

10-1998

Air Activities of Texas: A Small Town's Contribution to the Big War

Tommy Stringer

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/ethj>



Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

Tell us how this article helped you.

Recommended Citation

Stringer, Tommy (1998) "Air Activities of Texas: A Small Town's Contribution to the Big War," *East Texas Historical Journal*: Vol. 36: Iss. 2, Article 7.

Available at: <http://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/ethj/vol36/iss2/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by SFA ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in East Texas Historical Journal by an authorized administrator of SFA ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact cdsscholarworks@sfasu.edu.

**AIR ACTIVITIES OF TEXAS:
A SMALL TOWN'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE BIG WAR**

by Tommy Stringer

From 1939 through 1941 the United States attempted to maintain a position of peace while war raged in Europe and Asia. Although proclaiming an official policy of neutrality, the United States demonstrated partiality toward the Allied Powers through measures such as the Lend-Lease Act. Denouncing Germany and Italy as representatives of hatred and force, President Franklin Roosevelt urged Congress to pass legislation needed to create "Fortress America," and to establish the United States as the "Great Arsenal of Democracy."

Congress appropriated massive sums for war preparations, increasing the existing budget of \$2 billion to more than \$10 billion in 1940. That year the Selective Service Act, the nation's first peace-time draft, called for 1.2 million inductees for one year's service and activated more than 800,000 reservists. Clearly the nation was moving toward direct involvement in the war.²

Among the areas that attracted special attention from the nation's political and military leadership as the war approached was air power. The issue had first been raised by Brigadier General William "Billy" Mitchell. As assistant chief of the Army Air Service in World War I, Mitchell concluded that the airplane put a completely new complexion on the old system of making war because of its capabilities to take the war beyond the battlefield to what he called the vital centers of the enemy's country, its cities and its industries. Mitchell predicted the airplane would replace the battleship as the dominant military weapon, a theory he demonstrated with highly publicized displays in 1921 and 1923 in which he sank warships by dropping bombs from planes. Predicting that Japan would likely be America's next military opponent, Mitchell urged the government to expand the nation's defenses, particularly its air defenses. Since the attitude of the Coolidge Administration was to cut the budget, reduce taxes, and avoid expensive innovations, Mitchell's cries went unheeded. His "Report on the Pacific and Far East" (1924) was buried in the files of the Department of War.³

Mitchell leveled charges of incompetency, criminal negligence, and almost treasonable administration of the national defense against the departments of the Navy and War. His attacks led to his court martial and eventual resignation from the Army in 1925. But by the late 1930s, Hitler's *Luftwaffe* was teaching bloody lessons on the effectiveness of the airplane as a weapon of war and destruction. Mitchell had been correct in his assessments. Clearly, the United States had to design a program that would produce the most air power in the shortest amount of time.⁴

America's venture into aviation began during the Civil War when the Union Army experimented with observation balloons as a way to monitor enemy movements. In 1892 a balloon section was organized in the Army Signal Corps and headed by Aldolphus Greeley. Fifteen years later the Signal Corps added

Tommy Stringer teaches history at Navarro College.

an Aeronautical Division and purchased its first planes from the Wright Brothers. General John J. Pershing created an independent Air Service of the American Expeditionary Force in France in 1917. Following the Great War, Congress passed the National Defense Act of 1920, which established the Air Service within the United States Army. The name of the Air Service was changed in 1926 to the United States Army Air Corps, and that designation remained until 1941 when it was changed to the United States Army Air Forces.⁵

In 1935 the Army Air Corps adopted a ten-year master plan of goals, but developments in Europe and Asia mandated that the plan be revamped and the time frame for accomplishing some of the goals be shortened. Overseeing the monumental task was General H.H. "Hap" Arnold, who as commander of the Army Air Forces directed the organization and construction of a behemoth air power with destructive forces the world had never before seen.⁶

Time was of the essence, beginning with a massive conversion from peace-time to a war-time economy. Although the United States declared an official policy of neutrality when hostilities erupted in Europe, officials began preparations for what appeared to be an inevitable involvement in the conflict. For example, a piano company began building airplane wings, a tire plant turned out fuselages, a pickle production facility produced airplane skids and floats, and a girdle manufacturer made parachutes. The most obvious and immediate need, however, was for airplanes. In 1938 American aviation manufacturers built 100 planes per month, but this was woefully inadequate. Arnold implored them to double or even triple production.⁷

It was apparent that increasing the number of available aircraft was not enough. According to Arnold, a powerful air force resulted from the sum total of air supplies, air bases, and airmen. It was as important to have a balanced production of trained combat and maintenance crews as it was to have planes. Consequently, training pilots to fly the planes that were coming off the American assembly lines was a top priority for the Army Air Corps.⁸

To train the necessary personnel, the Army Air Corps became the largest educational organization in existence. But even the Army's greatest efforts were insufficient to train all the pilots and support personnel that would be needed when the United States entered the war. To build a facility comparable to Randolph Field in San Antonio would require five years, and it could train only 500 pilots a year. So Arnold devised an unorthodox plan: he invited directors of some of the nation's best civilian flying schools to his office in Washington. He explained that he had no funds for the proposal, but he expected Congress to provide the necessary financing in the next appropriations bill. He proposed that the civilian flying schools expand their facilities to feed, house, and train cadets for the Army Air Corps. Even in 1940 the Army needed 100,000 pilots, but the military trained only 750 annually. According to Arnold's plan, the Army would furnish planes and a small supervisory staff and pay the civilian schools a fixed fee per student pilot. The proposal was received less than enthusiastically, since such a move was "against precedent." Arnold recalled, "My training experts though I was slightly balmy."⁹

When the civilian contractors estimated it would require an initial expenditure of \$200,000 for each school, Arnold suggested they borrow the money until Congress approved the appropriation. Incredibly, they did precisely that. President Roosevelt approved \$106 million for the training program, which included building costs, gasoline, transportation, and training planes. Arnold hoped the civilian schools would train up to 2,400 pilots per year, but as the situation in Europe and Asia intensified, he boosted that number to 12,000 per year. By 1939 he was hoping for 30,000. According to Arnold, the objective was met.¹⁰

Training pilots was an "assembly line" procedure, much like the mass production of planes. The entire process of taking raw cadets and turning them into pilots spanned thirty-two weeks of training and involved three levels of flying schools. It began with pre-flight training where recruits learned army discipline and military customs and traditions while undergoing intensive physical training and conditioning. The second level involved primary flight school that entailed ground school as well as actual flying. The aspiring pilots learned various maneuvers in a P-T (pilot training) plane that culminated in a successful solo flight. From primary school the cadets moved to more advanced training, commonly called basic, where they learned to fly more sophisticated aircraft. Some specialized as navigators or bombardiers. Borrowing from the personnel practices of America's giant corporations, each trainee was assigned the job for which he seemed best suited. After graduation from basic, he received a commission as a second lieutenant and was ready to make his contribution to the war effort.¹¹

Because of its extensive open area, level terrain, and significant number of clear weather days, Texas was an ideal location for numerous Army Air Force stations. The government built new facilities and contracted for the use of existing facilities to meet the growing need for trained pilots and related personnel. By the end of World War II, sixty-five different stations in the Lone Star State were involved in various levels of flight training. They stretched from Dalhart to Brownsville and from Tyler to El Paso.¹²

Under those arrangements, the Air Activities of Texas, Corsicana Field came into existence. Prior to World War II, Air Activities of Texas, owned and operated by J.D. Reed in Houston, trained civilian pilots, sold airplanes to private individuals, and provided charter service. Reed sold controlling interest in the school to a partnership of B.L. Woolley, B. W. Woolley, E.D. "Dick" Criddle, Edward F. "Doc" Booth, and J.O. Womack. A graduate of the University of Texas, B.L. (Bennett) Woolley was an independent oil producer in Dallas. He served as president of the Highland Park School Board and vice president of the Petroleum Association. Booth was a West Point graduate, and he had received flight training at Kelly and Brooks fields in San Antonio. He had flown as a commercial pilot for Pan American Airlines before founding his own aviation company in 1933. Womack was a licensed commercial pilot who had operated civilian flight schools in Marshall and Houston. B.W. (Wynne) Woolley, Bennett Woolley's brother and business partner, moved to Corsicana

to operate the flight school on a day-to-day basis as director of Air Activities of Corsicana. His brother-in-law, E.D. "Dick" Criddle, was the assistant director of the school.¹³

The new owners negotiated a contract with the government to train military pilots under the provisions developed by General Arnold. B.L. Woolley traveled to San Antonio's Randolph Field in August 1940, to meet with a Major Smart to discuss the agreement. Smart advised Woolley to examine existing facilities at California Aero Academy in Ontario, California. Stover Brothers Contractors had constructed that facility, and it had proven to be an effective training site. Woolley's inspection of California Aero was helpful as he planned his Texas operation. Following lengthy negotiations, Air Activities of Texas received a contract from the government to establish a facility at Corsicana. Congressman Luther Johnson, a Corsicana native and ranking member of the House Foreign Relations Committee, no doubt was instrumental in securing the site for his hometown. A formal contract was signed December 13, 1940, in Dayton, Ohio, authorizing the Air Activities of Texas to provide primary flight training, the second tier in the three-level training process. The contract provided a rate of \$17.50 per flying hour to be paid to the flight school.¹⁴

Construction of the facility began six weeks later. The field was located six miles south of downtown Corsicana on U.S. Highway 287 on a 400-acre tract owned by banker J.N. Edens. A large part of the acreage had been an oil tank farm, which meant the tanks must be removed before construction of the airfield could begin. That was only one of many obstacles. When construction began on February 2, 1941, so did the rain, and every load of building materials had to be pushed through mud by heavy tractors. More than 250 carpenters, plumbers, painters, and laborers worked in sloppy conditions to get the facility ready for the first class of cadets due to arrive in a matter of weeks. The task was monumental. Plans called for a landing strip 2,000 feet long and 225 feet wide, hangars, barracks, offices, maintenance buildings, and a combination kitchen and mess hall. Despite time constraints and inclement weather, workers completed six buildings by March 18. The first class of cadets, Class 41-H consisting of fifty-one men, arrived the next day to begin primary flight training. America's entry into World War II was nine months away, but preparations proceeded in earnest.¹⁵

Wendell W. Hutchinson rode the train all night from his home near Anderson, Iowa, to Corsicana to report for duty. He was the first cadet to check in at the Corsicana Field. George Gaffney came from Arkansas, arriving in the middle of the night at the Corsicana bus station. The agent on duty had no idea what Gaffney was talking about when he asked directions to the "air field." When daylight came, Gaffney walked downtown and made contact with B. W. Woolley, who told him to check into the Navarro Hotel and await further orders. Woolley told the early arrivals to "eat in the hotel restaurant when you're hungry, but I hope you don't get hungry more than three times a day." The cadets occupied their barracks on March 19, and the Air Activities of Texas, Corsicana Field, was in operation. It was designated as the 301st

A.A.F.F.T.D. (Army Air Force Flying Training Detachment). In May 1944, the designation was changed to 252nd A.A.F. Base Unit Contract Pilot School, Primary.¹⁶

Major O.E. Ford, Jr., who had a degree in mechanical engineering from Texas A&M and had graduated from Kelly Field Flight School in 1934, was named post commander. Major Ford's staff, all of whom were transferred from the Air Corps Training Detachment in Lincoln, Nebraska, consisted of two officers, three enlisted men, and a civil service clerk. They arrived in Corsicana in February prior to the completion of their offices at the field, so they established temporary headquarters at the Navarro Hotel. They later moved to the private residence of Sergeant Major Spencer and finally occupied a suite of offices in the State National Bank on Beaton Street. On April 1 the officers finally moved to their new quarters at the Corsicana Field. By that time their numbers had increased to five officers, nine enlisted men, and three civil service clerks. The military personnel were to establish military organization and discipline and insure the cadets received proper training in standards of the Army Air Corps.¹⁷

There were eighteen civilian flight instructors and twenty-two airplanes that had arrived from Dallas, where they had been used to train army pilots. The number of planes and instructors grew dramatically as the field and its operations expanded. For example, Class 44-A had 164 instructors, and by late 1944 there were 199 planes at the Corsicana Field. The directors attempted to maintain a 3.5:1 ratio of planes to cadets and a 4:1 ratio of instructors to cadets.¹⁸

The primary flight training involved ten weeks of instruction with sixty hours devoted to flight training and 140 hours to ground school instruction, which involved flight theory, airplane engines, maps and air navigation, plane identification, meteorology, and mathematics. The 140 hour ground school was reduced to ninety-six hours by mid-1944. Paul C. Holcomb was director of the ground school, a position he held during the entire operation of the Corsicana Field.¹⁹

Ground school instructors, who normally numbered about ten, had backgrounds in the field of education. Miss Margaret Pannill, who later had a distinguished career as an English instructor at Navarro Junior College, taught in the Corsicana Public Schools before she moved to the aviation school. She recalled being approached by officials of the Air Activities school with an offer to teach there. She expressed surprise since her background was in music and literature, and she knew little about airplane identification and weather patterns. When she questioned her qualifications to teach such subjects, she was told the most important concern was her teaching skills. "They asked me if I thought I could teach, and I told them I knew I could teach. Then they told me they would teach me what I needed to know," she recalled. She remembered "staying one step ahead of the cadets," by preparing each day's lesson the night before.²⁰

Besides the ground school instructors, the Air Activities of Texas employed other civilians. Many Corsicana residents worked as maintenance

personnel, mechanics, barbers, cooks, secretaries, and other positions. In January 1944, Air Activities had 552 civilian employees on the payroll. The school also purchased many goods and services from local merchants, providing significant boosts to sales. George Baum, owner of a local shoe store, contracted to provide footwear to the cadets. Obviously, the Corsicana Field had a major impact on the local economy.²¹

Within months, a rigorous physical exercise program was added to the cadets' curriculum. Under the leadership of Joe Lagow, the program included exercises to improve coordination and build stamina, essential traits for effective pilots. Cadets performed calisthenics to music, a forerunner of "jazzercise." The sessions included lively games of volleyball, baseball, and soccer which encouraged the competitive spirits of the cadets and built a bond of camaraderie among them. The construction of a swimming pool enhanced the physical fitness program and provided opportunities for leisurely recreation. A highlight preceding the graduation of each class of cadets was a tug-of-war between the graduating cadets and the underclassmen. The contest was held across a creek so the winners dragged the losers through the mud. Although the competition was intense, the activity was viewed by the cadets as one of the more fun events of their experiences while training at the Corsicana Field. The physical training program built morale among the men and kept them in top physical condition.²²

The cadets came from all over the United States and some special groups were brought in for training at the Corsicana Field, including a unit from Brazil and another from Mexico. There were no African-American cadets in any of the classes. Although many of the trainees were Texans, the vastness of the state made it difficult for even some of them to get their bearings in the rural area around Navarro County. A flight instructor from Arkansas and his trainee took off for their initial flight and after practicing some stalls and spins, the instructor told the trainee to return to the field. Looking below in order to orient themselves, neither could find recognizable landmarks. They set their plane down in a pasture and learned from a farmer that they were a short distance from Hubbard, located about 30 miles west of Corsicana in Hill County. A car was dispatched to drive the lost pilots back to the base where they endured good-natured ridicule from colleagues. Since four hours of flight time and one forced landing were added to the trainee's record as a result of the miscue, the episode was not a complete waste of time.²³

Instructors made a concerted effort to build a sense of teamwork and community among the members of each cadet class. To establish a network of communication, the cadets published a newsletter, *The Reville*, later expanded and the title changed to *Flying Lines*. It was printed every two weeks and contained news about activities on the base and personal information about cadets, instructors, and civilian employees at the Corsicana Field. Each edition included a page entitled "Locker Lovelies" with photographs and information about cadets' sweethearts back home. A regular feature was the "Girl of the Week," usually a female civilian employee at the Field. Political correctness was not a matter of concern in the 1940s.²⁴

Class 42-A published a class book, *The Lazy 8*, in the format of a high school annual with photographs of cadets, instructors, and civilian personnel. It provided a pictorial review of the class activities at the Corsicana Field. Succeeding classes continued the publication until the end of the Field's operations.²⁵

The cadets also produced a radio broadcast from the studio of radio station KAND in Corsicana. The program provided listeners with news and information about base activities and featured the musical talents of some of the cadets. The aspiring pilots also showcased their talents with periodic revues held in the Corsicana High School auditorium where the cadets combined some serious performances with nonsense ranging from vocal and instrumental presentations to magic acts. Large audiences always attended the performances.²⁶

Of course, the primary reason the men had come to Corsicana was to learn to fly. The responsibility for that task lay with the civilian flight instructors. By January 1944, 153 flight instructors were on the staff. Each instructor was assigned four or five cadets. Beginning cadets were labeled "Do Do's," after the extinct, flightless birds noted for their lack of intelligence. The instructor sat in the front seat of the cockpit in the training plane, the P-19, and communicated with the trainee through a one-way "no-talk-back" speaking tube. According to Tillman Reed, a flight instructor from Kerens, their task was sobering. The lives of trainees depended on the instructors' effectiveness in transmitting information. The flight instructor had the sobering responsibility of deciding if and when a cadet was sufficiently skilled to move to the next level of instruction. Each cadet had to solo as a final step in completing his primary flight training. He then received his "Wings" and was initiated into the "Society of Soloers" by being thrown into the lake or washed down with a fire hose. This "ceremony" was the last rite of passage before the cadet moved to the next level of training.²⁷

The cadet classes graduating from the Corsicana Field were sent to various locations for basic training including: Majors Field in Greenville; Perrin Field in Sherman; Enid (Oklahoma) A.A.F.; Strother Field in Winfield, Kansas; Independence (Kansas) A.A. F.; Garden City (Kansas) A.A.F.; and Waco A.A.F.²⁸

At times the flight instructor had to deliver the heartbreaking news that the aspiring pilot had "washed out." One instructor was nicknamed "Captain Maytag" by the cadets because he would "wash them out" like a washing machine. A special bond often developed between the instructor and his charges. Reed still had contacts in person and by mail with several of his former cadets more than fifty years after they completed their training.²⁹

As the war intensified and the demand for pilots increased, the Air Activities facilities expanded. By July 1941, a total of six barracks provided housing for the cadets, and by September two more hangers had been added. Cadets considered the Corsicana Field as a "country club" base. New arrivals often commented about the comfort of the facilities, which included three-

quarter beds in spacious barracks. They even had positive remarks regarding the food served in the mess hall. One cadet recalled that by paying twenty-five cents a week he could have his bed made and his shoes shined by a porter, and his "caretaker" would virtually guarantee the cadet would pass inspection each Saturday.³⁰

The additional numbers of planes and cadets created a congested air traffic problem, so additional runways and landing strips were added near Kerens. As the demand for pilots increased, the size of the cadet classes expanded as well. The first class, 41-H, which arrived in March 1941, totaled fifty-one cadets; class 43-H, which began training in February 1943, started with 343 members, and each succeeding class through 1944 had over 300 cadets. Success rates based on graduation figures varied. For example, thirty-seven members of the first class, or seventy-two percent, graduated and moved to the next level of training. Class 44-G graduated 286 of its original 296 cadets for a ninety-two percent success rate, the highest compiled by any class. While safety of pilots and instructors was a major concern, accidents did occur. During the four years the Air Activities facility was in operation, nine flying-related fatalities occurred.³¹

Various changes evolved at the Corsicana Field over time. Major Ford was relieved of his command and assigned combat duty in March 1942. He was replaced by First Lieutenant Robert Johnson, who was post commander until July. Captain Stanton Smith, a twenty-six-year-old native of San Antonio and a West Point graduate, then became post commander. In February 1943 Major Leonard Dysinger assumed command and remained in that role until the based closed.³²

The lives of the cadets could be stressful. The training was demanding, and each man realized he was going into combat once his training was completed. There were frequent reports from the battlefield regarding former Corsicana cadets who had been injured or killed in the line of duty, grim reminders to the aspiring pilots of the hazards awaiting them. The progress of the war was always in their thoughts. On the evening of June 6, 1944, the men gathered for a prayer service led by two Corsicana clergymen in behalf of the Allied invasion of France that had occurred earlier that day, commonly referred to as D-Day.³³

The citizens of Corsicana attempted to alleviate some of the fears and concerns of the trainees by welcoming the cadets with open arms. They thought of their own sons away in military training at different locations around the country, and they hoped the towns where they were stationed would treat them kindly and hospitably and lessen their pains of being homesick. The community tried to make the cadets feel at home as much as possible while they were in Corsicana by providing them with ample recreational opportunities when the young men had "open post." Each new class was entertained with a dance held at the Corsicana Country Club. In addition to ample supplies of food and refreshments, young ladies from the community were on hand as dancing partners. Other social functions were held on a regular basis. Corsi-

cana churches provided transportation from the air field to town for worship services, and members invited the young men into their homes for Sunday dinner. Although the cadets were in Corsicana for a brief period of time, some met their future wives, and after the war ended, they moved back to make their permanent homes in the community.³⁴

One of the most successful endeavors in acclimating the cadets to the community was the Hospitality Center located in downtown Corsicana. Opened in 1943, the center provided a homelike, attractive environment where the cadets could gather in their off hours. Women's clubs donated food and refreshments, which were served by the Red Cross Canteen unit. Several local single women formed the Cadet Co-Ed Club, eighty young women who volunteered their time at the Hospitality Center each weekend to show their patriotism and loyalty to the men in uniform. The center also had reading areas, ping-pong and pool tables, and other recreational activities. It was a popular gathering place for the off-duty cadets.³⁵

The number of trainees arriving at the Corsicana Field began to decline as the Allies gained the upper hand in the war. The last class of cadets arrived for training August 8, 1944, and completed their studies in October. The 195 members of the last class was the smallest since class 42-J (May 1942), which had 176 cadets. Of the 8,480 cadets in thirty-seven classes who trained at the Corsicana Field, 5,769 graduated to the next level of instruction, a sixty-eight percent graduation rate. Pilots who received their primary flight training at the Corsicana Field participated in every theater of the war. A total of 145 Corsicana graduates received decorations and awards for their combat service. They were honored by inclusion in the Hall of Fame at the Air Activities field, where their photographs were displayed in a prominent location on the base. Obviously, the Air Activities of Texas had made a major contribution to the Allied victory over the Axis powers.³⁶

With the war winding down, the Corsicana Air Activities became unnecessary. Consequently, general orders dated October 13, 1944, deactivated the Corsicana Field. The government continued its contracts with only fifteen primary flight schools nationwide, and only four of those were in the Gulf Coast region, including El Reno and Chickasha, Oklahoma, and Brady and Uvalde, Texas. The process of closing down the Corsicana facility began almost immediately upon issuance of the general orders. The military personnel and the civil service employees were reassigned to other bases, and many of the civilian flight instructors found employment with commercial airlines. The official closing date was November 15, 1944. Immediately following the closing, some of the buildings on the base were used for dead storage, and a crew of mechanics arrived to recondition various types of airplanes, which were then sold to the public.³⁷

In reflecting upon his experience with the primary flight school, assistant director Dick Criddle commented about the pride that the Air Activities of Texas had in helping to make the Army Air Corps the largest and best in the world. He had words of praise for the civilian and military personnel who

worked at the base, and he was especially complimentary of the citizens of Corsicana who gave generously of their time and money to make the cadets feel welcome while they were in the community. He expressed hope that peace and security would once again return to the world and the need for such a facility would not reoccur, but if such a need did arise, he and his partners were prepared to contribute in whatever way they could.³⁸

Interest in new uses for the abandoned air field developed in the Corsicana almost immediately. As early as the 1920s, local business leaders and educators had discussed the creation of a "first class junior college" for Navarro County. Corsicana postmaster A.A. Allison, who also chaired the Education Committee of the Corsicana Chamber of Commerce, published an article in the *Texas Outlook* in 1928 promoting the advantages of a junior college, especially in meeting the educational needs of Navarro County. Impressed with Allison's arguments, the Chamber of Commerce made the project its number one priority for 1929, but the Great Depression derailed the plan.³⁹

When the nation and the county recovered from the economic woes of the 1930s, once again talk of a junior college surfaced, only to be deferred by the outbreak of World War II. When the War ended, community leaders again pursued the goal of establishing a college. Led by Corsicana school superintendent W.H. Norwood, Navarro County educators met in April 1946, to discuss the steps that should be taken. Norwood said the time had come to start the college because of the availability of the Air Activities of Texas facility which could serve as a campus. He believed that returning servicemen would provide an ample number of potential students. Many of them had their academic careers delayed or interrupted by military service, and now they would have financial assistance through the recently passed GI Bill. A public, two-year college in their community would be both affordable and accessible. Jobs would be difficult to find after the demobilization of the military and the closing of war-related plants and factories.⁴⁰

The county's response to the proposal was overwhelmingly positive. Community leaders contacted federal authorities to secure the transfer of buildings and equipment, which was accomplished with minimal problems. Local civic clubs and organizations began a campaign to secure public support in an election to be held July 16, 1946, to create Navarro Junior College, approve an *ad valorem* tax to help fund the institution, and elect a seven-member board of trustees to govern the college. Voters approved all three measures by a four to one margin. At its first meeting on July 22, 1946, the board of trustees named Ray Waller as the first president of the new college. One week later they approved a \$52,000 annual operating budget for the new college. On September 16, 1946, only two months after the voters approved the creation of the junior college district, Navarro Junior College began classes. Of the 238 students who enrolled for classes that fall, eighty-five percent were ex-GIs.⁴¹

The Air Activities of Texas that had been used as a facility to train young men for combat became a college campus to prepare young men and women for careers in the new postwar world. From the outset, the board of trustees

agreed that the Air Activities site was to be a temporary campus until a more suitable location could be secured. That was accomplished in 1951 when the college moved to its current location on Highway 31, three miles west of downtown Corsicana. Many of the buildings that had been part of the Air Activities facility were moved to the new campus and used as classrooms, offices, and dormitories for many years. When the buildings deteriorated and maintenance became too expensive, they were demolished and replaced with new structures. The last building moved from the original campus was an airplane hangar that was used for a number of years on the new campus as a gymnasium. It was razed in 1985, replaced by a modern structure which opened the following year.⁴²

Once the college vacated the property that the Air Activities had occupied, the city of Corsicana leased the land from E. N. Edens and modified it for use as a municipal airport. The city purchased the property outright in 1963 and has operated the Corsicana Municipal Airport at that location since that time.⁴³

The Air Activities of Texas, Corsicana Field, like hundreds of similar facilities across the United States, is a remarkable example of the spirit of cooperation and determination that characterized the nation during the dark days of World War II. The effects of the Air Activities were felt immediately as well as long term. It contributed to the nation's security by training literally thousands of pilots who made important contributions to the Allied victory over the Axis powers. The presence of such a facility dramatically impacted the local economy of Navarro County and touched the lives of the young men and the military personnel who came to the field for training. The base also provided the foundation for the beginning of Navarro College, which has become the "first class" institution its founders envisioned. The success of the Air Activities of Texas is a testimony to men such as General H.H. "Hap" Arnold, whose vision enabled the United States to assemble the largest, most powerful, and best trained air force the world had ever seen. The dedication of the owners and directors of the operation made the endeavor successful, and the eagerness of the instructors and cadets speak to the depth of patriotism which the entire country experienced during those trying times.

NOTES

¹C. L. Sulzberger, *World War II* (New York, 1970), pp. 70-73.

²Gerald P. Nash, *The Crucial Era: The Great Depression and World War II, 1929-45* (New York, 1992), p. 120.

³Russell F. Weighley, *The American Way of War: A History of the United States Military Strategy and Policy* (Bloomington, 1973), pp. 232-36.

⁴Weighley, *The American Way of War*, pp. 231-32.

⁵"The Development of the Army Air Forces," *Lazy 8: Gulf Coast Army Air Forces Training Center Yearbook, Class 43-C*, Corsicana, Texas, 1943, pp. 3-10.

⁶H.H. Arnold, *Global Mission* (New York: 1940), p. 179.

⁷H.H. Arnold, "Report of the Commanding General of the Army Air Forces to the Secretary of War," *United States News*, January, 1944.

⁸Arnold, *Global Mission*, p. 190.

⁹Arnold, "Report of the Commanding General," p. 5.

¹⁰Arnold, *Global Mission*, pp. 181, 206. According to Arnold, by the end of the war the civilian flight schools were training 105,000 pilots per year.

¹¹*Lazy 8 Yearbook, Class 43-C, Air Activities of Texas, Corsicana Field*, pp. 18-21.

¹²A. Ray Stephens and William M. Holmes, *Historical Atlas of Texas* (Norman, 1989), p. 48.

¹³*Flying Lines*, February 8, 1944.

¹⁴"History of the Corsicana Field," *Flying Lines*, May 3, 1943; "Chronological History of the Contract," *History of the 2552nd AAF Base*, Book VI, September 14-November 15, 1944, Appendix. The contract was amended on January 1, 1942, to pay \$18.10 per flying hour. A contract signed on July 23, 1942, reduced payment to \$16.70, followed by another reduction to \$11 in September 1943. The final contract, executed August 26, 1944, paid \$9.75 per flying hour. It should be noted that during the time rates were being reduced, the size of the classes of cadets significantly increased, greatly expanding the number of flying hours.

¹⁵*Lazy 8 Yearbook, 43-C*, p. 47.

¹⁶Interview with Wendell Hutchinson and George Gaffney, October 1991; *Lazy 8 Yearbook*, p. 47.

¹⁷*Flying Lines*, February 8, 1944; *Dallas Times Herald*, June 14, 1962.

¹⁸*History of the 2552nd AAF Base Unit*, Book VI, Appendix, Attachment II-A.

¹⁹*Lazy 8 Yearbook*, p. 47.

²⁰*Lazy 8 Yearbook*, p. 47; Interview with Margaret Pannill, December 15, 1977.

²¹Chart prepared by E.D. "Dick" Criddle. Later references cited as "Criddle Papers."

²²*Lazy 8 Yearbook, 42-A and 42-B*, p. 19.

²³*Flying Lines*, May 11, 1943.

²⁴*Flying Lines*, August 24, 1944.

²⁵*Lazy 8 Yearbook, 42-A*, p. 19.

²⁶*Flying Lines*, March 13, 1943; *Flying Lines*, February 8, 1944.

²⁷Interview with Tillman Reed, October 25, 1991; Interview with Gerald McClung, November 11, 1991; *Flying Lines*, March 24, 1944.

²⁸*Flying Lines*, March 24, 1944.

²⁹Ed Steger, personal letter, August 24, 1993; Reed interview.

³⁰Steger letter.

³¹"Criddle Papers."

³²*History of the 2552nd*, Appendix. According to an article in the August 4, 1944, *Flying Lines*, Colonel Ford was killed on a combat mission.

³³*Flying Lines*, June 27, 1944.

³⁴Interview with Richard James, October, 1995. James was a cadet in Class 43-C.

³⁵*Flying Lines*, August 19, 1943.

³⁶"Criddle Papers."

³⁷*History of the 2552nd*, p. 3.

³⁸"Criddle Papers."

³⁹A.A. Allison, "Junior Colleges," *Texas Outlook*, June, 1928.

⁴⁰Interview with R.A. (Andy) Armistead, June 20, 1978. Armistead was principal of Corsicana High School and was involved in many of the meetings in which the formation of the Navarro Junior College was discussed.

⁴¹*Corsicana Daily Sun*, July 17, 1946; Minutes, Board of Trustees of Navarro Junior College, July 22, 1946; *El Navarro* (yearbook of Navarro Junior College), 1947.

⁴²Interview with E.E. Burkhart, February 3, 1943. Burkhart was a Corsicana contractor who supervised the moving of the buildings from the Air Activities site to the new campus.

⁴³City Records provided by Nelda Neal, city secretary of Corsicana.