

Museum News: The 464th Aero Construction Squadron

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The 464th Aero Construction Squadron began life as the 52nd Aero Service Squadron. As World War I raged on the battlefields of Europe, the 464th was organized on August 7, 1917, as a construction group to do construction work in France. They served the American Expe-



ditionary Force from October 29, 1917 until July, 1919, when they were demobilized. Their

This is the construction camp, before arrival of pilots and planes. The bulk of the field has been cleared, much of it with pick and shovel. This site is on Highway 285, where the water yard and highway department sit today.

Photo by William A. Hartman, courtesy of G. R. Hartman

chief work in France was construction of the 3rd Aviation Instruction Center at Issoudun Aerodrome.

Back in the United States, the group was headquartered at Kelly Field in San Antonio, when not serving in the field. One of their first missions was to build Alation Field at Ajo, Arizona, a copper mining community near the US border.

In August of 1919, a branch of the 464th was ordered from its last mission field at Laredo, Texas, to Eagle Pass, to construct the new Aerodrome for the 90th Aero Squadron Flight A, which was to assume border patrol duties at that post.

In November, 1919, their mission complete at Eagle Pass, the 464th was ordered to Sanderson, Texas, to construct an aerodrome for the 90th Aero Squadron Flight B. November 8, 1919, the 464th Aero Construction Squadron arrived in Sanderson to do basic groundwork on the new aerodrome. The group consisted of about 110 men, and they quickly carved runways and tent spaces from the rugged mesquite and cactus-strewn valley floor. Much of the work was done with pick and shovel...other than trucks to haul men and supplies, heavy earthmoving equipment was not brought along to build the aerodrome. The monumental task was completed in 15 days.

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, where the 464th had cleared the land.

These troops immediately began to set up the aerodrome, with help from the 464th. The installation consisted mostly of tent structures, both for the men and as hangars for the DH-4 bombers. The bombers themselves were flown in when the field was ready. Four permanent wood structures, which would serve administrative purposes, would come later when Eagle Pass was closed and the Squadron Headquarters moved to Sanderson.

As work was completed, gradually the numbers of the 464th dwindled as men were reassigned to other duty. One group was dispatched to Nogales, Arizona, to complete work on a new aerodrome for the 12th Surveillance Squadron, to be reassigned from El Paso when the work was finished.

On June 27, 1920, the remaining four officers and 54 enlisted men of the 464th were ordered back to their home base at Kelly Field, their job essentially finished at Sanderson. They were re-designated a third time, now called the Air Park No. 4, and assigned to the 2nd Bombardment Group. They would not remain long at Kelly. In July they moved to Leon Springs to construct another aerodrome at that place.

On January 29, 1923, the 464th/Air Park No. 4 was re-designated once again as the 59th Service Squadron. This group was finally demobilized in 1936 and the remnants of the 464th were no more.

The men of the 464th who were stationed at Sanderson came from all walks of life. For many, it was their first time in the deserts of the Great American Southwest. As with most soldier-boys, they brought their Kodaks with them and literally thousands of photos were taken of the towns and environment of the West.

At Sanderson, they also figured in the social life of the town. To make life as pleasant as possible for the home-sick soldiers, the 464th hosted a ball for the men and for the town folks on November 14, 1919. To insure the utmost propriety, Mesdames Bodkin, Doak, Morris, McKee and Purl, venerable ladies of the community, were appointed as chaperones for the evening. By all accounts, a good time was had by all. And, the young ladies of the community were thrilled to be the center of attention for the handsome young soldiers in their dress uniforms.

When not on duty, the men roamed the hills, exploring their environs, Kodaks in hand. One young gentleman, Sergeant William A. Hartman, took a series of photos in and around Sanderson, including some spectacular bird's-eye photos of the town as it sat in 1920. They used Sanderson as a home base as they went out into the Big Bend and built a series of emergency landing fields on area ranches.

By June, 1920, the 464th was gone, their duty done. Maintenance of the field was carried on by the 90th Aero Squadron.

Today, nothing is left of the Aerodrome. The wooden buildings were dispersed into the community and the land returned to desert. Yet another chapter in our unique history had come to a close.