

The Return of Kelly Field

Most of the huge Texas base is now “KellyUSA,” but USAF will keep the field as a part of Lackland.

NEARLY 85 years after it first set up shop as a flight school for pilots in the Army’s Aviation Section, Kelly Field, which grew into one of the nation’s oldest and most colorful military bases, has regained its original name and returned to its original mission of training airmen.

On July 13, much of the sprawling Texas complex that has been Kelly Air Force Base officially becomes “KellyUSA,” a vast industrial park for aerospace firms, major corporations, and San Antonio businesses. Major elements of the logistics operations that have been the base’s primary mission since World War II already have shifted to other installations. Many of the Air Force facilities are passing to civilian hands.

However, under the conversion plans, the base’s airfield and flight operations will remain under the Air Force and become part of Lackland AFB, Tex., which itself was carved out of the Kelly complex during World War II.

Now called Kelly Field Annex, it is home to the 149th Fighter Wing (ANG) and the 433rd Airlift Wing (AFRC). Joint-use arrangements will allow the businesses that move into KellyUSA to use the runways as well.

Interestingly, it is the Guard wing that has brought Kelly back to its function as a training base. Although Kelly served that role for two world wars, it later evolved into a major supply and maintenance depot. Two years ago, however, the 149th FW was transferred to Air Education and Training Command and launched a four-month course to retrain experienced fighter pilots in the F-16. Since



In its early days, Kelly Field truly was a field—an unpaved former cotton field. Here, cadets awaiting their turn to fly sit in a shelter watching the Jennys being prepared for take off from the grass.

By Bruce D. Callander

then, the F-16 training has expanded into a full seven-month course to give newly graduated pilots their first taste of combat aircraft.

Beginnings

Kelly cannot claim to be the first training ground for military aviators or even the first in Texas. The Army's first air school was at College Park, Md., where Wilbur Wright in 1909 taught Lts. Frank P. Lahm and Frederic E. Humphreys to fly as part of the Wright's first airplane deal with the Army. As a bonus, he also gave Lt. Benjamin Foulois a couple of lessons, but he did not let him fly solo.

In February 1910, the Maryland weather turned sour and the two qualified Army pilots had gone on to other duties, so the Army sent Foulois to San Antonio with the flying machine and orders to teach himself to fly and explore military uses of the airplane. He set up shop on the parade ground at Ft. Sam Houston and later was joined by three other officers who had begun their flight training at Glenn H. Curtiss's school at North Island, San Diego. Among the three was Lt. George E.M. Kelly.

On May 10, 1911, Kelly took off in a Curtiss Model D for what turned out to be his final qualifying flight. He damaged the machine trying to land, and then he tried again and was killed. An investigating board ruled that Kelly had died trying to steer his damaged airplane away from a group of soldiers.

The accident was the last straw for officials at Ft. Sam. Foulois himself had survived numerous accidents. The Curtiss had been wrecked and repaired shortly before Kelly's fatal flight. Army officials banned all flying at the fort, flight training returned to College Park, and Foulois went on to a desk job in Washington.

In November 1915, however, Foulois returned to Ft. Sam as a captain in command of the 1st Aero Squadron. The following spring, he took the unit south to support Brig. Gen. John J. Pershing's punitive expedition against Mexican revolutionary Pancho Villa. Air operations in Mexico were disappointing, but they were a valuable learning experience. One of the lessons the Army learned was that it needed training centers to more fully prepare pilots before they reported to operational units.

With war already under way in



With a Jenny in the background, aviation cadets take an exam. In World War I, Kelly trained not only pilots but also those going into aviation mechanics and other aviation skills. It was also a reception and testing center for recruits.

Europe, the importance of airpower was becoming apparent. In 1916, Congress approved \$13.3 million to beef up the Aviation Section and part of the money went into setting up new schools. Foulois was ordered to scout out a suitable site in the San Antonio area and chose a 700-acre tract south of the city. Congress authorized the Army to lease the property and on April 5, 1917, the first four JN-4 Jenny trainers landed on what had been a cotton field.

The next day, Congress declared war on Germany and, three months later, the installation was named Kelly Field in honor of the lieutenant who had been the first American military aviator killed while piloting a military aircraft.

During the war, the base grew rapidly. It became a reception and testing center for new recruits and trained not only pilots but mechanics and specialists in other aviation-related skills. It also served as the birthplace for new combat units.

Operations soon outgrew the available real estate and the Army leased more land to the north. The original site, now known as Kelly Field No. 1, took on maintenance and supply, and the new area, Kelly Field No. 2, became the flying training center. In February 1918, a satellite area called Kelly Field No. 5 was set up as a flying school and named Brooks Field. Later, the School of Aviation Medicine would move there.

During the war, the airmen at Kelly

organized some 250,000 men into units, including such combat outfits as the 17th, the 148th, and the 94th ("Hat in Ring") Aero Squadrons. The flying school graduated 1,459 pilots and 398 flight instructors in the course of the war, and enlisted courses had turned out an average of 2,000 mechanics and chauffeurs a month.

Kilner's Complaint

The training program, however, was not as seamless as officials might have wished. Col. Walter Kilner, chief of the Army Air Service's Training Section in Europe, wrote a blistering postwar critique of Stateside schooling. He complained that too many men received their wings and commissions before they could actually fly, there was no efficient way to eliminate worthless students, and the sheer magnitude of the program was causing delays in training and in assigning trained officers to units.

Writing about what he called the lack of proper "trade testing" and placement, Kilner specifically cited Kelly Field for the way it formed men into aero squadrons. "Wood workers were rated as machinists," he said, "farmers as mechanics, and good mechanics were given fatigue duties. Clerks were made mechanics and good mechanics were made clerks, and then the entire squadron would be turned over to a supposedly technical officer for further training and assignment to duty.

Under such conditions, it is not strange that mechanical work progressed slowly and that much of it was not properly done.”

With the end of the war, the Air Service cut back sharply, and most of the smaller fields that had been set up to train men for the American Expeditionary Forces closed. Training and maintenance operations were consolidated, and although Kelly itself shrank, it continued to function in both areas.

Kelly Field No. 2 became the advanced flying school for the Air Service and, later, the Air Corps. It trained pilots in pursuit, bombardment, attack, and observation. Most Army aviators who were trained between the wars graduated from this school. They included future Chiefs of Staff Gens. Thomas D. White, Curtis E. LeMay, John P. McConnell, Hoyt S. Vandenberg, and John D. Ryan.

A Distinguished Group

Other distinguished alumni included Gen. Ira C. Eaker, the World War II commander of Eighth Air Force; Lt. Gen. William H. Tunner, boss of Military Air Transport Service; Maj. Gen. Claire Lee Chennault, leader of the Flying Tigers; and Charles Lindbergh, the first to fly solo nonstop across the Atlantic. Gen. Carl A. Spaatz once commanded the base, and Gen. James H. Doolittle served at Kelly with the 104th Aero Squadron and later attended the Air Service Mechanical School.

The names of several other men with ties to Kelly have since been given to other bases. Among them were Brig. Gen. Frank D. Lackland, a former Kelly Field commander who campaigned for a separate cadet center, and Sidney Johnson Brooks Jr., who was killed at Kelly on his last training flight and awarded his wings posthumously. Both gave their names to bases once attached to Kelly. Other Air Force installations named for men with Kelly connections, included Ellsworth, Castle, Vandenberg, Chennault, Moody, and Pease.

Over the years, however, Kelly took on new chores that eventually would lead it away from training and become its principal mission. During World War I, the aviation general supply depot had moved to Kelly Field No. 1 from downtown San Antonio. In 1921, the aviation repair depot in Dallas joined Kelly’s supply depot to form the San Antonio Intermediate Air Depot.

In the mid-1920s, Kelly Field No. 1 was renamed Duncan Field for Lt. Col. Thomas Duncan, a pilot formerly stationed at Kelly Field and later killed in a crash. Field No. 2 became simply Kelly Field and the two installations functioned separately for the next 18 years.

The now-smaller Kelly Field continued not only as a training base but as a major maintenance center and showcase installation. It hosted flying circuses and was the site of the 1924 National Elimination Balloon

Race. In 1926 it was the starting point for the Pan American Goodwill Flight, a 133-day mission to “show the flag” in 23 Central and South American countries. Kelly graduate Capt. Ira Eaker was one of the pilots.

In that same year, Kelly became the filming location for the World War I epic, “Wings,” which starred Buddy Rogers and Clara Bow and included bit player Gary Cooper. The base supplied airplanes and pilots for the movie, and many base personnel served as extras. Lt. Hoyt Vandenberg gave Rogers flying lessons. The actor later flew with Navy Ferry Command in World War II.

In the 1920s, Kelly also was home to Maj. William C. Ocker and Capt. Carl J. Crane, who did pioneering work in the field of instrument flying and developed a “blind flying” curriculum for the base’s training school.

The airmen at Kelly, like the rest of the Army Air Corps, limped into the 1930s short of airplanes and personnel while the nation struggled under the Great Depression. In 1938, however, Hitler began his move in Europe and the strength of the German military and, particularly, its Luftwaffe, shocked the US into a buildup. Congress voted \$300 million for Air Corps expansion, and Kelly received funds to build new classrooms, cadet housing, dining halls, offices, and training facilities, many of which still survive. Over the next four years, the base’s advanced flying school would graduate more than 6,800 pilots and 1,700 instructors.

In June 1942, the War Department broke off a piece of Kelly Field and named it the San Antonio Aviation Cadet Center. SAACC’s main mission was to provide preflight and officer training to cadets, but as the flood of students grew, it opened a tent city annex to accommodate cadets waiting for preflight and those who had washed out of one type of training and were waiting to try another. It was that area that became Lackland Air Force Base.

Air Congestion

With several flying fields operating in the same neighborhood, congestion in the air posed a safety problem. Thus, Kelly and Duncan were reunited and again called Kelly Field.



An aerial photo of Kelly in the 1920s to 1930s. After World War I, Kelly Field No. 2 was used as an advanced flying school. Several future Air Force Chiefs of Staff and other distinguished fliers trained there.



Gradually its mission shifted to that of supply and maintenance, and the base evolved into a giant industrial complex under Air Service Command, headquartered at Patterson Field, Ohio.

The base's maintenance work included overhaul, repair, and modification of aircraft, engines, and related equipment. It handled B-17s, B-25s, B-29s, P-51s, and the ubiquitous C-47 cargo airplane. It also worked on bombsights, guns, and electrical equipment. To add storage space, the base annexed Normoyle Ordnance Depot, which became known as East Kelly. In 1945, Kelly also was used as an out processing center for soldiers being discharged.

By war's end, the workforce at Kelly had grown to more than 16,000 military and 15,000 civilian workers. Almost 40 percent of the latter were women, known as "Kelly Katies," who worked in almost every area, including engine overhaul.

In the postwar drawdown, Kelly cut back on some functions but continued its depot and supply missions. In 1946, the San Antonio Air Technical Service Command (ASC was redesignated Air Technical Service Command in 1944) became the San Antonio Air Materiel Area. The following year, Congress created the independent United States Air Force and in January 1948, Kelly Field became Kelly Air Force Base.

The shooting war was over, but a new Cold War developed and Kelly would play a major role in it. In June 1948, when Soviet forces blocked

its B-58 Logistics Support Management Office, Kelly became a model for a major organizational realignment. Under the new arrangement, a weapon system manager's responsibilities included budgeting, funding, computing requirements, and arranging for maintenance.

The BUFF

Then, in 1960, Kelly began what would become a 33-year relationship with the B-52 bomber. What started as traditional repair and overhaul evolved into extensive modification of the bomber, increasing its load capacity, range, and service life.

During the Vietnam War, SAAMA set up supply centers in the western Pacific, dispatched maintenance



The aircraft maintenance hangar, here and above, at the San Antonio Air Materiel Area at Kelly could house 13 B-52s at once. The same hangar was later used to overhaul eight C-5s at a time. By then, SAAMA had become the San Antonio Air Logistics Center.

ground access to Berlin, the C-54 Skymaster became the workhorse of the Berlin Airlift. Kelly was the only US depot performing repair and replacement of the airplane's PW R-2000 engines. Within six months, the base handled more than 1,300 power plants for aircraft used in Operation Vittles.

When war erupted in Korea, Kelly put in a night-lighting system and worked around the clock to recondition B-29s for duty. With arrival of the jet-powered B-36D, the base took on a new generation of aircraft and engines.

By the mid-1950s, it was handling the B-47. And when SAAMA opened

teams to Southeast Asia, and opened an aerial port to provide airplane cargo service to the war zone. Kelly also took on responsibility for USAF's entire watercraft program, including landing craft and combat ships. It managed weapon systems such as the F-102, F-106, A-37, O-2, and F-5 aircraft and did maintenance on life support systems and aerospace ground equipment.

As that war wound down, Kelly became involved with the Vietnamization Program, aimed at withdrawing US troops and preparing South Vietnam's forces to carry on alone. SAAMA developed plans to turn Bien Hoa Air Base into an engine over-



The skilled workforce at Kelly extended the service life of C-5s and many other USAF aircraft. The base is evolving again, this time into an industrial park, but USAF retains the airfield, as Kelly Field Annex, home to ANG and AFRC wings.

haul facility and to transfer A-37, F-5, and T-38 aircraft, engines, and support spares to South Vietnam. Then, in 1973, Kelly became the reception area for prisoners of war returning to the San Antonio area for medical treatment and family reunions.

In 1974, San Antonio Air Materiel Area changed its name to San Antonio Air Logistics Center but continued to manage some of the Air Force's largest aircraft programs. It helped extend the life and airlift capacity of the C-5, ramped up work on the F100 engines as the numbers of F-16s and F-15s increased, and continued to support the space program and handle maintenance responsibility for items in the Air Force's Nuclear Weapons Program. It moved into areas such as advanced metallics, nondestructive inspection, artificial intelligence, and robotics.

During Operation Just Cause, Kelly served as a transit point for more than 8,200 troops deploying to Panama and as a reception site for some 250 incoming wounded service members. Later, the base moved more than 10,000 short tons of material and 4,700 passengers and deployed 17 million pounds of munitions to Southwest Asia for Operation Desert Storm. More recently, it has supported US operations in Kosovo.

In 1992, a major defense reorganization had shifted ownership of most of Kelly's warehouse space from the Air Force to the new Defense Logistics Agency. The follow-

ing year, the Base Realignment and Closure Commission added Kelly and three other logistics centers to the list of installations marked for closure. Local officials convinced the commissioners to spare the base, but it was only a temporary stay. The 1995 BRAC voted to close the San Antonio ALC, shift some base missions and organizations to Lackland, and cut between 10,000 and 13,000 local jobs.

Roots of KellyUSA

With Kelly's future uncertain, San Antonio City Council created a not-for-profit group to develop plans for converting the base to commercial and industrial use. That panel evolved into the Greater Kelly Development Authority, which developed a master plan for what it dubbed "KellyUSA."

Rather than manage the conversion itself, GKDA opted to contract that job to EG&G Inc., a global technology company that supplies support services to government and industry. The company's local subsidiary, EG&G Management Services of San Antonio, also contracted with Defense Logistics Agency to manage the privatization of the DLA distribution depot at the base. GKDA then leased other parts of the base to major aerospace firms such as Pratt

& Whitney, Boeing, and Lockheed, which will continue to work for the Air Force, and to a variety of local and international businesses and industrial firms.

Under separate but similar agreements, the Air Force will transfer most of Brooks Air Force Base to the city. San Antonio then will lease back some facilities to the Air Force and develop the rest into a high-tech business and academic park.

While the transition is going forward, however, a parallel effort is under way to undo the environmental damage that nearly 85 years of use have wrought on the base. As early as 1983, Kelly began a clean-up effort to correct past waste management practices that had left some areas of the base contaminated by hazardous substances and wastes.

The service already has spent close to \$200 million on the effort and expects the final bill to come to some \$480 million when the job is finished in 2004. Much of the money is going into systems to clean up contaminated ground water, but some of the base's civilian neighbors are not satisfied with the results.

The real problem, they say, is that solvents and other wastes from the base seeped into the aquifer and contaminated the water for miles around. The Air Force contends that some of the pollution has been caused by off-base sources. Even so, some residents are suing the service for the damage to their property.

The final word on whether the Air Force has done its clean-up job properly will be rendered by two agencies, the Texas Natural Resource Conservation Commission and the US Environmental Protection Agency. USAF officials have pledged not to stop the effort until both are satisfied.

Meanwhile, the environmental disputes have not slowed the development of KellyUSA. Billing itself as "the center for global business," the base that began with Wright Flyers and Curtiss biplanes now sees itself as a futuristic industrial park, a distribution gateway to the Americas, and one of the nation's largest commercial aviation maintenance centers. ■

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