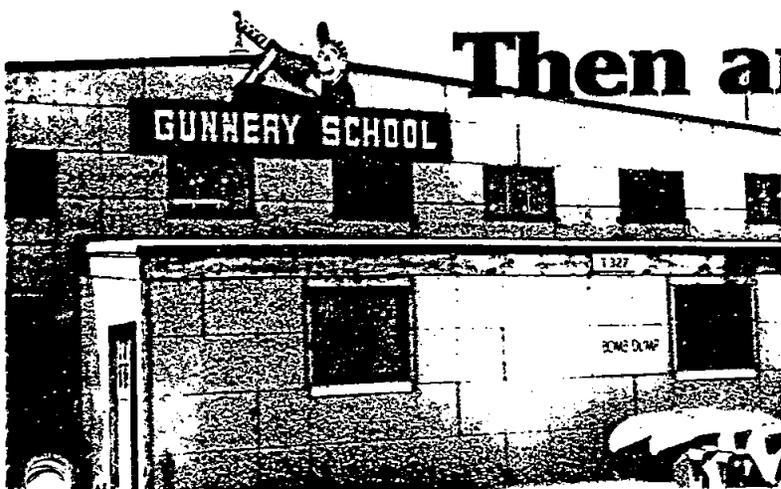


Fairmont Army Air Field

Then and Now



*Gunnery School building,
circa 1944. (USAF)*



*Hangar as it appears today, used
for grain storage. (Thole)*

By

Lou Thole

Drive north on State Route 81 out of Geneva, Nebraska, and after a few miles on the right you will see what remains of an important part of Air Force history. In the distance, over rows of corn, are visible the tops of three large hangars. Hangars big enough to enclose the B-17s, B-24s, and B-29s that once roared down the runways and parked on the hardstand here at Fairmont Army Air Field. Today's entrance is marked by a sign that tells you Fairmont Army Air Field is now Fairmont State Airfield.

Turn right onto the gravel road and after about a mile you'll cross a runway, one of the three that is still here. Soon you're on the windswept, deserted hardstand that stretches in the distance in front of the three remaining squadron hangars. It's quiet now. Not like it must have been when members of the 451st Bombardment Group (Heavy) arrived here in

September of 1943 for Final Phase training with B-24s. Off behind the hangars is the former base water tower, the tallest structure then as now. It stands silently, overlooking the remains of the base hospital, barracks, motor pool, PX, movie theatre, and many other buildings of this once busy 1980-acre Army training field. They're gone now, as are the young men who once made this a temporary home on their way to the skies over Europe and Japan.

Corn grows where once stood the barracks housing the almost 6000 officers and enlisted men; some assigned permanently, others making up the groups being trained. Directly behind the water tower are the remains of the base hospital, then a large 350 bed facility that served not only Fairmont but also the nearby air bases at Bruning, and Harvard, Nebraska. The gravel road is

still here, and it takes you past what remains. Weeds and brush are slowly obscuring the foundations of the various wards, examination rooms, dental clinics and theatre. In 1943 this was the largest hospital in Nebraska. The base commander's home is still here, sitting by itself on the edge of the field overlooking what's left of the warehouse area. Giant slabs of concrete mark the foundations for each of the warehouses. Then, as now, a gravel road runs past the house; today there's little traffic. Occasionally a car will go by, and from time to time a small plane, usually a crop duster, will use what's left of the runways, landing to refuel or refill its tanks with chemicals.

World War II was 9 months old when a small article appeared in the September 3rd, 1942 edition of the "Nebraska Signal." It said "Prospects of Filmore County having an Army airplane refueling base became more definite Saturday when several Army officers came to Geneva to establish offices." Actually, by this time the surveyors had been working for several weeks. Some of this work was done near the farms of Fred Baker and Bob Holsey, and it included taking soil samples and checking the availability of a good supply of water.

Things moved quickly after the article appeared . . . by September 17th construction contracts had been signed, and offices opened in the nearby town of Fairmont for the architect-engineering company of Wyatt Hedrich, and also Major

1. Rear view of hangers. Empty field was formerly barracks area. (Dudley)
2. Small building with five openings was for storage of bomb sights. This was under guard 24 hours a day. Large building is recent construction and was not part of the airdrome. (Thole)
3. Entrance sign to Fairmont State Airport off State Route 81. (Thole)
4. Side view of a hangar as it appears today. One of three still remaining. (Thole)
5. Water tower for Fairmont Army Air Field overlooking area formerly occupied by the base hospital. (Rita)

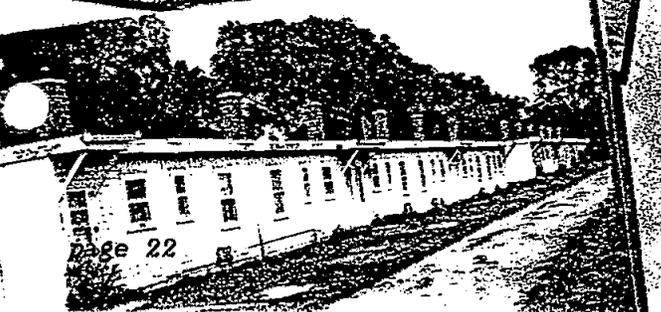
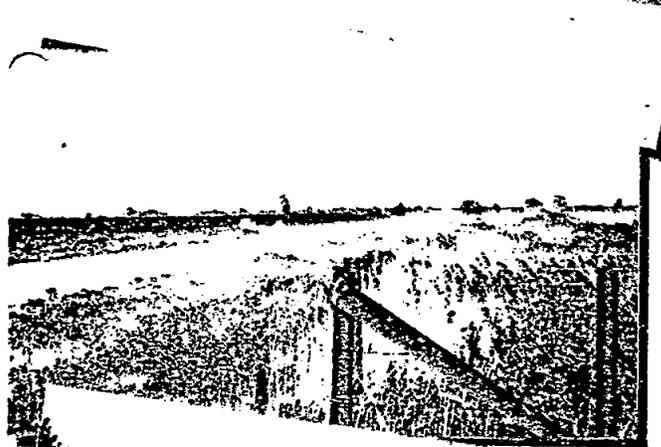
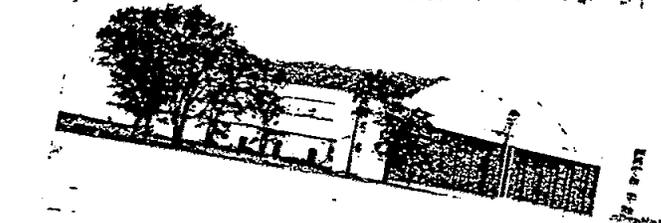


Bert Burgivin of the Army Corps of Engineers. The effected farmers had until September 26th to retain possession of their homes and other buildings.

Housing availability would always be a problem for the construction workers, and later on military personnel and their dependents.

As early as the beginning of September, workers were inquiring about living quarters in the nearby towns of Geneva and Fairmont whose population in 1940 was 1888 and 800 respectively. Plans were made for establishing a trailer camp at the Geneva Fair grounds, and the Geneva Woman's Club began a survey of housing units for rent. The Bushman Construction Co. took over a former Safeway Grocery store and set up sleeping quarters for fifty men. Another store was converted to a commissary to help feed the construction workers when regular restaurants were closed. Construction would go on around the clock, with one shift ending at 2 AM and another beginning at 6 AM. On the edge of Geneva, a 'temporary' housing project of frame barracks-type buildings was put up to help accommodate construction workers and their families. Later on it was used for housing of married personnel stationed at Fairmont. It's still there today, and used for low income rental properties. As late as August of '44, homes which prior to the war were renting for forty dollars a month were rented for \$100.00 a month and sometimes more.

1. This building was probably part of the motor pool. It's not used today. (Thole)
2. Warehousing area. Trees hide concrete foundations that still exist. (Thole)
3. Hardstand in front of hangar with base water tower in distance. (Scobie)
4. Still existing gravel road leads past former hospital area. (Thole)
5. Former base commander's home. (Scout)
6. Housing units in Geneva, Nebraska, built for construction workers and later used by married personnel stationed at Fairmont. This is how some appear today. Others have been reconditioned and are used for low-income housing. (Smith)



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Bedrooms, in some cases, were rented for as much as \$12.00 a week. Making matters worse, two additional airfields, Harvard and Bruning, were being built at the same time, each within 30 miles of Fairmont.

Construction of Fairmont was scheduled to begin on September 16, 1942, but much wasn't done that day because of rain, so it began in earnest the next. A railroad spur was built next to the construction site, and for a time 50 carloads of construction material were used per day. Approximately 1000 workers were employed. During the early phase of construction the base was called Fairmont Satellite airfield. The parent base was the Topeka Army Air Base at Topeka Kansas. Early in 1943, the name was changed to Fairmont Army Air Field. At this time, a major expansion was announced to support the field's new mission as a final phase training facility for heavy bomber groups. Runways were lengthened, additional buildings constructed, and later on four celestial navigation training buildings built.

The first military personnel arrived around noon on November 10, 1942 under the direction of Quartermaster Corps officer, 2nd Lt. William Prince, Jr. The small group of six men was an advance party and they would pave the way for the thousands to follow. They visited several businesses in the surrounding towns to sign contracts for bread, milk, and other needs. They also coordinated the handling of supplies arriving from the Kansas City Quartermaster Depot. At this time there were no transient sleeping facilities at Fairmont, so their first night was spent at the Mc Cloud Hotel in York, 21 miles north of Fairmont. Later on, Dan's Hotel in Geneva would be used because it had washing facilities in the basement. Meals were eaten in the various cafes around Geneva. Often the men were invited into homes in Geneva for meals and use of bathing facilities.

The first civilian, Ted Everts, was employed on November 23rd and he along with several others, worked at trucking supplies to and from the field. Today

Mrs. Dorothy Bunker lives in the nearby town of Milligan and she was one of the earliest civilian employees. She would be at the base for its opening and also the closing. Dorothy met her husband, Jim, at the nearby Bruning Army Air Field, and they were the last couple married at the base chapel at Bruning. Dorothy worked for Lt. Prince and spent much of her time typing purchase orders, requisitions for building materials and payrolls for the construction workers. For a while she also handled the switchboard. One of the earliest purchases was dated December 28, 1942 for 21,350 quarts of milk at 14 cents per quart from the Fairmont Creamery Co. Requisition Sheet #1 was dated October 25, 1942 and indicated the field was authorized 1202 officers and enlisted men. Items such as "spoon, table, 1262," "pitchers, water, 5 qt." and "cots, folding steel, 1250" were ordered.

At this point, the field was still under construction and Dorothy remembers everything being "knee deep in mud." Construction workers came from many different places, some from bases just completed. Local people also helped with the building during the day, then at night would work their farms. The field was completed in November with just a few carpenters left doing finishing jobs. Many of the workers returned in late spring to complete the base expansion. By December there were approximately 75 military personnel on base, with the first large number arriving in January of 1943 when the field was ready for operations.

A base newspaper, "The Dust Bowl Sand Sock," first appeared in April of 1943. The name was later changed to "Fairmont Army Air Field News." Items about the base were printed, as was war news from all over the world. The paper was intended to keep the personnel informed and also to be sent home to let family and friends know about the happenings at Fairmont.

The May 20th, 1944 issue advertised the current movies at the base theater: "Silent Partner," and "And the Angels Sing," with Dorothy Lamour and Fred Mc

Murray was showing. Thursday's and Friday's feature was "Once upon a Time" with Cary Grant. Matinees were at 1430 hrs, evening showings at 1800 and 2000, and there was a double feature on Saturday. The same issue talked about the importance of "giving prompt consideration to the advisability of making a will."

Service Club activities were a regular feature. The schedule for the week of May 13th was bingo on Saturday, variety show on Sunday, a dance on Tuesday, movies on Wednesday, Square Dance on Thursday, and a dance on Friday attended by young ladies for the U.S.O.

The first significant training started in August of 1943, when a B-24 Standardization School was established at Fairmont. However, this was short lived, because in September it was moved to make room for the 451st Bombardment Group (H). They would be followed by the 485th, 504th, 16th, and for a short period of time the 98th, 467th, and 489th.

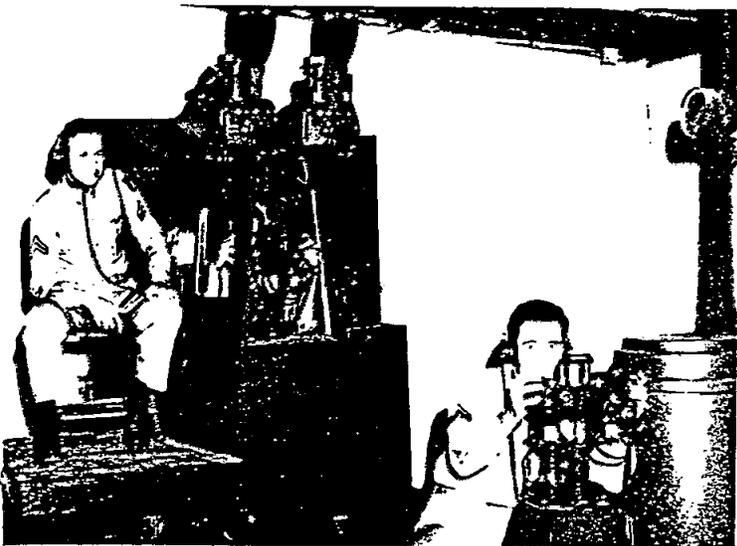
The 451st and 485th would train with B-24s, the 504th and 16th with B-29s and the 98th, 467th, and 489th were groups returning from Europe for training on B-29s.

The 451st came from Wendover Field, Utah, and left in November. The group operated with the Fifteenth Air Force and bombed aircraft factories, bridges, and airfields throughout Europe. The group received three Distinguished Unit Citations for its performance on raids to Regensburg, Ploesti and Vienna.

With the arrival of the 451st, the base activity significantly increased as did the number of personnel. Total military assigned to Fairmont in November was 3732.

Training of these groups was final phase training prior to the group being sent to a staging area, then to a combat zone. Each group's training varied slightly, both in time and content, depending upon the war situation at that time. Each group was self-contained, with its own doctors, cooks, mechanics, etc., assigned and performing their responsibilities within the group. Each person came to Fairmont already trained in his specialty, and now they would be joined to practice as a group and refine their skills. Additional training in gunnery, navigation, formation flying, bombing, etc., was given by the personnel permanently assigned to Fairmont.

People in the surrounding commun-



Gunnery School classroom. (USAF)

Fairmont Open House, August 1944. Approximately 900 people attended. This view shows photographic section's exhibit. (USAF)





ities became accustomed to the new base and frequently invited the soldiers into their homes for dinner. Young women under the supervision of the local U.S.O. often attended the Friday night dances. Many servicemen who met their wives here returned after the war to raise their families. Farmers were at first concerned that the noise from the bombers' engines would bother their cattle and chickens. However, the animals soon became accustomed to the noise and went about as usual.

Accidents happened both in the air and on the ground. The 451st had the worst air accident when at about 4:30 P.M. on October 25, 1943, two B-24s collided at 20,000 feet. Seventeen men were killed and one survived. This was a particularly sad happening because the flight was to be one of the last prior to finishing training. Most of the men's wives and girl friends were waiting at the P.X.

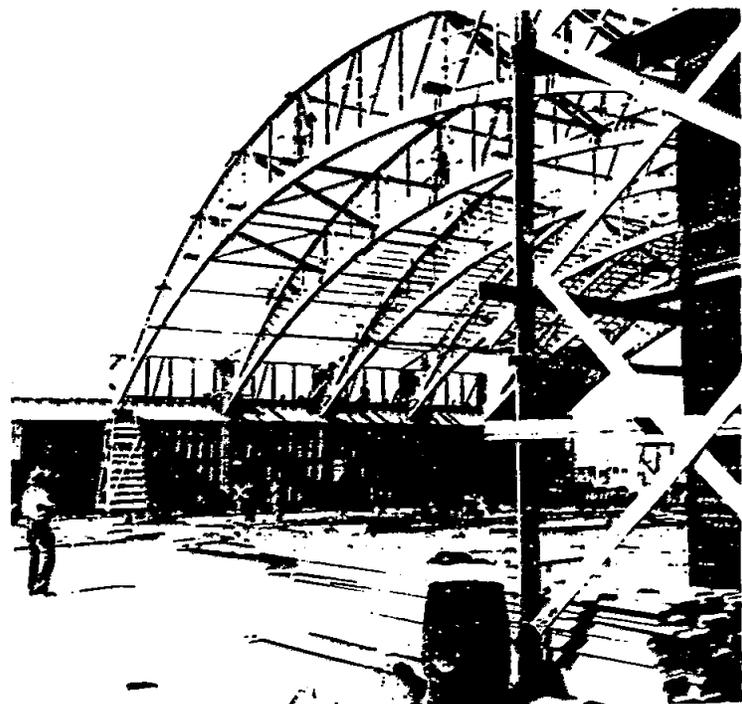
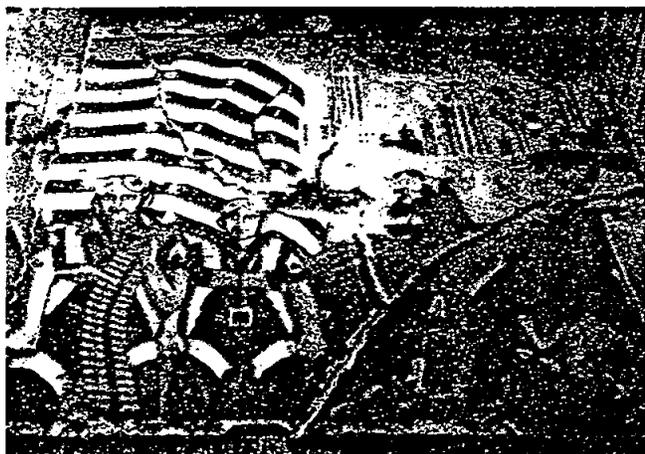
The 485th Bomb Group followed the 451st and began arriving in late October of 1943. Housing continued to be a problem, with some homes valued at \$500.00 renting for \$50.00 per month.

The 485th completed training in March of 1944 and moved to the Mediterranean Theatre flying B-24s. The Group took additional training in Tunisia prior to going to Italy. Half of the 831st Squadron, eight officers and 146 men, were lost while moving from Africa to Italy. A torpedo attack on their troop ship took a total of 498 lives.

The missions and targets were similar to those of 451st. The 485th won a Distinguished Unit Citation for its attack on an oil refinery at Vienna.

The first group to take B-29 training at Fairmont was the 504th, and it began arriving in March of 1944. There were few B-29s available anywhere for training, so most of the group's early work was done in reconditioned, war-weary B-17s. At this time, B-29s were considered an elite operation and pilots had to have considerable flying time prior to being assigned command of a B-29.

Tom Harker had about 450 hours as a B-17 command pilot before being sent to Fairmont for his B-29 training. Formerly, he was an instructor for the A.A.F. School of Applied Tactics at Orlando, Florida. Tom left Fairmont with the 504th and flew 35 missions out of Tinian.



Construction photo of a hangar. (USAF)

Photo of mural that hung in the Enlisted Men's Service Club. Discovered 40 years later when the building, then being used as a church hall, was torn down. (Kleinschmidt)

Of his training at Fairmont, Tom remembers having only about 5-10 landings and takeoffs in the B-29 before he soloed. For his solo, he took off in the afternoon and did not return until after dark. Tom never did get his long range 3000 -mile practice mission. This was accomplished on the way to Tinian. B-29s and their crews were urgently needed in the Pacific, and there simply wasn't enough time or airplanes to be as thorough as everyone would have liked. His crew flew navigation missions to Puerto Rico and to Cuba's Batista Field, and then out over the Gulf of Mexico for additional navigation practice.

Hampering training was the lack of B-29s, parts and personnel (especially navigators), and the inability of the war weary B-17s to gain high altitude. Training mock-ups were lacking, as well as radar sets for the B-29s. Also the B-29s required 4.3 hours maintenance for each hour's flight, versus the B-17s, 2.4 ratio.

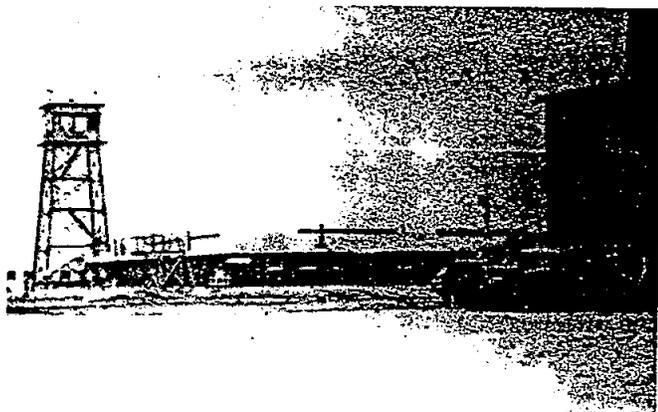
In addition to training in the air, the group received ground instruction in many subjects, including gunnery. Gunnery training was given on the B-29's

Central Fire Control System both for maintenance men and gunners. In one month, 20,000 feet of film was used to give gunners practice tracking L-5s diving on the installation in a pursuit curve. Instruction on the B-29 Fire Control System was given by technical representatives from the General Electric Company.

In September of 1944, (then) Lt. Col. Paul Tibbets visited Fairmont and selected the 393rd Bomb Squadron of the 504th Bomb Group to become part of his 509th Composite Group. The Squadron left for further training at Wendover Field, Utah. Part of the Squadron flew to Utah, while the ground personnel left Fairmont on a troop train at night. They left without their friends knowing where they had gone.

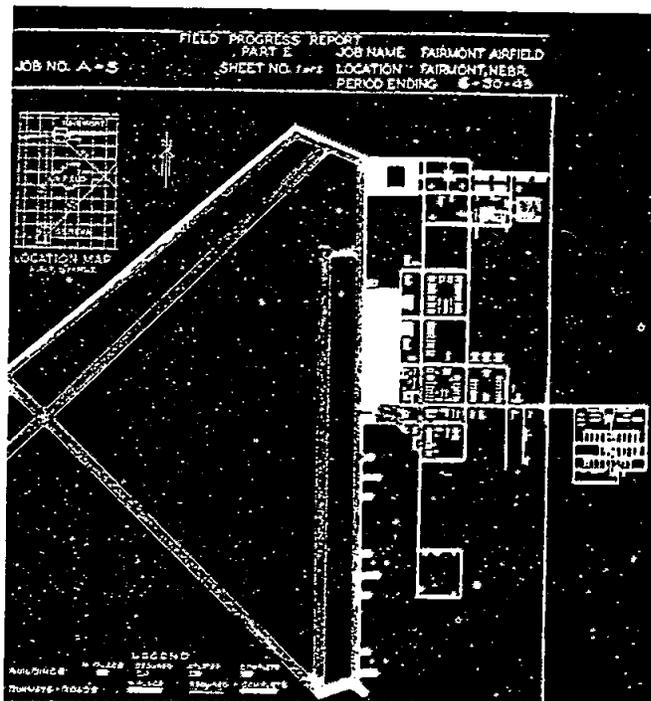
The Geneva U.S.O. started its operation in May of 1943, and was located in the Geneva City Auditorium. It was open on Sunday afternoons and in the evenings from 6 P.M. until the last bus left for the base at 12:10 A.M.

The U.S.O. was a place to get away from the base. Men visited it to write letters, play games such as ping pong, listen to music, meet friends, or just talk with the volunteer hostesses. The hostesses often helped with marriage arrangements and finding rooms in town for visiting wives, friends and relatives. The U.S.O. was also used by



View of one of Fairmont's smaller hangars with control tower in the background. (USAF)

Photo from a progress report showing Fairmont's proposed and completed structures as of June 1943. (USAF)





wives and girlfriends, and the weekly attendance was usually over 3000. Weekly dances were held on Monday nights, sponsored by a local church and the American Legion.

The women of the U.S.O. also helped in chaperoning the young ladies who went to the field for the Friday night dances at the Service Club. They also visited the field hospital, and while at the Service Club did mending and sewing on of insignia. They often took homemade cookies, candy, and flowers to the base.

People from the surrounding area went out of their way to make the service men's stay at Fairmont more pleasant and to make them feel welcome. Men from the larger cities were especially impressed with the warm, open hospitality of the townspeople. After leaving Fairmont, many service personnel wrote letters expressing their appreciation for the kindness shown. Here's an excerpt from a letter written by the wife of S/Sgt. Robert Long:

"I know I would have been very lonely if I had not felt that I was welcome to make use of the U.S.O. facilities. I spent part of every day there and many evenings, sewing, reading, playing the piano or playing cards. I made many friends among the soldier's wives through contacts at the U.S.O. During my three years as an 'army wife' I have traveled a lot but I have never been anywhere where people were as kind and friendly and as interested in the welfare of the serviceman and his wife as they are in Geneva. People were especially kind to me after my baby was born. I

wanted you to know just how much the U.S.O. meant to me and that it made a lonely soldier's wife much happier."

Another wife of a soldier wrote, "While there I lived at the home of Mrs. Verle Wilson who was the sweetest landlady I've ever had. She made all of her roomers feel at home and was like a mother to all of us far from home."

The last B-29 group at Fairmont was the 16th and it began arriving on August 15th, 1944, while the 504th was in the process of leaving. The 16th then left in March of 1945 and moved to Guam to fly missions over Japan. This group also won a Distinguished Unit Citation.

After the departure of the 16th Bomb Group, things slowed a bit because there was no tactical unit to train. The length of the work day shortened and passes were easier to get. During this time, personnel at the base received refresher training. Some were sent to other bases to help with the training there. A long list was prepared for a general cleaning up and repair of buildings on the base.

One project during this period was



Former base chapel at Fairmont. After the war, it was moved to Friend, Nebraska, and is now the Friend Berean Church. (Eret)

One of the remaining runways as it appears today. In the background is a squadron hangar. (Thole)

to determine how to replace the large amount of missing tools that had been assigned to the maintenance personnel. There were two options: have the men pay for replacement via "report of survey" or "find" them. The barracks were searched and tools picked up at the various hangars and shops. When this was completed, there were more tools collected than had been listed as loaned out.

The bombing range at Silver Creek, Nebraska was repaired, fencing improved, and stray cattle removed. The 100', 300', and 500' bomb circles were graded and limed and the target shack repaired.

During the May through July 1945 period, three groups returning from combat tours were assigned to Fairmont for training with the B-29. They were the 98th from the 15th Air Force, and the 467th and 489th from the 8th Air Force, all of which had used the B-24. Their stay was short because at this point of the war it was becoming clear that they would not be needed as very heavy bombardment groups. The number of people stationed at the field in August was 2762 military and 650 civilian.

On September 27th, the War Department announced that on October 31st the field would go on temporary inactive status, so preparations were made to shut down Fairmont. It was done in several phases. The first part was to survey each department to determine how much time and resources it would take to inactivate it. Then, the material was dismantled, packed, shipped out or placed in storage. Final reports were prepared,

personnel reductions continued, and a last inspection made. Much of the material was temporarily stored at Fairmont but there was not sufficient warehouse space, so two hangars were used.

There was some chance that Fairmont might be kept open and made a permanent installation, so a representative of the towns around Fairmont went to Washington to help sell the idea of keeping the base open. The discussions were held with Gen. H.H. Arnold's Chief of Staff.

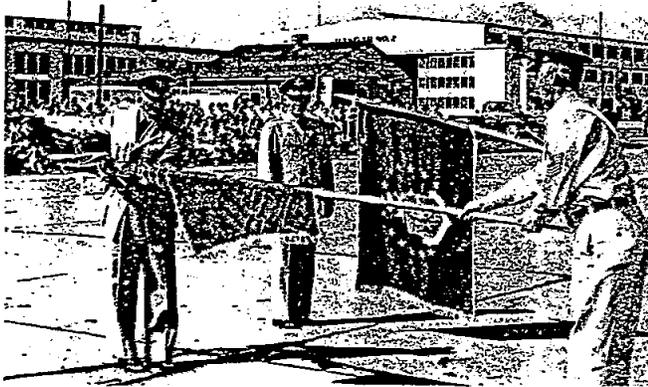
The decision to close Fairmont was not changed, and the process to remove equipment and buildings began in earnest. In November Mayor Bixbey of Geneva attended a meeting in Lincoln, Nebraska, called by the Governor to discuss the future of Fairmont and six other fields in the state scheduled to be closed. At that time, the government was offering the airfields with their equipment to the municipal authorities for one dollar. Geneva did not accept the offer because of the expense that might be required to maintain buildings and equipment.

The field was declared surplus in the spring of 1946. Some equipment was given to the various schools; for example, the Geneva High School received considerable shop equipment including a drill press, lathes, band saws, grinders, etc. Much material was sold in lots. A sale of surplus property, open to the public, was held on October 7th through 11th at the field. There were about 275 small lots that included items such as office furniture, office supplies, small hand tools, beds, mattresses, photo equipment, and farm machinery. Some unsold material such as typewriters and eating utensils was dumped in a trench and buried.

Buildings were dismantled and the lumber sold by the truckload for one dollar. Other buildings were taken down and rebuilt at different locations. In 1947, one building, the Enlisted Mens
see "FAIRMONT"/page 47

Entire mural, painted by PFC Edward Flinsky, which hung in the Enlisted Men's Service Club. (USAF)





The unfurling of the Military Air Transport Service flag symbolized the passage of Scott Air Force Base as a major training installation of the Air Training Command, 1 October 1957. Scott's present mission of hosting the headquarters of the Military Airlift Command, Air Force Communications Command, and United States Transportation Command dates to this time.

responsible for rigid airships, leaving the Air Service to develop semi-rigid airships. Both used non-rigid airships. 4. Scott's airship fleet included for a time (in order of arrival): S.S.T., A-4, OA-1, D-2, D-4, A-5, TC-1, AC-1, TA-1,

TA-2, TA-3, TA-5, TC-3, RN-1, TC-5, TC-6, TC-7, TC-8, RS-1, TF-1-261, TC-10-243, TC-10-252, TC-10-253, TC-11-271, TC-6-241, and TC-14. 5. Scott Field became Scott Air Force Base on 13 January 1948.☆

"FAIRMONT" from page 28

Service Club, was dismantled and rebuilt at St. Mary's Church in Shickley, Nebraska, a town about 20 miles from Fairmont. The building was used as a church hall for about 40 years and then torn down again. While it was being taken apart a painting was discovered on the backside of a wall board. It was a mural depicting several airmen against a backdrop of an American flag and some tall buildings. Two airmen who appear to be gunners, and several others are doing various maintenance tasks. The painting was saved and is being kept by the people who purchased the former church hall.

Today Fairmont is owned by the state. Much of it has been sold and a large part leased for agriculture purposes. One runway remains open and is visited from time to time by an occasional aircraft.☆

AUTHOR'S NOTE

My son Chip and I had a delightful dinner at Bunker's Inn in Milligan, Nebraska, where we first met Dorothy and Jim Bunker. Over the months following the dinner, while I was preparing this article, Dorothy went out of her way to research past issues of the local newspapers. Those she thought of

interest were sent to me and they proved most helpful.

I also want to thank Don Eret of Dorchester, Nebraska. He answered numerous questions, helped identify some still existing structures at Fairmont, and sent me many articles about the base, which also proved most valuable in writing the article.

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