Upon the March 6, 2005 Dedication of the Texas Historical Commission Events Marker Commemorating the Harlingen Army Air Field and Harlingen Air Force Base.

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This year marks the 60th anniversary of the end of World War II. It is long overdue that we gather here today to remember certain important events in Harlingen history. It was sixty three and a half years ago that Col. John R. Morgan arrived in this city and in this location to assume command of the new Harlingen Army Air Field. Those, mostly military but many also civilians, who served here in the 1940s, and still survive, would now be in their 80s or older. Belatedly we recognize their contributions, thank them, and recognize those who are deceased. Others who passed through the Base gates in the 1950s are in their 70s. To them we also extend our gratitude.

To put into proper prospective their contributions, we must reflect on the history that transpired both here and thousands of miles from this peaceful place.

With the depressed U. S. economy still lingering into the late 1930s, the city fathers of Harlingen, Texas lead by Mayor Hugh Ramsey 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 3, 1941 the War Department then accepted Harlingen’s invitation to establish a military airfield on the 960 acres being offered. The following month 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. The facility would reach nearly 1,600 acres in size by 1944. The facility eventually accommodated 6,500 trainees, and at peak operation carried a maximum load of 9,000.

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) 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.

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. 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 solder'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 combat missions before experiencing combat fatigue, a condition which resulted in his being demoted to the rank of private.

The other very distinguished gunnery school graduate was Technical Sergeant Forrest L. Vosler. The Harlingen Army Gunnery School was his first unit. He received a Congressional Medal of Honor citation for action occurring in the European Theater. His citation is dramatic and moving. It reads:

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.

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 contribution of women to the war effort should not be overlooked. By 1943 there was a contingent of ninety Women's Army Corps (WAC) personnel dong twenty-one jobs at the base. The Women's Airforce Service Pilots (WASP) ferried planes between bases and performed other duties thereby relieving male pilots to other assignments. In Harlingen the WASPs flew over the Gulf in B26s towing targets upon which B24 gunners could practice. 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. 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 the 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. Four officer nurses served under her at the HAAF. After serving in Harlingen she went on to Maxwell Field, Montgomery, Alabama.
The Harlingen Army Air Field closed within six months after the cessation of World War II in August 1945.

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.

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.

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 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.

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. Numerous graduates became career officers and rose in rank over time to assume important commanding positions.
The astounding 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.

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. That is why the unveiling of this historical marker today in this place is in itself a significant event.