

## A Brief History of Laredo Air Force Base

By

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### I. Context

Ever since Fort McIntosh was established one mile west of town on March 3, 1849, the military has played a large role in the history of Laredo.<sup>1</sup> The history of aviation in the community, however, dated to February 1911, when the Army Signal Corps decided to use Fort McIntosh as a base to test one of its newest “aeroplanes.” The “flying contraption” was a Wright Brother biplane called the “Scout” that was loaned to the military. On March 3, with thousands of Laredoans watching, and with the two pilots on board, the engine on the “Scout” was gunned and the airplane headed upriver for Fort Duncan at Eagle Pass. After a successful flight of two hours and ten minutes, the plane arrived at Eagle Pass without mishap. The 116-mile flight by such a plane was the longest in aviation history. In a return flight to Laredo two days later, however, the plane took a nose dive into the Rio Grande, and although the two pilots managed to escape injury, the plane was badly damaged.<sup>2</sup>

During World War I, when Kelly Field in San Antonio reached the peak of its training activities, it became necessary to establish several small auxiliary landing fields in South Texas.

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<sup>1</sup> Jerry Thompson, ed., *Texas and New Mexico on the Eve of the Civil War* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2001), 23-24.

<sup>2</sup> Jerry Thompson, *Laredo: A Pictorial History* (Norfolk: Donning Company, 1986), 250-51.

Largely because of the sunny climate in the region, the Army Air Force began maintaining a small auxiliary landing strip at Laredo that was administered with only one master sergeant on duty.<sup>3</sup> The tiny facility consisted of little more than a single dirt runway which was probably located in what is now Anna Avenue north of Fort McIntosh.

## II. Overview

As war clouds descended on the Pacific and in Europe, in 1940, the city of Laredo, with a population of 39,274, arranged for H. B. Zachary, a local contractor, to build a new airport to replace the old Kelly Field dirt landing strip. Zachary, who would build numerous airfields across Texas in the years to come, was able to complete the new 320-acre facility, one mile northeast of Laredo, which the city named Zachary Field in honor of Zachary's father, Col. John Zachary.<sup>4</sup> With the approach of World War II, local political leaders, including the influential Judge John A. Valls, persuaded Senator Morris Sheppard, who was chairman of the powerful Senate Military Affairs Committee, to ask the War Department to consider the site for a military air training facility. After the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, the United States declared war, and on May 7, 1942 the government acquired Zachary Field for an Army

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<sup>3</sup>“Status Update: Formerly Used Defense Site Environmental Investigations at the Former Laredo Air Force Base,” Tulsa: U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, 1997 quoted in Thomas E. Alexander, *The Wings of Change: The Army Air Force Experience in Texas During World War II* (Abilene: McWhiney Foundation Press, 2003), 97.

<sup>4</sup>*Texas Almanac and State Industrial Guide, 1943-1944* (Dallas: A. H. Belo Corporation, 1943); *The Laredo Times*, February 16, 1943; Alexander, *Wings of Change*, 99.

Air Corps gunnery school. Mayor Hugh S. Cluck received a telegram verifying the acquisition a week later, on May 13. By October 1942 the airport had expanded to 2,085 acres plus another 685,000 acres leased for a military field flexible gunnery school and target ranges. The lease began about twenty-five miles north of Laredo and reached some thirty miles from Eagle Pass. Another 35,000 acres some seven miles north of the city limits were used for ground target practice by gunnery students. Constructed at a cost of \$8.5 million, the new facilities were operational by January 1, 1943. By the fall of 1943, the federal government had completed the purchase of all airfield property for \$185,000 from the City of Laredo and Webb County.<sup>5</sup>

By September 2, 1943, the War Department Headquarters of the Army Air Force Base officials were authorized to improve the runways. The current runways were limited to 30,000 pound aircraft; they would be upgraded to handle 74,000 pound gross loads. The authorization was given in spite of the objections of the Chief of Engineers Office given in a telegram dated August 13. The Office argued that the runways, taxiways, and apron would have to be strengthened if four engine aircraft were to be used for training and the lengthening of the runways would require excessive grading.<sup>6</sup>

The local chamber of commerce scrambled to find housing for construction workers and

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<sup>5</sup>*The Laredo Times*, November 1, 1940; May 13, 1942; January 24, 1943; *The San Antonio Evening News*, December 18, 1951; Alexander, *Wings of Change*, 99-100.

<sup>6</sup>Memo from J. D. Shivery, War Department Headquarters of the Army Air Forces, Washington, September 10, 1943, to Chief of Engineers; Weinert, USEO Fort Sam Houston, August 13, 1943, 1434Z to Chief of Engineers, U.S. Army, Washington, D.C.

the expected influx of personnel and their families. So serious was the housing problem in Laredo that the government agreed to assist with the cost of converting basements, garages, offices and stores into accommodations. Aware of the need for recreation, on January 1943 the city leased the Casa Blanca Country Club to the Army for \$1 per year for use as an Officer's Club. In February 1943, tensions in Laredo and at the base erupted when the military declared twenty-four bars and brothels in the community off limits. The *Laredo Times* blamed the local political machine, the Independent Club or Partido Viejo for the unhealthy conditions, and in a scathing letter, demanded that Governor Coke Stevenson take action.<sup>7</sup>

By 1944, the Laredo Army Air Field Flexible Gunnery School had a peak military population of more than 15,000 and 250 aircraft. As indicated before, the runway at the airfield which had been limited to 30,000-pound aircraft, was improved and increased to handle 74,000-pound loads. By the end of the war, the site, just off Highway 59, had come to be known as the Laredo Army Airfield. Gunnery instruction, airplane mechanics and turret mechanics involving B-17, B-25, B-29 and B-32 bombers were taught at the facility. For the first time in history women were trained to fly American military aircraft as Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP). They flew B-26, P-40 and P-63 as engineering test pilots at the Laredo Army Air Base.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Alexander, *Wings of Change*, 99-103; *The Laredo Times*, January 13, 24, February 3, 1943.

<sup>8</sup> "Guide to Laredo Air Force Base," n.p., n.d., p. 9, Laredo Air Force Base File, Laredo Public Library; "Status Update," Corps of Engineers, p. 6; *Laredo International Airport Master*

By the late summer of 1945, with the end of the war, the field became inactive but the federal government reserved the right to reclaim the facility with a 30-day notice in case of an emergency. A few Army personnel remained on the site although the property was transferred to the War Assets Administration. As the Army contemplated closing the airfield in the early summer of 1947, much of the property reverted to the City of Laredo, which by 1950 began using the airfield as a municipal airport. During the Korean War, on April 1, 1952, however, the base was reactivated at a cost of over \$10 million and renamed Laredo Air Force Base to provide basic pilot training, for not only Americans but pilots from twenty-four countries.<sup>9</sup> With the mayor of Laredo, Hugh S. Cluck, and a number of dignitaries in attendance, the official orders activating the base were read by the base commander and a contract between the United States and the City of Laredo was signed. In the process, the base was converted into an Air Force pilot school where T-28 and T-33 aircraft training was conducted. Student pilots were required to receive 262 hours of primary training before they could receive their wings. By January 1956,

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*Plan for the City of Laredo*, Cress & Associates, Inc. And Howland & Medina Consulting Engineers (Lexington, Kentucky and Laredo, Texas, 1985) II-2; [www.wasp-wwii.org/wasp/baselist.htm](http://www.wasp-wwii.org/wasp/baselist.htm) . See [www.twu.edu/library/woman/list\\_i-L.htm](http://www.twu.edu/library/woman/list_i-L.htm) and [/list\\_wz.htm](http://www.twu.edu/library/woman/list_wz.htm) for the papers of Codye Gwen Clinkscales Linder and Elizabeth A. Watson as examples of women who were stationed at the Laredo Army Air Base.

<sup>9</sup>Art Leatherwood, "Laredo Air Force Base," *Handbook of Texas Online* at <http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/LL/qb12>; *The San Antonio Evening News*, December 18, 1951; Alexander, *Wings of Change*, 103-104.

however, the propeller-driven T-28 aircraft were phased-out and only jet aircraft were being used. The change presented problems which were resolved by providing training to inexperienced personnel.<sup>10</sup>

The air base was to be fully operational by May 1952. Unfortunately a serious problem had been overlooked: no money had been appropriated for air conditioning. An officer wrote that he was “distressed to learn that Headquarters USAF had not approved our request to be considered in the arid area for air-conditioning. I rather expect that operating experience will necessitate the reopening of this question at a later date if we are to have people here who can function at maximum or even normal efficiency.” Although approval to air condition the academic building, the contractor hired could not guarantee it would be operational. An officer understandably complained that “This presented the danger of having to conduct academic classes in classrooms where temperatures averaged 105 to 110 degrees.” It was not until 1956 that \$25,000 were provided for air conditioning the academic building and high altitude classroom.<sup>11</sup>

A typical class at LAFB was composed of U.S. aviation cadets, U.S. student officers and a sprinkling of trainees from various allied and NATO countries such as France, Belgium, the

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<sup>10</sup>*History of Laredo Air Force Base CMS 69, 3640<sup>th</sup> Pilot Training Wing (Base) 1 July - 31 December 1955*, p. 74; *Laredo Airport Master Plan*, II-2.

<sup>11</sup>Restricted correspondence April 1 to June 30, 1952; “Chart XVI, Operations and Maintenance Projects Approved,” *History of Laredo Air Force Base, 3640<sup>th</sup> Pilot Training Wing (Base), Laredo, Texas, 1 July - 31 December 1956*.

Netherlands, United Kingdom, the Scandinavian countries, Portugal, Italy, Turkey, Ethiopia, Afghanistan, Iran, Germany and Mexico. The U.S. cadet program was phased out in 1955 leaving only U.S. student officers. By the early 1960s, the LAFB roster was composed primarily of Air Force Academy graduates. By 1973, more than 9,000 pilots had been trained at LAFB. Many of these pilots saw action not only in Korea but in Vietnam and around the globe.

Although the majority of the officers and enlisted men were housed on base, many officers and airmen continued to live in the spacious government housing at Fort McIntosh, five miles southwest of the base, where the military maintained nineteen enlisted and twelve officer quarters. A few officers lived in the Buena Vista apartments across from the main gate on Saunders. By this time, approximately 450 civilian employees under the Federal Civil Service System were employed in performing about 100 different types of work.<sup>12</sup>

LAFB was in danger of being closed during the first half of 1963 but managed to remain open. Labor disputes in early 1965 against the base services contractor, Defense Contractors, Inc., however, seriously curtailed the number of flights from the base. On March 9 Defense Contractors was “defaulted and removed from the base.” Temporary military fuels supply personnel were assigned to Laredo until fourteen civilians who had worked at the base were hired under U.S. Civil Service temporary appointments to do the work. It was not until April 14, 1966 that the refueling job was changed from a military operation to a civilian contract bid won by Transport Services, Inc. of Corpus Christi. Construction of a new control tower began in July

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<sup>12</sup>“Guide to Laredo Air Force Base,” n.p., n.d., p. 10. Numerous biographies on the internet of pilots who served in Korea and Vietnam mention being trained at the LAFB.

1969. The original tower had to be evacuated when winds reached 50 knots or above, and better visibility to handle increased traffic more efficiently was necessary.<sup>13</sup>

By the 1960s the base boasted of not only numerous barracks buildings, but a post office, library, base exchange, two barber shops, washeteria, service station, thrift shop, and a kindergarten. Recreation facilities included a large gymnasium for intramurals and the base basketball team, a theater, picnic area, golf driving range and putting green, handball courts, tennis and volleyball courts, a bowling alley, swimming pool, and a skeet range. A large chapel located at the corner of North Sandman and Foster streets held Protestant and Catholic services every Sunday. In Laredo, Jewish services were held at Congregation Agudas Achim every Friday night. A modern, air conditioned, fifty-bed, fully-operational hospital opened in November 1955. A well-equipped dental clinic also provided needed services to airmen, officers and their families. LAFB even boasted of a weekly newspaper, *Que Paso*, that featured Air Force local news, women's and church items, club schedules, sporting events, feature stories, and timely editorials. The editorial staff of the Office of Information Services at the base also published a shorter *Daily Bulletin* that featured official orders and vital information. Each officer, airman, and civilian employee was required to read the *Daily Bulletin* which was

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<sup>13</sup>3640<sup>th</sup> Pilot Tng Wing, *Semiannual Historical Report, Jan - Jun 1963, Laredo AFB, Texas*, p. 29; 3640<sup>th</sup> Pilot Tng Wing, *Semiannual Historical Report, 1 Jan - 30 Jun 1965, Laredo AFB, Texas*, pp. 44-45; 3640<sup>th</sup> Pilot Tng Wing, *Semiannual Historical Report, 1 Jan - 30 Jun 1966, Laredo AFB, Texas*, p. 36; *Quarterly Historical Report, 1 July 1969 - 30 September 1969, CMS 69, 3640<sup>th</sup> Pilot Training Wing. RCS: HAF-D 48, Laredo Air Force Base, Texas*, p. 18.

displayed on bulletin boards in each squadron orderly room.<sup>14</sup>

### III. Significance

The base was again declared “excess” by the General Services Administration during the administration of Richard Nixon in 1973. All pilot training was terminated on April 17, 1973 and the base was deactivated in September.<sup>15</sup> With a public announcement by Secretary of Defense Elliot L. Richardson, LAFB was officially closed the following year. Many civilian employees and public officials in Laredo were caught by surprise with the announcement. Indeed, the closing brought severe economic consequences for the community. An “Opportunity Laredo” committee was formed to develop airport properties into an economic venture. The reopening of the base under the city contributed to a dramatic increase in imports and exports. An Airport Advisory Board was organized on August 16, 1983 to oversee the airport.<sup>16</sup> The acreage and facilities were transferred to the Department of Interior, United States Postal Service, Texas National Guard, Texas State Department of Highways and Public Transportation, Laredo Municipal Housing Corporation, City of Laredo, and Webb County. Flynn Investment Company bought the base housing and San Martín de Porres Mission (later Parish) purchased the non-denominational chapel.<sup>17</sup> Today the lengthy runways at the former base are all part of Laredo

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<sup>14</sup> “Guide to Laredo Air Force Base,” 20-21; Interview, Carlos Valle, April 3, 2006.

<sup>15</sup> *Laredo Airport Master Plan*, I-1.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, II-2.

<sup>17</sup> Stanley G. Cenega, “Defense Environmental Restoration Program, Findings and Determination of Eligibility, Laredo International Airport, Texas,” January 23, 1991. Copy in

International Airport, the “only publicly owned, public-use, controlled airfield” and the only one “capable of serving commercial airline and general aviation activity.”<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup>*Laredo Airport Master Plan*, IV-1.

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