

# Buffalo Tales



Volume 11, No. 4

Buffalo County Historical Society

April, 1988

## THE KEARNEY ARMY AIR BASE *The Military*

(This is the first of two articles about the Kearney Army Air Base 1942-1949)  
by Alice Shaneyfelt Howell

What impresses one today, 45 years later, is how quickly the Kearney Army Air Base was built and made ready to function as a complete facility. With World War II at fever pitch and troops fighting on two fronts, airfields were urgently needed, hastily built, and operating within a few months time.

Immediately after the dedication of the new Keens Municipal Airport on August 24, 1942, it was learned that the Army was considering the site for an airfield. Construction was approved on September 5, 1942 for the Kearney base and for satellite fields at McCook, Grand Island and Harvard. The City of Kearney not only offered the use of the Keens 532-acre airfield, but signed a long-term lease with the Army for \$1.00 per year for as long as the field was needed. An additional 2,227.5 acres of farmland was condemned by the Army to provide more room.

On September 10, 1942, an area office was established with Captain Lyman G. Youngs assigned as Area Engineer. First view of the project indicated sugar beets, corn and water throughout the area, necessitating the construction of drainage ditches approximately four miles in length to adequately drain the area. Contract for construction of buildings and utilities was awarded to A. Guthrie & Co., Inc., of St. Paul, Minnesota, who moved to the site on September 14 to set up offices and start building construction.



Entrance to Kearney Army Air Field

BUFFALO TALES is the official publication of the Buffalo County Historical Society, a non-profit organization, whose address is P. O. Box 523, Kearney, NE 68848. It is sent to all members of the Society.

Membership is open to anyone who has an interest in the history of Buffalo County and its people. Annual dues, payable January 1, are:

- Basic Membership . . . . . \$10.00
- Institutional Membership . . . . . \$15.00
- Supporting Membership . . . . . \$25.00

Life memberships are \$100.00 for an individual; \$150.00 for husband and wife, jointly.

Officers and Directors: President, Margaret Hohnholt; Vice-President, Alice Howell; Secretary, Colleen Parker; Treasurer, Philip S. Holmgren. Directors: Glen E. Wisch, Frances Link, Barb Avery, Merlin Burgland, Minnette Steinbrink, Edna Hehner, Robert Stubblefield, Viola Livingston and Chandler Lynch III. Publications Chairman: Alice Howell.

### WITH THE SOCIETY

A Buffalo County Memorial Day Fund has been established by the Board of Directors of the Buffalo County Historical Society. Its purpose is to honor friends and family on Memorial Day through memorial gifts to the Historical Society.

Mrs. Margaret Cary Tunks of Seattle, Washington, made this proposal with the thought in mind that many Society members living outside Buffalo County would welcome such an opportunity to remember and honor their loved ones, and at the same time be of help to the Society.

Donors of memorials will be appropriately recognized at the Trails and Rails Museum.



Your tour committee has been working on a spring tour. Because there were requests to repeat the plans for the tour to Mitchell, South Dakota, this is the plan: The tour will be the weekend of June 11-12. We will travel north to Mitchell, visiting Fort Randall Dam on the way. At Mitchell a visit to the Corn Palace, the Doll Museum, the Middle Border Museum of Pioneer Life and the Prehistoric Indian Village. We will spend the night at Mitchell where reservations have been made at Motel 8.

On Sunday we will travel to Yankton and to the new Niobrara State Park, and home by another route.

Cost: \$62.50 (2 to a room) for BCHS members, including admissions  
\$72.50 (2 to a room) for non-members, including admissions.

Please make reservations as soon as possible. After April 20, reservations will be open to the public. A \$30.00 deposit is requested with each reservation. Mail to Buffalo County Historical Society, Box 523, Kearney, NE 68848.



Plans for the Air Base Reunion on June 3, 4 and 5 are growing day by day. This is for everyone, so mark your calendar and plan to attend. This is the Wagons West celebration for this year. The history of Kearney Army Air Base is a part of the history of the county, and now is the time to preserve it.

For a special display at Trails and Rails Museum, any memorabilia you might care to share, such as ration books, clothing, hats, newspapers, magazines, photos, sheet music, etc., would be appreciated.

The calendars are published and ready for sale at \$10.00 each. Many heretofore classified photos are featured, along with a time line of events at the base. Available at Midtown Business Center, 2022 Avenue A, Kearney.

### NEW MEMBERS

- |                                      |   |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| <b>BASIC</b>                         | <b>SUPPORTING</b>                             |
| Jim Cudaback . . . . . Riverdale     | Helen Kotsiopoulos Collins . . . San Jose, CA |
|                                      | <b>LIFE</b>                                   |
| Mrs. Eileen Mercer . . . . . Kearney |   |

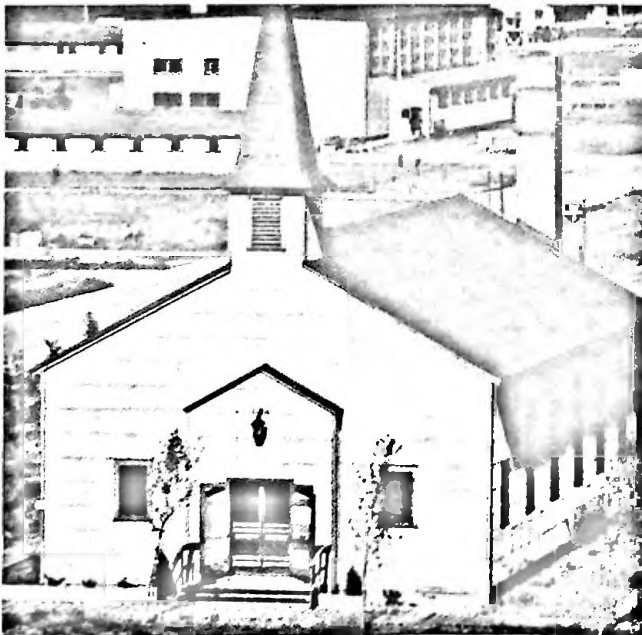
On September 22 a contract was awarded Kiewit-Condon Company for grading and paving taxiways, runways and aprons. They plowed up much of the newly laid asphalt runways of the Keens field to make way for the thicker, wider concrete runways needed for Army use. The new Keens Airport hangar became a machine shop for the ordnance repair depot.

Paving operations were initiated on October 6 and were completed on November 24, a period of seven weeks. One thousand cars of cement were used, enough cement, it was said, to pave a two-lane highway from Kearney to McCook. When the final bucket of concrete was dropped, Kiewit-Condon's general superintendent, Dan Bell, threw his hat into the mix to celebrate the completion of the runway paving project.

In the meantime, construction of buildings and laying of utility lines also went ahead in feverish haste. By October 1 one thousand men were employed. By the end of November three thousand men were on the job. The first buildings were occupied by some of the units that arrived to work on construction. Immediately necessary were housing and eating facilities for 600 laborers. On Wednesday, October 7, work was started on the officers' mess hall, and by the following Monday, October 13, meals were served in the building to approximately four hundred men, mostly laborers on the base.

The project gathered speed as warehouses, hangars, barracks, post office, recreation hall and post exchange, hospital, theater and chapel were built. By the end of November construction had progressed to the point that a commanding officer was needed to receive the equipment accumulating at the base. Major V. B. Trevelyan was assigned as the first commanding officer of Kearney Army Air Base, arriving on November 30, 1942.

Post Engineer of the base was activated December 3, which meant the transferring



**Base Chapel for All Faiths**

of the buildings and grounds from the Area Engineers. Within sixty days the Post Engineer had expanded from a few to 138 civilian employees. Kearneyites Silas A. Wilson entered on duty December 18 as chief clerk, and J. W. Bowker entered on duty as fire chief January 11, 1943, transferred from the Area Engineers where he had been employed as fire chief since October 6, 1942. Bowker had been a longtime member of the Kearney Volunteer Fire Department. In the Army's official history of the Air Field, it is noted that "he (Bowker) believes that the best time to put out a fire is before it starts."

Buildings were essentially completed and ready for occupancy by December 15. "It is a complete city within its own area," explained the Corps of Engineers. However, it would be January of 1943 before the base was ready to fully function. The base Post Office was started about December 25. The extent of the mail then was about fifty letters a day, by September, 1943, it would be close to five thousand a day. On January 7, twenty-five trained medical corps men arrived for duty, and on January 17, the Chemical Section arrived. A training air base such as Kearney's was to contain a Chemical Section. Its purpose was to train troops in case of gas weapons—how to use and care for gas masks, how to identify the odor of the gas and what its effects might be, also, decontamination procedures. The first Kearney Air Base Chemical Warfare Squadron of one officer and four enlisted men was named "Stinky and his Four Stinkers." All units arriving on the base were given training in defense against chemical attack, and all combat crews and airplanes were equipped with necessary chemical warfare items.

Training units began arriving in Kearney January 30, 1943. Troops were moved in via Union Pacific "troop" trains. The first planes to move in arrived February 4, when a B-17 squadron arrived. The base served a dual purpose during 1943: one for training, the other for processing. It became a training field with the arrival of the 100th Bombardment Group. The 100th became the parent group responsible for producing cadres for new Army Air groups being formed and for training of combat crews. The ground crews were stationed at Kearney while the air crews were divided among various bases where they served as instructors. Then, having organized its offspring units, the 100th reunited at Kearney in mid-April and prepared for overseas movement. It departed Kearney in May and joined the Eighth Air Force in Europe.

Kearney's functions as a processing center started in February, 1943, when the Army Air Corps assigned a heavy bombardment processing unit to the base to prepare B-17 crews for overseas duty. Four-engine aircraft were received from modification centers, such as one in Cheyenne, Wyoming, and prepared for specific centers of operation. Personnel from the Second Air Force heavy bombardment training program were received, formed into combat crews, assigned to particular aircraft, then dispatched for movement to combat zones.

After the 100th moved out in May, it was decided to move the processing unit out of Kearney and to make the Kearney Air Base a replacement training center to develop replacement crews, provide them with second and third phase training before sending them off to staging centers for overseas duty. However, Kearney's days as a replacement training center lasted only from August to November of 1943. On November 1 the training group was transferred to Sioux City Iowa, and was replaced by the bombardment processing units for B-17, and later B-29, crews and planes. From then until the end of the war Kearney Army Air Base remained a processing station.

Bill Potter, a native of Syracuse, N.Y., was one member of the 140 crews sent to

the Kearney base in August and September, 1943, to complete training before being sent overseas. Here he met his future wife. He said that living conditions were adequate at the base:

"The buildings were built to be used on a temporary basis . . . and they threw up the buildings very fast—almost overnight. Sidewalks varied from boards, gravel, dirt to concrete or black top, and most main roads were black top or gravel, but both sidewalks and roads changed as growth and needs of the base required.

"I came during favorable weather conditions (September, 1943) and left before any of the big storms got started (November, 1943), so I didn't experience any big inconvenience as far as weather conditions went. Our practice bombing range was between Broken Bow and Sumner. The Army moved people off their farms in that area. We had night and overwater flights, and kept practicing to put everything together."

Following his training at Kearney, Potter was sent to England on the liner *Queen Mary*, which had been converted to a troop ship. In the winter months troops and planes were sent over by ship, then the crews were assigned as replacement crews to various Bomb Groups in the European Theater of Operations. In the summer, crews were more often made up and assigned to aircraft, then sent off to England by air.

Potter was a navigator on a B-17 and took part in bombing raids on Germany. On his fourth mission, January 11, 1944, his B-17 was shot down, killing six of his crew, and he was taken prisoner of war by the Germans. He was returned to U. S. control May 14, 1945, and returned later that year to Nebraska to marry his wife Marjorie. After spending the summers of 1946 and 1947 on his father-in-law's farm he said, "I really liked it after I got out here for a while. I didn't want to go back to that crowded area (New York state)".



**B-29 Superfortress as it cleared the runway for takeoff on first leg of its flight to Theater of Operations — World War II.**  
—Official photo of U.S. Army Air Force

Facilities for entertainment, recreational activities and religious needs had been built in the initial construction, and added onto as base population grew. The base chapel was so constructed that it would serve any faith as a place of worship. Many weddings took place there, and it was the scene where many couples said good-bye to each other before the men were shipped out. The chapel building was eventually moved into Kearney and is now the church home of the Family of Christ Lutheran congregation at

1319 5th Avenue.

A football team was organized in October, 1943, under 1st Lieutenant Victor Spadaccini, former All-American from the University of Minnesota. The team played Army Air Base teams from McCook and Grand Island bases, and Fort Crook at Omaha, and were the champions that first season, having won four, tied one and lost two.

An Air Base Band performed for many functions and also played each week for dances at the Recreation Center. Many big-name bands came to play for dances at the base, sometimes held in a hangar, sometimes in the N.C.O. Club. Among those visiting were Duke Ellington, Tommy Dorsey, Louis Prima, the King Cole Trio, Tony Pasteur, Art Kassel and his Castles of the Air, and Les Brown and his Band of Renown, which included songstress Doris Day.

Movie star Anna Mae Wong toured the base in December, 1943, visiting the hospital, the clubs and the mess halls. The movie celebrity who received the most attention from soldiers and civilians alike was 1st Lieutenant Clark Gable, who was a member of one of the combat crews processed through the Kearney Army Air Base.

On June 21, 1943, the 824th WAC unit of twelve enlisted women and two officers was activated at the Kearney base. Like all women's military units, it was organized to free able-bodied men for overseas duty. Housing at the base provided for 132 WACs.

The command at the base passed in January, 1944, from Lt. Col. Trevellyan (who was promoted while serving at Kearney) to Lt. Col. Charles C. Coppin, Jr., and then in June, 1944, to Col. Cornelius W. Cousland, who remained in command until the war ended in August, 1945.

One crew after another arrived at and departed from the base and by April, 1944, the base was capable of handling 388 B-17 crews monthly. Of the six hangars built at the Kearney field, four were capable of holding either B-17 or B-29 aircraft. Considerable publicity was given to the "5-Grand", the 5000th B-17 manufactured by Boeing's Seattle plant, which was processed at the Kearney base in July of 1944.

The base was designated Kearney Army Air Field in October, 1944, two weeks after the first B-29 arrived for overseas processing. From January 1 to June 1 of 1945, there were 554 B-29s processed for dispatching. During the month of May, 1945, 84 B-29 combat crews were processed through Kearney with an average stay at the base of 9.3 days each.

Jack F. Schmitz, Jr., now of Denton, Texas, was one of the early arrivals. He describes his 2-year experience at Kearney Army Air Base:

"I arrived at the base in the early part of 1943. Really wasn't much there at that time. We were in the process of getting the B-17 bomber ready and outfitted for combat duty . . . We checked them out as to all equipment, oxygen, armament, engine checks, etc., for overseas duty and (they were) flown to Presque Isle, Maine, where they were installed with ammunition and bombs, then flown to England. I was in the engineering section as a staff artist and aircraft draftsman, making drawings of modifications, charts, maps, . . . also doing large drawings of bomber parts, etc. After the B-17s, we were assigned to B-29s . . . I believe runways were made longer and front sections of some of the hangars had to be cut out (slotted) at front section so tail could get into the hangar for maintenance and check.

"One of the things I liked about the base when we first arrived was the

great pheasant hunting we had along the runways early in the mornings. Our mess hall sergeant would cook them for us. Very good and tasty. The worst part while stationed there were the cold winters as we had to keep bomber engines warm all the time with put-puts and also we had to get on wing and tail sections and keep off ice and snow so as not to rupture them as to weight, etc. Bombers had to be ready to go at any time.

"The early part of 1945 we were sent to the Marianas in the Pacific. ... Kearney Air Base played a great part in World War II."

Contrary to the situation at many bases, with the end of the war in Europe in May, 1945, work at the Kearney base increased as attention was devoted to the war against Japan and the expanding B-29 program. After Japan's surrender in August, 1945, the number of base personnel gradually diminished, and by March 1, 1946, the base was reduced to mere housekeeping functions and it seemed as if it might be deactivated.

However, after the rejuvenation of the Eighth Air Force in December of 1946, the Eighth's fighter wing, the 27th, needed a home and the Kearney field was selected. From a key personnel numbering only four in July the base population increased to 795 by August 31, and to 2,344 by March, 1948, the postwar peak.

The fighter organization was to be equipped with P-82s (later designated F-82s) and to start training for escort duties to accompany the very heavy bombers of the Strategic Air Command on long-range missions. However, delivery of aircraft was delayed and the older type aircraft was not replaced until late in 1948.

The base was redesignated Kearney Air Force Base in January, 1948. Many improvements were made, but the facilities were considered substandard by some military



A Squadron of P-51s, 1947  
—Kearney Daily Hub photo

Buffalo County Historical Society  
Box 523  
Kearney, NE 68848

Non-Profit Organization Bulk Rate
U.S. Postage PAID
Postal Permit No. 7 Kearney, Nebraska

---

officials. The two major deficiencies were inadequate housing facilities (even though twenty-six new fourplex apartment houses had been built) and a need for additional funds of \$2,800,000 to bring existing facilities up to desired operating standards. Consequently, the Strategic Air Command decided to abandon the field.

The citizens of Kearney, with the support of U. S. Senators Hugh Butler and Kenneth Wherry, requested the Air Force to reconsider the move. The Chamber of Commerce appointed Barlow Nye, C. S. Morrow and Ormand P. Hill as a special committee to carry the city's plea to the Pentagon. This resulted in a personal visit and an inspection of the base on February 13, 1949, by Secretary of the Air Force W. Stuart Symington, SAC Commander Lt. Col. Curtis LeMay and Senator Wherry. However, the final decision to deactivate the base had apparently already been made. The official announcement to move the 27th Fighter Wing was made on February 16, 1949, and operations officially ceased at Kearney on March 15.

The Kearney Air Force Base was then declared excess. It was listed as late as January, 1951, as an inactive base, and after that it disappeared from the Air Force's list of stations.

### SOURCES

*Kearney Daily Hub*, September 24, 1963; *Kearney Army Air Field*, history, declassified as per EO 11652, DOD. DIR 5200.9; personal interviews with Bill Potter, Chandler Lynch, Jean Lynch; correspondence from J. F. Schmitz, Jr.

Special thanks to Bill Potter for reading and tabulating declassified information from three rolls of microfilm on the history of the *Kearney Army Air Field*.

---

(Next month's *Buffalo Tales* will tell about the civilian personnel at the base, the USO, the Red Cross, and the effect of the Army Air Base on Kearney and the surrounding community.)