

The birthplace of military aviation – 100 years of growth

Construction a Fort Sam hallmark then as now



When Lt. Benjamin Foulois brought the Signal Corps Number 1 aircraft to Fort Sam Houston in 1910, he was coming to a burgeoning military installation. His nascent experiments with military flight and aerial reconnaissance laid the foundation for pioneer aviators that paralleled the impact of the Army post's growth on San Antonio and on American air power today.

Just prior to the turn of the century, Fort Sam Houston was the home of Headquarters, Department of Texas, one of the Army's regional administrative headquarters and a General Officer Command.

The Department of Texas was, at that time, comprised the states of Texas and Arkansas, the Oklahoma and Indian Territories. Within these regions were more than 4,000 troops.

The Commanding General of the Department and his staff occupied the Quadrangle with the San Antonio Quartermaster Depot which supplied troops within the Department.

The Department of Texas was responsible for the security of the border with Mexico and reinforcing the Panama Canal Zone in the event of a threat.

At the end of the war with Spain, Fort Sam Houston totaled 466 acres.

The Quadrangle and the Staff Post, where the officers of the

Headquarters lived, accounted for 137 acres.

East of the Quadrangle was the Upper Post, where the regiment-sized garrison lived, and accounted for another 19 acres. The remaining 310 acres were located about three miles northeast of the Quadrangle and had formerly been used as a camp ground and firing range.

Since the mid-1890s, units on post had had to lease ranch land north of Leon Springs in order to fire their Krag-Jorgensen rifles and field artillery with which the troops were armed, as the weapons were too powerful to be fired on post.

By 1898 in order to accommodate an expected garrison of one full infantry regiment, one full cavalry regiment, an artillery battalion and assorted signal and medical personnel, additional land was required for the necessary barracks, mess halls, stables and other facilities.

Between 1903 and 1907, the War Department purchased 109 acres adjacent to the north side of the post, between Wilson and Eleanor Streets, extending east to approximately present-day Chaffee Road.

Construction began in 1905 along what would become Stanley Road.

The new construction, dubbed the Cavalry and Light Artillery Post Addition, provided for three artillery barracks, twelve cavalry barracks, and two band barracks all with the

necessary stables, mess halls and latrines, a regimental headquarters, a bakery and a stockade.

There were 42 single-family officer quarters, two quadruplex officers quarters, seven noncommissioned officers quarters and a bachelor officers quarters. This building program would make Fort Sam Houston the largest post in the Army by the time it was completed in 1912. It would also allow the elements of the garrison to have its own, separate campus.

Thus were born the Infantry Post, the Cavalry Post and the Artillery Post.

For a garrison of this size, the old hospital on the Staff Post, built in 1886 with a twelve-bed capacity was no longer adequate. A new station hospital with an eighty-four bed capacity was begun in 1908 in the area behind the Artillery Post officer quarters. It would be expanded several times in the years to come.

In addition to the stables, the 2,000-plus horses in the garrison needed a veterinary hospital which was built in 1908 in the area behind the officers' quarters on the Staff Post.

An additional 340 acres to the north was leased from George Brackenridge for a drill ground. It was here where the "aeroplane shed" would be built, several hundred feet from the nearest inhabited

building.

Incessant demand for a government-owned reservation for firing ranges and maneuver areas prompted the War Department to buy additional ranch land north and east of Leon Springs

in 1906.

A total of 17,000 acres was acquired but Col. Joseph Dorst, commander of the post, recommended the War Department purchase additional acreage along and beyond Salado Creek east of the post for close-in training.

During mobilization for WWI, this land was obtained and offered a variety of tactical environments. The high ground along the eastern edge of the post gave commanders an excellent perch from which to observe maneuvering troops.

Foulois' activities at Fort Sam would change the Army and Fort Sam Houston, leading to the development of the Air Service and the creation of an operational air field on what would become Dodd Field.

The operations of the Aviation Section would lead to major changes in San Antonio as additional airfields and military bases would be built – Kelly Field, Duncan Field, Brooks Field and Randolph Field – but Fort Sam's growth during the early part of the 19th century added to the military might of the United States and brought concurrent economic development to San Antonio.

(Source: Fort Sam Houston Museum with contribution from L.A. Shively)