

BRIEF HISTORY
OF THE
AIR FORCE IN HAWAII

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Air Force history in Hawaii began with the arrival of the 6th Aero Unit, Aviation Section, Army Signal Corps, at Fort Kamehameha on 13 March 1917.¹⁴¹³ Airplanes assigned to the unit consisted of three N-9 seaplanes which were single-engine bi-planes carrying a crew of two and capable of a top speed of 70 miles an hour.

Late in 1917 the U.S. Government purchased Ford Island in Pearl Harbor for use as an airport and by September 1918 the 6th Aero Unit, composed of ten officers and a small group of enlisted men, moved to Ford Island.

The first inter-island flight occurred in February 1919 and by 1920 inter-island flights were used for training purposes. Early in 1920 the 4th Observer Squadron arrived at Ford Island, known by then as Luke Field, named for "balloon buster" Frank Luke who fell in action on the Western Front in 1918. Also by this time, Luke Field was used jointly by the aerial forces of the Army and Navy.

The year 1920 marked a considerable advance in aviation in the Islands. The first night flight over Oahu took place on 30 June 1920. Also air power began to take its place in the Hawaiian Department's military maneuvers. An aerial photo section joined other air units.

The first detachment of twenty men started clearing land south of Schofield Barracks for Wheeler Field in February 1922. This Field was named for Major Sheldon H. Wheeler, who had assumed command of Luke Field in 1920 and was killed in an air accident in 1921. By June 1923, Wheeler boasted six 112x200 foot hangars, three used for housing shops and three others for planes, plus four hangars used as warehouses, and oil storage tanks holding 50,000 gallons. Tents and huts housed the men. The first commander of Wheeler Field was Major George E. Stratemeyer, who by 1941 was a brigadier general and Acting Chief of the Air Corps.

The first known reforestation by plane was accomplished for the Department of Agriculture by a plane from Wheeler in 1926. The first non-stop Hawaiian flight from Oakland to Wheeler Field was made in June 1927 by Lts. L. J. Maitland and A. F. Hegenberger. (Navy Commander John Rodgers had set a non-stop seaplane record from San Francisco in 1925 and had fallen short of the mark for Honolulu, landing off the Island of Kauai.) The

famous Dole flight also took place in 1927, with Art Goebel and Lt. W. V. Davis, USN, the only fliers completing the flight to Hawaii.

During the period from 1917 to 1931, the military air component in Hawaii consisted of 7 tactical squadrons and 2 service squadrons. In 1931 the 18th Composite Wing was formed with headquarters at Fort Shafter. The Hawaiian Air Depot was based at Luke Field.

Since the Navy contemplated using the entire area available at Ford Island, plans for purchasing land adjacent to Pearl Harbor near Ft. Kamehameha for construction of an airfield resulted in purchase by the U.S. Army on 20 February 1935 of this land from Faxon Bishop et al for \$1,091,239. Hickam Field was dedicated on 31 May 1935, named for Lt. Colonel Horace M. Hickam, C.O. 3rd Attack Group, killed 5 Nov 1934 at Ft. Crockett, Texas.

Clearing and construction of Hickam began in September 1935, constituting the largest peace-time task for the Army Quartermaster in converting 2,200 acres of cane fields and algaroba into a base for a wing and an air depot. At that time, a wing consisted of Headquarters Squadron, 4 bomber squadrons, and a service squadron, with 57 bomber planes and 4 cargo ships. "Hale Makai", a 3,000-man barracks plus messhall, kitchen, pastry shop, and various concessions, was part of this construction project. (Five wings of this building became Headquarters Pacific Air Forces on 1 July 1957.)

The first detachment of 12 men (the 31st Bomb Squadron) arrived at Hickam on 1 September 1937 and was housed in tents. By September of 1938, the Hawaiian Air Depot began its move from Luke Field. The move was completed on 31 October 1940.

On 1 November 1940 the Hawaiian Air Force was activated with headquarters at Fort Shafter - the first Army Air Force outside the continental United States. It consisted of two air base commands: the 18th Bombardment Wing (B-10's) at Hickam and the 14th Pursuit Wing (P-26's) at Wheeler. Aircraft strength at the beginning of the year 1941 consisted of 117 planes, mostly obsolete.

In connection with defense plans for the Pacific, planes were brought to Hawaii throughout 1941 (principally P-36's and P-40's) by carrier. The first mass flight of Army bombers (twenty-one B-17's) from Hamilton Field, California, arrived at Hickam on 13 May 1941.

By December 7th, 1941, the Hawaiian Air Force had been an integrated command for slightly more than one year, under the

command of Major General Frederick L. Martin, and consisted of 754 officers and 6,706 enlisted men, with 231 military aircraft.

Total Air Force casualties on Oahu during the Japanese attack on December 7th were 163 killed, 43 missing, and 336 wounded, of which 121 killed, 37 missing, and 274 wounded were at Hickam. Out of a total of 231 aircraft of the Hawaiian Air Force, 64 were destroyed and not more than 79 were left usable.

Early in 1942, the Hawaiian Air Force was redesignated 7th Air Force and moved to forward areas.

After December 7th, Hawaii grew into a key position in the logistical organization of the Pacific war. One of the biggest elements of this organization was the Hawaiian Air Depot at Hickam, which served as an in-transit supply, repair, and modification center for forces scattered all the way to Australia. The Air Depot had to expand its activities, which in peace time included assembly, repair, and reconditioning of the Hawaiian Department's planes, to handle large numbers of P-39's and P-40's which were rushed out in crates for assembly, flight-testing, and delivery to combat units. Hickam also became the hub of the Pacific aerial network - supporting, in addition to Depot functions, the 4-engine all-weather transport used in ferrying troops, supplies, and evacuating wounded from forward areas. These transport planes were under the command of Pacific Division, ATC. Hawaii also played a major role throughout the Pacific War as a training, staging, and supply center for air and ground troops.

Changes of command and even designations of command occurred with such frequency during the war years that it was said "the turnover of squadrons was so frequent that the soldier on the street couldn't remember outfits during the preceding six months." However, the primary mission of support and training remained the same.

The first contingent of WACs arrived at Hickam in March 1944. Approximately 200 were assigned to the Air Transport Command. The ATC Terminal at Hickam was dedicated early in 1945 - and figures released at the end of the war indicated that at the peak of the staging period, a total of 30,000 troops per month moved through Hawaii.

After return of 7th Air Force Headquarters to the Islands in January 1946, Hickam passed under its jurisdiction (1 March 46) while PACD, ATC, and the Hawaiian Depot also continued to carry out their missions. In May 1946 Hawaiian Air Depot assumed jurisdiction of Hickam.

Reorganization after World War II

Changes in command designations continued during several years following the war:

7th Air Force, the only number air force outside the continental United States, was redesignated Pacific Air Command (PACAIRCOM) on 15 December 1947 and the Hawaiian Air Depot was redesignated Hawaiian Air Materiel Area (HAWAMA) both at Hickam. Also, in accordance with the Armed Services Unification Act of 1947, the Military Air Transport Service (MATS) was established on 1 June 1948, combining the missions of both Army and Navy Transport services.

A further change occurred in 1949 when the Pacific Air Command was discontinued and its responsibilities were delegated to Pacific Division MATS.

During the Korean action in 1951 and the years following, Hickam again became the hub of trans-Pacific military air activity.

On March 1954, the Joint Chiefs of Staff directed that Pacific Air Force be established. This unit came into being on 1 July 1954 with Major General Sory Smith as commander, the primary mission being to serve as the USAF component on the staff of the Commander-in-Chief, Pacific. Responsibilities included preparation of plans to support CINCPAC and allied operations. For purely Air Force matters, the new command was placed under the command of Far East Air Forces Headquarters located in Japan. That headquarters completed its move to Hickam on 1 July 1957, its designation being changed to Pacific Air Forces, under the command of General Laurence S. Kuter, the first Air Force general of four-star rank to represent the USAF in Hawaii.

Effective 1 April 1955, the 1500th Air Base Wing, charged with the mission of support for tenant and transient units at Hickam AFB, was relieved from assignment to Military Air Transport and redesignated the 6486th Air Base Wing, under Far East Air Forces, with no change in strength, location, or mission. After relocation of Hq. Far East Air Forces at Hickam, the Wing became the Pacific Air Forces Base Command with the same mission of support to all units assigned, attached, or transient through Hickam Air Force Base.

Between establishment of Pacific Air Forces Headquarters in Hawaii in 1957 and the end of 1965, Air Force military personnel assigned to the Hawaiian area increased from just over 8,000 to 10,000. Support was given for many historical events connected with air and aero-space activities such as atomic testing projects by the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) at Johnston Island, flights by the astronauts, sponsored by National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), and increasing support for transient aircraft en route to and from Southeast Asia in connection with the steady build-up of military activity in South Vietnam.