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 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. Thousands 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. In the 3 ½ years it operated the school trained over 48,000 airmen.

Upon the closure of the field in February 1946 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.

Norman Rozeff, Harlingen Historical Preservation Society, January 2003