

FSH home to first airborne border patrol, smuggling interdiction

One unique aspect of Fort Sam Houston's aviation history was the assignment of the last operational air unit to Fort Sam's Dodd Field – U.S. Coast Guard Border Squadron One.

"From 1934 to 1937, Coast Guard Border Squadron One flew open-cockpit planes from Brownsville to Fort Bliss out in El Paso out of Fort Sam Houston, Dodd Field," said retired Coast Guard Reserve Capt. Richard Whynot.

"They went back and forth for three years against smuggling out of Mexico, mostly alcohol," Whynot said.

When Prohibition was repealed in 1933, a vast majority – 242 of the existing 252 counties – remained "dry." Liquor distribution to "wet" counties and other states was government controlled.

Excise and local taxes equated to a little over one-third the purchase cost, thus liquor smuggling remained extremely profitable, and illegal alien and drug smuggling remained unaffected by the repeal of Prohibition.

At that time, the Coast Guard was heavily involved in interdiction and the Customs Service and Border Patrol had the enormous task of combating the smuggling of alcohol, illegal aliens and drugs along 5,900 miles of open border between the U.S. and Mexico.

In Mexico, communications were primitive and communities isolated, connected only by dirt roads and a few railroads.

Local border patrol and customs officials realized

that aircraft flying patrols would be of significant benefit. The problem was that neither agency had aircraft or the money to operate them.

The smugglers themselves provided the solution utilizing aircraft to carry out their operations. One by one customs officials seized these aircraft, and before long customs officials in Texas had created their own ad-hoc "air force" composed of a rag-tag collection of confiscated airplanes.

Unfunded and officially discouraged by Washington, their operation continued with Army assistance at Dodd Field, providing obsolete parts, materiel and an old hangar.

"The hangar was along Harry Wurzbach [Road] and the field was a dirt strip about where the chapel is now on Dodd Field," Whynot said, adding that Wynans Road had some buildings

used as the crew's quarters.

Customs agents were so effective at stemming major smuggling activities, Washington could no longer ignore the operation.

So, early in 1934, Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau, Jr. directed that all flying activities of the Treasury Department be consolidated under the cognizance of one organization, the Coast Guard.

The Coast Guard had a cadre of trained pilots and maintenance personnel, access to well-qualified training and was expanding its aviation program to include induction of customs pilots as Chief Petty Officer Aviation Pilots according to the USCG Web site.

The following month, a unit of five men commanded by Coast Guard Lt. Clarence Edge arrived at Dodd Field. First order of business was an evaluation of the planes.



Photo courtesy of FSH Museum

The Curtiss F6C-4 "Hawk" aircraft (left) and a Curtiss F8C-1 or C-3 "Falcon" (right) are used in a simulated "take-down" as crew members of Coast Guard Border Squadron One rehearse techniques they used against smugglers crossing from Mexico into the U.S.

All had been seized from air smugglers. Most of the aircraft were in extremely poor condition and unsuitable

As a result, they were condemned by the Coast Guard and burned. Replacement aircraft were acquired from the U.S. Navy.

The clear air in South Texas allowed easy spotting of other aircraft at great distances. The Coast Guard patrols would spot smugglers coming across the border and force them to land for inspections.

Coast Guard crews carried side-arms and a Thompson sub-machine gun. If signaling did not get the desired response – showing the Thompson usually clarified the message.

Contraband was usually five-gallon tins of alcohol picked up in Mexico. According to early accounts, the facilities at Dodd Field were Spartan, crew scrambling for spare parts and

fuel. When certain shiny tools and parts began to mysteriously disappear, a cat was "recruited" to attend to the culprits – pack rats.

There were also the more traditional missions that the crews performed such as medical evacuations and searching for people lost in the wilderness.

At the end of a year, operations were transferred from Dodd Field to Del Rio Texas, operating from a commercial airfield and relying on American Airlines facilities and assistance.

In December 1936, Coast Guard Headquarters again ordered relocation of the detachment to Biggs Field at Fort Bliss in El Paso.

After a chain of endorsements including the Treasury Department, War Department, Army Eighth Corps Fort Sam Houston, Chief of Staff U.S. Army Signal Corp, and the commanding officer of the Air Corps Detachment at Fort Bliss, the Coast Guard Air Patrol took up residence in a small hangar at Biggs in February 1937.

At the end of 1939 it was decided to close the El Paso air detachment as world events were overtaking the remote border patrols and assets were needed elsewhere.

(Sources: U.S. Coast Guard and Society for the Preservation of Historic Fort Sam Houston, Inc.'s "Preservation Gazette." L.A. Shively and retired Coast Guard Reserve Capt. Richard Whynot contributed.)