Airplanes, Airports, and Airlines in Harlingen—A Brief Survey

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Part I: Into the Blue

Since its construction 68 years ago, the current airport has played a major role in the developmental, economic, and social history of Harlingen. It and its predecessors have seen a lot of history roll by. Here are some highlights of that history.

10/29/18 Returning home for his brother Gordon's funeral, Lon C. Hill, Jr. lands the first airplane ever in Harlingen. The light bi-wing aircraft puts down in a football field close to where the present Harlingen airport exists. In his trip from San Antonio he has refueled at the King Ranch and approaching Harlingen looks for sheets spread along side the grass field selected for his landing.

1923 The first locally owned plane is brought to town. Leman Nelson and Clay Rader have purchased a surplus WWI bi-plane, still in its crate. They purchase an engine for it bringing the total cost to $600. Later it is destroyed by high winds. In time Leman Nelson and Bill Williams open a flying school.

In mid-February 1933 thirty-three year old Nelson is in the front cockpit of the Comma-daire two-place airplane, while twenty-year old student pilot Erin McCall of San Benito is in the rear. While airborne over San Benito McCall shots Leman in the back of his head and kills him. The novice McCall puts the plane down between Harlingen and San Benito, damaging the propeller in his poor landing. Upon dismounting McCall is approached by authorities and commits suicide. At first the newspapers portray him as deranged, but it is later learned that he intended to dump the body in the Gulf, land, and pick up an accomplice. The two students had planned to hi-jack the plane to Central America.

The site of the municipal airport is a 72 acre triangular piece of land wedged between the Arroyo Colorado on its east and the Main Canal on its west side. It is at the south end of what will eventually become the municipal golf course. It possesses a gravel-dirt airstrip. (Little is known about the strip direction and no photos of the facility have yet come to light.)

6/29 The Harlingen Star on its editorial page daily promotes, among others, the following for the city and area: A Modern, Fully Equipped Airport.

11/29 Harlingen boosts that its airport was the first in the Valley to be rated by the Department of Commerce. In May after a committee was appointed to find a new 400 acre site for a city airport, it begins to draw up plans to enlarge and modernize the existing facility and equipment. Mid-year efforts to entice Pan American Airlines here from Brownsville had fallen on deaf ears despite occasional flooding of the Brownsville strip.

1930-34 A Valley resident since 1930, C.W. Blackwell has a flying school in the area. Mr. and Mrs. O.N. Joyner's daughter Evelyn is one of his students and is considered to be the youngest woman pilot in the country. After she earns a flying license, her father purchases a plane. Blackwell makes most of his living with his pioneer agricultural dusting service and will manager the old Harlingen Airport for a number of years. At age 67 on 5/15/59 Blackwell passes.
Army Air Corps officials in Washington announce approval of Harlingen Air Training Base and in May this is confirmed. Later authority to proceed comes with the approval of a $3.8 million appropriation.

Harlingen Army Airfield is established for the training of gunnery students. By 1945 more than 48,000 gunners have utilized the facility, now the Valley International Airport. With its palm-lined streets and flowering shrubs it was known as the "showplace of the air force." For a time the school is called the Harlingen Army Gunnery School or "Hags" for short.

Col. John R. Morgan, who will become the airfield commander, lands first base aircraft, a BT-13, on new southeast runway. At this time only a one-chair contractor's shack exists.

The 72 acre municipal air field west of town is leased to an individual concern.

The first hint of the closure of the Harlingen Army Airfield comes in an AP story noting it will be declared surplus, the last of four such bases in this area to be deactivated. Others have been Moore Field, the Brownsville Army Air Base, and the Laguna Madre Sub-Base of the HAAF. Col. Louis R. Hughes is commanding officer of the 5,000 men, both trainees and permanent personnel, now here. By 1/29 negotiations start on the use of HAAF. On 2/1 the base is placed into inactive status and four days later declared surplus property. HAAF base commanding officer Col. Roy T. Wright had received orders on 9/17 to go overseas. Col. Lewis R. Hughes, deputy CO as of 4/13, then took command of the base. On 10/5/45 Col. John R. Morgan, commanding officer of the 79th Flying Training Wing with headquarters at HAAF, had been ordered to assume command at Keesler Field, Mississippi. He had been here since 1941.

In 1946 E.O. Young establishes the Young Flying service. It is purchased by Wayne French in 1979. By 1985 it is a full, fixed base operation handling fueling, and on-call maintenance of smaller aircraft, air charters, sale of new Piper and Cessna airplanes, and rentals. Its 43 employees have a payroll of $437,000 by 1984.

Harlingen Army Airfield is deactivated and formally taken over by the city on March 21, 1946.

Harlingen Field dedicated as a municipal airport by Rear Admiral C.A.F. Sprague, commander of the Corpus Christi Naval Air Station. From this field is flown the first air cargo ever from the Valley. It is a planeload of strawberries for Canada. From 1947 to 1951 when it is reclaimed by the military the airport is called the All-Valley Regional Airport.

Nationwide Air Transport flies into the All-Valley Airport, Harlingen with the its first international air cargo ever. The DC 3 carries 7,000 lbs. of shrimp from Carmen, Mexico.

Trans Texas Airways, with its 21 passenger DC 3s, offers twice daily flights. The city is advertised as the "Valley's Commercial, Industrial and Transportation Center."

Trans Texas Airways has its first flight between Harlingen and San Antonio.

Merle Huston is manager of the Harlingen All-Valley Airport.

Val-Air Lines headquartered in the Madison Hotel building operates two flights daily to San Antonio and return to Harlingen. It had started out in Mercedes' Rebel Field and was a light plane feeder service using Beech Bonanzas and Ryan Navions.

The Defense Department seeks $15,462,000 to construct Harlingen facilities at the All-Valley Airport. It is to be transformed into a school for Air Force navigators. In
the end $14,721,000 is appropriated as part of the defense spending bill, $100,000 of which will be used to repurchase real estate sold since the army air field closed.

4/1/52 The once deactivated military air field turned into a city-owned regional one is reactivated as the Harlingen Air Force Base. While the original Harlingen Army Airfield cost just over $20 million, the reactivation this year will cost $15 million. Its mission is to train navigators, an urgency brought on by the initiation of the Korean War in June 1950. At its peak there are 3,500 military personnel and 600 civilians. The annual payroll comprises $15 million.

1952 Charles A. (Cut) Washmon is Mayor (12/15/52-12/15/56), when the Harvey Richards Field, Harlingen's municipal airport is opened on August 3, 1954 (but dedicated in November) in what is now the Harlingen Country Club in Palm Valley (26.2 N/97.76 W). It has a small terminal and a 3,650' runway. A 1963 directory shows that it had by then two paved runways with the primary one (19/35) being 4,900' asphalt, a third runway, taxiways, an apron, several hangars, and a terminal building. Operators listed were the Elliott dusting Service, Elliott Aviation Co., Valley Flying Service, and Young Flying Service. It is updated in 1959. Air travel times from Harlingen to major Texas cities are: Houston 3 hrs 22 min., San Antonio 2 hrs 32 min., and Dallas-Ft. Worth 4 hrs 50 min. Texas International Airline operates from Harlingen. In 12/55 it is given permission by the CAB to provide four a day plane service from Harlingen to Dallas with stops in San Antonio and Austin. It pulls out 12/74 and returns in 4/75. In May 1979 it leaves again. Later it is merged into Continental Airlines, which commences flights into Harlingen in the 1990s.

In 1957 as Highway 77/83 was expanded and new bridges were to be built across the Arroyo Colorado, plans were for the city airstrip, a leased out setup at the south end of the course, to be removed to make a home for new 7th and 13th fairways of the Harlingen Municipal Golf Course.

1/12/59 $600,000 construction funds are set for the planned Harvey Richards Municipal Airport expansion six miles west of the city. One half of this amount will come from the FAA and one half from the Harlingen Airport Board, whose chairman is C. Grant Kloperstein. Others on the board are J.R. Fitzgerald, Harvey L. Richards, A.J. Wittenbach, E.D. McDonald, H.W. Bahnman, and D.B. Blankin. No local tax monies will be involved.

With the purchase of 160 additional acres a runway of 4,900' is constructed.

1/29/59 Mayor C. Worth Wood announces a 25 year lease for city-owned land of 1,489 acres for the Harlingen Air Force Base.

4/30/60 The Harvey Richard Municipal Airport is rededicated with its $70,000 terminal building which is but part of a $400,000 improvement program. Congressman Joe M. Kilgore gives the dedicatory address. Trans-Texas Airways is to move here on 7/1/60 after being satisfied with the longer runway.

3/19/61 The first public announcement is made that the Harlingen Air Force Base is to be closed.

1962 The Harlingen Air Force Base closes and throws the city into an economic slump of major proportions. Between April and December the military complement at the base drops very sharply as does civilian employment.

Harvey Richards Municipal Airport is operating. Four flights arrive daily while six flights depart. The north-south runway is 4,950'; the NW-SE one 3,400'. It also has a
third turf runway, taxiways, an apron, several hangars, and a terminal building. Operators at the field are Elliot Dusting Service, Elliot Aviation Company, Valley Flying Service, and Young Flying Service. In 12/67 the facility is to close as the airlines move to the much larger runways of the former HAFB.

Part II: A New Life for an Old Warrior

The return of an expensive asset, namely the former Harlingen Air Force Base, to the city offered many possibilities. Following is what was to transpire.

1963 (early) Braniff Airlines proposes a single regional airport at Harlingen as it was thought to be uneconomical to service two other airports only 30 miles distance from Harlingen.

2/21/63 A City Commission resolution to establish a regional airport in Harlingen elicits protests from McAllen and Brownsville interests.

1964 TIA has six flights into Harlingen; three eastbound and three westbound.

April 1964 A CAB Associate Chief Examiner decides for continuation of service for all three current major airports in the Valley.

2/65 The Base Aviation Maintenance Company (BAMCO), a subsidiary of Base Industries, commences operations at the airport. Its employment will rise to 140 individuals before the 11/65 bankruptcy announcement of its parent company. This follows negation of a $700,000 contract to overhaul 31 Air Rescue Service Planes.

3/18/65 After months of negotiation, the city awards Kenneth C. Jones of North Olmstead, OK a contract involving six buildings and 2 ½ acres of the deactivated HAFB. He wants to manufacture vacuum cleaners and also establish a flying school.

4/16/65 Airport board to investigate possibility of bringing Braniff Airlines here.

8/65 By a four to one margin Harlingen voters approve a $1.25 million bond issue to convert the former HAFB to a major jet international airport.

Not only was the physical field itself to be recycled but its support facilities too.

In 9/65 The first classes, with 59 students, of the Marine Military Academy take place at old wartime facilities of the Air Force Navigation School at the deactivated Harlingen Air Force Base. The academy for high school students follows elements traditional to the U.S. Marine Corps. Prior to 1965 the founders of MMA planned to locate in Prescott, AZ. A Marine recruiter in Harlingen, Gunnery Sgt. John S. Allerton, read about the proposed academy in Leatherneck. He showed the article to Sam Searles, then a major in the Army Reserve and an official of the Harlingen National Bank. Searles was a former Marine Corps sergeant-major. He spoke to city officials about the academy. The organizers visited here and liked what they saw. Funding came from many sources. One major one was J.D. Stetson Coleman, a WWII Marine Corps Veteran. He bought 26 buildings and about 83 acres from the city for $55,000. He also secured a half million dollar loan and paid the interest on it for the first three years. By 1985 the academy had nearly 400 cadets, 37 teachers, and an annual budget of $3 million for its now 139 acre campus. Its 1981 class had 20 going on to the U.S. Naval Academy, and one the Air Force Academy. Sixteen others received full ROTC scholarships to attend college, with 41 others accepted at major colleges and universities. Two years later will see additional use of some old structures. In 9/67 Texas State Technical Institute (later to be renamed College) – Harlingen, also known as the Rio Grande
Valley Campus begins operation as an extension of the Waco Campus of the Texas State Technical Institute (also called the James Connally Technical Institute). Located at the former HAFB, it starts with two instructors and 40 students. Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey is guest of honor at the official dedication ceremonies held in a former aircraft hangar on 10/23/68. In the summer of 1969 it, and the campuses at Waco and Amarillo, is separated from the Texas A&M system. Milton Schiller became the vice president of the TSTI Rio Grande Valley Campus and Archie Rosales the school's first general manager. By 9/69 it is offering classes for credit; 78 students are taking classes.

3/16/66 Bernard Johnson Engineers, Inc., Houston recommends to City of Harlingen that a regional airport be established at the former HAFB.

4/14/66 The proposed movement of the airport from Harvey Richards Field to the former HAAF is opposed by some, but the economics are there as well as the future of an industrial park at the site.

11/66 George Young is Mayor. He is to serve from 12/13/66 to 12/8/70. Under him the municipal airport moves into the former HAFB and the Confederate Air Force is invited to establish its facilities at the airport.

This year Hank Stanley (d.1999) lays the foundation for the RGV's Winter Texan Industry which by 2004 will pour an estimated $329 million annually into the Valley's economy. Stanley, a realtor who was suffering losses due to the HAFB closure, leases city land at the site of the old base. The site is exactly in the middle of where the TSTC campus now exists. He then offers trailer and RV hookup pads, 150 the first year, at his Fun N Sun RV Resort. By year three, this has grown to 550. He also worked with travel trailer manufacturers to bring touring caravans to the Valley. This became a nucleus for new customers. The C of C helped by launching a promotional campaign aimed at turning Harlingen into a destination for Midwestern snowbirds. In the early 70s "Smokey" Boyle, a lay minister who preached at area RV parks, is credited with originating the term "Winter Texan."

1/67 Gene Snaveley is airport manager.

6/15/67 City and federal funds provide $1,446,000 for former HAFB improvements. This includes $417,000 to convert base into an industrial park. And $375,000 for a terminal building complex. $751,490 will go towards runway improvements. The main runway will be lengthened to 6,350 feet to handle TIA's new DC 9 jet airliners.

6/27/67 The Confederate Air Force asks permission to move to Harlingen.

8/17/67 City approves sale of Harvey Richards Field to the Harlingen country Club for $133,650.

11/1/67 The old Air Base becomes the Harlingen Municipal Airport and Industrial Air Park and the commercial airline facility. Between 1/68 and 2/18/69, a total of 3,000 passenger boardings occur. In January Trans Texas Airways starts its jet service to Harlingen on a newly extended runway.

1968 The Confederate Air Force, an organization formulated to preserve World War II military aircraft in flying condition, outgrows its facilities at Rebel Field, Mercedes, where one of its founders Lloyd Nolan runs a flying service, and moves to several hangars and buildings on the north end of the old Aerial Gunnery School facilities at the Harlingen airport. This has been facilitated by the $25,000 September 1967 fundraising campaign spearheaded by Dr. George Willeford and Don Bodenhammer.
1/21/68 The Valley Morning Star runs a special section on Trans Texas Airlines and “Jet Age Comes to Harlingen and the Rio Grande Valley.” The airline got its start here 10/1/47 with two DC 3s.

2/19/69 With work having commenced 1/26/68 and completed in October, the new Harlingen Airport terminal facility costing $297,000 is dedicated. Congressman Kiki de la Garza is the main speaker. Iwo Jima Blvd. Has been repaved as has been the airport termina l parking lot.

1/12/70 After a TIA (old name TransTexas Airline-TTA) DC 9 jet landing at the Harlingen Airport clipped a tree of the Moncus family and left scraps of metal behind, people called it “tree-top-airline”.

1/71 Spartan Aviation, a Los Angeles company, now has 500 employees in its over 150,000 square feet hangars at the airport. It repairs airplane engines. Its time here is short-lived, and it is gone from the scene by March 1974. Plans by Navion to start a small plane manufacturing operation here are given considerable publicity but never reach fruition.

In 1972 the city receives a grant to construct a new airport control tower.

7/25/72 It is announced that the Hawaii firm Murray Air will build giant agricultural crop dusting planes here under the company name EMAIR and with George Roth as partner. The company is to occupy Hangar 38 at the airport.

7/30/73 EMAIR rolls out the first of its giant crop dusting aircraft manufactured here.

1974 Lamar Muse announces that Southwest Airlines, founded in 1971, has plans to fly to the Valley. With its unusual no-frills method of operations and a single type of aircraft, the Boeing 737, it becomes a phenomenal success while other national airlines struggle.

2/16/75 Texas International Airlines announces plans to pull out of its Harlingen operations and concentrate its services in McAllen. It had provided three daily non-stop flights to Dallas, San Antonio, and Houston. Southwest Airlines will fill the void with 12 flights daily on Boeing 737s. After disappearing from the local scene Texas International will return years later in another incarnation.

1979 David Garza establishes a sole proprietor operation as Garza Aircraft Service providing aircraft maintenance.

1980 Don Wiles establishes Gulf Avionics when he makes a lease/purchase arrangement with Eddie Anderwald for his avionic shop, then a part of Air Central, Inc. at the Harlingen Industrial Airpark. He officially opens for business 1/1/81. Months later David Garza is brought in as a general partner. The business remained a partnership with the name later changed to Gulf Aviation when aircraft maintenance was added to the services. In 1987 the business was incorporated as Gulf Aviation, Inc. In 1990 Wiles left the company and started Gulf Avionics, Inc., which is continuing to operate at the Valley International Airport in 2004. Garza bought out Wiles' interest in Gulf Aviation in 1993. By 2009 Gulf Aviation is the only surviving FBO at VIA and employs over 35 employees with an annual payroll of over a million dollars. Garza has gone on to receive the
"SBA Business Man of the Year" award and the "Southwest Airlines National Fueler of the Year" award.

1981  The Eagle Bus Company leases a large hangar at the airport to manufacture buses but goes broke the following year.

11/26/80  Continental Airlines is cleared to commence flights into the city and will do so in early 1981.

3/13/81 Mal Kasanoff becomes chairman of the Harlingen Airport Board. Architect Whitey Fletcher will present it a $2.7 million plan for terminal expansion to the north, parking and drainage improvements, and radar acquisition.

9/9/81  Braniff International begins Harlingen service with four flights daily to Dallas-Ft. Worth. In December American Airlines begins Harlingen service, at first only to Dallas. It spends $1.3 million/yr here. On 5/13/82 Braniff files for bankruptcy and closes its operations forever.

11/18/83  The Valley International Airport has its grand opening with the very attractive and efficient terminal being welcomed. Its size has grown to 21,000 sq. ft. Fire Station No.5 at the airport will be manned by Harlingen Fire Department personnel, but the physical facility is under the Airport Board.

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12/81  Gulf Aviation commences servicing the South Texas area. David Garza and Don Wiles are co-owners. The firm sells aircraft, performs maintenance, aviation electronics, supplies fuel, trains student flyers, rents hangar space and tiedowns.

12/82  Trailways starts a bus-making plant in Harlingen after obtaining a building in March. By October 1984 work for 175 people diminishes. Through 2/85, 55 workers recondition older buses. By April only 11 people are left at the plant.

5/87  General Dynamics Services Center is set up in Harlingen. An immense supermodern hanger and support facilities are constructed at the southwest side of the airport. It is able to accommodate the largest commercial aircraft. In 1/91 the unit's name changes to General Dynamics Base Systems. In 5/94 the Martin Marietta Corp. acquires the facilities. In 3/95 this company is merged into Lockheed and the facility is under the aegis of Lockheed Martin. It has been assembling one component of the Atlas missiles. In the beginning of 2004, 234 employees are at the plant.

1991  In a major tourism loss to the city, the Confederate Air Force organization headquartered in Harlingen departs its Harlingen Airport base for Midland, TX which has offered it a $1 million facility/museum. This year the CAF has nearly 7,000 members nationwide and about 140 flyable WWII aircraft.

11/96  Minneapolis-based Sun Country Airlines begins to serve Winter Texans of the mid-west with direct flights to Harlingen. It will serve VIA seasonally from November through April. For a time after the 9/11 terrorist attack it will pull out of the market but resume by 2003. It sets records for passengers carried when it goes to five flights a week in 2004. By November 2006 it marks its 10th anniversary with the local airport scheduling three round-trip flights per week and four during the holiday season.

7/1/00  Airline boardings valued at $246,371 for the six months are down .81%.

12/02  Lockheed Martin added 36 employees to its Harlingen payroll during the year. The current total stands at 225. The plant at the Valley International Airport puts togeth-
er components for the Atlas launch program, F-16 jetfighters, and Theater High Altitude Aerial Defense (THAAD). The latter is an interceptor missile.

12/30/03 Valley International Airport (Harlingen) controls 53% of the domestic boardings of the three Valley airports. The Texas Dept. of Transportation attributes $52.9 million as VIA's direct contribution to the local economy. The 245,000 annual visitors it handles are estimated to contribute $97.2 million directly to the economic output. The VIA's total economic activities stand at $259.5 million. Besides Continental and Southwest Airlines (and Sun seasonally), other major tenants are Lockheed Martin, FedEx, UPS, Airborne Express, Gulf Aviation, Gulf Avionics, and Amigos Aviation. Roy Rodriguez is chairman of the aviation board, and Ernie D. Arredondo, director of marketing.

3/14/04 On the east side of the airport the NAFTA CargoPort has opened in the 60,000 square foot facility built by LYXNS Holdings. In addition to Bax Global and Menlow Worldwide, Swissport, a company which works closely with air cargo carriers, will be a tenant. The setup will facilitate the movement of parts into northern Mexico for manufacturing operations there.

4/14/04 FedEx, which handles air freight to the Valley using Harlingen as a terminal, replaces its standard cargo airplane with a larger and more fuel efficient aircraft. This is the French-manufactured Airbus A310 which may carry up to 40 tons of cargo. Increased business to the Valley and northern Mexico necessitated the change. The twin-engine plane has 25% greater holding capacity than presently use craft.

5/12/04 As its aerospace business slows, the local plant of Lockheed Martin Space Systems Co. lays off 19 employees. The Denver–based company will retain 211 people in Harlingen.

3/15/06 The US Department of Transportation awards the Valley International Airport a $3.24 million grant. It is to reconstruct 50 year old taxiways on the east side of the airport, that servicing two major cargo handlers.

5/10/06 Valley International Airport becomes "international" again when FedEx commences a five times a week flight schedule to transport freight between Harlingen and Monterrey, Mexico.

1/08 This month saw the demolishment of an historic World War II Army Air Field building. This was Hanger 38 with its distinguishable orange and white stripes. Its longtime lessee, EMAIR, ceased operations in 2002. Except for its foundation, Hanger 38 was removed to make added space for air operations of the adjacent Federal Express Company.

Also to see the dust this month were the Field's four railroad-accessible warehouses just across the road from the museum. The tracks, which once connected to the Southern Pacific Brownsville route, paralleled Loop 499 and were torn out many years ago. The story of Harlingen's airports and ancillary businesses is one of change and evolution. It will continue to be so in order to keep competitive and abreast of progress.

2/10/09 Sun Valley offers the city a proposal to establish an aviation service at VIA.

5/30/09 Southwest and Continental Airlines renew VIA lease for five more years. Together they serve close to 730,000 passengers per year at VIA. In February SW had served 34 years. Continental has served about 21 years averaging 71,000 passengers to and from VIA.

10/31/09 A bus shuttle to South Padre Island is announced by Logisticorp of Dallas. The fare will be $20 one way and $35 round trip.
4/10/10 SW starts direct flights to Midway Airport, Chicago to begin 8/15/10.
2/21/12 After going back and forth since July 2011, the city paves way for Sun Valley Aviation to lease land to establish a second aviation service business on the east side of the airport.
City approves amended budget providing $400,000 for infrastructure improvements at VIA, its northapron and parking lot around land that Sun Valley would lease to operate a second aviation service business. Remaining cost of $1.5 million would be a FAA grant. Earlier the FAA advised city officials to find a place for Sun Valley. This ends Patrick Konegay's five yeareffort to open an aviation service at VIA.
2/22/12 Sun Valley Aviation, Clyde Konegay president, awaits six month completion date of $1.5 million apron.
2/25/12 To commence in May, Sun Country Airlines adds to extra weekly non-stop flights from Harlingen to Minneapolis.
6/15/12 Southwest announces that it will initiate on November 4, twice daily direct flight to and from Harlingen and Love Field, Dallas.