

Terrell County Memorial Museum News

February, 2013
Sanderson, Texas

Sanderson's magnificent men in their flying machines.

The 90th Aero Squadron Story



Photo courtesy of the Terrell County Memorial Museum

Proud airmen pose with their de Havilland DH-4 bomber at the 90th Aero Squadron Aerodrome in Sanderson, Texas, ca 1920.

*“Flying low o'er Verdun's trenches,
'Midst the shot and shell,
A pair of dice our lucky emblem.
Give the Huns more hell.”*

So goes the first verse of the unofficial anthem of the 90th Aero Squadron, Flight B, stationed at Sanderson from 1919 to 1921.

Brought in as reconnaissance aircraft to patrol the desolate southern border of the United States from California to the tip of Texas, the sturdy DH-4s were successful in discouraging forays onto American soil by marauding bands of Mexican insurgents, who invaded US territory at will and carried off anything of value to benefit their

revolutionary efforts.

Created by Army Special Order 104 at Kelly Field in San Antonio on September 25, 1917, the group was made up of Washington and Kansas boys previously gathered at Kelly as a provisional squadron for future deployment to France.

On the 30th, they shipped out to Mineola, Long Island for three weeks of preparation and organization for eventual overseas duty.

On October 26, 1917, two officers and 157 men boarded the HMS *Orduna*, embarking on a two-week voyage to England.

By the 12th of November, the men found themselves standing in France on the wharf at Le Havre.

Boarding the famous "Hommes 40, Chevaux 8" railroad box cars (maximum capacity of 40 men or eight horses,) they were shipped to Colombey les Belles for what they thought would be immediate deployment to the front.

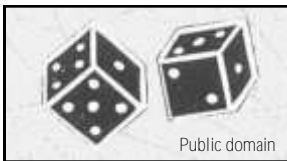
But, to their great disappointment, they were given the assignment of road and barracks construction work.

This work was profitable, though, and their skills would be useful throughout the war and later. These US efforts created the great American Aviation Field at Colombey.

Later that year, the 90th and other squadrons were in the thick of battle, both in aerial combat and aerial reconnaissance photography.

Due to ever-present low clouds and rain, the flyers were forced to drop dangerously close to the ground to carry out their missions, usually in the worst conditions.

One plane was shot through the radiator and, with wheels practically bouncing on the ground, skipped through the craters and pockmarked fields trying to get back to the American side...with a mob of angry Germans chasing after them on foot!



The group's lucky "Seven Up" emblem of red dice with white dots reading "7" no matter which way it was tallied, proved prophetic, for they lost only one plane over enemy lines.

The 90th distinguished itself throughout the war, suffering only four casualties, in a day when German planes literally drug cables with grappling hooks through the air, snagging wings and ripping off tails.

At war's end, the 90th was sent home in 1919 to Kelly Field with many honors, medals and commendations, only to be promptly decommissioned.

A few months later, though, it was reorganized for US border patrol duties and divided into two flights, Flight A being stationed at Eagle Pass and Flight B at

Sanderson.

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 graded the landing strips and cleared the property for the hangars and barracks. The hearts of all the young ladies in town were aflutter with the massive injection of available husband material!

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.

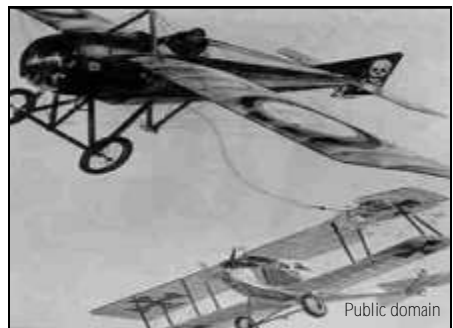
Men and equipment were off-loaded and began the short journey to a spot west of Sanderson on the road to Fort Stockton, on US 285 about where the Highway Department is located today.

The troops immediately began to set up the aerodrome, which consisted mostly of tent structures, both for the men and as hangars for the DH-4 bombers. The only permanent wood structures came later when Eagle Pass 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 cen-



90th Aero Squadron Quadrangle and assembly area.



tral 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 that 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 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, 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. A donor recently brought in the remains of one to give to the museum, and others are still being found.



Photo courtesy of Bill Smith

G. Walter Downie, local rancher, historian and journalist, related the ultimate demise of the 90th in the Terrell County history book: "Daily patrols of the Rio Grande were discontinued in September of 1920,



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Men and equipment arrive by train at the Sanderson rail yards, Nov. 26, 1919. Note the future rock quarry in the distance.

but the unit remained at Sanderson until the summer of 1921, when it returned to Kelly Field."

The revolution in Mexico was cooling down, but more importantly, the show of deadly force intimidated the insurgents 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. G. Downie remarked that the base personnel quickly integrated into the social fabric of Sanderson. Many dances and social gatherings were held for and by the airmen, and even a few marriages resulted from local involvement.

The young airmen tried to maintain as normal a life as possible, including the romantic aspects.

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, and made the 300-mile flight as often as possible to woo her and try to steal her from the other.

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, to use Happle's language, the young flier "salvoed" the pup to a rocky fate, thereby dooming his chances for the young lady's hand.

As the airmen of the 90th Aero Squadron were well-known in Sanderson, they 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 venerable and over-worked DH-4 aircraft limped into Sanderson from the east. Throughout the flight the engine had coughed and sputtered, threatening to quit altogether.

As he came to the outskirts of town, the engine gave up the ghost and he 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 Dolittle, hero of World War II who led the daring bombing raid on Tokyo.

The young Dolittle 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.

Dolittle 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.

Usually, the government ordered downed planes destroyed to prevent the technology from falling into foreign hands. This plane, however, was thought salvageable, and, with its \$11,250 pre-inflation price tag, was deemed worthy of repair.

When Dolittle and his group reached the airplane they found that, indeed, it was repairable. Dolittle 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 is 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.



References

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"Jimmy Dolittle", retrieved from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jimmy_Doolittle, Jan. 28, 2013.

.All newsletters can be found at <http://terrellmuseum.info/newsletters/>

More 90th Aero Squadron photos are available at <http://terrellmuseum.info/90th/>