

Kelly Field in World Wars I and II

On 5 April 1917, one day before the United States entered World War I, four intrepid flyers, Captains Bert Atkinson, Carl Spaatz, and George Reinberg, and civilian Eddie Stinson, flew from Ft Sam Houston and landed on a newly prepared field south of the city. This field grew into today's Kelly Air Force Base.

After America's entry into the war, Kelly quickly grew into the largest aviation field in the United States. Even as the contractors were clearing the land, thousands of recruits streamed through the gates of the new camp. As quickly as the cotton and mesquite disappeared, scores of new buildings took their place, buildings such as hangars, barracks, mess halls, warehouses, machine shops, and offices. Despite this construction "boom," most of the men lived in the "tent city" which covered the landscape.

During World War I, Kelly Field served as a reception and testing center for recruits and as a training center for new pilots, mechanics, cooks and bakers, and engineering and supply officers. Kelly officers either processed or taught most of the American-trained World War I flyers--1,459 pilots and 298 instructors graduated from Kelly flying schools during the war. Its personnel tested approximately 250,000 men in 53 different fields, classified them by trade, and organized the men into aero squadrons. The Enlisted Mechanics Training Department, later the Air Service Mechanics' School, turned out a monthly average of 2,000 mechanics and chauffeurs.

When World War II erupted in the fall of 1939, Kelly Field's main mission was pilot training at the Advanced Flying School. The San Antonio Air Depot occupied Duncan Field, once part of Kelly but organized as a separate base in 1925. Initially the expansion of the Air Corps during the war meant enlarging the training mission at Kelly, but within a few brief years the maintenance mission would swallow up the entire base.

Between 1939 and the early spring of 1943, Kelly's Advanced Flying School graduated 6,845 pilots. Another 607 men successfully completed navigator training at the Navigation School established on the base in 1941. As in World War I, a "tent city" sprang up to accommodate the sudden influx of pilot trainees. Candidates for pilot's wings also got their first taste of military life at Kelly. Some 18,349 prospective pilots passed through the Replacement Training Center before flying operations shifted away from the base in 1943.

Expansion of the San Antonio Air Depot at Duncan Field was equally rapid. By 1942 the workforce was twenty times what it had been in 1939. Air traffic congestion posed a dangerous problem, resolved in March of 1943 by the consolidation of Kelly and Duncan under the single name of Kelly Field. The sole mission of Kelly Field became logistics support.

By 1945 Kelly Field was home to over 6,000 military personnel and over 22,000 civilian workers. As elsewhere in America, women were an integral part of this workforce. Over 10,000 "Kelly Katies" labored in the shops alongside men, providing the critical support for aircraft such as the P-51 fighter and the B-29 heavy bomber. By the end of the war, Kelly was the world's largest aviation depot with a critical role to play in the shaping of post-war American airpower.

Kelly Air Force Base and the Korean War

The outbreak of the Korean War in June of 1950 found Kelly in the midst of implementing a new Air Force logistics system and adjusting to reductions in personnel. Once again, almost overnight, Kelly geared up in support of the national war effort. Kelly's supply and maintenance personnel began working round-the-clock shifts in an effort to prepare mothballed aircraft for shipment to the Far East. In five days 22 B-26 bombers underwent full depot inspection and repair, while in rapid succession supply programs accelerated.

By mid-July 1950 the Kelly maintenance line was in the process of re-conditioning B-29s for overseas service. Special outdoor lighting was installed so work could continue during the night. The aircraft production line was soon nicknamed the "Great White Way" as the reflected glow of the lights shining on the aluminum skin of the bombers lit up the sky after dark.

Alongside the B-29 production line, Kelly's maintenance crews labored long hours to overhaul other aircraft hurriedly recalled from storage, including F-51 fighters, C-46 transports, T-11 trainers, and helicopters. Kelly's shops repaired and manufactured hundreds of radios, propellers, air-frame parts and engine accessories, and also prepared 446 ground vehicles for shipment overseas.

By the end of the fighting in Korea in July, 1953, Kelly's primary mission was support of the immense B-36 "Peacekeeper," the first American bomber capable of spanning the globe. Yet, the B-36, with its six powerful turboprop engines, was already approaching obsolescence. Kelly's mission would soon shift again as it, and the Air Force, entered fully into the jet age.

Kelly and the War in Vietnam

Kelly's association with the long war in Vietnam began early and lasted until American involvement ended in 1975. From 1960 to the late summer of 1964, the San Antonio Air Materiel Area (SAAMA) supplied specific items through the Military Assistance Program. But following the Gulf of Tonkin Incident in August 1964, Kelly's support of the war effort intensified which, in some cases, meant direct involvement in the war for civilian employees. For most of these this simply meant doing their job under difficult and dangerous conditions. A few, however, would pay the ultimate sacrifice in support of this commitment.

During the build-up of American forces in 1965, SAAMA sent eleven joint military/civilian teams to Southeast Asia as part of a command wide effort to establish supply centers throughout the western Pacific, including Vietnam. Other Kelly workers served in Vietnam on special F-5 modification teams; helped reassemble newly shipped F-5 aircraft at Bien Hoa Air Base; assisted in the creation of an engine repair facility at Bien Hoa; served on rapid area maintenance, supply support or area transportation teams; and served weapon system logistic officers.

For those who remained in San Antonio, the Vietnam years were often a time of intense effort as they strove to meet the demands for materiel or aircraft maintenance. Kelly managers oversaw weapon systems such as the F-102 fighter/interceptor, the O-2 observation aircraft, the A-37 attack aircraft, and the F-5 fighter, as well as the T34, T56 and J79 engines. In addition, Kelly was one site for specialized repair of the B-52 bomber. In 1972, under project "Enhance Plus" (part of the on-going Vietnamization effort), Kelly maintenance personnel prepared 66 A-37 aircraft for shipment to Vietnam by working around the clock for nearly 62 hours. Later, Kelly workers assisted in processing 32 Iranian F-5 fighters for delivery to Vietnam, before, in November, preparing 28 T-38 trainers for shipment during another round-the-clock effort. By the end of "Enhance Plus" Kelly's workers had piled up nearly 100,000 hours of overtime. It was, though, only one example of the skill and dedication of the men and women of Kelly. There are many more. Their support of the war effort during the Vietnam years continued the tradition of service to the nation sustained by the people of Kelly for over seventy years and through four wars.