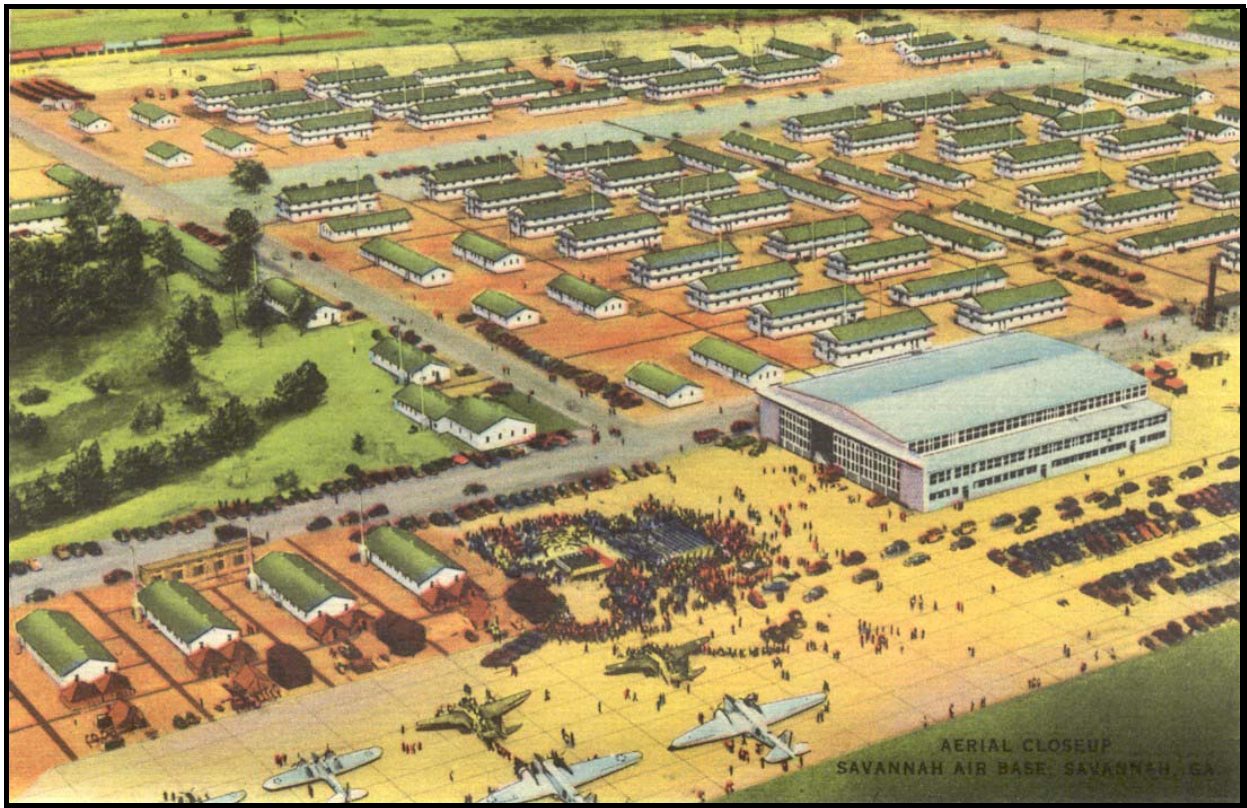


United States  
Department of Defense  
Department of the Army

---

# Hunter Army Airfield: A History

---



*Prepared by*  
U.S. Army, Fort Stewart  
Directorate of Public Works  
Environmental Division, Prevention & Compliance Branch  
November 2006



Hunter Field, 1933

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

---

BEGINNINGS .....	2
SAVANNAH AIRPORT .....	2
WORLD WAR II .....	3
HUNTER FIELD GOES TO WAR!.....	4
A MUNICIPAL AIRPORT AGAIN.....	7
THE COLD WAR AND STRATEGIC AIR COMMAND .....	8
EARLY SAC OPERATIONS AT HUNTER AFB .....	10
“THE NEW LOOK” .....	11
FROM WING ROTATION TO REFLEX.....	13
CHANGING STRATEGIES.....	16
MATERIEL AIR TRANSPORT SERVICE .....	18
VIETNAM AND THE ARMY’S ARRIVAL .....	18
HUNTER ARMY AIRFIELD: 1974 TO 2001 .....	20
CONFRONTING GLOBAL JIHAD: 2001 TO THE PRESENT .....	21
SOURCES .....	22
IMAGE CREDITS.....	23

---

## BEGINNINGS

The 1920s marked the true beginning of civilian aviation in the United States. By 1930 nearly 1700 civilian airports had been established in the nation. As part of this national trend, in



Inside the WPA hangar (Building 1206), 1937

### Airfield Lighting at the Savannah Airport in the Early 1930s

*"Robbie Richard and myself used to ride with Mr. Tillman... on the running board of his Ford and put out lanterns... so that the airplanes can land at night... So when we come from school, just every afternoon... Mr. Tillman would have the lanterns filled with kerosene [in] the Model A... We'd get on the running board and we'd put the lanterns down... He'd go another say, fifty feet, and put another lantern down..."*

— Joseph Butler Harris

1927 the city of Savannah bought 900 acres of woods, pasture, and swamp three miles south of the city limits for the first Savannah Airport—later known as Hunter Field.

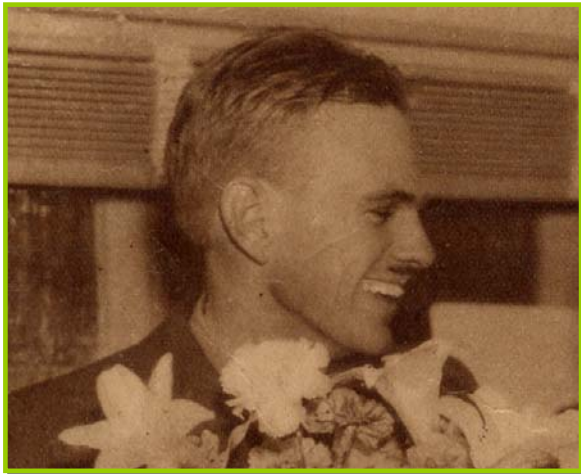
## SAVANNAH AIRPORT

In three years, using mostly chain-gang labor, Chatham County ditched the area, graded the field with 400,000 cubic yards of sand, and planted it with Bermuda grass. The landing area was 4500 feet long and 3500 feet wide with no runways. Aircraft could take off and land in any direction. The original airfield lay roughly on what is now Hunter Army Airfield's parking apron.

On 20 September 1929 a six-seater Bellanca CH-300 Pacemaker named "The City of Savannah" became the first aircraft to land at the Savannah Airport, inaugurating the Eastern Air Express New York to Miami air service. One month later the stock market crashed, plunging the US into the Great Depression. By November of that ill-fated year, Eastern Air Express folded. This left Savannah without regular air service until 1931, when Eastern Airlines began offering intrastate travel from Savannah to Augusta and Atlanta.



In spite of the Depression the city undertook a number of improvements to the airfield throughout the decade, including the 1932 construction of Wilson Boulevard, named after Judge Emmett Wilson, chairman of the city's airport commission. In 1936 the city and one of President Roosevelt's public works programs, the Works Progress Administration (W.P.A.), cooperated in making significant improvements to the airport. The W.P.A. spent \$130,000 and the city \$36,000 to rebuild the drainage system, construct a new metal hangar, and replace the grass airfield with three new asphalt runways.



« H. G. "Sandy" Strachan, first airport manager

The current Building 1206 is the W.P.A. hangar, little changed from the 1930s. The first Savannah-based flying service, Strachan Skyways, moved into this hangar after it was built. Henry G. "Sandy" Strachan owned the company and was also the airport

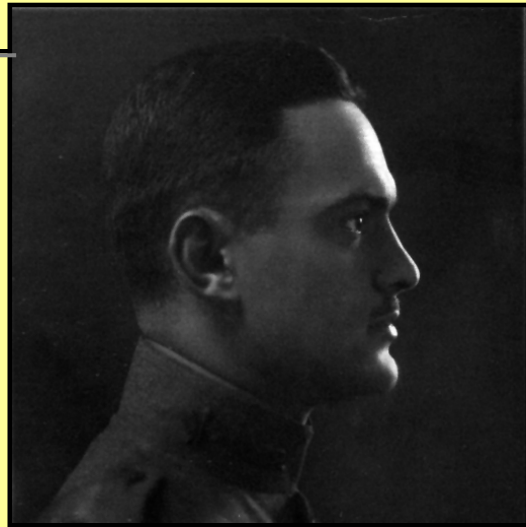
manager. Strachan was the most prominent local aviator of the 1930s. According to the Savannah Morning News Strachan was "recognized as one of the leading fliers of Georgia... [and] credited as much as anyone else with bringing the magical world of flight to Savannah's attention." Air activity grew apace with the airfield. By decade's end, the airfield hosted regular flights from both Delta and Eastern Airlines.

## WORLD WAR II

When Hitler invaded Poland in September 1939 the US Army had 175,000 men, ranking seventeenth in the world—weaker than both the Dutch and Romanian armies. Meanwhile the Japanese, locked in combat with the Chinese since 1937, were looking to expand their empire in Asia. The Air Corps, part of the Army at the time, had only 2200 obsolete aircraft stationed at twenty-four airfields around the country. Europe and China were engulfed in war, and although the US was not yet involved, in the corridors of Washington preparations began for a military build-up.

## Frank O'Driscoll Hunter

*Usually public facilities are named after deceased persons. However, Hunter Army Airfield's namesake, Frank O'Driscoll Hunter (1894-1982), Lieutenant Colonel, US Army Air Corps, was very much alive when the city of Savannah christened the installation "Hunter Field" in 1940. Hunter, Georgia's only World War I flying ace, native Savannahian, and a lifelong bachelor, would be promoted to Major General and briefly lead Eighth Air Force Fighter Command in the coming war.*

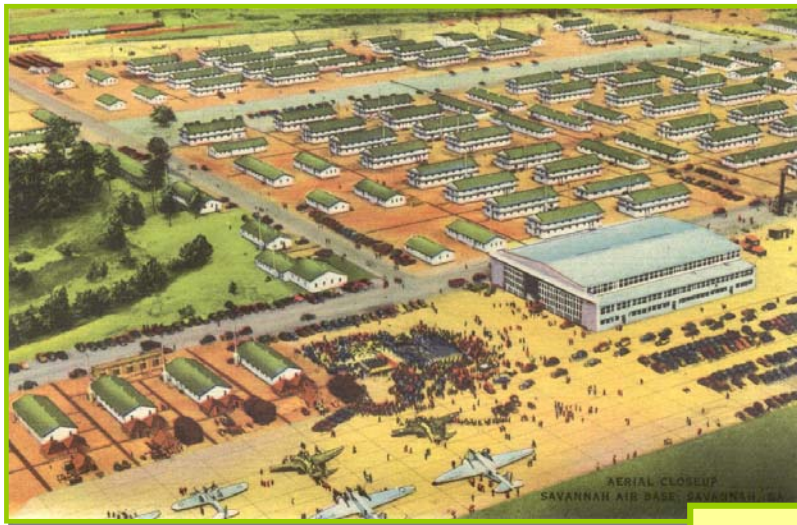


Still, the war seemed far away from Savannah in that late summer. The Air Corps commissioned Sandy Strachan a lieutenant in September, but business continued as usual at the airport. In 1939-1940 the city built a permanent municipal airport building to house growing administrative activities of the airport (the building's terrazzo floor still stands intact on the installation flightline). On 19 May 1940 the city officially dedicated the airport as "Hunter Field."

### HUNTER FIELD GOES TO WAR

In 1940 the US began to re-arm in preparation for war. The government increased funding for new equipment and bases and instituted a peace-time draft. A primary beneficiary of this new largesse was the Air Corps, which by 1941 had grown to over 25,000 personnel and 4000 aircraft. The Air Corps needed new airbases to accommodate its growth, and in August 1940 selected Hunter Field as a light bomber training base.

Within two months the Air Corps transferred 3000 personnel of the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> Bomb Groups, and a hundred A-18 trainers, A-20 light bombers, and B-18 medium bombers to the new base, sharing the airfield with the civilian airport. Within nine months the military had constructed an entire cantonment north of the runways, featuring over 220 facilities including barracks, warehouses, a hospital, hangars, and operations buildings. The threat of war had transformed the sleepy southern airfield into a bustling military installation.



Hunter Field in 1940

and parking aprons Strachan Road (in the 1990s the installation changed this street's name to Lightning Road).

The 3<sup>rd</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> Bomb Groups trained at Hunter Field throughout 1940-41, participating in large-scale Army maneuvers in the Carolinas. On 7 December 1941 the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. All passes from Hunter Field were immediately canceled and airmen required to wear uniforms at all times. The US now faced war with Japan and Germany.

From 1941 to 1943 the base grew to a population of 10,000, expanded its boundaries from 900 to nearly 3000 acres, built six additional cantonments and tent camps at the installation, expanded runway capacity, built aircraft parking aprons, and trained ground support squadrons, bomber groups, and fighter groups. Units trained at Hunter Field later saw active combat in all major theaters of war, including the China-Burma India Theater, the Pacific, and in Europe.

In March 1943 the USAAF designated Hunter Field as the Third Air Force Staging Wing Base, changing its mission to staging air crews and aircraft for transfer to combat operations in Europe. Over the next two years, Hunter Field processed 9000 aircraft and 70,000 crewmen.

In January 1941 Savannah received the tragic news that Sandy Strachan had died in a training accident at Barksdale Field, Louisiana. In his honor the Air Corps named the road running adjacent to the runways

### **Birth of the Mighty Eighth Air Force**

*On 28 January 1942 the USAAF formed the Eighth Air Force at Hunter Field. For three months in early 1942 Hunter Field's personnel and facilities prepared the embryonic command for overseas service until its transfer to England, where the Eighth Air Force gained fame conducting daylight strategic bombing missions over western Europe.*

## The Ill-Fated 27<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group

*In November 1941 the Air Corps transferred the 27<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group from Hunter Field to the Philippines. The 27<sup>th</sup> arrived just before the Pearl Harbor attack on 7 December 1941. The Japanese invaded the Philippines days later. In a letter dated 18 February 1942 Lieutenant Colonel John Sewell described the 27<sup>th</sup>'s ordeal to his family: "We never did get any airplanes and... as*

*infantry we have functioned... We are living in the jungle; no tents... We eat twice a day... mostly canned salmon and rice. Morale is high... I have lost several men and one officer, mostly killed by bombs... But we have killed hundreds of [Japanese] too...How or when this letter will reach you I have no idea. I am putting it in the hand of God." The Japanese killed or captured the entire unit when the Philippines fell in April 1942. The photo depicts U.S. prisoners of war on Bataan being led into a brutal captivity.*



The military built approximately 450 buildings at Hunter Field from 1940 to 1945. Over the past sixty years the installation has demolished most of its World War II buildings. Remaining on-post World War II structures include a water tower (Facility 721), an abandoned ammunition storage area (Buildings 1305-1308), a heat plant (Building 812), two bomb sight storage facilities (Buildings 803 and 816), the sewage treatment plant, the small arms range (used in World War II to test fire and sight in aircraft-mounted machineguns and cannon), three hangars (Buildings 811, 813, and 1290), and various administration buildings and warehouses.

After Germany's surrender in May 1945 Hunter Field processed aircraft and crew returning from the Mediterranean and slated for duty in the Pacific. This operation was cut short on 6 August 1945, when the B-29 *Enola Gay*, piloted by Colonel Paul Tibbetts, dropped a terrible new weapon—an atom bomb—on the Japanese city of Hiroshima, killing 100,000 Japanese. A second bomb dropped on Nagasaki prompted the Japanese government to surrender unconditionally. The mushroom clouds over Hiroshima and Nagasaki marked the final act of World War II and ushered in an era of global uncertainty. Would the destructive power of the bomb force an end to war? Or would the bomb lead to an end to humanity?

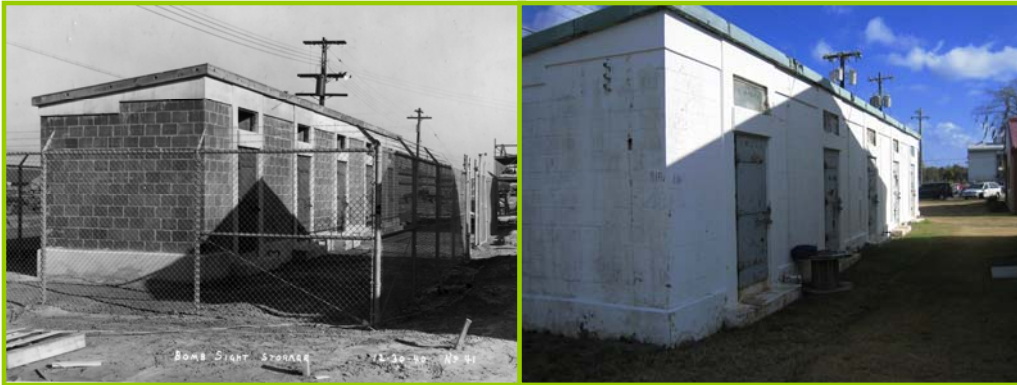


# Hunter Army Airfield—Then (1940-1950) and Now (2006)

Facility 721 Water Tower



Building 816 Bomb Sight Storage Facility



Building 811 Hangar



## A MUNICIPAL AIRPORT AGAIN

After 1945 Hunter Field reverted to the Savannah Municipal Airport. The airport only used a small fraction of Hunter Field's cantonment, the balance leased by the Federal Public Housing Administration to various public and private enterprises. Businessmen converted buildings to industrial plants, commercial businesses, and even apartments. The University of Georgia, overwhelmed with returning veterans, even opened a satellite campus on the old airbase.



## Colonel Paul Tibbetts

*Tibbetts (born 1915) trained at Hunter Field in 1940-41 as a lieutenant in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Bomb Group and remembers that "The... months [training at Hunter Field] were the most important of my career from the standpoint of learning to become a precision pilot." He distinguished himself in World War II as a squadron commander in Europe. In the Pacific Tibbetts commanded the 509<sup>th</sup> Composite Group, which dropped the Hiroshima and Nagasaki A-bombs. Tibbetts returned to Hunter as commander of the 308<sup>th</sup> Bomb Wing from 1956 to 1958. He married his second wife in the Hunter Chapel, Building 145, in 1956. At right is Tibbetts just after completion of the Hiroshima mission.*



## THE COLD WAR AND STRATEGIC AIR COMMAND

As the 1940s ended the Soviet Union, formerly a World War II ally, showed itself under the dictator Josef Stalin to be an implacable foe of western capitalism and democracy. The Soviets took control of Eastern European nations, attempted a blockade of Berlin in 1948, and exploded their own atomic weapon in 1949. The US grew increasingly concerned with Communist aggression and expansion. In 1947, President Truman signed the National Security Act (NSA), reorganizing the US defense and intelligence establishments and making the Air Force a completely independent branch of service. Because of its role in atomic bomb deployment, the Air Force became the most important branch of the service. The Air Force's Strategic Air Command (SAC) was responsible for atomic bomb delivery, making it the most important of the Air Force commands.

And what of SAC's principal weapons? In 1948 there were less than sixty atomic bombs in the US nuclear arsenal, stored in four "Q Areas" controlled by the civilian Atomic Energy Commission, all adjacent to Air Force bases in the southern parts of the country: one in New Mexico, one in Tennessee, and two in Texas. By 1950 SAC consisted of fourteen bomb wings, flying mostly B-29 and B-50 propeller medium bombers, or huge B-36 piston-pull heavy bombers. Like the Q Areas, SAC based its bombers primarily in the southeast and southwest parts of the country.

## General Curtis LeMay



*The controversial General Curtis LeMay (1906-1990) commanded SAC from 1948 to 1957. LeMay made frequent surprise visits to his bases, including Hunter AFB. Under LeMay SAC continually improved its training, technology, doctrine, and morale, although the general was notorious for making disturbing public comments favoring pre-emptive nuclear war. LeMay retired as the Air Force Chief of Staff in 1965 and in 1968 ran unsuccessfully for vice president on George Wallace's ticket.*

As part of SAC's southern strategy, in 1949 SAC stationed the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bomb Wing and its B-50 bombers at Chatham Field, a World War II airbase built a few miles west of Savannah. However, Chatham Field had inadequate barracks and operations facilities, and proved unsatisfactory for SAC. In order to keep SAC in the Savannah area, the city offered to exchange Hunter Field for Chatham Field.

SAC accepted and in September 1950 the switch occurred. Hunter Field became Hunter Air Force Base (Hunter AFB), while Chatham Field became the Savannah Municipal Airport, now known as the Savannah/Hilton Head International Airport.

When SAC arrived at Hunter AFB in 1950, they found a neglected World War II-era airport. Buildings creaked with rotten siding and broken windows, while asphalt roads showed ruts and holes, and grass grew

through the pavement of aircraft parking aprons. A land conflict in Asia soon accelerated the pace of base construction and development.

In June 1950 Communist North Korea invaded South Korea, starting the Korean War (1950-1953). Concerned that this attack was orchestrated by Moscow as the first round of World War III, the Truman administration began an immense American military build-up, with SAC a major beneficiary. During the Korean War the US nuclear arsenal increased from 300 atomic bombs to over 800, while SAC grew from 59,000 to 153,000 personnel, developed and issued new jet aircraft, and built up new bases, including Hunter AFB.

## SAC Bombers at Hunter AFB: 1950-1953

SAC stationed B-29 and B-50 bombers at Hunter AFB from 1950 to 1953. The B-29 entered service during World War II and had a maximum speed of 357 mph and a range of 3,250 miles. The B-29 spawned many variants, including the B-50 (pictured at right), which entered service in 1948. The B-50 was similar to the B-29, but had greater speed (385 mph), range (4,650 miles), and mid-air refueling capability.



By January 1951 SAC had slated a second bomb wing for Hunter AFB, and in 1950-51 spent over \$5.6 million on the base, mostly in repairing World War II buildings, roads, and runways, and expanding the base to its current boundaries west to the Little Ogeechee (Forest) River and east to White Bluff Road. In the summer of 1951 Congress spent nearly \$6 billion on the largest military construction program since World War II. Hunter AFB received \$24.5 million, promptly spending \$2.5 million on building what is now the installation's current runway.

### EARLY SAC OPERATIONS AT HUNTER AFB

In the midst of this new construction the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bomb Wing conducted ground training, aircraft maintenance, Unit-Simulated Combat Missions (USCMs) which included practice bomb runs over American cities, and practiced loading and deployment of nuclear weapons. For weapons exercises SAC constructed a new ammunition storage area (still the post's ammunition storage point) and also



“Hardstand 13,” an unassuming facility (once located within the Building 1336 motorpool area but now demolished) which served as a classroom for nuclear weapons operations, and as a central control point for weapons loading exercises.

« Hardstand 13, December 1950



Pinwheel barracks, circa 1954 »

«Building 850 under construction, 1954



In April 1952 the 308<sup>th</sup> Bomb Wing, armed with B-29s, arrived at Hunter AFB. The 2<sup>nd</sup> and 308<sup>th</sup> Bomb Wings together formed the 38<sup>th</sup> Air Division. On paper each wing had 45 bombers in three combat squadrons and over 2500 men, including combat crews, maintenance personnel, and security teams. In reality, the more recently-formed 308<sup>th</sup> did not possess its full complement of bombers and was not yet rated combat ready.

## “THE NEW LOOK”

In 1952 Dwight D. Eisenhower was elected President. After Eisenhower’s election, a series of military and political events, including the development of thermonuclear weapons thousands of times more powerful than atomic bombs, spurred the arms race between the US and the Soviet Union. It was thus under Eisenhower that the concept of deterrence through the threat of massive nuclear

retaliation became central to US strategic planning, and was formalized in a reform of the military establishment called “The New Look”—named after a style of women’s fashion advertised in Vogue magazine. Under the New Look, the Eisenhower administration stressed the deterrent potential of

## US Special Weapon Deployment:

### 1948-1956

*From the late 1940s through the 1950s the government stored its nuclear arsenal in secure “Q Areas,” which grew in number from four in 1948 to twenty in 1960, matching the increase in the US nuclear and thermonuclear arsenal. Some SAC airfields were located next to Q Areas, but for the other installations not adjacent to Q Areas (like Hunter AFB) the Air Force, prior to 1952, deployed the nuclear weapons in two ways: bombers would fly to the Q Area, pick up bombs, and then conduct the exercise; or transport aircraft would fly the bombs from the Q Areas to the bases, and the bombs would be temporarily stored on the base.*



nuclear weapons by making SAC the centerpiece of the military establishment, and from 1953 to 1961 SAC received nearly 50% of the entire US military budget.

With this massive increase in funding it is no surprise that many buildings at Hunter Field today date from this time period. From 1953 to 1956 the installation, in conjunction with the Savannah District Corps of Engineers, constructed on-post family housing, three massive pinwheel barracks, new double cantilever hangars, new administration and shop buildings, new air traffic control buildings, and new community and recreation facilities.



The B-47 Stratojet »

The advent of the New Look coincided with a long-planned SAC-wide aircraft upgrade. In 1953 SAC began issuing the new B-47 jet bomber to its units, with Hunter AFB receiving its first jets in January 1954. Throughout the previous year, in addition to undertaking regular duties, SAC personnel at Hunter AFB had been training to fly and maintain this new aircraft, vastly different from their World War II-vintage propeller-driven bombers. With its swept-wing design and bubble cockpit, it looked and maneuvered more like a fighter than a bomber.

The B-47 flew at a top speed of 600 miles an hour, 200 mph more than its predecessors. The B-47 only had a range of 4000 miles, but its in-flight refueling capability gave this bomber a global reach. B-47's speed and maneuverability revolutionized bomber tactics and doctrine. Instead of flying in mass formations, the B-47s would individually fly into enemy airspace at various points, relying on surprise and speed as its main defense. This required more intensive flight training than was given to World War II bomber crews, and Hunter AFB, like other SAC bases, emphasized a high degree of training and readiness. Combat crews continually practiced navigation problems, bomb runs, outdoor survival, and other skills necessary to fight and (possibly) survive nuclear war.

## **SAC Aircraft Maintenance at Hunter AFB**

*Crew chiefs would inspect their aircraft and inform Wing Maintenance Control of any maintenance problems. Maintenance Control, in turn, tracked the status of all sixty aircraft under its responsibility through a large plexiglass board, from which they scheduled the shops to work on aircraft. Maintenance Control issued the wing maintenance shop work orders, then each shop assigned their particular mechanics to the aircraft, giving them specific times for the work to be completed. Because B-47 bombers had limited space for maintenance work, the maintenance had to be very carefully coordinated. Each mechanic had a specific scheduled time to work on each aircraft, and if a mechanic ran out of time and did not inform Maintenance Control by radio, he would have to leave and let the next mechanic work.*

In support of the combat crews, SAC maintenance personnel worked on aircraft along the massive concrete aircraft parking apron, capable of parking over 130 bombers and refueling tankers. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Bomb Wing operated from the north edge of the apron, while the 308<sup>th</sup> operated on the east edge. The space between the two double cantilever hangars, Buildings 850 and 860, marked the operational boundary between the two wings. New buildings were arranged and old buildings adapted to suit a maintenance system centrally controlled by single bomb wings. Basic

maintenance and inspections of aircraft by combat squadrons and organizational/periodic maintenance squadrons occurred in nosedocks such as Buildings 843, 844, and 845 or on the flightline.

More specialized maintenance occurred in the large hangars under field maintenance squadrons in Buildings 850 and 860. Smaller aircraft components were often removed for maintenance in the armament & electronics squadron shops, which mostly operated out of old World War II buildings and hangars, such as Buildings 811, 813, 1206 and 1290. Wing maintenance control directed all of these maintenance activities.

## **FROM WING ROTATION TO REFLEX**

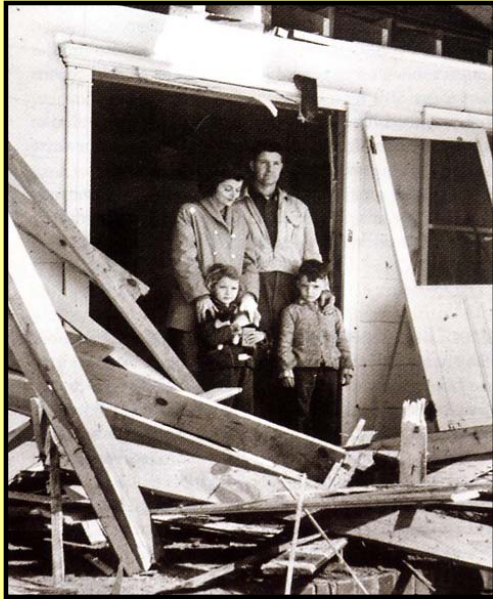
In 1954 SAC headquarters rated the entire 38<sup>th</sup> Air Division combat-ready and nuclear-capable. The 38th took part in wing rotation, a SAC program bringing bombers within easy range of the Soviet Union through ninety-day tours at SAC bases in the United Kingdom and North Africa.



A Second Bomb Wing Combat Crew, 1957

Hunter AFB's flightline was the staging area for the wings' deployment. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Bomb Wing undertook two wing rotations to the United Kingdom in 1951 and 1952. Both the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 308<sup>th</sup> Bomb Wings conducted multiple wing rotations to North Africa, particularly to Sidi Slimane, Morocco, after 1952. However, the presence of large U.S. bomber forces often caused political problems for the host countries. Wing rotation deployments ceased by the late 1950s.

The 1950s was a decade of continual evolution of nuclear weapons and delivery technology. By 1953 both the Soviet Union and the United States had developed thermonuclear, or hydrogen bombs, hundreds of times more destructive than atomic bombs. More ominously still, the development of missiles meant the warning time for an attack would soon be measured not in hours, but within minutes. This dawning realization led to SAC developing both a rapid response for its bomber force (the Alert program), and on-site nuclear and thermonuclear weapon storage on all SAC bomber installations. The latter program was called the Bombs on Base (BOB) program—fifteen facilities built in the current ammunition area were constructed as part of BOB in 1957.



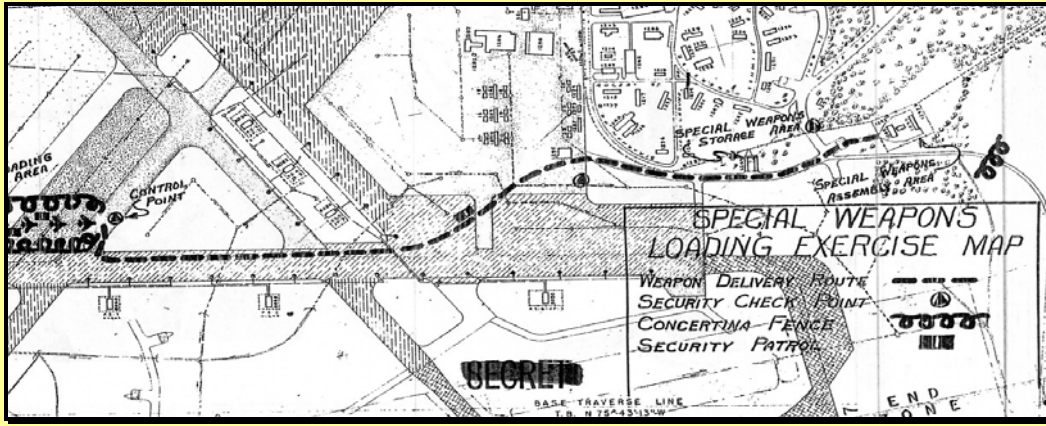
## H-Bomb Accidents and Hunter AFB

*Hunter AFB was involved in two accidents involving hydrogen bombs, occurring within a month of each other. In February 1958 a bomber from Homestead AFB collided with a fighter plane, forcing the bomber to jettison the bomb off the coast of Tybee Island and land at Hunter AFB. In March 1958 a B-47 of the 308<sup>th</sup> Bomb Wing inadvertently dropped a hydrogen bomb near Florence, South Carolina, injuring six people and destroying a farmhouse owned by the Gregg family (shown at left with their house after the incident). Because of standard SAC safety precautions neither bomb was armed for a thermonuclear detonation.*

By 1956 SAC had developed a one-third ground alert concept, which envisioned a third of SAC aircraft on alert *and armed*, ready to take off within fifteen minutes' warning for retaliatory nuclear strikes. In 1956 SAC headquarters designated Hunter AFB as the first test site for this concept. Under Operation TRY OUT (November 1956-April 1957) Hunter AFB locked the installation down, placed a third of its aircraft in full alert configuration, and continued normal training and maintenance schedules. The next six months were a grueling ordeal for the officers and men at Hunter AFB. One airman of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Field Maintenance Squadron recalled, "[W]e come on the base, we didn't go off the flightline for... months. I slept on mattresses brought in from the barracks on the hangar deck [of Building 850]. The messhall brought bag lunches, that's what we ate, and we lived and worked right out of the hangar."

Hunter AFB proved the one-third alert concept feasible and SAC quickly moved to implement the program after TRY OUT. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, when the US faced the threat of missile attack with only a bomber force, one third ground alert remained critical to US nuclear deterrence, and SAC bombers used variations of this alert concept through the end of the Cold War. In July 1957 SAC also began Reflex operations, which stationed bombers on ground alert in overseas bases primarily in North Africa and England. Reflex soon replaced wing rotation. By 1958 Hunter AFB began both home station alert and Reflex operations.





## Special Weapons Operations at Hunter AFB

*"[W]e always towed the Bomb behind a truck and...the trailer was covered with canvas. When we got to the B-47, the crew chief on the B-47 would open up the bomb bay, back the bomb in, in between the engine and the bomb bay, then we would hang the curtains from the bomb bay to the trailer and we'd push the Bomb in... Now when you loaded your Bomb... then we would set in what was called the Capsule. In those days, the Capsule was the Uranium-235 or whatever they put in the atomic weapon, and it set separately in the bomb bay... [I]t's against the law to fly over the continental United States with a loaded atomic bomb, so [when the aircraft got beyond the three mile limit] the bombardier...would [crawl] back into the bomb bay, take the Capsule out, go around behind it (there was a little walkway where you'd go around behind the Bomb), [attach] the Capsule, then the Bomb was loaded..."*

**—Joe Kerr, 804<sup>th</sup> Supply Squadron, Hunter AFB, 1955-1957**

In October 1957 the Soviet Union launched Sputnik I, the first man-made orbital satellite, leaping ahead of the US in what came to be known as the "Space Race." Sputnik proved Soviet intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) capability. With the United States' own rockets and missiles under development, SAC's bomber alert and Reflex program became more important than ever to the country's defense against Soviet missile attack.

## CHANGING STRATEGIES

In the mid-1950s SAC began basing bomb wings in the northern tier of the country, closer to the Soviet Union when flying over the Arctic Circle, and away from heavily populated areas. By 1955 the first B-52 heavy bombers—with greater range and payload capacity than the B-47—came online, while the US deployed ICBMs by 1959. The development of ICBMs and the B-52 precluded the need for B-47 bases in the southeast. Hunter AFB became obsolete.

## The SAC Alert Area at Hunter AFB



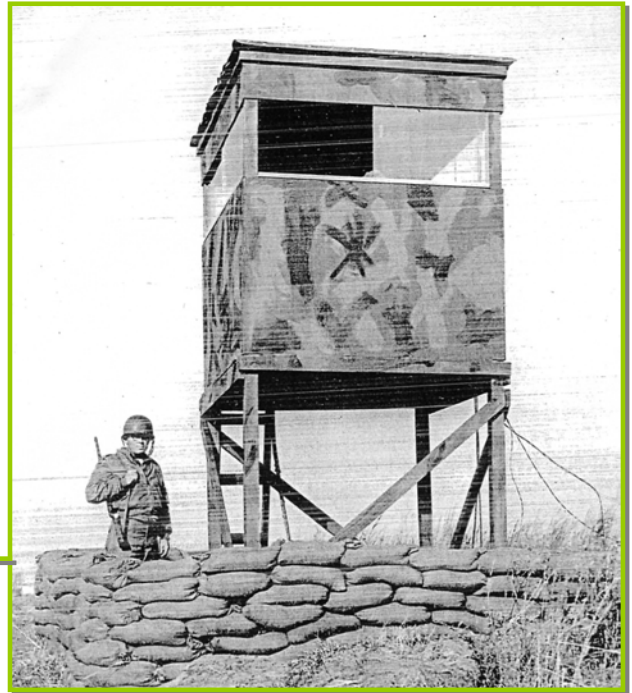
*The area known as “Saber Hall” was originally a SAC alert area, built in 1960 for home station alert operations. Building 8661, known as the “molehole,” housed combat crews on alert, ready to run up the ramps to waiting aircraft, parked on the “Christmas Tree” apron, fully fueled and loaded with nuclear weapons. Aircraft parked at the Alert area stood ready to take off within fifteen minutes of the alert siren. The photograph at left depicts an alert crew running to their B-47 at an unknown alert area.*

By 1960 SAC had transferred the 308<sup>th</sup> from Hunter AFB and announced the base’s eminent transfer to Material Air Transport Service (MATS), another Air Force command. Because of changes in technology and American nuclear strategy, Hunter AFB’s days as a SAC installation were definitely numbered.

The country elected John F. Kennedy President in 1960. The Soviets tested the young president repeatedly. Two years into Kennedy’s presidency, in October 1962 (six months before SAC was scheduled to leave Hunter AFB), the Soviets began installing medium-range nuclear missiles in Cuba. The US imposed a naval blockade on missile shipments and demanded the missiles’ removal. The world waited nervously and wondered what would happen if the Soviets tried to run the blockade—would a naval incident between the two superpowers start World War III?

Hunter AFB’s 2<sup>nd</sup> Bomb Wing already had seventeen B-47s on Reflex alert overseas, and dispersed thirteen other bombers to Shaw and Charleston AFBs in South Carolina, all in full Emergency War Order configuration, loaded with nuclear weapons and Jet-Assisted Take Off rockets for lift-off. Beginning on 20 October 1962 the installation hosted the B-47s of the entire 306<sup>th</sup> Bomb Wing. On 22 October SAC placed its fleet at DEFCON 3, increasing readiness and alert levels above normal levels. By 24 October all aircraft at Hunter AFB, sixty B-47 bombers with full nuclear payloads, sat silent on the aircraft parking apron and the “Christmas Tree” apron at the alert area, waiting for the balloon to drop.

Other SAC bases in the U.S. and overseas were on full alert. Overhead, B-52s flew on airborne alert. Fortunately the Soviets stepped back from the abyss on 29 October 1962, pulling the missiles from Cuba while Kennedy secretly agreed to withdraw US missiles from Turkey. In this most dramatic Cold War incident of nuclear brinksmanship, the Soviets had blinked.



Temporary guard tower built during the Cuban Missile Crisis, Hunter AFB October 1962 »

## **MATERIEL AIR TRANSPORT SERVICE**

Within six months of the end of the Cuban Missile Crisis, all SAC aircraft had left Hunter AFB. In April 1963 SAC transferred Hunter AFB to the 63<sup>rd</sup> Troop Carrier Wing of MATS (Materiel Air Transport Service), which stationed sixty C-124 cargo planes and 4300 men to the installation. By 1964 tenant units had also moved to the base, including the Coast Guard. The 63<sup>rd</sup>'s missions were truly global, and flew in support of humanitarian efforts, the Gemini NASA missions, and military operations such as the US intervention in the Dominican Republic in 1965. Significantly, missions to Vietnam gradually increased as the decade wore on and the US became more deeply involved in that country's affairs.

In 1964, a year after MATS arrived, the Department of Defense announced Hunter AFB's closing. Built as a SAC base, Hunter AFB did not have the facilities needed to support transport missions.

## **VIETNAM AND THE ARMY'S ARRIVAL**

In the late 1950s and early 1960s the Army developed troop-carrying transport helicopters, helicopter gunships designed for close air support, and tactical doctrine for airmobile warfare. These efforts paid off in a tactical sense when the US became involved in the Vietnam War.



Saber Hall (the old SAC Alert building) in 1970, then in use as an AH-1 Cobra training facility

In 1965 US combat troops were sent to bolster a shaky authoritarian regime in South Vietnam against an insurgency sponsored by Communist North Vietnam. The helicopter became the crux of the Army's tactical efforts, essential in jungle terrain for air transport, fire support, medical evacuation, and supply.



## The AH-1 Cobra

*Pictured above is an AH-1 landing in the Oglethorpe Mall parking lot, 1972. The AH-1 entered service in 1967 and saw extensive use in Vietnam. HAAF was the only location in the United States during the Vietnam War where aviators could train on the Cobra. The Army has since phased out the AH-1 but it is still used by the Marine Corps.*

The need for more helicopter pilots drove the expansion of the Army's aviation program, which saved Hunter AFB as a military base. In December 1966 the Department of Defense announced that the official new home of the Army's Advanced Flight Training Center (AFTC) would be Hunter Army Airfield (HAAF) and Fort Stewart. The airfield's massive parking apron, built by SAC for jet bombers, offered more than enough space for helicopter training operations.





Hunter Army Airfield is reactivated, 1974

HAAF became one of the Army's key helicopter training sites during the Vietnam War. Between 1967 and 1972, HAAF and Fort Stewart trained 11,000 rotary wing pilots and 4,328 fixed wing pilots, including 1400 South Vietnamese aviators. The US withdrew all combat troops from Vietnam in the early 1970s and in 1972 the Army closed HAAF. In 1975 North Vietnam conquered South Vietnam, closing an ignominious chapter in American history.

### **HUNTER ARMY AIRFIELD: 1974 TO 2001**

The Army reopened HAAF in 1974 and designated it a sub-post of Fort Stewart and a base for the 24<sup>th</sup> Division's helicopter and support elements. In 1978 the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 75<sup>th</sup> Ranger Regiment moved to HAAF as a tenant unit.

By the late 1970s HAAF had become the US Army's premier rapid deployment node on the eastern seaboard, thanks in no small part to facilities left behind by the Air Force, including the runway, parking apron, and the old SAC alert area, now called "Saber Hall." Special Forces troops or elements of the 24<sup>th</sup> Division could deploy as rapidly as possible to nearly anywhere in the world,

making it a potent offensive resource in the Cold War. The installation's effectiveness was demonstrated by its use as a rapid deployment center during the 1983 Grenada invasion, when the US squelched a Cuban-sponsored Marxist island state in the Caribbean.

In 1990 the Soviet Union collapsed, relegating Communism to the dustbin of history. For forty years the installation's purpose had been largely geared to the ongoing Cold War. What would the future hold for Hunter Field, and indeed, the US military?

In 1990-1991 the 24<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division participated in Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm, taking part in the liberation of Kuwait and the destruction of much of Saddam Hussein's Iraqi Army. However, few missions in the 1990s had the clarity of Desert Storm, and the Army conducted multiple open-ended peace-keeping and humanitarian missions in countries as diverse as Haiti, Somalia, and the former Yugoslavia, with mixed results. In the middle of this uncertain decade, in 1996, the 24<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division was re-flagged the Third Infantry Division, "The Rock of the Marne."

## **CONFRONTING GLOBAL JIHAD: 2001 TO THE PRESENT**

After a close and controversial election, in 2001 President George W. Bush was sworn into office. On September 11 of that year, al-Qaeda terrorists flew three passenger aircraft into the Pentagon and World Trade Center towers, killing 3000 people. Once again America was at war, although not with a traditional enemy, but an extremist religious movement.

The current protracted guerrilla conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq—fought as part of the larger War on Terror—have accelerated changes in organization and doctrine and also increased the construction tempo on Army bases. Within this context HAAF continues to be an important deployment and support base for the Army thanks to its existing airfield facilities, and location adjacent to Fort Stewart and the east coast ports of Savannah and Charleston. Its status shows no sign of changing soon, particularly since Army reorganization and withdrawal from Europe means more troops will be stationed on the installation.

Sixty years ago the Air Corps developed HAAF into a military airfield. During the Cold War the installation adapted to the military's changing needs, serving first as a bomber and air transport base for the Air Force, then as an Army helicopter training base, and finally as a rapid deployment node and home for an infantry division's aviation units, in addition to various Special Operations, Marine Corps, Coast Guard, and Air Force tenants. The War on Terror, too, will eventually pass into history but it will not be the final chapter in this installation's story.



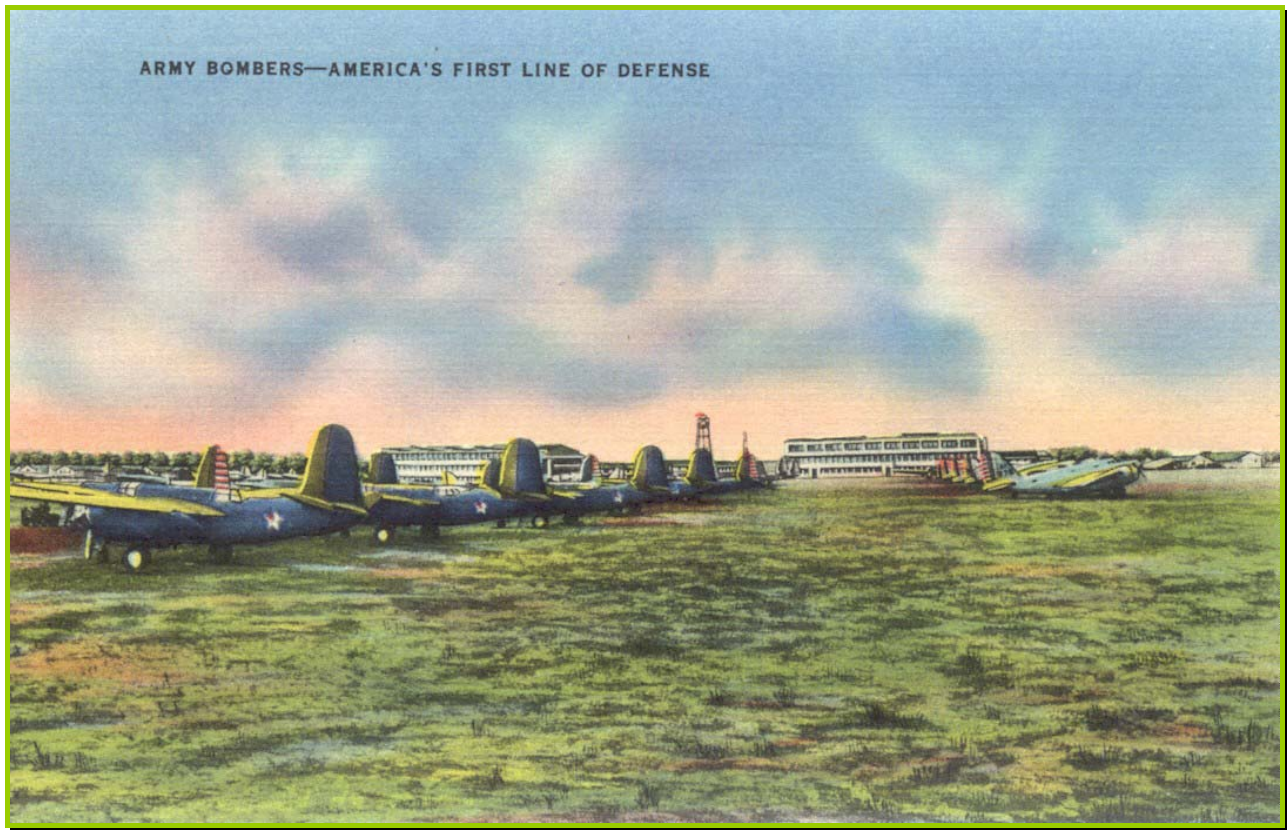
Third Division troops returning from OIF III deployment in December 2005 walk through the massive doors of Building 850, a historic Strategic Air Command hangar.

---

### •SOURCES•

- Burr, Jack. Personal interview, October 11, 2002.  
Dick, Ron. Reach and Power. U.S. Air Force, Washington DC: 1997  
Hall, R. Cargill. Case Studies in Strategic Bombardment. U.S. Air Force, Washington DC: 1998  
Harris, Joseph Butler. Personal interview, April 17, 2002.  
Kerr, Joseph. Personal interview, April 10, 2002.  
Maggioni, Joseph P. Hunter Army Airfield: A Developmental History. Fort Stewart: 2005.  
Maggioni, Joseph P. Hunter Army Airfield Flightline Mitigation Report Vol. I. Fort Stewart: 2005.  
Tappert, Annette (editor). Lines of Battle. Pocket Books, New York: 1989.  
Weitze, Karen J. Cold War Infrastructure for SAC. Corps of Engineers, Fort Worth: 1999.
-





A-10 and B-18 bombers of the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> Bomb Groups parked at Hunter Field, early 1941. Buildings 811 and 813 are visible in the background of the photograph.

---

## IMAGE CREDITS

- Air Force Historical Research Agency—pages 8, 16, and 18.
  - Associated Press/World Wide Photo—page 6.
  - Bull Street Library (Municipal Airport Vertical File)—pages 1 and 3.
  - Dick 1997—pages 9 and 12.
  - Esquire Magazine, May 2005—page 15.
  - Georgia Historical Society (Cordray-Foltz Collection)—page 2.
  - Ms. Beth Grashof—Cover, page 5, and page 23.
  - Hall 1998—page 10.
  - Mighty Eighth Air Force Museum (John Baker Collection)—pages 7 and 10
  - Mighty Eighth Air Force Museum (Holly Lantz Collection)—page 14.
  - National Archives and Records Administration—page 11.
  - U.S. Army—pages 4, 7, 19, 20, and 22.
  - Weitze (Photo courtesy Geomarine, Inc.)—page 17.
- 

This brochure was funded by the Environmental Division, Directorate of Public Works, Fort Stewart, Georgia, and researched and written by Mr. Joseph P. Maggioni, Universe Technologies, Incorporated.