

## Origin and History of TravisAFB

During 2000, Solano County will celebrate its 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary. A number of events are planned throughout the county to commemorate this event. It is also the fiftieth anniversary of the naming of Travis Air Force Base in honor Brigadier General Robert F. Travis, who was killed in a B-29 crash at the installation on 5 August 1950. At the time of his death, the general was commander of the 9<sup>th</sup> Heavy Bombardment Wing and was the Base's commanding general. Formal dedication ceremonies were held on 21 April 1951.

Although today Travis is the home of the largest airlift organization in the Air Force, 60<sup>th</sup> Air Mobility Wing, it began as an isolated air strip with a few tar paper shacks set in the middle of a windswept prairie during World War II.

The establishment of an Army airfield near Fairfield and Suisun City, two neighboring farming towns located astride the Southern Pacific Railroad and U.S. Highway 40 (now Interstate 80) half way between Sacramento and San Francisco, was first recommended in December 1941, shortly after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. The Fourth Air Force, which was charged with improving air defense along the Pacific Coast, included the Fairfield-Suisun City site among several well-dispersed military air bases proposed for northern California. A site board composed of representatives of the Fourth Air Force and Army Corps of Engineers investigated the area and approved the idea early in 1942. Inexpensive flat land, usually good flying weather, excellent drainage, and nearby rail and water transportation contributed to the favorable recommendation. Thus, on 22 April 1942, the Office of the Chief of Engineers, Washington, DC, authorized spending \$998,000 for construction of two runways and a few temporary buildings on a 945-acre site located "six miles east of the twin farming communities of Fairfield and Suisun City." This project received a top wartime priority.

Land was purchased from local ranchers at an average cost of \$50 an acre. The rural road running



through the reservation was procured from Solano County. On 6 July, bulldozers began carving out the base and by September runways and operations buildings were completed. The land on which the base was constructed was a prairie of short grass and vernal pools. In the spring it was emerald green and ablaze with wild flowers. The Jepson Reserve is a remnant of that open range, Indian hunting trails or trade routes passed through it, for their artifacts have been found on the base. Prior to World War II, a few scattered ranches were the only evidence of human occupation. Their owners were chiefly occupied with raising cattle and sheep. Among the ranchers were the Calveras family who had a farm near the present Eucalyptus Park. The Frietas family lived where HQ 15 Air Force Stands. 'The Best family farm was where the stables were located. The Chelps family lived where the Crosswinds Recreation Center is located. An the Capral farm was on the site of the museum. The first base headquarters stood at a sport that the original owner called "the grove," which is now part of base housing.

Perhaps the most well known local farmers were Joseph and Mary Enos. They owned 320 acres, 21 of which they sold to the government for housing. They lived in a small white frame house immediately to the right as one departed the North (Vacaville) Gate. When military personnel first arrived, they lived in tar paper shacks with no hot water and no dining hall. Some men frequently went to the Enos house, where

there was hot water, to do their laundry and to get fresh eggs and vegetables. The Enoses allowed the base full access across their land for water and power and, in return, the base brought electricity to their house in 1949. Later, both Joseph and Mary Enos worked in the base nursery. When Joseph passed away in 1962, military personnel helped Mary look after the farm. On her 70<sup>th</sup> birthday in 1965, Mary Enos was “officially” named “Mother Travis” by General and Mrs. Chapman. In the following year she went on her first airplane ride, C-141 flight over San Francisco. “Imagine,” she said, “going to San Francisco and back in one day!” She died in 1982.

Initially, Fourth Air Force intended to station medium attack bombers at the new air base, and in the autumn of 1942, some of its aircraft used the runways for practice landings. During this period, Navy planes also practiced maneuvers at the same field. For a few months, in fact, the outline of the deck of an aircraft carrier was painted on one runway. This helped newly commissioned Navy pilots, flying Hellcats and Helldivers, practice carrier landings and takeoffs before they were assigned to the Pacific Fleet. The strong local prevailing winds were similar to conditions at sea. Indeed, the town of Suisun took its name from a local Indian word meaning “west wind.”

Despite its plans, the Fourth Air Force never officially occupied the base. On 13 October 1942, following negotiations that had begun in September, the War Department assigned the new facility to the Air Transport Command (ATC) in recognition of the base’s potential to become a major aerial port and supply transfer point for the Pacific War Zone. Its proximity to rail, highway, and water transportation plus its location near San Francisco figured heavily in this decision. Fourth Air Force had to station its bombers elsewhere.

The Army Air Forces considerably expanded the area of the base during World War II. This was testimony to its great strategic value from the very beginning. As noted, the Army initially acquired 945 acres for construction of runways and essential buildings. Authorized in April, the original purchase was completed on 17 June 1942. Almost immediately, however, this area was supplemented by the purchase of 1,312 adjacent acres by eminent domain

proceedings in the Federal District Court in San Francisco. Authorized for purchase on 11 September 1942, this new land was procured in early 1943. Shortly before the end of the war, on 30 June 1945, the Army added another 1,143 acres to the base. Subsequent expansion in the 1950’s and 1960’s, which was primarily for additional base housing and lengthening the runways to accommodate jet aircraft, increased the size of the base to more the 6,000 acres, some ten square miles.

Although the Army Air Forces decided to assign the new base to the Air Tactical Command in October 1942, its actual transfer to ATC did not take place until 8 February 1943. At that time, the War Department officially designated the field as the Fairfield-Suisun Army Air Base (AAB). ATC then assigned it to the West Coast Sector of its Pacific Wing. The West Cost Sector had its headquarters at Hamilton Field in Marin County, north of San Francisco, about 45 minutes from Fairfield-Suisun. Lieutenant Colonel Henry J. Weltmer, Administrative Officer of HQ West Coast Sector, exercised temporary command of the new base as of 15 April 1943. He and his staff never lived at the isolated airstrip. They continued to live and operate from Hamilton, driving to Fairfield-Suisun in a staff car when required. At



**Lieutenant Colonel-select  
Arthur “Steve” W. Stephenson, Jr.  
First Base Commander**

that time, the only residents were civilian construction workers of the Casson and Ball Company. They operated a “mess and two barracks” in a eucalyptus grove a mile northeast of the flightline, approximately where Turner Drive is today. The first Army unit to take up permanent residence was a group of ten enlisted men and one officer from the 914<sup>th</sup> Quartermaster Division at Hamilton Field. These supply and food service workers arrived on 10 May 1943 to prepare the base for the arrival, in turn, of the first ATC personnel. One week later, on 17 May, ATC officially activated Fairfield-Suisun AAB. Lieutenant Colonel-select Arthur (“Steve”) W. Stephenson, Jr., arrived with an advance party of men from the 23<sup>rd</sup> Ferrying (later Transport) Group on 29 May 1943. Upon arrival, he assumed command as the first permanent base commander.

The rest of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Group followed on 31 May and the base officially opened on 1 June 1943, with a primary mission of servicing and ferrying tactical aircraft from California across the Pacific to the war zone. By 1945, the base had become the West Coast’s largest aerial port. The airlift of troops and supplies to occupied Japan and Korea, and the processing of war-weary returning GI’s, had become its primary mission. On 1 June 1948, the Military Air Transport Service assumed jurisdiction. In July, two of the base’s air transport squadrons left for Europe to assist in the Berlin Airlift.

On 1 May 1949, the Strategic Air Command (SAC) became the parent major command for the base, turning it into a major long-range reconnaissance and intercontinental bombing installation. For the next nine years, airlift operations become secondary while the base served as home for SAC bombers such as the B-29, B-36, and eventually, the B-52. During this period, new hangers appeared, runways were added and widened, and permanent barracks and family living quarters were built. The base grew to its present size which encompasses 6,383 acres.

The Military Air Transport Service (MATS) resumed command of Travis AFB on 1 July 1958, after SAC’s new dispersal policy led to the transfer of the 14<sup>th</sup> Air Division to Beale AFB, California. The base became headquarters for the 1501<sup>st</sup> Air Transport Wing—1955; for MATS Western Transport Air Force

(later Twenty-Second Air Force)—1958; and the 60<sup>th</sup> Military Airlift Wing (later the 60<sup>th</sup> Airlift Wing, later the 60<sup>th</sup> Air Mobility Wing)—1966

The 60<sup>th</sup> replaced the 1501<sup>st</sup> as the host unit on Travis on 8 January 1966. The 349 MAW (USAF Reserve) joined with the 60<sup>th</sup> when it moved from Hamilton AFB, California, in 1969.

Travis became part of the Air Mobility Command on 1 June 1992, when assets from MAC and SAC were fused into a single team. AMC’s primary mission is mobility for America’s armed forces. Travis supports this capability by deploying air mobile forces anywhere in the world, and sustains them in a conflict. The base has become the largest in AMC in terms of aircraft and personnel. Both C-5 “Galaxy” and the KC-10 “Extender” aircraft are flown from the base. Further, during the past two fiscal years, a total of 6,918 transient aircraft have utilized Travis’ facilities.

With the addition of the KC-10 community, and with other force structure changes, Travis AFB’s construction budget for Fiscal Years 1995 through 2000 totalled over \$444.8 million. Facilities constructed during this period included a new Child Development Center, the largest Base Exchange in the Army and Air Force Exchange System.

Known as the “Gateway to the Pacific,” Travis handles more cargo and passenger traffic through its aerial port than any other military air terminal in the United States. Additionally, the base has a long and proud history of supporting humanitarian airlift at home and around the world.

Today, the Travis Team includes approximately 7,136 active military, 3,580 reservists, and 3,326 civilian personnel.