

The Women Army Air Corps (WAAC) arrived at the Depot May 14, 1943.



The beginning of a military legacy

by Blythe Thimsen



A woman checks aircraft parts on the depot's assembly line. Fifteen thousand tons of supplies were processed through the depot each month.

photo courtesy of Fairchild Airforce Base

IN 1919, A MONTANA PILOT MADE AN emergency landing in a field west of Spokane, known as White Bluff Prairie. People flocked from town to see the airplane, something that most at that time had never seen, staring at its strange shape and the daring pilot who had dipped through the sky in the contraption. While a plane in that area was so rare it was reason for excitement, airplanes soon became a regular sight on White Bluff Prairie, thanks to the arrival of the Spokane Army Air Depot.

Due to the economic depression gripping the nation and Spokane in the 1930s, the Spokane Chamber of Commerce felt they needed to find a way to boost the local economy, which radiated with despair. They figured one of the best ways to pump enthusiasm and dollars into the local economy was to attract a military installation to the area.

A congressional party set out to tour Washington in 1935, in an effort to find a location in the Pacific Northwest in which to establish an Army Air Corps supply and maintenance depot. According to *Fairchild AFB 1942-1982*; *Sentinel of the Pacific Northwest* by the 92BWM History office, "Records indicate that one of the prime factors considered in selection of Spokane was the strategic location for the defense of Alaska." The process of selection took several years, but the group soon narrowed their choices to Salt Lake City, Utah, and Spokane.

A military presence would have been nothing new in Spokane. Fort George Wright, which was an old Army post north of the Spokane River, was established in 1892. Additionally, Felts Field and the later-built Spokane International Airport, served as airfields used by the military.

By 1940, the government's interest in Salt Lake City had been replaced by an interest in Everett, Washington. This set up a competition between two Washington cities. According to *Sentinel of the Pacific Northwest*, "Competition between the industrial and commercial west and the agricultural east had long been an element in the growth picture of the state of Washington. The location of this defense complex became another area in which the interest of the factions conflicted."

While Everett offered close prox-

imity to McChord Field and the Boeing Plant, which would make repairs and supplies for military airplanes more accessible, Spokane was attractive because it was inland, which made it less susceptible to air attacks. Northern Pacific Railroad stepped in, providing an extra benefit that made Spokane more desirable. They worked with Spokane city officials to create priority-shipping schedules and guaranteed equipment and line construction, ensuring the depot would be able to quickly and efficiently move supplies to service the planes.

It wasn't just voices in Spokane

though. Most noticeably opposed were the farmers who lived and made their livelihood on White Bluff Prairie, the land that was the proposed site for the depot. Eight families took legal action to stop the sale of their land, but "opposing the government during wartime was not looked upon favorably," noted the authors of *Sentinel of the Pacific Northwest*.

In the end, their legal action was no match for the voices of the city leadership and of Congressman Leavy. The depot was awarded to Spokane on September 12, 1941.

Before construction could begin,



Pan American Flyers receiving DFC certificates from President Calvin Coolidge on May 2, 1927, in Washington, D.C. General Muir S. Fairchild is third from the right.

that were rallying for the depot; Congressman Charles M. Leavy, from Spokane, was back in Washington D.C. rallying on behalf of his constituents, explaining to Congress why a depot in Spokane was a great decision.

Not everyone was excited to see the possible arrival of the depot,

though, the War Department had to receive the title for the land, which financially fell on the shoulders of the citizens of Spokane. The land had to be provided to the government free of charge, so it was up to the citizens of Spokane to purchase the land for the depot. To purchase 1,500 acres, the city needed to



photo courtesy of Fairchild Airforce Base

A local artist puts his talents to use painting the nose of one of the B-29s.



photo courtesy of Fairchild Airforce Base

General Muir S. Fairchild, for whom the present-day Fairchild Air Force Base was named.

raise around \$110,000. While that amount could have been a daunting sum of money to raise during an economy that was slumped, the people of Spokane saw the benefit of having the depot here and were willing to put their money where their goals were. In two days they had raised \$76,000, and by the end of the week they had reached their goal, with all of the money raised, plus nearly \$15,000 extra. The city raised \$124,996.77.

Knowing they would have to sell and abandon their land, the landowners that had opposed the depot grudgingly accepted a proposed offer of \$70 per acre. They were outraged when the final sale went through and they only received \$40 per acre. The discrepancy came about because the final sale included 2,400 acres, rather than the 1,500 originally sought by the government.

The property was purchased by public subscription by citizens of Spokane for a total of \$101,078.66, in January 1942, and the title for the land was officially transferred to the U.S. Government.

Construction of the depot took more than a year. At one point, 2,500 workers were employed on the construction project. The workforce erected 262 buildings, the largest of which was a 12-acre repair hanger. Construction also resulted in eight miles of railroad track traveling throughout the depot and 12 warehouses that were each larger than a city block.

There was a great deal of administrative work to be done before the completion of the construction process; however, there were no completed buildings at the depot, nor space available at Fort George Wright or at Felts Field, both of which saw military activity. As a result, administrative and headquarters were based in downtown Spokane in the Hutton Building, later moving to the Kemp & Herbert Building, also downtown.

Finally, in March 1942, the first

buildings were completed and were available for occupation by Army engineers. The depot was to be home to the Spokane Air Technical Service Command (the maintenance portion of the depot), and Spokane Air Material Command (the supply portion). Although the newly constructed depot would go through ten different names over the years, and was often called “Galena” by locals, the first official name was Spokane Army Air Depot.

The depot not only provided an economic boost for workers, but for the city as well, as demonstrated in *Sentinel of the Pacific Northwest*. “Unlike the usual defense industry which operated in the suburbs of cities and drew their workers from its population, early Spokane Depot operations actually revived the economy of the inner city. Buildings like the Cowley School and the Kemp & Herbert Building, which had been vacant for three years prior to the arrival of the Service Area Command, were put back into use, thus increasing their value. The population grew in the city and the tax base of the city increased monthly.”

The goal for the city was to bring a military installation in order to pump money in to the local economy, and that was exactly what happened. As noted in *Sentinel of the Pacific Northwest*, “Expectations for the depot were overwhelmingly surpassed. The government spent more than \$25 million in construction of the installation; the civilian workforce was more than double the anticipated level; and the expected payroll of \$8 million a year was nearly tripled by the fall of 1943.”

In June 1943, Service Area Command (SAC) moved onto the depot, occupying 44 buildings and employing over 700 civilians.

Those 700 employees were just the tip of the iceberg. A constant supply of trained employees was needed. Unfortunately, most of the jobs that needed to be filled were skilled labor



photo courtesy of Fairchild Airforce Base

Working to maintain and repair engines was a round-the-clock job for the workers at the Spokane Air Technical Service Command, the maintenance portion of the depot.



photo courtesy of Fairchild Airforce Base

Equally as busy as the maintenance side was the Spokane Air Material Command, where all of the supplies that were shipped overseas were first processed.

in areas like aircraft maintenance and other defense-oriented trades, and there were not enough people trained in those professions. The government created a solution that was too good to pass up. Men and women could go to school to learn these trades, and get paid \$75 a month to be students. This had the same buying power as \$960 does today. When they graduated, many of them could look forward to jobs at the depot that paid \$125 per month, which is equivalent to \$1,600 nowadays. Men and women both took advantage of this offer, with women eventually composing 25 percent of the work force at the depot. They partook in all forms of work, including welding, sheet metalwork and making wooden boxes for shipping supplies.

The spring and summer of 1943

brought much activity to the depot. May 14, 1943, marked the arrival of the first Women Army Air Corps (WAAC) contingent, and on July 5, 1943, one day after Independence Day, the first official aircraft to land at the depot was a B-17 Flying Fortress, flown by Brigadier General Jacob H. Rudolph, the commanding officer for the depot.

In June 1943, the recently trained graduates of the aircraft maintenance program put their skills to work, performing the first aircraft maintenance on a B-17 bomber they nicknamed “Junior.” By the end of November 1944, 1,250 B-17 aircraft had been repaired at the depot, and by June 1945, 10,000 engines had been repaired.

It wasn’t just the number of aircraft that were repaired that was

impressive; the turn-around time for repairs was a point of pride for those who worked at the depot. Aircraft were repaired and back in the air within three days thanks to the skill, efficiency and pride taken by the employees at the depot.

While the depot was a spot to which injured aircraft came for maintenance, it was also a supply station from which aircraft supplies could be sent anywhere in the world. “Fifteen-thousand tons of supplies and aircraft parts were processed through the depot each month. In less than two years, a total of 150,000 tons of material was supplied from the airfield, with nearly 20 percent of that sum going overseas,” notes *Sentinel of the Pacific Northwest*.

The end of the war was good, in



photo courtesy of Fairchild Airforce Base

A line of B-17s fill a hangar, awaiting repairs.



photo courtesy of Fairchild Airforce Base

Personnel of Main Guard, 92nd Air Police, ca. 1950

the sense that the end of any war is good for those who are involved and touched by its devastating events, but it also marked the bittersweet beginning of the end for the depot. By August of 1945, 75 percent of the aircraft maintenance department had been let go and the number of employees dropped from 10,000 down to 7,536. By the fall of 1945, that number was reduced again, leaving only

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History



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Maintenance crews work on a B-29 engine, one of over 10,000 that were repaired at Spokane Army Air Depot.

744 maintenance employees. The supply portion of the depot felt the cuts too, losing over 50 percent of its ranks, due to decreased demand.

The Air Service Command, which provided the supply portion of the depot, was officially deactivated in March of 1947, bringing the Spokane Air Depot to a close. With the closure of the depot came another name change, from Spokane Air Depot to Spokane Army Air Field.

Six months later, on September 18th, the United States Air Force was formed as a separate branch of the military, and in 1948, the Spokane Air Depot officially became Spokane Air Force Base. The airfield was transferred to the Fifteenth Air Force (15AF) Strategic Air Command (SAC) and the 92nd and 98th Bombardment groups were assigned with their B-29 bombers. At one point, the largest B-29 organization was ten miles outside of Spokane.

The two bombardment groups were deployed to Okinawa, Japan,

in response to the hostile situation in Korea, and, according to *Sentinel of the Pacific Northwest*, "The 92nd returned after only two months, but the 98th remained in the Far East for the duration of the conflict and never returned."

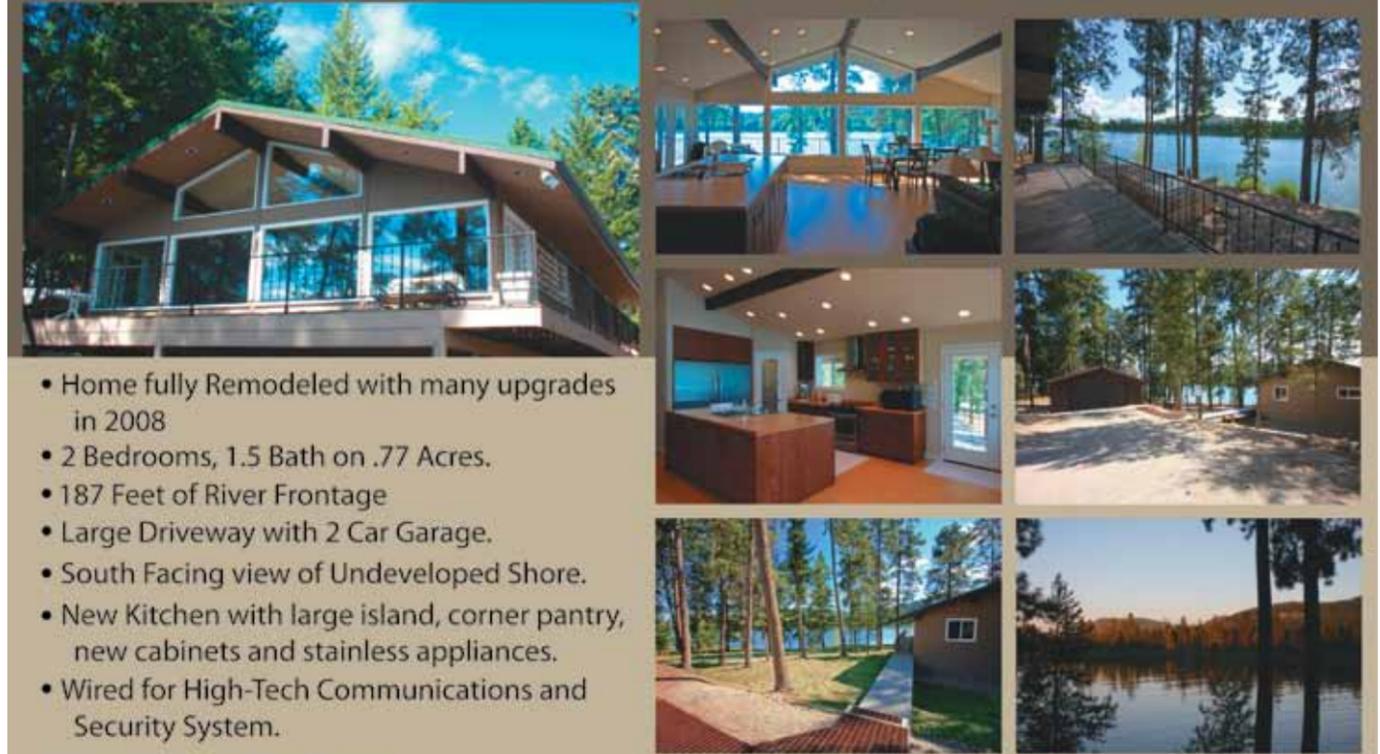
By 1950, the Air Force had created a policy to name its installations after fallen, local aviators, preferably ones who hailed from areas near each base. Needing to change the name from Spokane Air Force Base, a committee met to select a local aviator who fit the bill. After much consideration they selected General Muir S. Fairchild.

A native of Bellingham, Washington, Fairchild was a member of the Washington National Guard from 1916-1917, at which time he transferred to the Aviation Cadets. After training stateside and in Europe, he was commissioned in the Aviation Section of the Signal Reserve. In 1918, he began a career as a flight instructor; however, he

"was separated from the Army in October 1919." The separation was short lived as he was back in the Army July 1, 1920. For the next 28 years, he held a variety of distinguished positions, including an Air Corps representative to the Douglas Aircraft Company, administrative roles in the Office of the Chief of the Air Corps, and his last role was Air Force Vice Chief of Staff at the Pentagon. He died while serving in this position, on March 17, 1950. A little over one year after his death, in July 1951, a dedication ceremony was held, changing the name of Spokane Air Force Base to Fairchild Air Force Base, which it remains today.

Though the names and exact assignments have changed, one thing that has remained constant is the presence of a military installation on White Bluff Prairie, and the continued dedication to our community and our nation by the men and women who have served there. **■**

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