When Giants Roared in Hanger 38

Norman Rozeff
January 2004

As people drive into the Valley International Airport they may spot a large hanger building set back from the road. Even with its fading paint job, this corrugated metal structure stands out because of its somewhat faded international orange paint job, which it has likely sported for 27 years. The logo spelling "EMAIR" in large white letters on its front side adds a sense of puzzlement to most passing by. This is Hanger 38. It was constructed in 1942 when the Harlingen Army Airfield was being developed to train over 48,000 soldiers in its aerial gunnery school, termed "HAGS" for short. It was used the military until late 1945 when the base was phased out upon the end of World War II. Two years after the Korean War commenced in June 1950 and was to be followed by the "Cold War", the field was reactivated as the Harlingen Air Force Base with a mission to train navigators. It did so for over 13,350 officers.

When the military used the black and white checkerboard-painted hanger, it was used to maintain such aircraft as P-39s, BT-13s (a basic trainer), and two seater AT-6s. The latter would either tow a target or fitted with a Browning machine gun in the rear of the cockpit fire at them. Still later B-24s and P-63s would be used in training. The Air Force when it later reoccupied the field used the hanger to maintain such larger aircraft as C-45s, C-47s, and T-29s.

Hanger 38 was one of several of nearly identical design to be found at the base. On its east side facing the runways it had sixteen sliding doors on six tracks. These would be pushed eight to each side to provided access to its 200' wide and 120' deep interior with 20' height clearance to the girder work. On north and south sides of the hanger additional 17' wide spaces had been constructed to hold machining, working, and storage areas. The west side held 19' wide office spaces.

When the base was closed in 1962 the field was turned back to the City of Harlingen. The city then tried to turn it into an industrial airpark and therefore sought to find tenants and businesses to utilize the available infrastructures. By 1967 the Texas State Technical Institute was on the scene using barracks, former administration, and other buildings for classrooms and other uses. Hanger 38, now painted in neutral colors, was used by students studying aircraft maintenance. In 1970 the city decided to move its municipal airport from Harvey Richards Field, where the town of Palm Valley and the Harlingen Country Club now stand, to the larger field closer to the city.

In 1972 the hanger was to see an unusual occupant. EMAIR, a subsidiary of Murray Air of Hawaii, was looking for a mainland site in which to fabricate a new type of agricultural airplane. A Dallas firm suggested Harlingen as a centrally located site with labor in the area not being highly organized. In addition the facility was reasonably priced for lease. The Chamber of Commerce then conducted much of the legwork to ease EMAIR's occupancy.
EMROTH Company doing business as EMAIR was organized by Bill Murray of Hilo, Hawaii and George Roth of Oahu, Hawaii to build a high capacity bi-wing agricultural plane similar to but much larger than the existing bi-wing Stearman aircraft being flown in the 1950s and 60s for agricultural dusting. The Boeing-built Stearmans had served as training planes at the start of WWII. After the war many were converted for aerial agricultural uses. Originally having 220 hp engines, some were upgraded to 330 hp.

The prototype designed by Roth was built in New Zealand over nine month period. It was tested there, dismantled, and shipped to Hawaii. It had the load capacity to apply 2,800 lbs. of fertilizer for Hawaii’s sugarcane and pineapple fields as well as convertibility to apply liquid herbicides. The Stearmans then in use had only a 1,200 lb. capacity. Five more super-sized planes were built on Oahu for use in the islands. These were powered by Pratt and Whitney R1340 600 hp engines.

It was 7/30/73 when EMAIR rolled out the first aircraft manufactured in Harlingen. The company had begun operations here in January 1973. The plane could reach a speed of 118 mph and carry 6,250 lbs in its 62 ½ cubic ft. hopper. This is the equivalent of 450 gallons. The upper wing of the MA-1 Paymaster was 41ft. 8 in. and the lower one 35'.

After manufacturing commenced in Harlingen, 46 aircraft were fabricated. While the initial models were designated MA-1, later ones, with Wright R1820 1200 hp engines, were designated MA-1B. As the cane industry wound down in Hawaii and competitors came out with new, more powerful applicators, manufacturing ceased here. The last aircraft was built December 1986.

As of this time EMAIR does some aircraft engine maintenance work but mostly cares for fabric-covered planes of aerial applicators, hobbyists, and collectors. Long-time owner/manager and Harlingen resident George Roth has retired to the Lake Livingston area. One unsold giant has sat forlornly in Hanger 38 for some years. It now seems that it will soon find a home in Louisiana with an owner who has a sister craft.

Lyle Chipps, supervisor for EMAIR, has been selling off the remaining inventory and plant equipment as the company will soon shutter its doors forever. The fate of Hanger 38 will then be in the hands of the Airport Authority. Whether its event-filled life of 62 years will continue or it will fall to the wrecking ball is anyone's guess.

In January 2008, except for its foundation, Hanger 38 was demolished to make added space for air operations of the adjacent Federal Express Company.