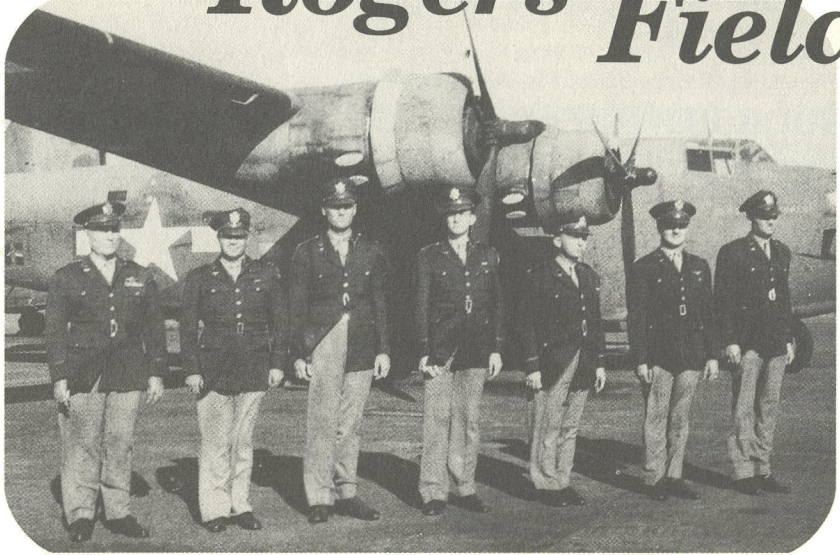


Will Rogers Field



The Life and Death of a World War II Airbase

*By Keith Tolman**

At the beginning of the epic World War II movie *Twelve O'Clock High*, Harvey Stovall, an aging former United States Army Air Forces officer played by actor Dean Jagger, pays an emotional visit to the bomber base in England at which he was stationed during that defining conflict. He nostalgically surveys the weathered, abandoned airfield and recalls an earlier time when the base was briefly alive with that frantic combination of bellowing engines and the boisterous comradery born of war.

If modern searchers look hard enough they can still find tucked away in the corners of the American landscape remnants of air bases not unlike the one of Stovall's remembrance. Most enjoyed a brief existence only to be abandoned at the close of the conflict. A few, however, went on to fulfill different, but important roles in the postwar world. The story of Will Rogers Field in Oklahoma City is typical of many installations established during the urgency of war.

Oklahoma, as well as other states in the southern half of the United States, was particularly suited to primary and basic flight training during World War II. States located in the Sun Belt afforded flight students a maximum number of flying days during the course of a year. More advanced instruction, such as instrument flight training, bombing, and other specialized activities, often took place in parts of the country where good flying weather was not a critical factor. One notable exception, however, was Will Rogers Field in Oklahoma City. At various times throughout the war the installation was used as a base to train aircrews in advanced techniques such as aerial bombardment and photographic reconnaissance.

The establishment of what would become Will Rogers Field began almost two years before the United States became embroiled in World War II. As political conditions worsened in Europe and the Far East, the military branches began a buildup of assets, which included the construction of new aviation bases. In August, 1939, Col. Robert E. Olds, commanding officer of Langley Field, Virginia, visited the Oklahoma City Municipal Airport to evaluate its potential as a future site for a bomber base. One of the most significant facts he noted in his report was that the Oklahoma City airport was located 4.5 miles south and 19.6 miles west of the half-way point between Langley Field, Virginia, and March Field, California, the two key coastal air bases in the United States.¹

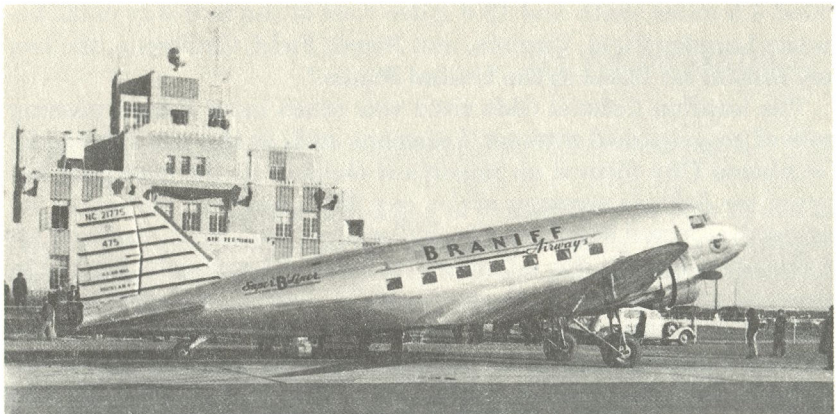
The location Colonel Olds cited was much more than a passing note of geographical interest. Locations such as the one enjoyed by Oklahoma City formed an important element in the emerging national air defense strategy of the day. With tensions mounting between the United States and both Germany and Japan, military officials considered it advantageous for bomber bases to be located in areas where they could respond quickly to an enemy attack on either coast. At the same time, they also favored inland, mid-continent locations to protect the valuable bombers in the event an enemy staged a preemptive strike. The value of that strategy was borne out on December 7, 1941, when the Japanese struck Pearl

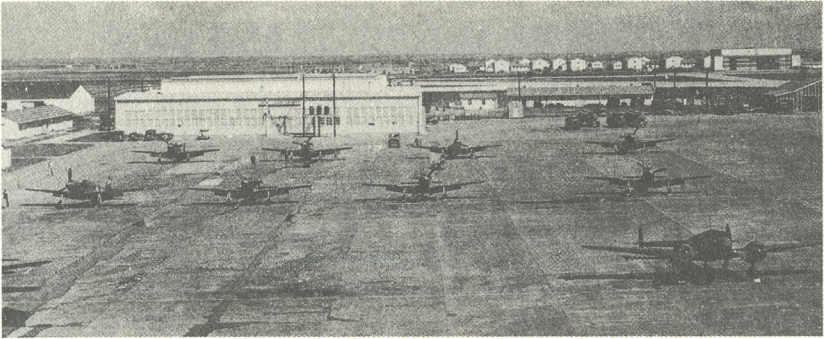
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Harbor, Hawaii. All too late, military leaders realized that in the case of the attack on the Pacific stronghold one of Japan's main targets was in fact United States air power.

At the time of Olds' visit, Oklahoma City Municipal Airport was a showplace of municipal planning. The facility was the successor to the old municipal airport located at Southwest Twenty-ninth Street and May Avenue, the present site of Woodson Park. Construction of the new facility was financed through a \$425,000 municipal bond issue passed in 1929 by progressive "air-minded" Oklahoma City residents. By 1938 the facility boasted an impressive two-story Spanish Colonial-style terminal building and up-to-date control tower. The first floor of the structure was taken up with a ticket office, waiting room, restaurant, barber shop, soda stand, and smoking room. The second floor was occupied by airline transport offices and an office of the United States Weather Bureau. Three hangars and two asphalt-over-stone runways completed the physical plant. Besides the general aviation sector's use of the facility, two airlines, Braniff and American, operated nine aircraft through the airport each day serving an estimated 1,000 passengers per month.²

It was only a short time before Oklahoma City civic leaders learned of Army Air Corps interest in their airport. R. A. Singletary, the Oklahoma City Chamber of Commerce manager of governmental relations in Washington, D.C., discovered through confidential sources that a base was in the offing and he passed the information on to local chamber officials. His sources also indicated that at least \$1 million would be spent to build the base and that approximately





Braniff Airways was one of two commercial airlines using Will Rogers Field when the military arrived. By 1943 the view from the control tower showed military planes lining the tarmac (Unless noted, all photographs taken from United States Army Air Force, Third Air Force, Wings Over America: History of Will Rogers Field [Oklahoma] [Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Army and Navy Publishing Company, 1943]; Courtesy Oklahoma Historical Society, No. 20533.163, opposite).

200 officers and 2,000 enlisted personnel would be stationed there.³ The potential long-term economic impact such a facility would have on Oklahoma City and the state quickly made winning the base a top priority for city leaders.

At the urging of dynamic chamber director Stanley Draper, the Oklahoma City Chamber of Commerce on July 13, 1940, submitted an unsolicited brief to Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson. Stressing the location factor already noted by Olds, the city offered the airport and its facilities to the Army Air Corps. Commenting later on the document, the Army Air Corps author of Will Rogers Field's first historical report noted skeptically, "The original application [chamber brief] was made locally as a method through which one hundred per cent government aid might be secured for the improvement of Municipal Airport No. 1" (Will Rogers Field).⁴

Events followed swiftly. On July 30, 1940, a site selection board consisting of Army Air Corps and Army Corp of Engineers officers arrived in Oklahoma City to meet with chamber and city officials concerning a possible site for the base. The board studied the needs of the military and requested the lease of at least sixty acres of land in the southwest corner of the airport. City officials called a special meeting of the Oklahoma City Council and within two hours approved the plan. Final army approval for the base came from Washington, D. C., on August 16.⁵

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Initially, the plan called for the proposed base to be confined to the west side of the airport and to share runway and air traffic control facilities with commercial and general aircraft operations. Though almost unknown today, the practice of civilian and military entities operating from the same airfield was quite common prior to World War II. As a practical matter the sharing of facilities was almost an economic necessity given the embryonic state of commercial aviation at the time and the scarcity of congressional military appropriations during the decades between the world wars.

Elated with their success in bringing the base to Oklahoma City, chamber members and city officials decided to go a step further. In a September 20, 1940, meeting, they discussed the possibility of acquiring additional land around the airport for expansion of facilities and as a buffer against encroachment by non-aviation-related development. They reasoned that the acquisition might induce the Army Air Corps to take over the entire airport and turn it into a large, permanent base, rather than having it occupy only a portion of the airport for what might prove to be a relatively short period of time. To facilitate the land acquisition for the airport and other future projects, city leaders created the Industries Foundation of Oklahoma City several months later. Through that public trust, they secured an additional 1,272 acres of land around the airport and leased it to the corps.⁶

The War Department on September 28 made a public announcement that Oklahoma City would be the home of a bomber base. In late January, 1941, the T. L. James Construction Company of Ruston, Louisiana, received the contract to build the base. By that time, the funds allocated for construction had risen to \$1.4 million, and the projected complement of the base had been increased to 350 officers and 4,200 enlisted personnel.⁷

Actual construction began in February and proceeded apace until April and May when heavy spring rains began to cause delays. As the first base historian wrote:

[A]n abnormal rainfall soaked the Oklahoma soil into a jelly-like mass. . . . One of the contractors is even reported to have said he had lost a tractor in the mud. It was not possible to drive a private automobile in the cantonment area, due to road conditions and it was scarcely possible to distinguish between officers and men, since all were mud-caked and well camouflaged from early morning until late at night.⁸

Impatient and doubting the tenacity of the Oklahoma mud, the commanding general of the project stationed at March Field, Cali-

fornia, ordered daily Oklahoma City weather reports forwarded to him.

Conditions at the formative installation were crude. In late February, 1941, the new base surgeon, Maj. Warren M. Scott, arrived to take command of a base hospital that did not yet exist. It was noted with admiration:

Major Scott's sole equipment and supplies consisted of one medical bag, normally carried by a general practitioner; from this bag Major Scott cared for the officers, enlisted men and families during a minor siege of respiratory disease during the Spring and early Summer of 1941 . . . until the hospital was unofficially opened in September, 1941.⁹

Early March witnessed the appointment of the first temporary commander of the base, Maj. William C. Lewis, a native Oklahoman who was a graduate of the universities of Oklahoma and Michigan. He received his army commission in 1925 and was rated a pilot in 1933. Before being recalled to duty and taking command of Will Rogers Field, he served as the United States district attorney in Oklahoma City. Following a two-month tour as a commander of the new base he was promoted to lieutenant colonel and sent to command the army air base at Albuquerque and later the air base at Carlsbad, New Mexico.¹⁰

Beginning in March, 1941, the base began to receive its support personnel, an essential element in carrying out the mission of the operational combat units that might be stationed at the new facility. The support units consisted of air base, finance, medical, ordnance, weather, and quartermaster commands. In an effort to build *esprit de corps*, the Army Air Corps also posted to the base the Eighty-third Army Air Force Band from Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.¹¹

The first permanent commander of the new base was Col. Ross G. Hoyt, who assumed command on May 3, 1941. A former World War I



The military named the Oklahoma City base after Will Rogers six years after his death in Alaska (OHS No. 20533.163).

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pilot, Hoyt would eventually rise to the rank of general following service against the Japanese in China and later as commander of the army air force base at Phoenix, Arizona.

On May 1, 1941, Oklahomans received astonishing news concerning the new military facility. Previously known only as "Air Base Oklahoma City," the base was renamed Will Rogers Field in honor of Oklahoma's wise-cracking vaudevillian, movie star, and nationally syndicated newspaper columnist. The Army Air Corps primarily had limited the naming of facilities to army aviators who lost their lives in aerial combat or during the course of advancing military aviation. Aside from pioneer aviators Wilbur Wright and Professor Samuel P. Langley of the Smithsonian Institution, Will Rogers was the only civilian to be so honored.¹²

The new designation, however, was far more than an effort to stroke the egos of Oklahomans. Throughout the military everyone was aware of the role played by the crusading Rogers in winning public and political support for military aviation. The base historian reported, "The men and officers of Will Rogers Field were greatly elated [concerning the name change] . . . because . . . Rogers, during his life, had been one of the greatest champions of aviation . . . and had been known throughout the Air Corps as a friend of all pilots."¹³

During the early hectic days of construction the first military aircraft arrived, a twin-engine Douglas A-20 Havoc attack bomber. Later in May other tactical and training aircraft began to arrive, four additional A-20s and two BT-18s. Those first aircraft were the nucleus of the Forty-eighth Bombardment Group, which was beginning to form at the base.¹⁴

The official dedication of the base took place on June 28, 1941. On that day an estimated 10,000 visitors toured the facility and heard military and civic leaders praise the late Will Rogers for his untiring promotion of aviation. Among the civilian dignitaries in attendance were Oklahoma governor Leon Phillips, Oklahoma City mayor Robert Hefner, and city manager H. E. Bailey. Maj. Gen. Jacob E. Fickel of March Field, California, represented the military. Fickel served as commanding general of the Fourth Air Force to which the new base was attached.¹⁵

The speeches of the dignitaries took second place to the displays of aircraft, at least as far as the majority of the crowd was concerned. Among a number of aircraft on exhibit was the air corps' latest technological wonder, the Boeing B-17 Flying Fortress. The giant four-engine bomber amazed the crowd as people lined up for

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hundreds of yards to get a closer look at it. Later that day, an aerial demonstration of the bomber took place with Fickel directing its maneuvers from the ground, while a radio announcer from Oklahoma City radio station WKY broadcast his impressions as he flew along as a passenger.¹⁶

Serving as home for 153 officers and 2,192 enlisted personnel, by the end of 1941 the base was nothing less than a city within a city. Its physical plant consisted of 114 structures, which included administration buildings, barracks, mess halls, chapel, hospital, recre-



Members of Will Rogers Field staff (p. 4) proudly stood before one of the planes used in their training, which eventually included bombsight training, above.

ation hall, and library. A new control tower directed air traffic using the new 4,500-foot-long macadam runways. Assorted support facilities consisted of a railroad yard, storage facilities, water system, and sewage treatment plant.¹⁷

With the prospect of war looming, plans for expansion of the base were in the making even before the base was dedicated. On May 10, 1941, Oklahoma City manager H. E. Bailey announced that the War Department had asked him to establish a purchase price for the entire airport. In effect, that would have left the city without a municipal airport. Enterprising Oklahoma City leaders, however, had already considered the possibility of vacating the airport and in hopes of turning it totally over to the air corps had begun construction of Oklahoma City Municipal Airport No. 2, which later came to be known as Tulakes and eventually Wiley Post Airport.¹⁸

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The news of a proposed transfer of civilian flight operations from Will Rogers Field to the new airport north of the city caused some concern in at least one quarter. At the time, Oklahoma City-based Braniff Airways, Inc., was constructing a new \$26,000 hangar at Will Rogers Field and company officials wanted to know what would happen to their investment if ownership of the airport were transferred to the military. Bailey reportedly told Tom Braniff, president of the airline, that it was not the city's problem and that Braniff would have to negotiate directly with the army concerning disposition of company assets.¹⁹ Soon after, it should be noted, Braniff moved its base of operations from Oklahoma City to the Dallas-Fort Worth area.

Even though construction continued and personnel came and went, the base began to take on a semblance of routine, but one that was shattered on December 7, 1941. With the attack on Pearl Harbor came a message from General Fickel to institute tighter security and gear up for war. Galvanized by the turn of events, the base commander canceled all leaves and dispersed the aircraft to protect them from possible attack by enemy saboteurs. The mood on the base was captured by the base historian who wrote, "It was as if a curtain had suddenly dropped around the field, hiding its activities and concealing its movements, for these activities and movements had suddenly become important factors."²⁰

With the coming of war the mission of the base began to evolve. The military transferred the base to the command of the Third Air Force. In January, 1942, command of the base again shifted, to the Second Air Force, when it was designated a light bomber training base. To prepare for the influx of new flight crews, the military erected a tent city to house 1,000 new personnel. It proved to be only a stopgap, however, as the new base commander, Col. Robert DeFord, announced in March that an additional \$1.4 million would be spent to double the size of the existing base.²¹

As the number of personnel at the base grew, a huge demand developed for off-base activities. The base historian commented that military personnel were well received by the people of Oklahoma City and that military personnel had no trouble finding wholesome entertainment. Popular pastimes were movie going, horseback riding, and bowling. To repay Oklahoma Citizens for their hospitality, base personnel wrote, produced, directed and performed a comedy, "The Laughs on US," at the downtown Civic Center.²²

The cooperation and good relations between the military and Oklahoma City extended to more than mere entertainment, how-

ever. On June 12, 1942, a tornado that swept through the city claimed twenty-seven lives. In response to the tragedy Colonel DeFord dispatched 400 much needed and very welcome base personnel in buses and trucks to assist with the rescue work.²³

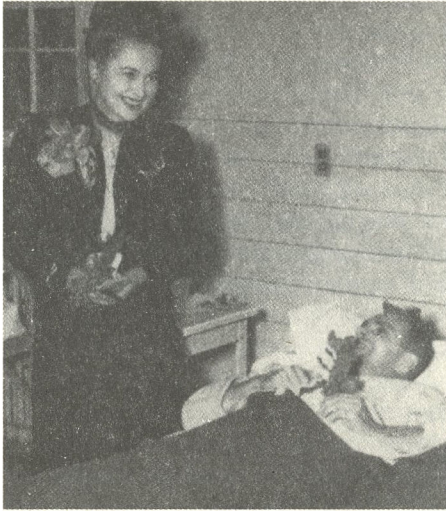
During its existence Will Rogers witnessed the comings and goings of a number of noted personalities. World War I flying ace Eddie Rickenbacher arrived in February, 1942, to instill confidence in pilots by instructing them about the psychology of aerial combat. Later in the year the base played host to crooner Bing Crosby and sultry actress Bette Davis, both of whom visited the base to boost morale.²⁴

In response to the needs for attack plane crews, Will Rogers Field by 1943 had become the largest light bomber training base in the country. The object of most aircrew attention was a practice bombing range located ninety miles north on the Great Salt Plains in northern Oklahoma. Day after day, A-20 Havoc crews dropped 100-pound practice bombs onto the outline of a battleship marked in the sand from an altitude of 300 feet. Spotters stationed atop sixty-foot-tall observation towers near the target zone reported their hits and misses. In a similar fashion, aircraft gunners practiced by firing at sixteen-foot targets located nearby. One observer commented that the bombing range provided a high degree of realism as the Great Salt Plains bore more than a passing resemblance to the Libyan desert where war was then raging.²⁵

During September and October, 1943, the mission of the base shifted from the light bomber training to photographic reconnaissance training. Replacing the departing A-20 attack aircraft were a number of Lockheed P-38, Consolidated B-24, and Boeing B-17 aircraft, which had been specially modified for high altitude photographic reconnaissance work. Utilizing simulated combat conditions, aircrews honed their skills in advanced navigation, mapping, communication, and instrument flying.²⁶

All was not work, however. Patients at the base hospital received a surprise visitor just in time for Christmas. Actress Olivia DeHavilland arrived to hand out autographed photographs and sprigs of holly to bedridden soldiers in honor of the season. Later in the evening she dined with members of the Women's Army Air Corps and attended a dance at the U.S.O. Club in downtown Oklahoma City.²⁷

The base continued to grow throughout 1943. Workers lengthened the runways to accommodate the large photographic reconnaissance aircraft and erected a new control tower with slanted, non-glare glass atop the old municipal terminal building. Among



Celebrity visitors to Will Rogers Field included Olivia DeHavilland in December, 1943. To further a good relationship with local citizens, base personnel participated in a Fourth of July parade in Oklahoma City in 1942 (opposite) (OHS No. 20218.1992, opposite).

the many additional buildings constructed was a bowling alley in which the base commander bowled the first well-publicized game for a score of 163.²⁸

The harmonious relations between Oklahoma City residents and base personnel became strained in response to an incident in July, 1944. While driving along Main Street late one night, an Army Air Corps officer struck and killed two Oklahoma City Railway Company employees who were repairing the streetcar tracks. Military police later apprehended the soldier and he was ordered to stand court martial for manslaughter.²⁹

Oklahoma civil authorities filed similar charges in civil court and requested that the accused be turned over to them for prosecution. The commanding general of the Third Air Force denied the request, and the subsequent court martial resulted in an acquittal. On July 18, 1944, civil authorities apprehended the soldier while he was off base, forcing the military to make a formal demand for his release. In the end, civil rulings eventually convinced city and state officials that to try the man again would constitute double jeopardy.³⁰

Near the end of 1944, the ongoing construction and maintenance of Will Rogers Field received an unusual but welcome boost. In December 225 German prisoners of war arrived at the facility to work as carpenters, bricklayers, kitchen workers, and in other positions. The prisoners stayed in their own secure compound at night, but during the day worked in all non-restricted areas of the base.³¹

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As the war drew to a close, activity at the base declined. In August, 1945, the military scaled back aerial operations to one-third of previous levels and civilian employees returned to forty-hour work weeks.³² In September the base became a separation center for mustering out troops and functioned as such through the following month. The base also became a storage facility for surplus B-24, B-25, A-20, and P-38 aircraft, which were later flown to other bases to be broken up for scrap and melted down. By January, 1946, the total number of monthly flying hours at the base had dropped to 159, as opposed to the previous August total of 4,115. The only instruction being conducted by 1946 was for a handful of Nationalist Chinese student pilots stationed at the base.³³

Lt. Col. Harry F. Van Leuven became the last commander of Will Rogers Field in March, 1946, with the sad duty of deactivating the base. It had been declared surplus to the needs of the government on February 27, 1946, and most base personnel separated from service or transferred to other facilities. By the end of March, the military had disposed of 98 percent of all government property, and civilian guards replaced military police. Shortly thereafter, right of entry was given to the War Assets Administration and the Civil Aeronautics Authority. The base was subsequently returned to the Oklahoma City municipal government.³⁴

At the time of its establishment, the people of Oklahoma City hoped Will Rogers Field would become a permanent facility with long-term economic benefit to the state. However, by the end of hostilities other military facilities, most notably Tinker Air Force Base in nearby Midwest City, had rendered the Oklahoma City base re-



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dundant. Despite the closing, however, unforeseen and long-term benefits proved to be substantial. The additional land acquired for the base subsequently allowed for expansion of Will Rogers World Airport during the dawning Jet Age. The original site of the base on the west side of the airport eventually became the home of the Federal Aviation Administration's (FAA) Mike Monroney Aeronautical Center. Besides training air traffic controllers from around the world, the sprawling facility also is home to the FAA aeromedical and aircraft registration branches. More recently, the United States Marshal Service established its model detention and prisoner transport facility on land once a part of Will Rogers Field.

Another lasting benefit of the base came with the establishment of the Industries Authority of Oklahoma City, formed originally to acquire additional land for Will Rogers Field. Over the years, the authority has been instrumental in bringing to the Oklahoma City area facilities such as Midwest Air Depot (Tinker AFB), the General Motors manufacturing facility, and a host of other enterprises.

In the end, Will Rogers Field shared much the same fate as dozens of other air bases built across the United States during World War II. Spawned during a time of trial and nurtured by unabashed boosterism, it served a brief, exciting, and important existence only to become little more than a footnote in local history and the object of nostalgic musings by the Harvey Stovalls who won World War II in the air.

ENDNOTES

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¹ "History of Will Rogers Field, Oklahoma, January, 1939, to 7 December, 1941," 11, Document 289-78-1, volume 1, United States Air Force Historical Research Center, Maxwell AFB, Alabama (hereafter cited as "Will Rogers Field, 1939-1941," and USAFHRC).

² Ralph E. Newcomb, "Oklahoma City's Modern Municipal Airport," 1936, unpublished manuscript, Townsite File, Library Resources Division, Oklahoma Historical Society, Oklahoma City. See also Eugene Murray, "Municipal Airport," 1938, unpublished manuscript, in the same file.

³ James L. Crowder, Jr., "More Valuable Than Oil: The Establishment and Development of Tinker Air Force Base, 1940-1949," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, 70 (Fall, 1992): 229-231.

⁴ "Will Rogers Field, 1939-1941," 11, USAFHRC.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 12; see also James M. Smallwood, *Urban Builder: The Life of Stanley Draper* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1977), 97-103.

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- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 26.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 23–24.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 13.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 19–20.
- ¹² *The (Oklahoma City, Oklahoma) Daily Oklahoman*, May 1, 1941.
- ¹³ “Will Rogers Field, 1939–1941,” 25, USAFHRC.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 25; *Daily Oklahoman*, May 10, 1941.
- ¹⁵ *Daily Oklahoman*, June 29, 1941.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁷ “Will Rogers Field, 1939–1941,” 26–29, USAFHRC.
- ¹⁸ *Daily Oklahoman*, May 13, 1941. Oklahoma City Municipal Airport No. 2 was eventually named for Oklahoma aviation pioneer Wiley Post, who lost his life with Will Rogers while flying in Alaska. The new municipal airport was probably not named for the famous aviator at the time of its construction because a private flying field in Oklahoma City by that same name already existed.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*
- ²⁰ “History of Will Rogers Field, Oklahoma, Period II, 7 December, 1941 to January 1943,” 1, Document 289.78.1, volume 1, USAFHRC.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 3–4.
- ²² *Ibid.*, 5.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 6.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.
- ²⁵ *Daily Oklahoman*, July 5, 1942.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.
- ²⁷ “History of Will Rogers Field, Oklahoma, Period 1 November, 1943, to 30 November, 1943,” 3, Document 289.78.78–1, volume 1, USAFHRC.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 1.
- ²⁹ “History of 348th Army Air Force Base Unit, Headquarters Will Rogers Field, Oklahoma, 1 July 1945 to 31 July 1945,” 16–17, Document 289.78.21, USAFHRC.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*
- ³¹ “History of Army Air Forces Base Unit 348, Headquarters Will Rogers Field Oklahoma, 1 May, 1945, to 31 May, 1945,” 30, Document 289.78.19, USAFHRC.
- ³² “History of 348th AAF Base Unit, Headquarters Will Rogers Field, Oklahoma, 1 August, 1945, to 2 September, 1945,” 3–4, Document 289.78.22, USAFHRC.
- ³³ “History of 348th AAF Base Unit, Headquarters Will Rogers Field, Oklahoma, 1 September, 1945, to 31 January, 1947,” 2–7, Document 289.78.23 00179651, USAFHRC.
- ³⁴ “History of 348th AAF Base Unit, Headquarters Will Rogers Field, Oklahoma, 1 February, 1946, to 31 March, 1946,” 104, Document 289.78.24 00179652, USAFHRC.