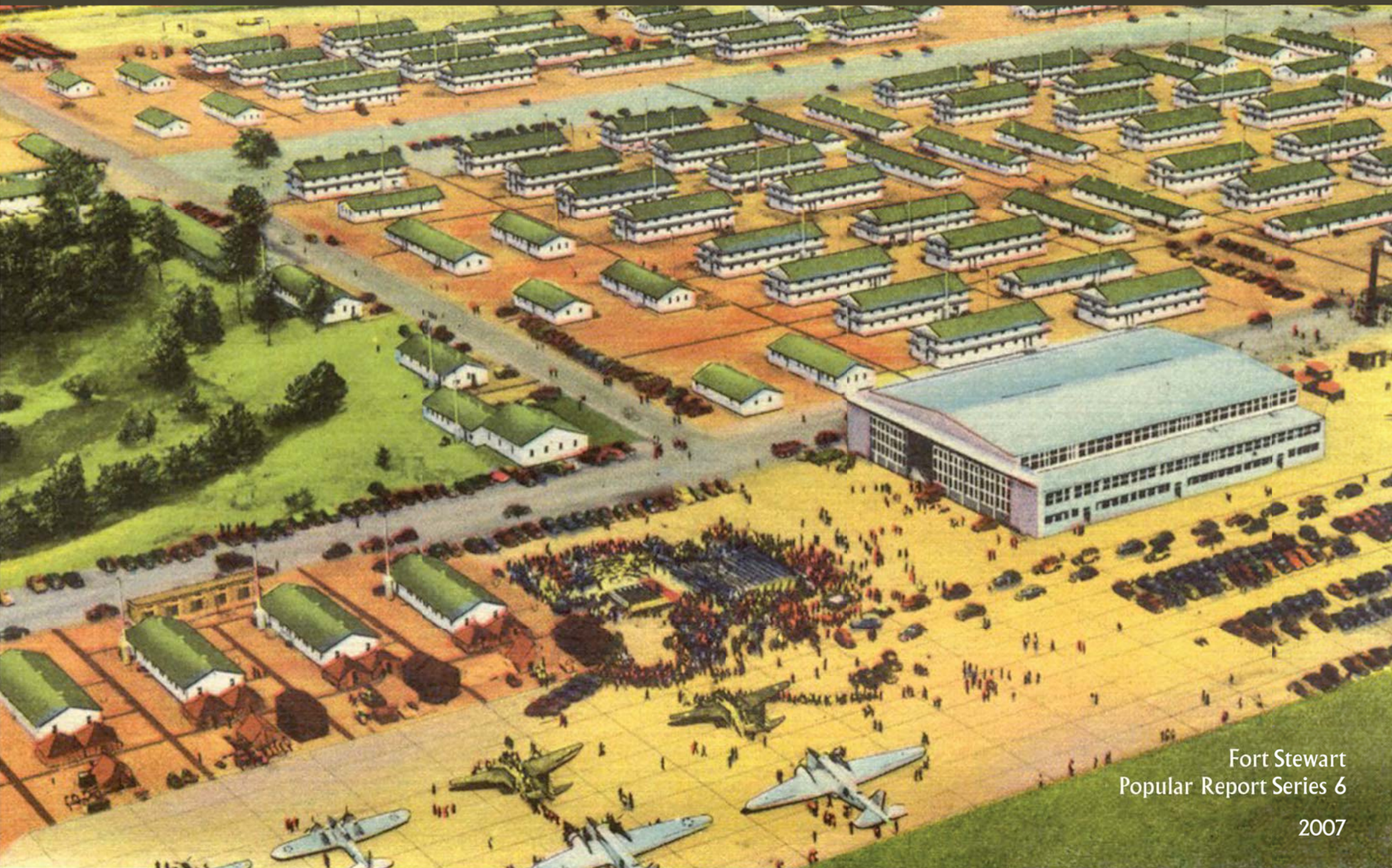
Hunter Army Airfield

A History



Fort Stewart
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Hunter Army Airfield

A History

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Beginnings

The 1920s marked the true beginning of civilian aviation in the United States. By 1930, nearly 1,700 civilian airports had been established in the nation. As part of this trend, in 1927, the city of Savannah bought 900 acres of woods, pasture, and swamp 3 miles south of the city limits for the first Savannah Airport—later known as Hunter Field.

Savannah Airport

In three years, using mostly chain-gang labor, Chatham County dug ditches in the area, graded the field with 400,000 cubic yards of sand, and planted it with Bermuda grass. The landing area was 4,500 feet long and 3,500 feet wide, with no runways. Aircraft could take off and land in any direction. The original airfield lay roughly on what is now Hunter Army Airfield's parking apron.

On September 20, 1929, a six-seater Bellanca CH-300 Pacemaker named "The City of Savannah" became the first aircraft to land at the Savannah Airport, inaugurating the Eastern Air Express, New York to Miami air service. One month later, the stock market crashed, plunging the U.S. into the Great Depression. By November of that ill-fated year, Eastern Air Express folded. This left Savannah without regular air service until 1931, when Eastern Airlines began offering intrastate travel from Savannah to Augusta and Atlanta.

Airfield Lighting at the Savannah Airport in the Early 1930s

"Robbie Richard and myself used to ride with Mr. Tillman... on the running board of his Ford and put out lanterns... so that the airplanes can land at night.... So when we come from school, just every afternoon...Mr. Tillman would have the lanterns filled with kerosene [in] the Model A.... We'd get on the running board and we'd put the lanterns down.... He'd go another, say, fifty feet and put another lantern down...."

— Joseph Butler Harris

In spite of the Depression, the city undertook a number of improvements to the airfield throughout the decade, including the 1932 construction of Wilson Boulevard, named after Judge Emmett Wilson, chairman of the city's airport commission. In 1936, the city and one of President Roosevelt's public works programs, the Works Progress Administration (WPA), cooperated in making significant improvements to the airport. The WPA spent $130,000, and the city $36,000 to rebuild the drainage system, construct a new metal hangar, and replace the grass airfield with three new asphalt runways.

Inside the WPA hangar (Building 1206), 1937

Henry G. "Sandy" Strachan ►

The current Building 1206 is the WPA hangar, little changed since the 1930s. The first Savannah-based flying service, Strachan Skyways, moved into this hangar after it was built. The most prominent local aviator of the 1930s, Henry G. "Sandy" Strachan (pronounced "strawn") owned the company and was also the airport manager. According to the *Savannah Morning News* (Jan. 1941), Strachan was "recognized as one of the leading fliers of Georgia…[and] credited as much as anyone else with bringing the magical world of flight to Savannah's attention." Air activity grew apace with the airfield. By decade's end, the airfield hosted regular flights from both Delta and Eastern airlines.

World War II

When Hitler invaded Poland in September 1939, the U.S. Army, with 175,000 men, ranked seventeenth in the world—weaker than even the Dutch and Romanian armies. Meanwhile the Japanese, locked in combat with the Chinese since 1937, were looking to expand their empire in Asia. The Air Corps, part of the Army at the time, had only 2,200 obsolete aircraft stationed at twenty-four airfields around the country. Europe and China were engulfed in war, and, although the U.S. was not yet involved, in the corridors of Washington preparations began for a military build-up.

Still, the war seemed far away from Savannah during that late summer. In September, the Air Corps commissioned Sandy Strachan a lieutenant, but business continued as usual at the airport. In 1939–1940, the city built a permanent municipal airport building to house the growing administrative activities of the airport. (The building's terrazzo floor still remained intact on the installation flightline as of July 2007.) On May 19, 1940, the city officially dedicated the airport as Hunter Field.

Hunter Field Goes to War

In 1940, the U.S. began to rearm in preparation for war. The government increased funding for new equipment and bases and instituted a peace-time draft. A primary beneficiary of this new largesse was the Air Corps, which by 1941 had grown to over 25,000 personnel and 4,000 aircraft. The Air Corps needed new airbases to accommodate its growth and, in August 1940, selected Hunter Field as a light-bomber training base.

Within two months, the Air Corps transferred 3,000 personnel of the 3rd and 27th Bomb Groups and 100 A-18 trainers, A-20 light bombers, and B-18 medium bombers to the new base, which shared the airfield with the civilian airport. Within nine months, the military had constructed an entire cantonment north of the runways consisting of over 220 facilities, including barracks, warehouses, a hospital, hangars, and operations buildings. The threat of war had transformed the sleepy southern airfield into a bustling military installation.

In January 1941, Savannah received the tragic news that Sandy Strachan had died in a training accident at Barksdale Field, Louisiana. In his honor the Air Corps named the

Frank O'Driscoll Hunter

Usually public facilities are named for deceased persons. However, Hunter Army Airfield's namesake, Frank O'Driscoll Hunter (1894–1982), Lieutenant Colonel, U.S. Army Air Corps, was very much alive when the city of Savannah christened the installation Hunter Field in 1940. A native of Savannah, Georgia's only World War I flying ace, and a lifelong bachelor, Hunter would be promoted to Major General and briefly lead the Eighth Air Force Fighter Command in World War II.

Aircraft at Hunter Field, early 1941

road running adjacent to the runways and parking aprons Strachan Road. (In the 1990s, the installation renamed this street Lightning Road.)

The 3rd and 27th Bomb Groups trained at Hunter Field throughout 1940 and 1941, participating in large-scale Army maneuvers in the Carolinas. On December 7, 1941, the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. All passes from Hunter Field were immediately canceled, and airmen were required to wear uniforms at all times. The U.S. now faced war with Japan and Germany.

United States Army Air Forces

The Air Corps was formed in 1926 as a subordinate branch of the Army. Initially the various ground force corps commands held operational control over Air Corps aircraft, but, in 1935, the Army formed General Headquarters Air Force (GHQAF), which placed all aircraft under the command of a single aviator general. This fractured the chain of command, as GHQAF only controlled flying aircraft, while the Air Corps, a separate organization, controlled logistics, training, and doctrinal development. To fix this problem, in June 1941, the War Department created the United States Army Air Forces (USAAF), a new organization that both the Air Corps and GHQAF (later renamed Combat Command) were subordinate to. Technically still a sub-service of the Army, the USAAF was assigned its own Undersecretary of War, with a seat on the General Staff. This was a major step towards the creation of the Air Force as a separate branch of service.

From 1941 to 1943, the base grew to a population of 10,000, expanded its boundaries from 900 to nearly 3,000 acres, built six additional cantonments and tent camps at the installation, expanded runway capacity, built aircraft parking aprons, and trained ground support squadrons, bomber groups, and fighter groups. Units that trained at Hunter Field later saw active combat in all major theaters of war, including the China-Burma-India, the Pacific, and the European theaters.

In March 1943, the USAAF designated Hunter Field as the Third Air Force Staging Wing Base, changing its mission to staging air crews and aircraft for transfer to combat operations in Europe. Over the next two years, Hunter Field processed 9,000 aircraft and 70,000 crewmen.

The military built approximately 450 buildings at Hunter Field from 1940 to 1945. Over the past sixty years, the installation has demolished most of its World War II buildings. As of 2007, the remaining on-post World War II structures include a water tower (Facility 721), an abandoned ammunition storage area (Buildings 1305–1308), a heat plant (Building 812), two bomb-sight

Birth of the Mighty Eighth Air Force

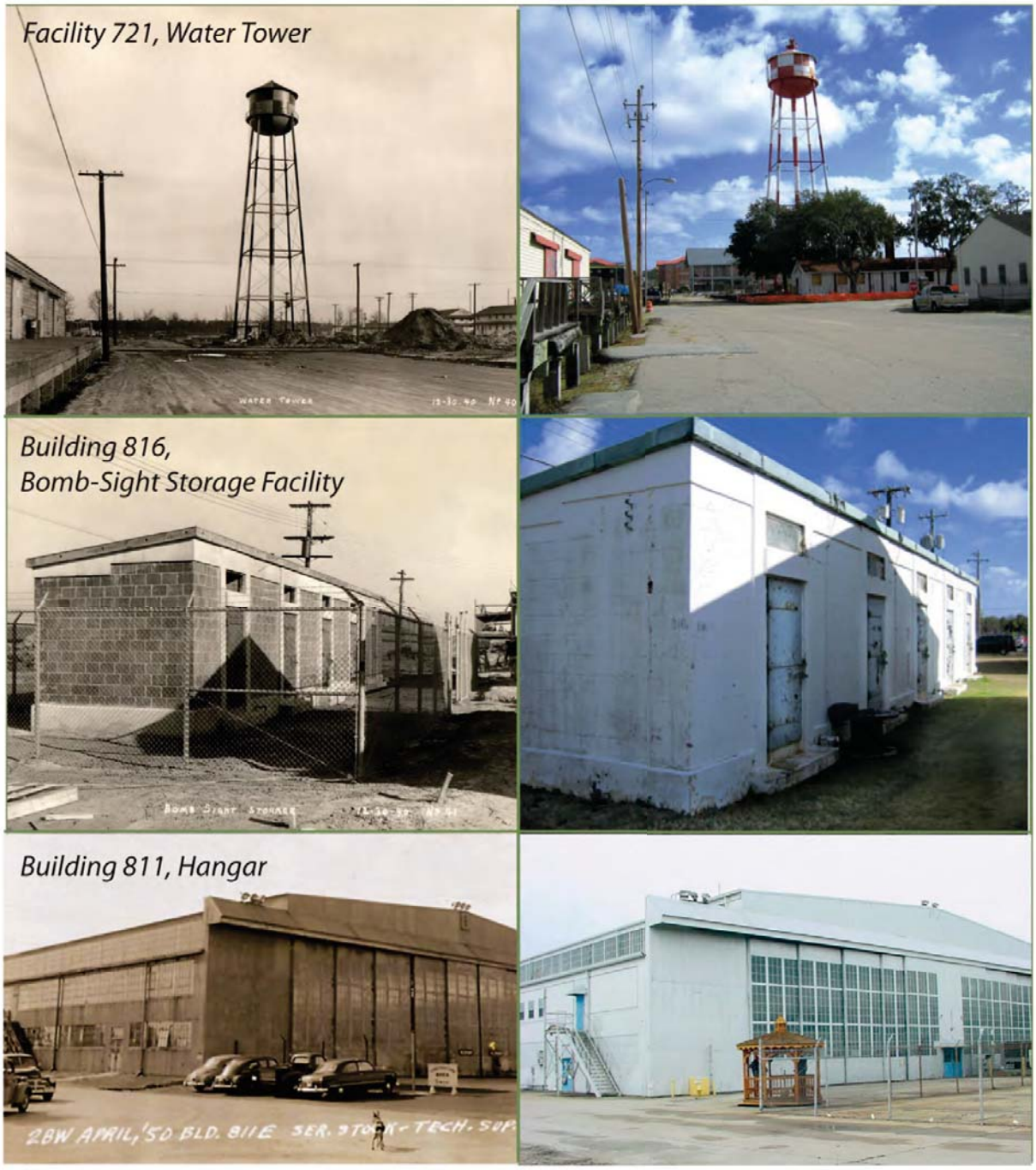
On January 28, 1942, the USAAF formed the Eighth Air Force at Hunter Field. For three months in early 1942, Hunter Field's personnel prepared the embryonic command for overseas service until its transfer to England, where the Eighth Air Force gained fame conducting daylight strategic bombing missions over western Europe.

The Ill-Fated 27th Bomb Group

In November 1941, the Air Corps transferred the 27th Bomb Group from Hunter Field to the Philippines. The 27th arrived just before the Pearl Harbor attack on December 7, 1941. The Japanese invaded the Philippines days later. In a letter dated February 18, 1942, Lieutenant Colonel John Sewell described the 27th's ordeal to his family: "We never did get any airplanes and…as infantry we have functioned.… We are living in the jungle; no tents.… We eat twice a day…mostly canned salmon and rice. Morale is high.… I have lost several men and one officer, mostly killed by bombs.… But we have killed hundreds of [Japanese] too.… How or when this letter will reach you I have no idea. I am putting it in the hand of God." The Japanese killed or captured the entire unit when the Philippines fell in April 1942. The photo depicts U.S. prisoners of war on Bataan being led into a brutal captivity.

Hunter Army Airfield Then and Now

1940–1950 ▼ *2006 ▼*



storage facilities (Buildings 803 and 816), the sewage treatment plant, the small arms range (used during World War II to test fire and sight in aircraft-mounted machine guns and cannon), three hangars (Buildings 811, 813, and 1290), and various administration buildings and warehouses.

After Germany's surrender in May 1945, Hunter Field processed aircraft and crew who were returning from the Mediterranean and slated for duty in the Pacific. This operation was cut short on August 6, 1945, when the B-29 Enola Gay, piloted by Colonel Paul Tibbetts, dropped a terrible new weapon—an atom bomb—on the Japanese

city of Hiroshima, killing 100,000 Japanese. A second bomb dropped on Nagasaki prompted the Japanese government to surrender unconditionally. The mushroom clouds over Hiroshima and Nagasaki marked the final act of World War II and ushered in an era of global uncertainty. Would the destructive power of the bomb force an end to war? Or would the bomb lead to an end to humanity?

A Municipal Airport Again

After 1945, Hunter Field reverted to the Savannah Municipal Airport. The airport only used a small fraction of Hunter Field's cantonment; the balance, administered by the Federal Public Housing Administration, was leased to various public and private enterprises. Businessmen converted buildings to industrial plants, commercial businesses, and even apartments. The University of Georgia, overwhelmed with returning veterans, even opened a satellite campus on the old airbase.

The Cold War and Strategic Air Command (SAC)

As the 1940s ended, the Soviet Union, formerly a World War II ally, showed itself under the dictator Josef Stalin to be an implacable foe of western capitalism and democracy. The Soviets took control of Eastern European nations, attempted a blockade of Berlin in 1948, and exploded their own atomic weapon in 1949. The U.S. grew increasingly concerned with Communist aggression and expansion. In 1947, President Truman signed the National Security Act (NSA), reorganizing the U.S. defense and intelligence

Colonel Paul Tibbetts

Tibbetts, born in 1915, trained at Hunter Field in 1940 and 1941 as a lieutenant in the 3rd Bomb Group. He recalled that "the...months [training at Hunter Field] were the most important of my career from the standpoint of learning to become a precision pilot." Tibbetts distinguished himself in World War II as a squadron commander in Europe. In the Pacific, he commanded the 509th Composite Group, which dropped the A-bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Tibbetts returned to Hunter as commander of the 308th Bomb Wing from 1956 to 1958. He married his second wife in the Hunter Chapel, Building 145, in 1956. At left is Tibbetts just after completion of the Hiroshima mission.

establishments and making the Air Force a completely independent branch of service. Because of its role in atomic bomb deployment, the Air Force became the most important branch of the military. Consequently, the Air Force's Strategic Air Command (SAC), responsible for delivery of the atomic bomb, became the most important Air Force command.

And what of SAC's principal weapons? In 1948, less than sixty atomic bombs were in the U.S. nuclear arsenal. Controlled by the civilian Atomic Energy Commission, the bombs were stored in four "Q Areas" adjacent to Air Force bases in the southern parts of the country: one in New Mexico, one in Tennessee, and two in Texas. By 1950, SAC consisted of fourteen bomb wings, flying mostly B-29 and B-50 propeller medium bombers or huge B-36 piston-pull heavy bombers. Like the Q Areas, SAC based its bombers primarily in the southeast and southwest parts of the country.

In 1949, as part of its southern strategy, SAC stationed the 2nd Bomb Wing and its B-50 bombers at Chatham Field, a World War II airbase built a few miles west of Savannah. However, with inadequate barracks and operations facilities, Chatham Field proved unsatisfactory for SAC. In order to keep SAC in the Savannah area, the city offered to exchange Hunter Field for Chatham Field.

SAC Bombers at Hunter AFB: 1950–1953

SAC stationed B-29 and B-50 bombers at Hunter AFB from 1950 to 1953. The B-29, with a maximum speed of 357 mph and a range of 3,250 miles, entered service during World War II. The B-29 spawned many variants, including the B-50 (left), which entered service in 1948. Similar to the B-29, the B-50 had greater speed (385 mph), range (4,650 miles), and mid-air refueling capability.

General Curtis LeMay

The controversial General Curtis LeMay (1906–1990) commanded SAC from 1948 to 1957. LeMay made frequent surprise visits to his bases, including Hunter AFB. Under LeMay, SAC continually improved its training, technology, doctrine, and morale. The general, however, was notorious for making disturbing public comments favoring preemptive nuclear war. LeMay retired as the Air Force Chief of Staff in 1965 and, in 1968, ran unsuccessfully for vice president on George Wallace's ticket.

SAC accepted, and, in September 1950, the switch occurred. Hunter Field became Hunter Air Force Base (Hunter AFB), while Chatham Field became the Savannah Municipal Airport, now known as the Savannah/Hilton Head International Airport.

On arrival at Hunter AFB in 1950, SAC found a neglected World War II–era airport. Buildings creaked with rotten siding and broken windows, while asphalt roads showed ruts and holes, and grass grew through the pavement of aircraft parking aprons. A land conflict in Asia soon accelerated the pace of base construction and development.

In June 1950, Communist North Korea invaded South Korea, starting the Korean War (1950–1953). Concerned that this attack was orchestrated by Moscow as the first round of World War III, the Truman administration began an immense military build-up, with SAC a major beneficiary. During the conflict, the U.S. nuclear arsenal increased from 300 atomic bombs to over 800. SAC grew from 59,000 to 153,000 personnel, developed and issued new jet aircraft, and built new bases, including Hunter.

By January 1951, SAC had slated a second bomb wing for Hunter AFB and, in 1950–1951, spent over $5.6 million on the base, mostly repairing World War II buildings, roads, and runways, and expanding the base to its current boundaries west to the Little Ogeechee (Forest) River and east to White Bluff Road. In the summer of 1951, Congress spent nearly $6 billion on the largest military construction program since World War II. Hunter AFB received $24.5 million and promptly spent $2.5 million building the installation's current runway.

Early SAC Operations At Hunter AFB

In the midst of this new construction, the 2nd Bomb Wing conducted ground training, aircraft maintenance, unit-simulated combat missions (USCMs) involving practice bomb runs over American cities, and practiced the loading and deployment of nuclear weapons. SAC constructed a new ammunition storage area, which is still the post's ammunition storage point today. Hardstand 13, an unassuming facility located within the present-day Building 1336 motor pool area, served as a classroom for nuclear weapons operations and as a central control point for nuclear weapon loading exercises. Hardstand 13 has since been demolished.

In April 1952, the 308th Bomb Wing, armed with B-29s, arrived at Hunter AFB. The 2nd and 308th Bomb Wings together formed the 38th Air Division. On paper, each wing had forty-five bombers divided into three combat squadrons and over 2,500 men,

◄ *Hardstand 13, December 1950*

Pinwheel barracks, circa 1954 ►

◄ *Building 850 under construction, 1954*

including combat crews, maintenance personnel, and security teams. In reality, the more recently-formed 308th did not have a full complement of bombers and was not yet rated combat ready.

The New Look

B-47 Stratofortress

In 1952, Dwight D. Eisenhower was elected President. After the election, a series of military and political events, including the development of thermonuclear weapons thousands of times more powerful then atomic bombs, spurred the arms race between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. Under the Eisenhower administration, the concept of deterrence through the threat of massive nuclear retaliation became central to U.S. strategic planning and was formalized in a reform of the military establishment named the New Look after a ladies' fashion style promoted by *Vogue* magazine. Under the New Look, the Eisenhower administration stressed the deterrent potential of nuclear weapons by making SAC the centerpiece of the military establishment. From 1953 to 1961, SAC received nearly 50 percent of the entire U.S. military budget.

With this massive increase in funding, it is no surprise that many buildings at Hunter Field in 2007 date from this time period. From 1953 to 1956, the installation, in conjunction with the Savannah District Corps of Engineers, constructed double cantilever

U.S. Special Weapons Deployment: 1948–1956

From the late 1940s through the 1950s, the government stored its nuclear arsenal in secure Q Areas, which grew in number from four in 1948 to twenty in 1960, matching the increase in the U.S. nuclear and thermonuclear arsenal. Some SAC airfields were located next to Q Areas, but for the other installations not adjacent to Q Areas (like Hunter AFB) the Air Force, prior to 1956, deployed the nuclear weapons in two ways: bombers would fly to the Q Areas, pick up bombs, and then conduct exercises; or transport aircraft would fly the bombs from the Q Areas to the bases, and the bombs would be temporarily stored on the base.

SAC Aircraft Maintenance at Hunter AFB

Crew chiefs would inspect their aircraft and inform Wing Maintenance Control of any maintenance problems. Using a large Plexiglas board to track the status of the sixty aircraft it was responsible for, Maintenance Control would then issue the wing maintenance shop work orders. Each shop, in turn, assigned mechanics to the aircraft, giving them specific work deadlines. Because B-47 bombers had limited space for maintenance, the work had to be carefully coordinated. If a mechanic, working on a tight schedule, ran out of time and did not inform Maintenance Control by radio, he would have to leave, allowing the next mechanic space to work.

hangars, three massive pinwheel barracks, new administration and shop buildings, air traffic control buildings, on-post family housing, and new community and recreation facilities.

The advent of The New Look coincided with a long-planned SAC-wide aircraft upgrade. In 1953, SAC began issuing the new B-47 jet bomber to its units, with Hunter AFB receiving its first jets in January 1954. Throughout the previous year, in addition to their regular duties, SAC personnel at Hunter AFB had been training to fly and maintain this new aircraft, vastly different from their vintage World War II propeller-driven bombers. With its swept-wing design and bubble cockpit, the B-47 looked and maneuvered more like a fighter than a bomber.

The B-47 flew at a top speed of 600 mph, 200 mph more than its predecessors. It had a range of only 4,000 miles, but its in-flight refueling capability gave this bomber a global reach. The B-47's speed and maneuverability revolutionized bomber tactics and doctrine. Instead of flying in mass formations, the B-47 would fly individually into enemy airspace at various points, relying on surprise and speed as its main defense. This required more intensive flight training than World War II bomber crews had received, and Hunter AFB, like other SAC bases, emphasized a high degree of training and readiness. Combat crews continually practiced bomb runs, outdoor survival, resolving navigational problems, and other skills necessary to fight and possibly survive nuclear war.

In support of the combat crews, SAC maintenance personnel worked on aircraft along the massive concrete aircraft parking apron, capable of parking over 130 bombers and refueling tankers. The 2nd Bomb Wing operated from the north edge of the apron, the 308th from the east edge. The space between the two double cantilever hangars,

Buildings 850 and 860, marked the operational boundary between the two wings. New buildings were arranged and old buildings adapted to suit a maintenance system centrally controlled by single bomb wings. Basic maintenance and inspections of aircraft by combat squadrons and organizational/periodic maintenance squadrons occurred in nosedocks, such as Buildings 843, 844, and 845, or on the flightline.

More specialized maintenance occurred in the large hangars under field maintenance squadrons in Buildings 850 and 860. Smaller aircraft components were often removed for maintenance in the armament and electronics squadron shops, which mostly operated out of old World War II buildings and hangars, such as Buildings 811, 813, 1206, and 1290. Wing maintenance control directed all of these maintenance activities.

From Wing Rotation to Reflex

In 1954, SAC headquarters rated the entire 38th Air Division combat ready and nuclear capable. The 38th took part in wing rotation—a SAC program that brought bombers within easy range of the Soviet Union through ninety-day tours at SAC bases in the United Kingdom and North Africa. Hunter AFB's flightline was the staging area for the deployments. The 2nd Bomb Wing undertook two wing rotations to the United Kingdom in 1951 and 1952. Both the 2nd and 308th Bomb Wings conducted multiple wing rotations to North Africa, particularly to Sidi Slimane, Morocco, after 1952. However, the presence of large U.S. bomber forces often caused political problems for the host countries. Wing rotation deployments ceased by the late 1950s.

A Second Bomb Wing combat crew, 1957

H-Bomb Accidents and Hunter AFB

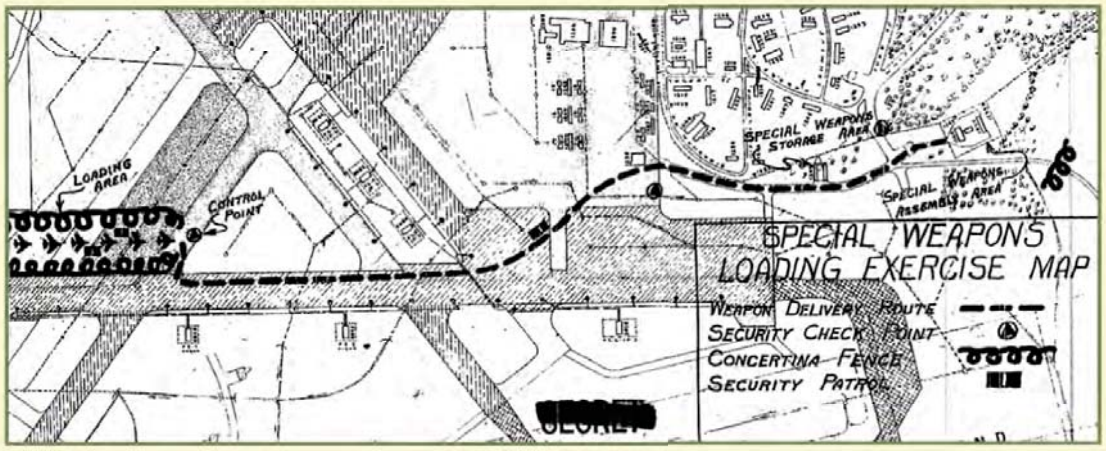
Hunter AFB was involved in two hydrogen bomb accidents, occurring within a month of each other. In February 1958, a bomber from Homestead AFB collided with a fighter plane, forcing the bomber to jettison the bomb off the coast of Tybee Island and land at Hunter AFB. Then in March 1958, a B-47 of the 308th Bomb Wing inadvertently dropped a hydrogen bomb near Florence, South Carolina, injuring six people and destroying a farmhouse owned by the Gregg family (shown here at their house after the incident). Because of standard SAC safety precautions, neither bomb was armed for a thermonuclear detonation.

The 1950s was a decade of continual evolution of nuclear weapons and delivery technology. By 1953, both the Soviet Union and the United States had developed thermonuclear, or hydrogen bombs, hundreds of times more destructive than atomic bombs. More ominously still, the development of missiles meant that the warning time for an attack would soon be measured not in hours, but in minutes. This dawning realization led to SAC developing both a rapid response for its bomber force (the Alert program) and on-site nuclear and thermonuclear weapon storage on all SAC bomber installations. The latter program was called Bombs on Base (BOB). Fifteen facilities in the current ammunition area were constructed in 1957 as part of BOB.

By 1956, SAC had developed a one-third ground alert concept, which envisioned a third of SAC aircraft on alert and armed, ready to take off within fifteen minutes' warning for retaliatory nuclear strikes. In 1956, SAC headquarters designated Hunter AFB as the first test site for this concept. Under Operation TRY OUT (November 1956 – April 1957), Hunter AFB locked the installation down, placed a third of its aircraft in full alert configuration, and continued normal training and maintenance schedules. The next

six months were a grueling ordeal for the officers and men at Hunter AFB. One airman of the 2nd Field Maintenance Squadron recalled, "[W]e come on the base, we didn't go off the flightline for…months. I slept on mattresses brought in from the barracks on the hangar deck [of Building 850]. The mess hall brought bag lunches; that's what we ate, and we lived and worked right out of the hangar."

Hunter AFB proved the one-third alert concept feasible, and SAC quickly moved to implement the program after TRY OUT. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, when the U.S. faced the threat of missile attack with only a bomber force, one-third ground alert remained critical to U.S. nuclear deterrence. SAC bombers used variations of this alert concept through the end of the Cold War. In July 1957, SAC also began Reflex operations, which stationed bombers on ground alert in overseas bases, primarily in North Africa and England. Reflex soon replaced wing rotation. By 1958, Hunter AFB began both home station alert and Reflex operations.



Special Weapons Operations at Hunter AFB

"[W]e always towed the Bomb behind a truck and…the trailer was covered with canvas. When we got to the B-47, the crew chief on the B-47 would open up the bomb bay, back the bomb in, in between the engine and the bomb bay, then we would hang the curtains from the bomb bay to the trailer and we'd push the Bomb in.… Now when you loaded your Bomb…then we would set in what was called the Capsule. In those days, the Capsule was the uranium-235 or whatever they put in the atomic weapon, and it set separately in the bomb bay.… [I]t's against the law to fly over the continental United States with a loaded atomic bomb, so [when the aircraft got beyond the three-mile limit] the bombardier…would [crawl] back into the bomb bay, take the Capsule out, go around behind it (there was a little walkway where you'd go around behind the Bomb), [attach] the Capsule, then the Bomb was loaded…."

— Joe Kerr, 804th Supply Squadron, Hunter AFB, 1955–1957

In October 1957, the Soviet Union launched Sputnik I—the first man-made orbital satellite—leaping ahead of the U.S. in what came to be known as the "space race." Sputnik proved Soviet intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) capability. With the U.S. rockets and missiles still under development, SAC's bomber alert and Reflex program became more important than ever to the country's defense against a Soviet missile attack.

Changing Strategies

In the mid-1950s, SAC began basing bomb wings in the northern tier of the country, closer to the Soviet Union when flying over the Arctic Circle and away from heavily populated areas. By 1955, the first B-52 heavy bombers came online with greater range and payload capacity than the B-47s. The U.S. deployed ICBMs by 1959. The development of ICBMs and the B-52 precluded the need for B-47 bases in the Southeast. Hunter AFB became obsolete.

By 1960, SAC had transferred the 308th from Hunter AFB and announced the base's imminent reassignment to Military Air Transport Service (MATS), another Air Force

The SAC Alert Area at Hunter AFB

The area known as Saber Hall was originally a SAC alert area built in 1960 for home station alert operations. Building 8661, known as the "molehole," housed combat crews on alert, ready to run up the ramps to waiting aircraft parked on the Christmas Tree apron. Fully fueled and loaded with nuclear weapons, aircraft parked at the alert area stood ready to take off within fifteen minutes of the alert siren. The photograph at left depicts an alert crew running to a B-47 at an unspecified alert area.

command. Because of the changes in technology and American nuclear strategy, Hunter AFB's days as a SAC installation were definitely numbered.

Temporary guard tower during the Cuban Missile Crisis, Hunter AFB, October 1962

The country elected John F. Kennedy president in 1960. The Soviets tested the youthful Kennedy repeatedly. Two years into his presidency, in October 1962 (just six months before SAC was scheduled to leave Hunter AFB), the Soviets began installing medium-range nuclear missiles in Cuba. The U.S. imposed a naval blockade on missile shipments and demanded the missiles' removal. The world waited nervously and wondered what would happen if the Soviets tried to run the blockade; would a naval incident between the two superpowers start World War III?

Hunter AFB's 2nd Bomb Wing, which already had seventeen B-47s on Reflex alert overseas, dispersed thirteen more bombers to Shaw AFB and Charleston AFB in South Carolina. All were in full Emergency War Order configuration, loaded with nuclear weapons and Jet-Assisted Take Off rockets for lift-off. Beginning on October 20, 1962, the installation hosted the B-47s of the entire 306th Bomb Wing based out of MacDill AFB, Florida. On October 22, SAC placed its fleet at DEFCON 3, increasing readiness and alert levels above normal. By October 24, all aircraft at Hunter AFB—sixty B-47 bombers with full nuclear payloads—sat silent on the aircraft parking apron and the Christmas Tree apron at the alert area, waiting for the balloon to drop.

Other SAC bases in the U.S. and overseas were on full alert. Overhead, B-52s flew on airborne alert. Fortunately, the Soviets stepped back from the abyss on October 29, 1962, pulling the missiles from Cuba while Kennedy secretly agreed to withdraw U.S. missiles from Turkey. In this most dramatic Cold War incident of nuclear brinkmanship, the Soviets had blinked.

Saber Hall (the old SAC Alert building) in 1970, then in use as an AH-1 Cobra training facility

Materiel Air Transport Service

Within six months of the end of the Cuban Missile Crisis, all SAC aircraft had left Hunter AFB. In April 1963, SAC transferred Hunter AFB to the 63rd Troop Carrier Wing of MATS (Military Air Transport Service), which stationed sixty C-124 cargo planes and 4,300 men to the installation. By 1964, tenant units had also moved to the base, including the Coast Guard. The 63rd's missions were truly global, supporting humanitarian efforts, the Gemini NASA missions, and such military operations as the 1965 U.S. intervention in the Dominican Republic. Significantly, missions to Vietnam gradually increased as the decade wore on and the U.S. became more deeply involved in that country's affairs. In 1964, a year after MATS arrived, the Department of Defense announced the closing of Hunter AFB. Built as a SAC base, Hunter AFB did not have the facilities to support transport missions.

Vietnam and the Army's Arrival

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the Army developed troop-carrying transport helicopters, helicopter gunships designed for close air support, and tactical doctrine for airmobile warfare. These innovations paid off when the U.S. became involved in the Vietnam War.

In 1965, U.S. combat troops were sent to bolster a shaky authoritarian regime in South Vietnam fighting against an insurgency sponsored by Communist North Vietnam. The

The AH-1 Cobra

An AH-1 Cobra lands in the Oglethorpe Mall parking lot in 1972. The aircraft entered service in 1967 and saw extensive use in Vietnam. Hunter Army Airfield was the only location in the United States during the Vietnam War where aviators could train on the Cobra. The Army has since phased out the Cobra, but it is still used by the Marine Corps.

helicopter became the crux of the Army's tactical efforts, essential in jungle terrain for air transport, fire support, medical evacuation, and supply.

The need for more helicopter pilots drove the expansion of the Army's aviation program, which saved Hunter AFB as a military base. In December 1966, the Department of Defense announced that the official new home of the Army's Advanced Flight Training Center (AFTC) would be Hunter Army Airfield (HAAF) and Fort Stewart. The airfield's massive parking apron, built by SAC for jet bombers, offered more than enough space for helicopter training operations.

HAAF became one of the Army's key helicopter training sites during the Vietnam War. Between 1967 and 1972, HAAF and Fort Stewart trained 11,000 rotary wing pilots and 4,328 fixed wing pilots, including 1,400 South Vietnamese aviators. The U.S. withdrew all combat troops from Vietnam in the early 1970s, and, in 1972, the Army closed HAAF. In 1975, North Vietnam conquered South Vietnam, closing an ignominious chapter in American history.

Hunter Army Airfield: 1974 to 2001

The Army reopened HAAF in 1974 and designated it a sub-post of Fort Stewart and a base for the 24th Division's helicopter and support elements. In 1978, the 1st Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment, moved to HAAF as a tenant unit.

Hunter Army Airfield is reactivated, 1974.

By the late 1970s, HAAF had become the U.S. Army's premier rapid deployment node on the eastern seaboard, thanks in no small part to facilities left behind by the Air Force, including the runway, parking apron, and the old SAC alert area, now known as Saber Hall. Special Forces troops or elements of the 24th Division could deploy as rapidly as possible to nearly anywhere in the world, making it a potent offensive resource during the Cold War. The installation's effectiveness was demonstrated by its use as a rapid deployment center during the 1983 Grenada invasion, when the U.S. squelched a Cuban-sponsored Marxist island state in the Caribbean.

In 1990, the Soviet Union collapsed, relegating Communism to the dustbin of history. For forty years the installation's purpose had been largely geared to the ongoing Cold War. What would the future hold for Hunter Field, and indeed the U.S. military?

In 1990–1991, the 24th Infantry Division participated in Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm, taking part in the liberation of Kuwait and the destruction of much of Saddam Hussein's Iraqi Army. However, few missions in the 1990s had the clarity of Desert Storm, and the Army conducted multiple open-ended peace-keeping and humanitarian missions in countries as diverse as Haiti, Somalia, and the former Yugoslavia, with mixed results. In the middle of this uncertain decade, in 1996, the 24th Infantry Division was re-flagged the Third Infantry Division, "The Rock of the Marne."

Confronting Global Jihad: 2001 to the Present

After a close and controversial election, George W. Bush was sworn into office as president in January 2001. On September 11 of that year, al-Qaeda terrorists flew three

passenger aircraft into the Pentagon and World Trade Center towers, killing 3,000 people. Once again America was at war, although not with a traditional enemy, but an extremist religious movement.

The current protracted guerrilla conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq—part of the larger War on Terror—have accelerated changes in organization and doctrine and increased the construction tempo on Army bases. Within this context, HAAF continues to be an important Army deployment and support base thanks to existing airfield facilities and its location adjacent to Fort Stewart and the east coast ports of Savannah and Charleston. HAAF's status shows no sign of changing soon, particularly since Army reorganization and withdrawal from Europe means more troops will be stationed on the installation.

Some sixty years ago, the Air Corps developed an airfield that over the years has adapted to the military's changing needs, serving first as a bomber and air transport base for the Air Force, then as an Army helicopter training base, and finally as a rapid deployment node and home for an infantry division's aviation units and various Special Operations, Marine Corps, Coast Guard, and Air Force tenants. Hunter Army Airfield continues to adapt, driven by changing strategic and operational realities of the Global War on Terror. While the war will eventually pass into history, it will not mark the final chapter in this installation's history.

Third Division troops, returning from OIF III deployment in December 2005, walk through the massive doors of Building 850, a historic Strategic Air Command hangar.

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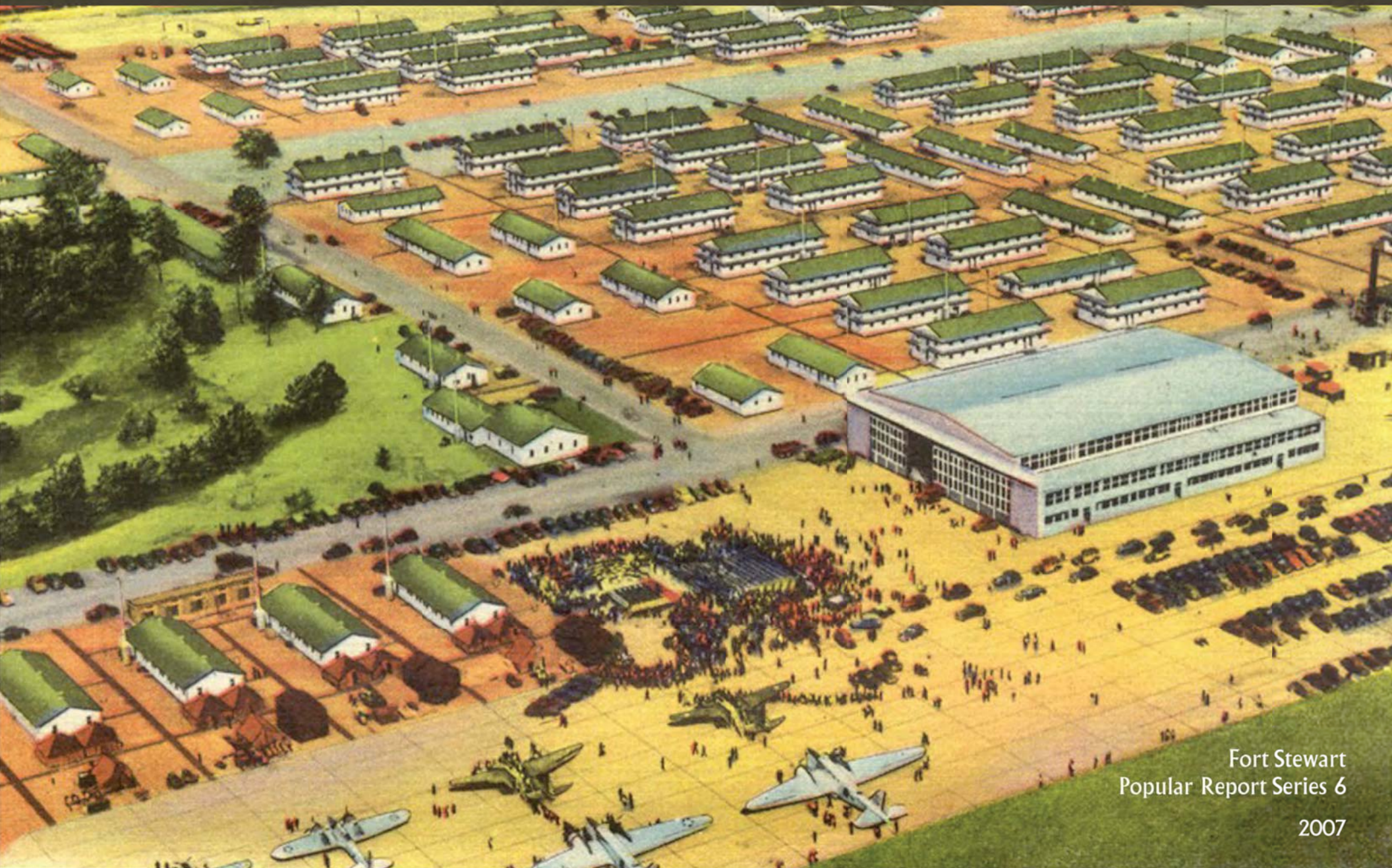
Illustration: Hunter Field, 1941



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