

Museum News: 90th Aero Squadron on patrol

By S. W. (Bill) Smith, curator
Terrell County Memorial Museum

On November 26, 1919, a large rail convoy with about 70 men and officers and their equipment arrived at the Sanderson rail yards, in sight of the hill that would one day become the rock quarry west of town.

Men and equipment were off-loaded and began the short journey to a spot west of Sanderson on the road to Fort Stockton, on today's US 285 about where the Highway Department is located. The troops of the 864th Aero Squadron, a construction group, immediately began to set up the aerodrome, which consisted mostly of tent structures, both for the men and as hangars for the DH-



Photo courtesy of the Terrell County Memorial Museum

4 bombers. The only permanent wood structures came later when the Eagle Pass Aerodrome was closed and the Squadron Headquarters moved to Sanderson. Those latter buildings consisted of four headquarter structures with offices for the administrative staff, arranged around a central quadrangle assembly yard, with a fifth building located to the south.

To the north of this complex sat three rows of thirty-six pyramidal tents, which served as barracks for the men. Beyond sat a row of twelve, large canvas hangar tents, which gave a measure of protection from the elements for the aircraft. In addition to this, there were tents set up for the cooks, a hospital for the flight surgeon and medics and various-sized tents for tools and storage, including a large mechanics' tent for aircraft and vehicle repairs.

In addition to the airplanes, there were also about fifteen heavy trucks for hauling supplies and about eight other vehicles and motorcycles for light transportation and ground patrol. In all, it seemed to be a large operation for a small town.

Almost immediately the 90th Aero Squadron moved in and patrols began. Two planes flew west, snaking along the Rio Grande as far as Lajitas in the Big Bend, then turned and flew back. Two other planes headed east as far as the Devil's River, and then returned. With a 400-mile range, the American versions of the British de Havilland DH-4 bombers made the trip easily. For armament, the DH-4s carried two .30-caliber Marlin machine guns on front and two .30-caliber Lewis machine guns on a rack in the rear for the co-pilot. In addition, it could carry four bombs, with a total weight of about 322 lbs. The local crews spent hours and days practicing bombing runs in the pastures around the aerodrome using dummy bombs made of metal nosecones and fins and terracotta bodies.

Daily patrols ceased in September of 1920, but the Aero Squadron did not return to Kelly Field until the summer of 1921. The revolution in Mexico was cooling down, but more importantly, the show of deadly force intimidated the insurrectos and border crossings took a dramatic downturn.

After 1921 the only things left at the site were the headquarter buildings, and they gradually disappeared, some to form the nucleus of homes in Sanderson, and one going to the Dryden air field to become the airport headquarters. That building was destroyed by fire in the 1980s. And, oh yes, lots and lots of broken practice bombs were left behind!

Obviously, having almost a hundred young airmen and their support crews living on the edge of town had a great effect on the populace of Sanderson. Many dances and social gatherings were held for and by the airmen, and even a few marriages resulted from local involvement.

Local businessman J.W. Happle related in the TC history book that two of the young fliers were in rivalry for the affections of a young lady in San Antonio. On one trip she rewarded one young beau with a cute little puppy, to keep him from being too lonely when they were apart. But, as he was making the journey home in the open cockpit of the DH-4, the puppy bit him, and Happle said the young flier "salvoed" the pup to a rocky fate, thereby dooming his chances for the young lady's hand.

The airmen of the 90th Aero Squadron quickly became a part of the social scene. Often, during these Prohibition days, their social affairs were fueled by contraband liquor, acquired on clandestine trips to Mexico where the 18th Amendment was not applicable. Mr. Happle said that during one of these "mercy" flights, the DH-4 aircraft limped into Sanderson from the east. Throughout the flight the engine had coughed and sputtered, threatening to quit altogether. As it came to the outskirts of town, the engine gave up the ghost and the pilot was forced to set down on

the baseball field/rodeo arena on the east side of town, crashing to a halt against a barbed wire fence. Very quickly a truck from the air field was dispatched to rescue the unbroken bottles of refreshment from the broken aircraft, before law enforcement could "spirit" it away.

Happle also told the tale of Jimmy Doolittle, hero of World War II who led the daring bombing raid on Tokyo. The young Doolittle was stationed at Eagle Pass with Flight A of the 90th, but frequently flew in and out of Sanderson. On one trip he is said to have flown under the Pecos River railroad bridge on a dare, and, apparently, without a reprimand from his superiors.

Doolittle was an engineering officer and pilot and commanded the group that went to Mexico to recover a downed plane. Lieutenant Alexander Pearson was making a transcontinental flight attempt when he went off-course and was forced down in a small canyon, not far from the Rio Grande. A few days later he rode into Sanderson on a borrowed burro.

When Doolittle and his group reached the airplane they found that it was reparable. Doolittle ordered a replacement motor and four mechanics using 1920 technology...carrier pigeons...to send the communication. The parts were delivered by parachutes and the repairs made. Piloting the airplane himself, Doolittle took off from a 400-yard airstrip hacked from the desert canyon floor and flew back to Del Rio.

An interesting sign of that time was the plethora of "Kodaks" (cameras) that found their way to the Sanderson Aerodrome. A huge number of photos taken by the young flyers recording their military experiences are available online and in books. Unfortunately, today, the actors in this interesting bit of our colorful history have long-since passed to their reward. But, their photographic evidence and written record is still here for us to marvel at and enjoy.