 cadets per year.

Although the great majority of navigation school graduates fulfilled their military obligations and returned to civilian life, others chose to become career officers.

Following is brief information of some individuals of note connected to the HAFB.
El Paso native Wellington J. Pindar, after receiving a master’s degree in physiology, intended to go directly to medical school but was diverted by the start of the Korean War. “I signed up for a three-year tour of duty with the Air Force but ended serving for four years putting my physiology skills to work as an instructor in aviation physiology at the HAFB in Texas.” This Albany Medical College graduate (Class of ’59) went on to a distinguished career and, sharing in his success, created an endowment for his alma mater.

General John L. Piotrowski was a July 1953 graduate. He retired as Commander-in-Chief, North American Aerospace Defense Command, Peterson AFB, Colorado Springs. He retired 3/31/90 and with his vast knowledge served as a consultant to industry and government.

Also graduating in 1953 was Christopher S. Adams, Jr. He retired on 3/1/83 as a major general and Chief of Staff, SAC, Offut AFB, Nebraska.

From a website we learn that David Steiner, a 1957 graduate at HAFB, obtained a PhD in the 60s, flew numerous weather missions into typhoons and later classified Air Weather Service missions in Laos. Before retiring as a Lt.-Col. on 7/1/83, he amassed 6,200 hours of flying time, including 706 hours of combat time. He was awarded eleven Air Medals and the Distinguished Flying Cross.

Another 1957 graduate was Major General Larry N. Tibbetts who retired 4/90. His last assignment was as Commanding Officer, Air Force Military Training Center, Lackland AFB, Texas.

May 1957 graduate Ralph E. Spraker was another major general before retiring 6/1/89. His last post was Vice Commanding Officer USAF Space Command, Colorado.

Graduating 9/57, James G. Jones also rose in rank to major general. He was Chief of Staff, Tactical Air Command Headquarters and before retirement Commanding Officer of Keesler Technical Training Center, Keesler AFB, Mississippi.

Brigadier General Marion F. Tidwell, who retired 7/1/84, was a distinguished graduate of the 2/55 class. He rose to assume the position of Deputy Director Logistic and Security Assistance, Headquarters of the US European Command, Germany.

Major General Ralph E. Spraker retired on 6/1/89. He attended school in Harlingen in 1956-57. His last assignment was as Vice Commander USAF Space Command, Peterson AFB, Colorado.


Robert I. Biss was commissioned in Harlingen 3/60. With the rank of captain and while piloting a F4C he was shot down and taken prisoner by the North Vietnamese on 11/11/66. He was not released until 3/4/73. He possessed innate determination. He is quoted: “I never had any doubts about coming out of it. This is not to say that things weren’t bleak and desperate at times after the tortuous moments, but I always knew I was coming home.”

In one of the last classes (1961), Maj.Gen. James J. LeCleir retired 7/92, relinquishing his post as Director, Latin America Defense College, Fort Lesley, Washington, D.C.
Harlingen hopes were ignited in early July when the Navion Aircraft Co., a subsidiary of the Tubular Service and Engineering Corp. (TUSCO), announced plans to consolidate its Galveston and Phoenix manufacturing operations in Harlingen. This company fabricated the single-engine, five-seater plane named the Rangemaster. It announced plans to occupy five hangars, employ 275 before a year was up, and produce 25 planes per month. While about 50 of the company’s families did move to Harlingen in the months to follow, by December the company was having major financial problems. It filed for reorganization. The company changed hands several times between 1964 and 1976 resulting in sporadic production of 50-60 of the 285 hp H Model Rangemaster.

As the air went out of the balloon in December, Sen. Yarborough let it be known that a helicopter base was being considered for Harlingen. This came to naught.

It took several years before permanent uses were found for the HAFB facilities. First to make major use of the Base’s support facilities was the Marine Military Academy (MMA), a nonprofit educational institution incorporated in April 1963. Its first classes commenced September 1965. It offers a college preparatory course, grades eight through twelve with elements traditional to the US Marine Corps. Enrollment has grown to over 400. While initially occupying the vacant barracks and other support buildings, the school over the years has upgraded and modernized nearly all the old structures and erected numerous new ones. It is the site of a full size replica of the renowned Iwo Jima Memorial portraying Marines and a navy corpsman raising the American flag over Mt. Suribachi. Nearby is the Iwo Jima Memorial Museum.

In November 1967 the Texas State Technical Institute began operations at the old HAFB as an extension of the Waco campus. Later becoming the Texas State Technical College, it as did MMA, used some of the older buildings and demolished others to make room for new structures. Numerous old two storyed barracks are currently being used by the school for student dormitories and one story ones for storage and maintenance operations. In 1968 the Confederate Air Force, presently the Commemorative Air Force, moved from Mercedes to the northwest side of the field and called this area Rebel Field. There it maintained its headquarters, museum and World War II aircraft collection in three large buildings and several small ones. It conducted well-attended annual air shows for many years at the field. In 1991 the CAF relocated to Midland, Texas.

Before commercial aviation came to the site the field was given the name Harlingen Industrial Airport. In late 1970 the field became the Rio Grande Valley International Airport and later was renamed the Valley International Airport. The city’s airport, Harvey Richards Field at what is now Palm Valley, then was closed. The Valley International Airport has long handled more passenger traffic than any other Valley airport. It strikingly beautiful passenger terminal sits between former military hangars 41 and 38. Part of the southwest portion of the HAFB was used by the city to establish the Rio Grande Valley Regional Museum. Initially the museum’s collection was housed solely in what has been the old Base brig, a building purchased by Howard E. Butts and later donated to the city.

In 1971 Spartan Aviation would utilize over 150,000 sq ft of hangar space and other buildings. It would employ 500 people for its business of overhauling airplane engines. In 1972 EMAIR, builders of giant agricultural applicator planes, located in Harlingen at Hangar 38 and has been there ever since.
The Base hospital was in March 1972 occupied by the Rio Grande State Center as a 20 bed unit for treatment of drug addiction and alcoholism. The horrendous number of 1,400 houses for sale in the city in 1963 and the years to follow alone indicates the magnitude of the closure. Homes were being put on the market for $10 a square foot, a bargain basement price. A typical story of what ensued is that related to the author by Mrs. Lois Weatherell Kinney Lynch. She and her Tech. Sgt. husband Charles Kinney had moved to Harlingen upon his assignment to the Base in March 1953. With a girl of five years and a boy of three at the time, they had waited four years before purchasing a modest home on the corner of Massachusetts and old F Street. When her now Master Sgt. husband was reassigned in August 1961 they were unable to find a buyer for the house. Belatedly they secured a renter. Upon the death of her husband Mrs. Kinney moved back to another home in Harlingen but was unable to sell her original house until February 1974.

Over time many homes were sold to retirees, primarily from the upper Midwest. A Valley Morning Star (8/11/02) re-run article notes that the city’s population had jumped from 23,000 in 1950 to 41,000 by 1960. Upon the Base’s closure the population dropped to 33,603 by 1972. Bob Hansen, a native of Manistique, Michigan, was working as a salesman for Bush Supply Co. when he heard the shocking news of the Base’s fate. He had enlisted in the US Army Air Corps in July 1940 and spent four months at the gunnery school in Harlingen while serving a five-year hitch. He is quoted as reflecting “In those days, people in this community enjoyed life, the economy was thriving, and it appeared the happiness would continue. I couldn’t believe it closed; it was so suitable for an air base. I came back from having lunch and one of the workers told me he heard it on the radio.”

What formerly comprised the Harlingen Air Force Base is now being put to excellent use. One major current occupant of the field is Lockheed Martin, fabricating, among other things, sections of the Atlas V rocket. The whole area is now an attractive asset to the community that suffered traumatic consequences when the HAFB ceased to exist in 1963. In the little over 14 combined years that the Harlingen Army Airfield and the Harlingen Air Force Base were in operation they were a pride and a joy to the city of Harlingen. The interaction between the military and the citizens of the area was one of mutual admiration and regard. Every one was well served. All deserve to be remembered.

Footnote: On March 6, 2005 a Texas Historical Commission Events Marker was dedicated in the front of the Harlingen Arts and Heritage Museum, once the site of the base swimming pool and also its brig. The marker commemorates both the Harlingen Army Air Field and the Harlingen Air Force Base.
The major references utilized in compiling this history are attributed within the text as they are used. They are to be found in the Archive Room of the Harlingen Public Library.

Additional, but generally minor, resources were obtained from perusal of the microfilm files of the daily issues of the Valley Morning Star (Harlingen, Texas) newspaper, 1/1/59 through 12/31/62.

Biographical information on various individuals was gleaned from the google.com search engine under the subjects Harlingen Army Airfield and Harlingen Air Force Base.

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7. Photograph of WASP pilot Elizabeth L. Gardner.
8. Citation and photograph of Bonnie Jean Alloway Welz.