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Article Title: Nebraska Army Air Fields, A Pictorial Review.

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Notes: Because the area between the Appalachian and Rocky Mountains was a natural "Citadel of Defense" where new defense manufacturing plants and military installations should be concentrated, Nebraska was the target of an intensive survey to locate sites suitable for army air forces air fields. Eleven sites were selected in Nebraska, near the cities of Alliance, Ainsworth, Bruning, Fairmont, Grand Island, Harvard, Kearney, Lincoln, McCook, Scottsbluff, and Scribner, and the building began.

URL of Article: [http://www.nebraskahistory.org/publish/publicat/history/full-text/1995\\_War\\_09\\_Air\\_Fields.pdf](http://www.nebraskahistory.org/publish/publicat/history/full-text/1995_War_09_Air_Fields.pdf)

Photos: Map of locations; various photos and diagrams from all the locations listed above, including graphics of the patches of the various squadrons, aerial views of facilities, men and women at work, etc.

# Nebraska Army Air Fields



## A Pictorial Review



*By Robert Hurst*

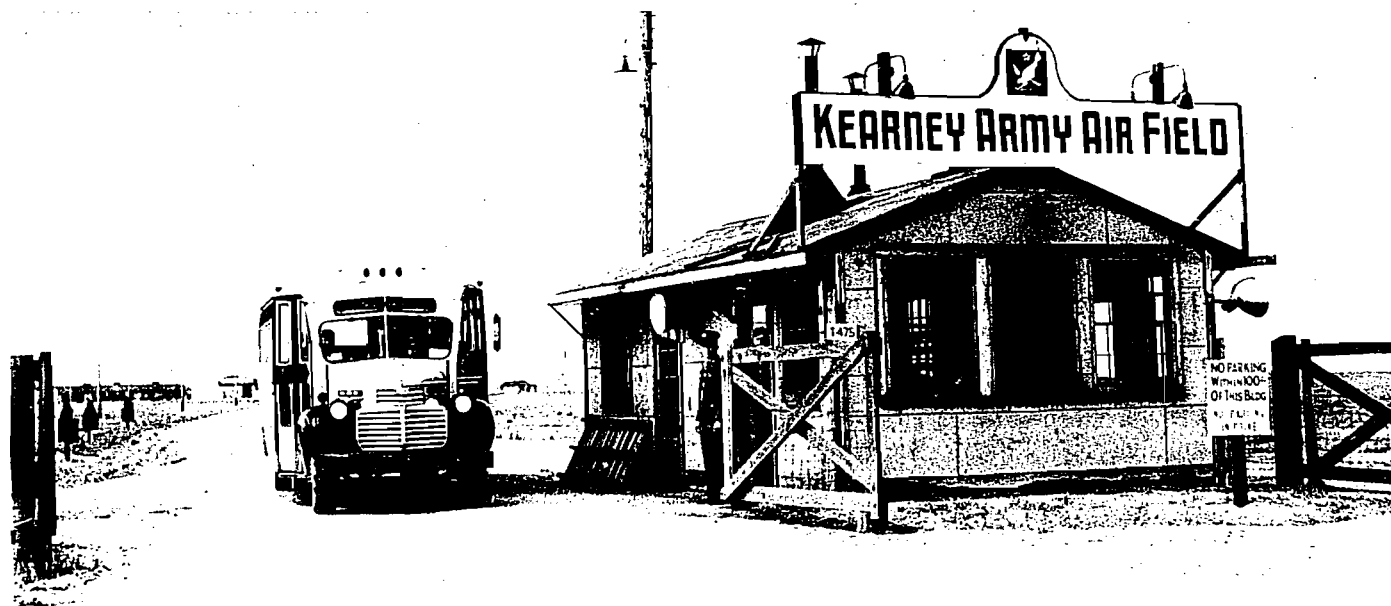
On September 1, 1939, Germany invaded Poland and within ten months occupied Denmark, Norway, Belgium, the Netherlands, and France. In the Far East Japan was at war with China in its attempt to conquer the vast continent of Asia. In response to Germany's and Japan's military aggression President Roosevelt proclaimed a "limited national emergency" for United States military defense expansion. On June 26, 1940, the president signed the First Supplemental National Defense Appropriation Act for 1941. The act provided

*Robert Hurst of Lincoln is a member of the Nebraska State Historic Preservation Board and has extensively surveyed wartime military installations in the state.*

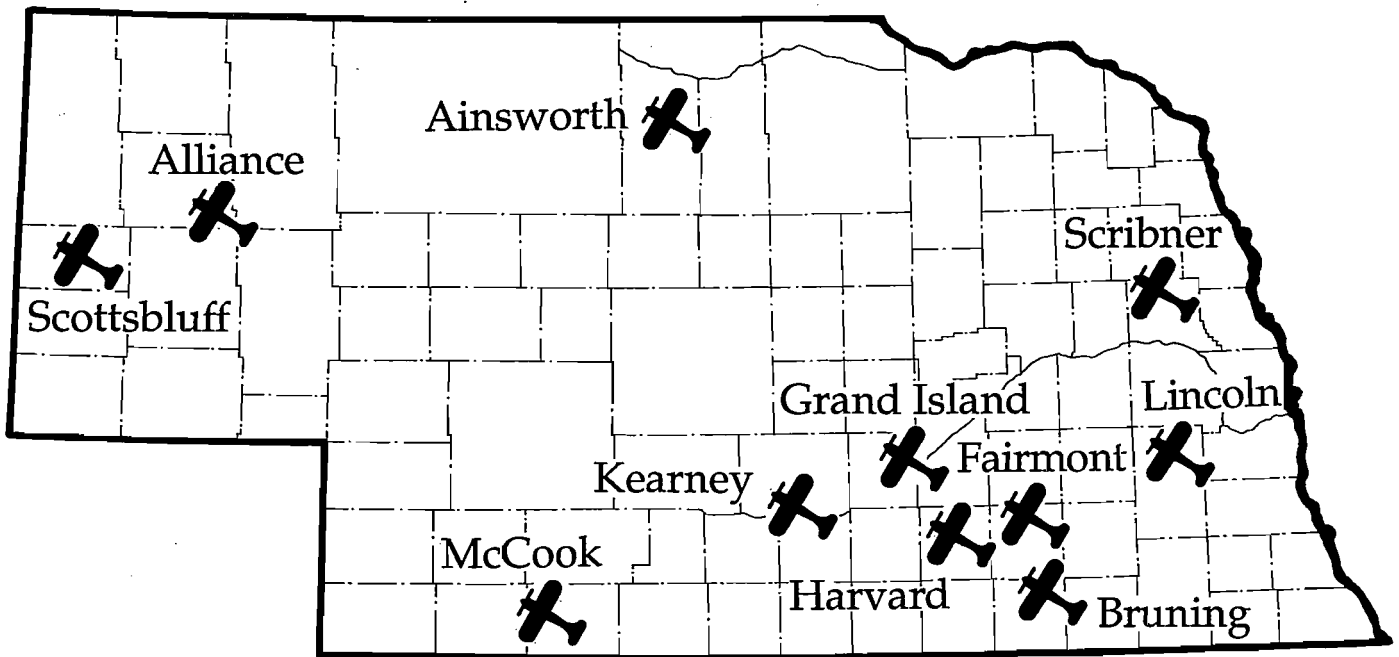
the War Department with just over one billion dollars for military mobilization. Eighty-four million was made available for construction of seacoast defenses, troop housing, and army air fields.<sup>1</sup>

By September 1940 President Roosevelt's Advisory Commission to the Council of National Defense (NDAC) gathered information on potential army air field sites in the midwestern United States. The commission's publication, *Strategic Military Planning for a Citadel of National Defense*, reported the Atlantic and Pacific coasts were vulnerable to air attacks. The area between the Appalachian and Rocky Mountains was a natural "Citadel of Defense," where new defense manufacturing plants and mili-

tary installations should be concentrated.<sup>2</sup> Because of this doctrine Nebraska was the target of an intensive survey to locate sites suitable for construction of army air forces air fields. Requirements for air field locations were level terrain free of natural and man-made obstructions; a mild climate with an abundance of clear weather flying days; rural sites to reduce the cost of real estate; reliable public utilities, including ample electricity, water, and natural gas; access to surface transportation routes such as paved highways and major railroads; and a large labor pool for constructing and maintaining the air fields. The surveys continued through the latter part of 1941.<sup>3</sup>



Kearney AAF main gate. The base's primary mission was to prepare bomber crews for combat. During the first six months of 1945, 554 B-29 crews were processed there for overseas assignment. Buffalo County Historical Society



Japan attacked the U.S. naval and air base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, without warning on December 7, 1941. The next day the United States Congress declared war on Japan followed, on December 11, 1941, by a declaration of war on Japan's allies, Germany and Italy. On January 6, 1942, President Roosevelt, in his state of the union message to Congress, called for a large-scale military buildup "to hasten the ultimate all-out victory."<sup>4</sup>

The U.S. Army Air Forces immediately began preparing for an air war in Europe and in the Pacific by producing 60,000 tactical and training aircraft, and by constructing hundreds of new air fields.<sup>5</sup> During the first quarter of 1942, the army air forces issued directives for two hundred construction projects for new air fields, pilot and technical schools, and bombing ranges. The number of construction projects doubled in the second quarter and doubled again in the third.<sup>6</sup>

The major burden of army air field design and construction fell on the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.<sup>7</sup> Col. Ewart

Plank, head of the construction section of the Chief of Engineers, described Congress's attitude on military funding following the Pearl Harbor attack: "We were just given a blank check . . . you didn't have any troubles in terms of getting funds."<sup>8</sup>

In 1942 the War Department, armed with the 1940-41 NDAC survey reports, selected eleven sites in Nebraska for construction of army air fields (AAF). The sites were located in rural areas near the cities of Alliance, Ainsworth, Bruning, Fairmont, Grand Island, Harvard, Kearney, Lincoln, McCook, Scottsbluff, and Scribner.<sup>9</sup> Using Corps of Engineers military mobilization plans for construction of runways and buildings, the air fields were operational within ninety days from the start of construction.<sup>10</sup>

The mobilization buildings were designed to be built from standardized drawings. Their architecture was straightforward, based on simple calculations of cost, efficiency, and speed of construction. The War Department's "Directive for War-Time Construction,

1 June 1942" stated, "In general, all construction shall be of the cheapest, temporary character with structural stability only sufficient to meet the needs of the service which the structure is intended to fulfill during the period of its contemplated war use."<sup>11</sup> To conserve critical war materials, primarily steel, the construction elements of the buildings consisted of wood, concrete, brick, gypsum board, and cement asbestos. Metal components were used only in the buildings' mechanical systems and assembly fasteners.

The air fields resembled small cities. In addition to the aircraft hangars there were barracks, warehouses, water towers, fire stations, hospitals, chapels, and other mission support structures.

By late 1942 thousands of military personnel began arriving at the air bases for training with bomber and fighter groups. Special technical schools were created for pilots, navigators, gunners, bombardiers, and mechanics. Alliance AAF had the distinction of also training army paratroops and combat engineers of the Troop Carrier Com-

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mand. After air and ground crews completed their training most were assigned to combat units in Europe, North Africa, the Middle East, and the Pacific.<sup>12</sup>

When the war ended in 1945 the War Department immediately began an evaluation program to determine the fate of the air fields. Due to the reduced need for military air power the air fields were deactivated and declared surplus. The state of Nebraska purchased the air fields at Bruning, Fairmont, Harvard, McCook, and Scribner to operate as state airports. Municipal governments acquired the air fields at Alliance, Ainsworth, Grand Island, Kearney, Lincoln, and Scottsbluff for use as municipal airports. In 1952 the Department of Defense reactivated the air field at Lincoln as a Strategic Air Command base under a joint-use agreement between the U.S. Air Force and the city of Lincoln. The base closed in 1966 and was returned to the city for use as a municipal airport, industrial park, and public housing community. The state air fields at Bruning and McCook were eventually closed to air traffic and the McCook Air Field was sold to private industry.

The 1988 Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS)/Historic American Engineering Record (HAER) Report, *World War II Temporary Structures: The U.S. Army*, states: "With its eye on the immediate crisis, the army built its mobilization structures with the expectation that they would be 'temporary' lasting five to twenty years."<sup>13</sup> As a result,

the historic integrity of mobilization buildings is often poor. Intermittent or discontinued use, and in some cases, relocation and destruction of the buildings, have led to the disappearance of nearly all of these structures. The Nebraska State Historical Society's 1991 Nebraska Historic Buildings Survey report for the Nebraska army air fields indicates only 134 of the original 4,500 mobilization buildings still exist.<sup>14</sup>

The construction of army air fields and other defense installations brought the reality of war to rural and small town Nebraska. The roar of aircraft engines and the presence of thousands of soldiers and civilian personnel were constant reminders that the job of defeating the enemy on faraway battlefields began at home. Although fifty years have taken their toll on the physical remains, the legacy of Nebraska's army air fields lives on through the recognition of their contributions to final victory.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Lenore Fine and Jesse Remington, *The Corps of Engineers: Construction in the United States*, The United States Army in World War II Series, The Technical Services Subseries (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Chief of Military History, 1972), 111-13.

<sup>2</sup> *Strategic Military Planning for a Citadel of National Defense* (U.S. War Department, Washington, D.C., 1940), copy in Val Kuska Collection, MS 1431, box 413, f. 79D6, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln. (Hereafter cited as Kuska Collection).

<sup>3</sup> Fine and Remington, *Corps of Engineers*, 121, 131, 133, 179; "Site for Bomber Airport Or National Defense Industry," June 18, 1941, Kuska Collection, box 412, f. 79D.

<sup>4</sup> Fine and Remington, *Corps of Engineers*, 480.

<sup>5</sup> Irving Brinton Holley, Jr., *Buying Aircraft: Materiel Procurement for the Army Air Forces*, The United States Army in World War II Series (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Chief of Military History, 1964), 238-40.

<sup>6</sup> Fine and Remington, *Corps of Engineers*, 484.

<sup>7</sup> Blanche D. Coll, Jean E. Keith, and Herbert H. Rosenthal, *The Corps of Engineers: Troops and Equipment*, The United States Army in World War II Series, The Technical Services Subseries (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Chief of Military History, 1958), 1, 132-43.

<sup>8</sup> Fine and Remington, *Corps of Engineers*, 478.

<sup>9</sup> Histories of U.S. Army Air Fields/ U.S. Air Force Bases in Nebraska, 1940-54, compiled from unit histories and related material, are at the U.S. Air Force Historical Research Center, Maxwell AFB, Ala. A microfilm copy of this collection is at the Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln.

<sup>10</sup> "Relic Components of Army Air Fields in Nebraska," National Register Multiple Documentation Form, Nebraska State Historic Preservation Office, Lincoln, 1993.

<sup>11</sup> "Directive for War-Time Construction," U.S. War Department, June 1, 1942, RG 77, Records of the Office of the Chief of Engineers, box 735, entry 107, Washington National Records Center, Suitland, Md.

<sup>12</sup> "Relic Components of Army Air Fields in Nebraska."

<sup>13</sup> Diane Wasch and Perry Busch, *World War II Temporary Structures: The U.S. Army* (National Park Service: Historic American Building Survey/ Historic American Engineering Record, 1988), 1-2.

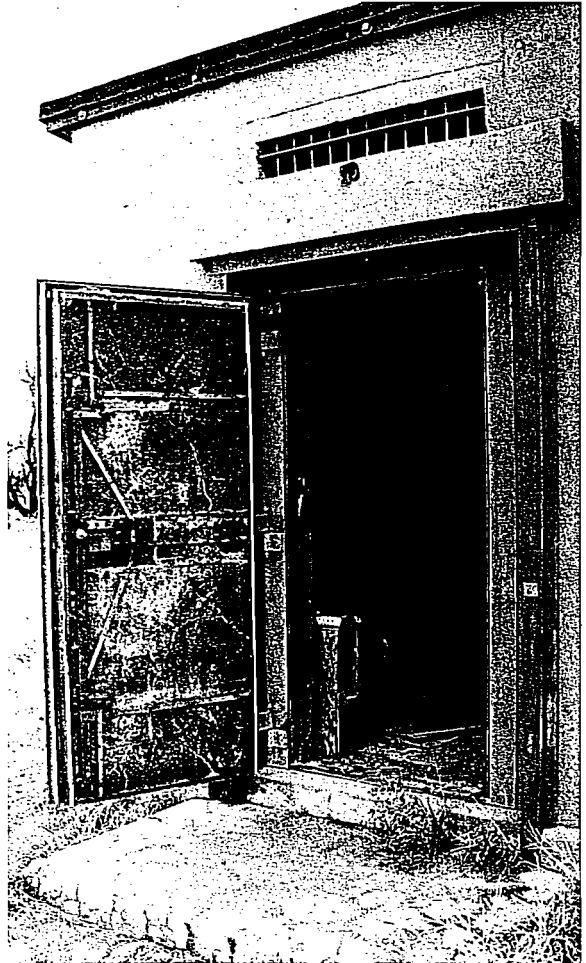
<sup>14</sup> "Relic Components of Army Air Fields in Nebraska."



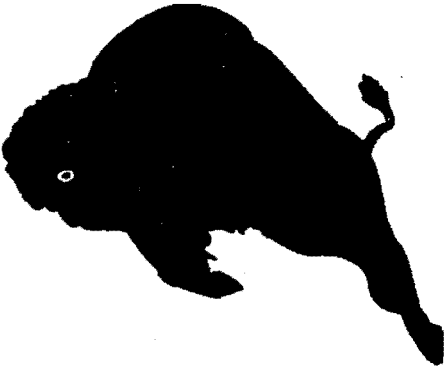
**53rd Fighter Squadron  
Ainsworth AAF  
1943-1944**

Right: Ainsworth Norden bombsight vault. Due to their "restricted" classification bombsights were stored in special bank-type vaults. B-17 aircrews and P-47 and P-38 fighter pilots trained at Ainsworth. Robert Hurst, NeSHPO 9103/37-2A/3, 1991

Below: This former Ainsworth AAF transient hangar is now the main hangar at Ainsworth Municipal Airport. Ainsworth AAF was a satellite of Rapid City (South Dakota) AAF. Robert Hurst, NeSHPO 9103/37:5, 1991

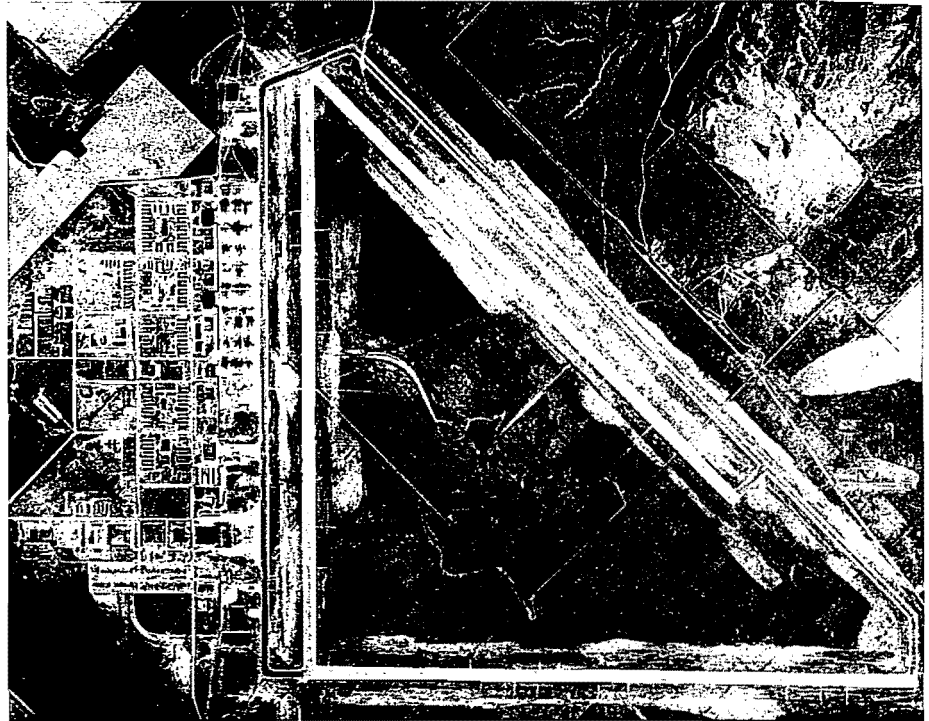


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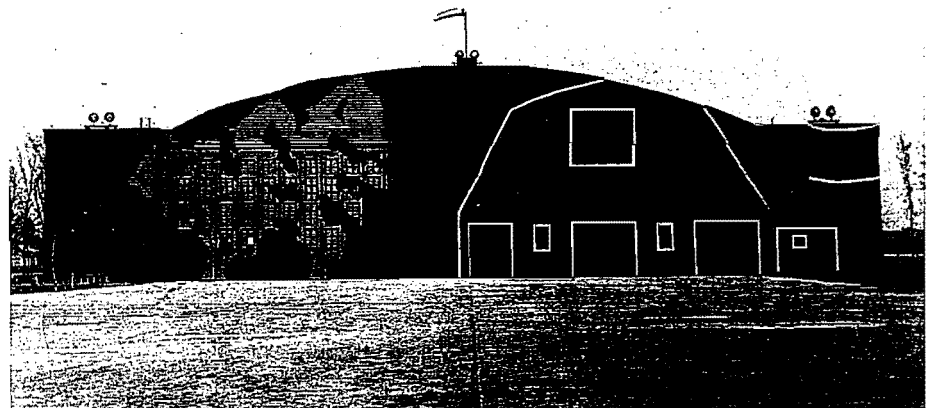


### **99th Bombardment Squadron McCook AAF 1944**

Right: An aerial view of McCook AAF about 1944 shows the 150 by 7,500 foot runways, taxiways, aircraft parking apron, hangars, and cantonment area, a typical configuration for most World War II army air fields. Nebraska Department of Aeronautics



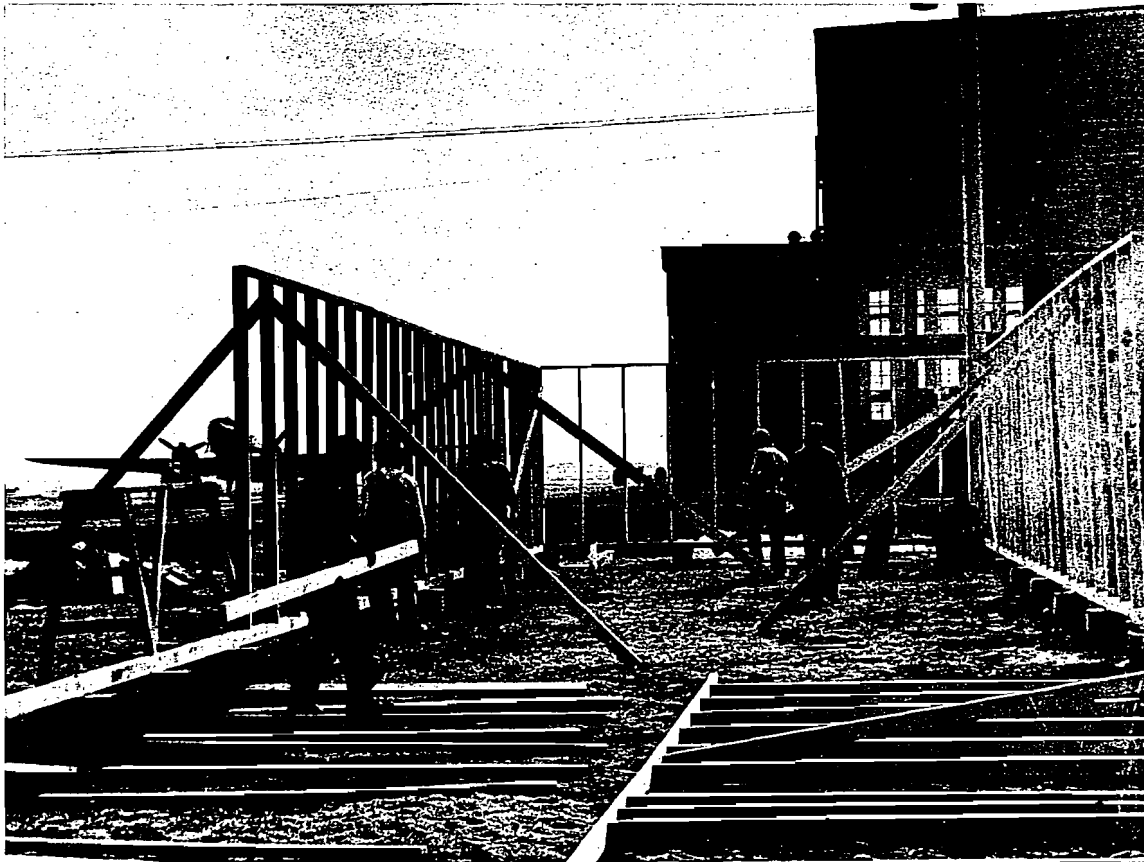
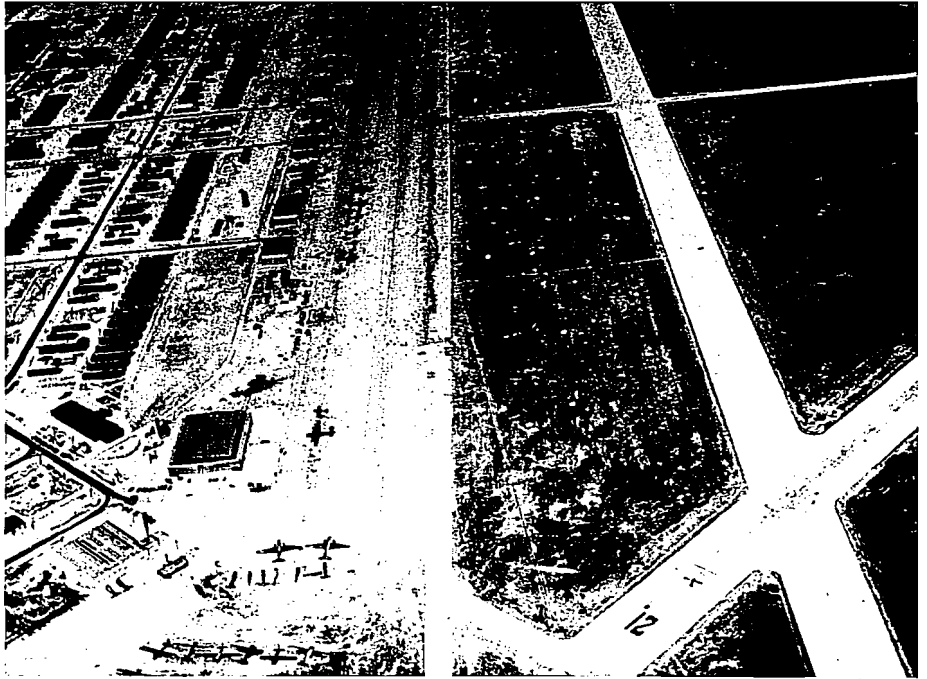
### **5th Bombardment Squadron McCook AAF 1944**



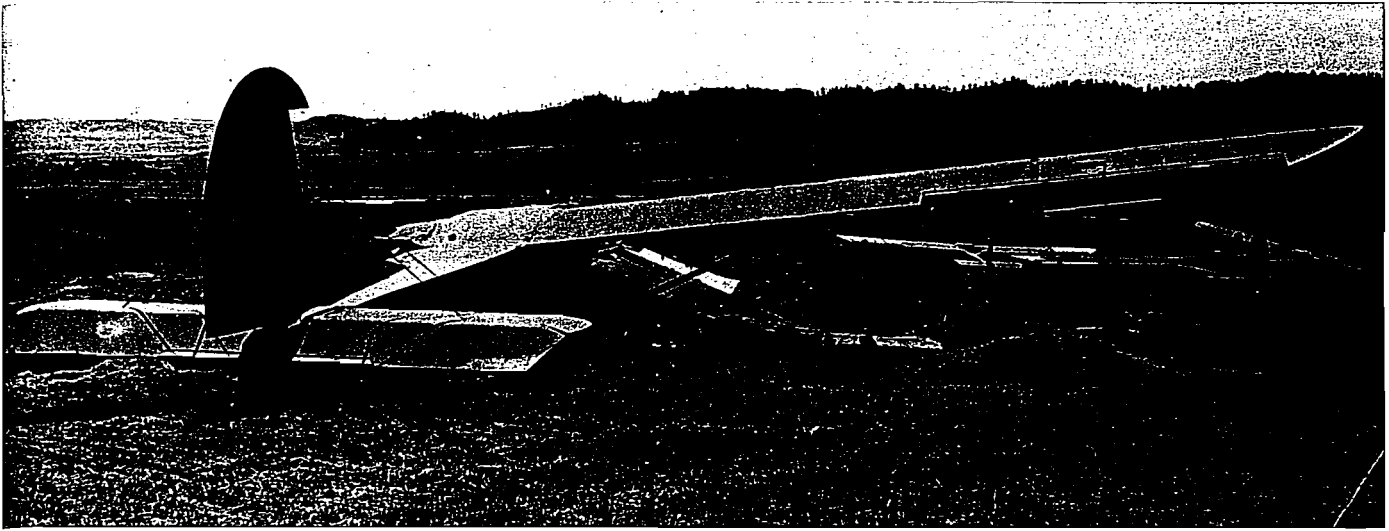
Scribner AAF was a satellite of Sioux City (Iowa) AAF, and provided operational training in B-17 and B-24 bombers and P-47 fighters. The air field was also the site of an extensive army camouflage experiment. The entire air field was camouflaged to blend with the surrounding countryside when viewed from the air. An aircraft hangar was painted to give the appearance of a barn and trees. Other buildings were painted to resemble sheds, stacks of hay, or trees. An engineering detachment repainted the buildings to match natural foliage as the seasons changed. *Omaha World-Herald*



**5th Troop  
Carrier Squadron  
Alliance AAF  
1944**



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Above: Fort Robinson's proximity to Alliance AAF made it a locale for practice invasions by the Troop Carrier Command, which trained more than 14,000 soldiers at Alliance. NSHS-R659-449

Right: An Omaha KOIL reporter interviewing soldiers in a C-47 transport during the Alliance AAF dedication, August 22, 1943. NSHS-PC1805-1991

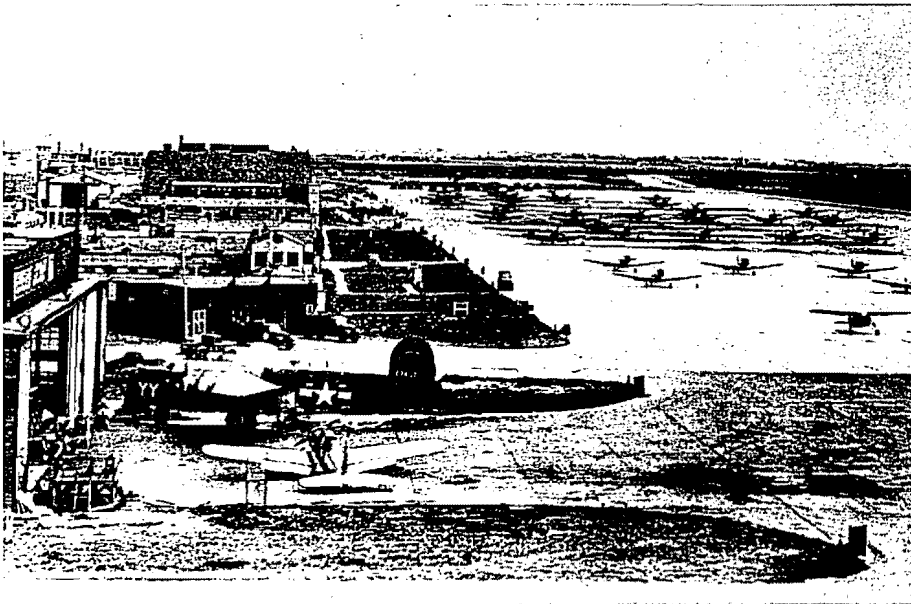
Below: Cargo drop near Alliance AAF. Knight Museum of High Plains Heritage

Opposite page, above: Aerial view of Alliance AAF in 1943. Knight Museum of High Plains Heritage

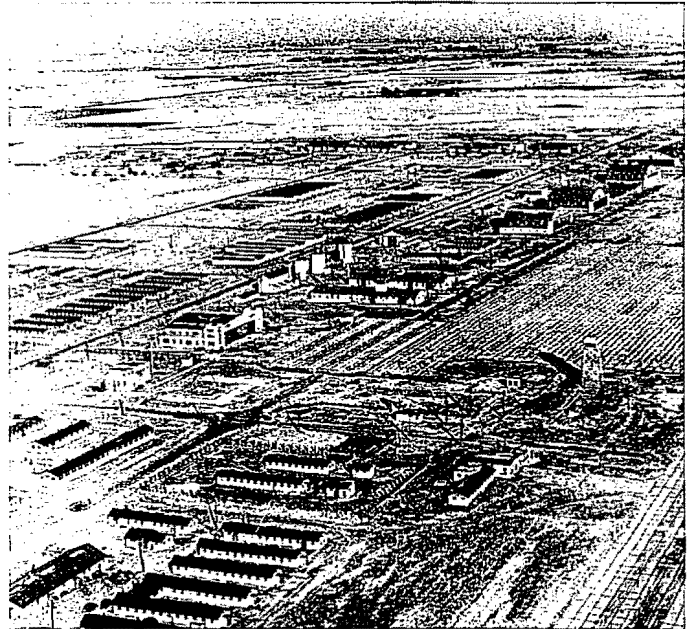
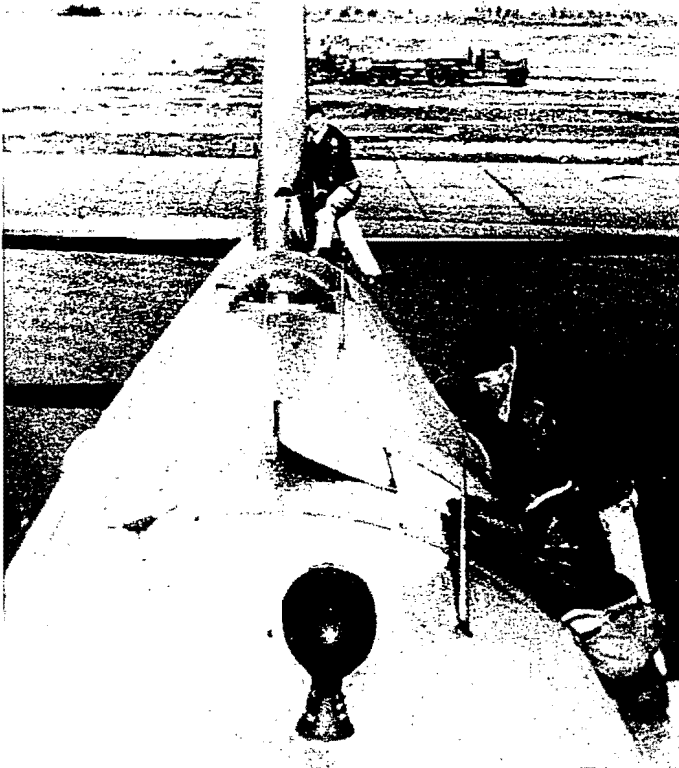
Left: Construction of the base photo lab at Alliance AAF, 1942. The field had 700 buildings, including a 500-bed hospital. Knight Museum of High Plains Heritage







**717th Bombardment  
Squadron  
Bruning AAF 1943  
Grand Island AAF 1945**

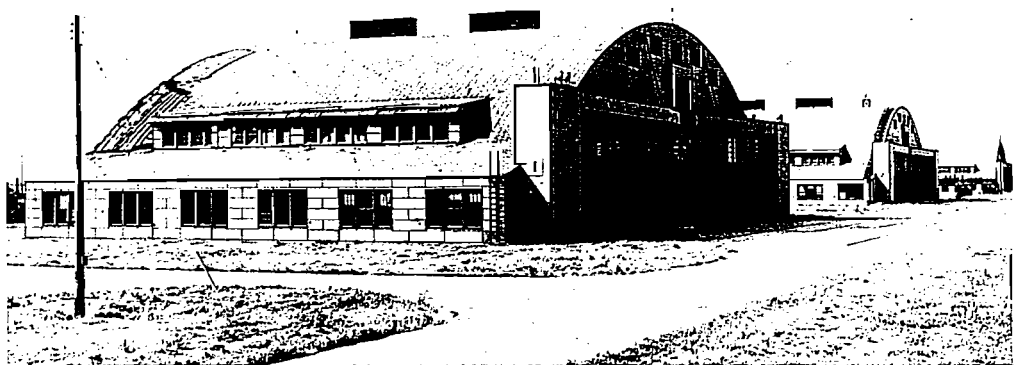
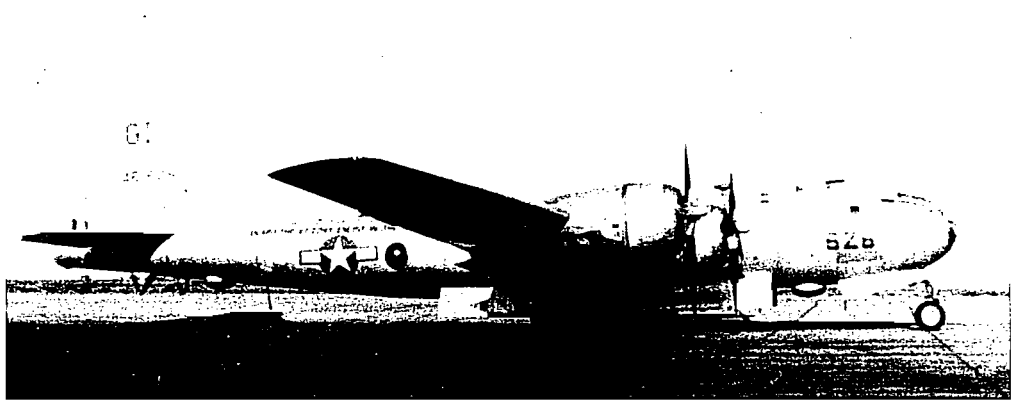


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Right: B-29 bomber at Grand Island AAF, about 1944.  
Courtesy of Ross Roach

Middle: Squadron hangars at Grand Island AAF about 1945.  
Courtesy of Gene Budde

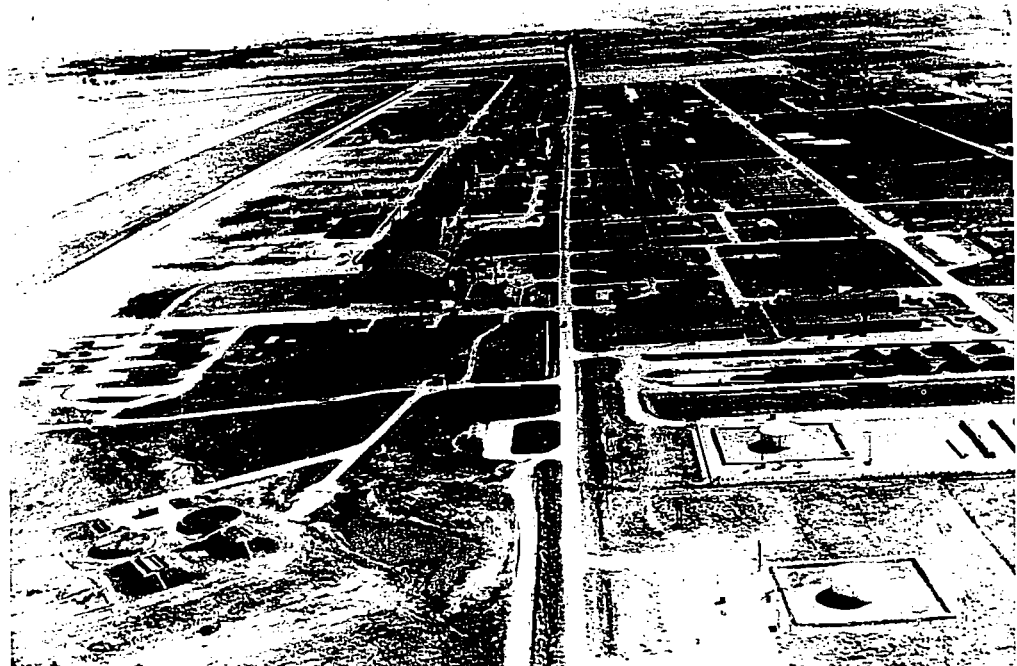
Bottom: Aerial view of Grand Island AAF. Several B-29 bombers are parked on the apron to the left. The field's primary mission was fourth phase training and overseas processing for B-17 and B-29 crews. In October 1943, 101 aircrews were processed for overseas duty. Courtesy of Gene Budde



Opposite page, clockwise, upper left: Bruning AAF parking apron with P-47 fighters and B-24 bombers. A B-24 Liberator is being serviced in front of the field transient hangar, about 1944. On August 3, 1944, tragedy struck the Bruning community when twenty-four Bruning AAF pilots were killed in the crash of their C-47 transport near Naper during a severe electrical storm. Thayer County Historical Society

This aerial view of Grand Island AAF suggests why Nebraska's wide open spaces provided ideal air field locations.  
Courtesy of Gene Budde

Subdepot repair crew modifying life raft doors on a B-29 bomber at Grand Island AAF. Extra equipment was installed in the bombers before reassignment to combat duty in the Pacific.  
Courtesy of Ross Roach



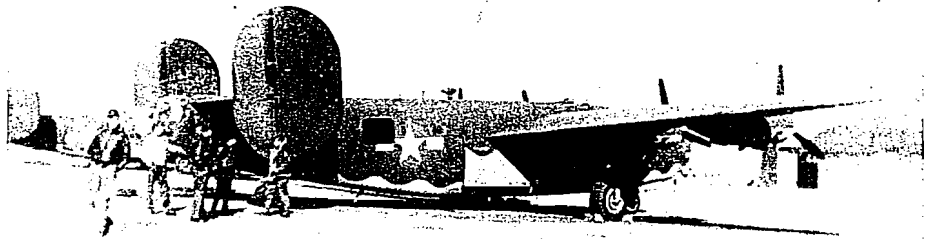
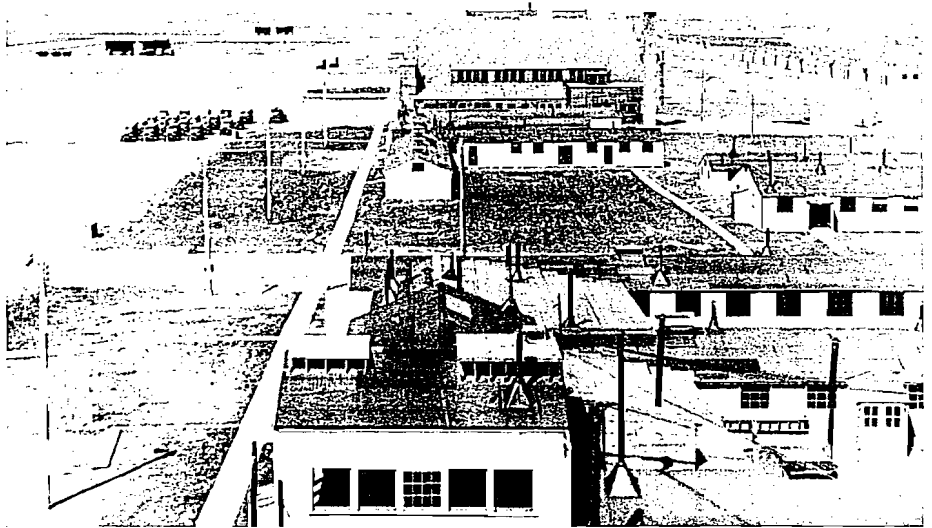


## 725th Bombardment Squadron Fairmont AAF 1943

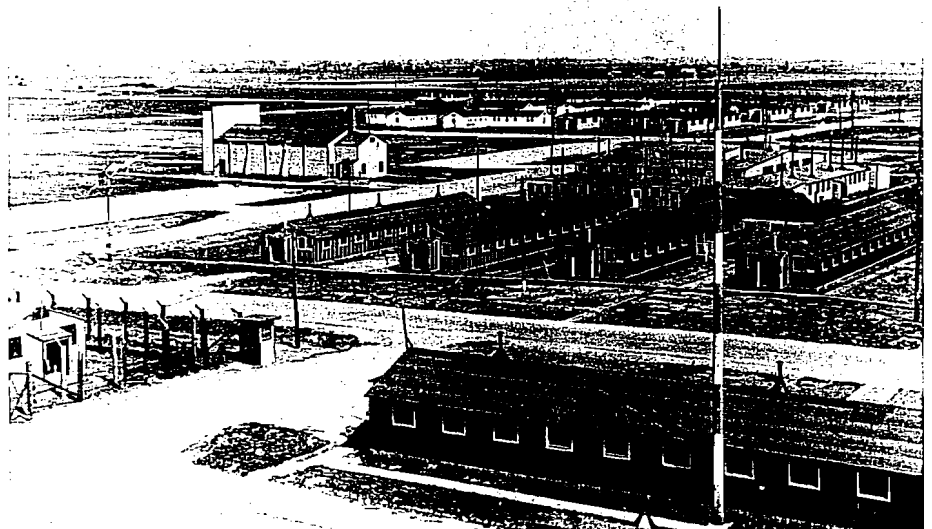
Fairmont AAF was a satellite field of Topeka (Kansas) AAF until 1943, when it was upgraded to independent status. The base trained B-24 and B-29 bomber crews. Fillmore County Historical Society

B-24 Liberator bomber and crew at Fairmont AAF, September 1943. Fillmore County Historical Society

Corps of Engineers mobilization barracks in the Fairmont AAF cantonment area. The wood frame buildings, designed to last five years, had tar paper and board and batten siding. Fillmore County Historical Society

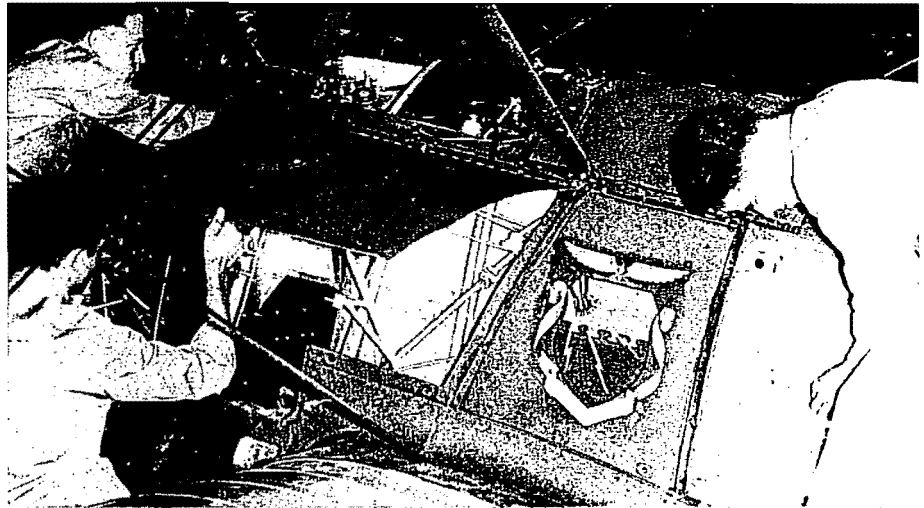


## 831st Bombardment Squadron Fairmont AAF 1943-1944





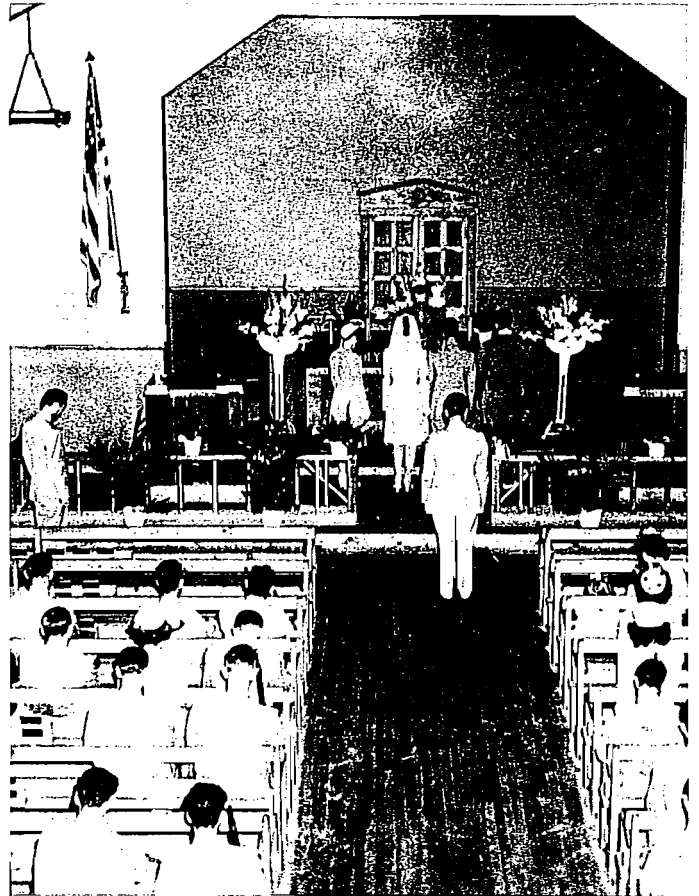
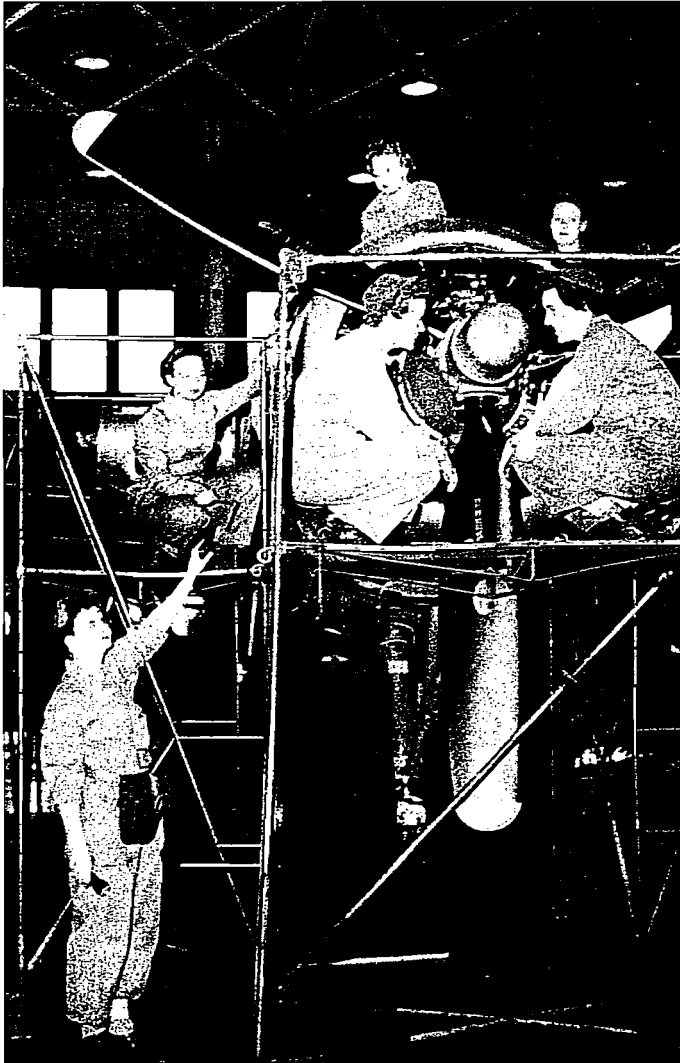
**29th Fighter Squadron  
Lincoln AAF  
1944**



Lincoln AAF technical mechanics begin an aircraft preflight inspection. More than 25,000 aircraft mechanics were trained at the base during World War II, and 40,000 aviators were processed for overseas duty. NSHS Collections

The Lincoln AAF Regimental Chapel was built in twenty-one days using Corps of Engineers mobilization plans. The chapel is listed in the National Register of Historic Places for its association with World War II and mobilization architecture. Robert Hurst, NeSHPO 9104/24-28, 1991





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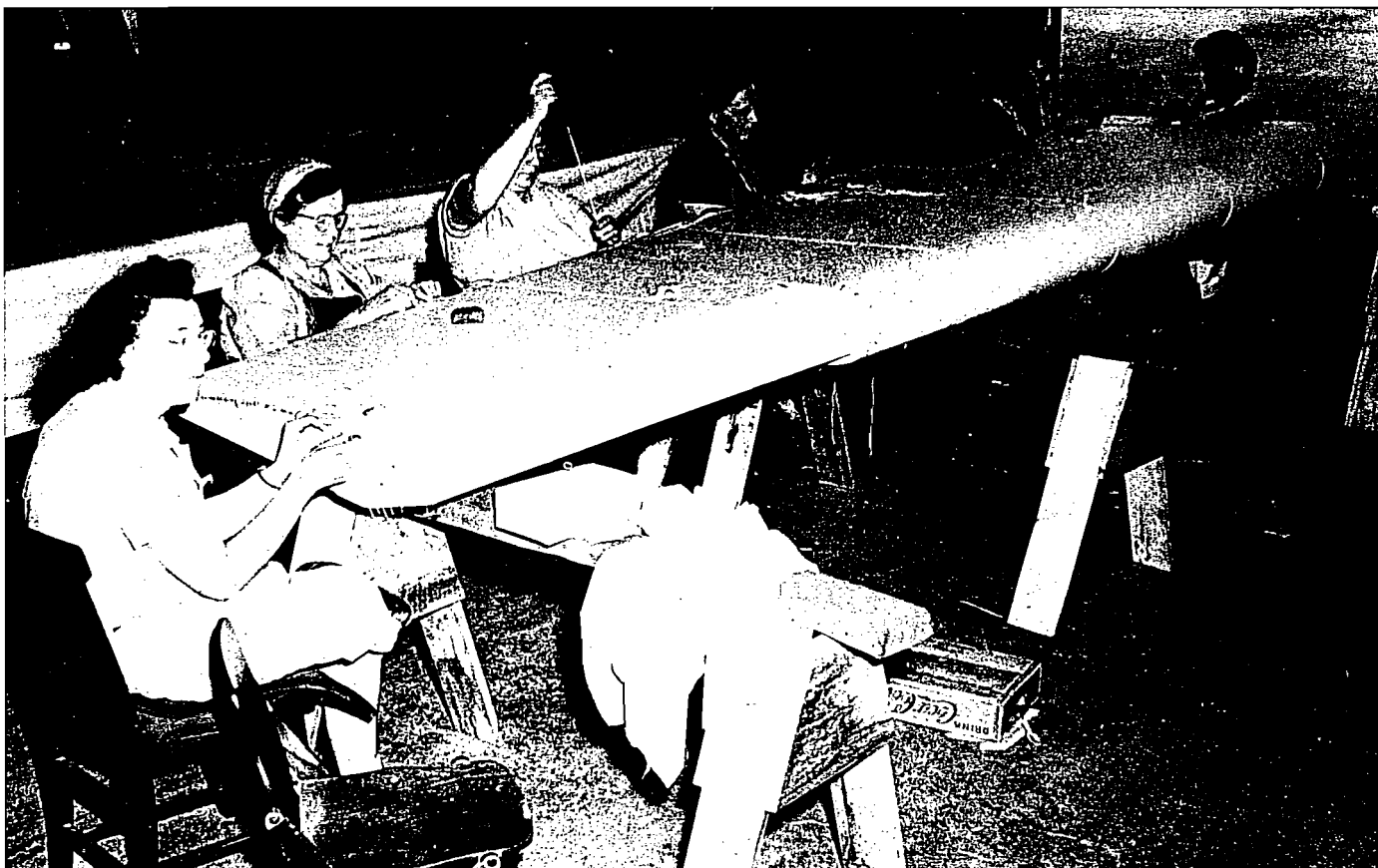
Right: Womens' Army Corps (WAC) personnel stand formation at Kearney AAF. The base had accommodations for 132 WACs. Buffalo County Historical Society

Below: Women are repairing fabric aircraft control surfaces at Kearney AAF about 1945. The field had a civilian work force of about 800. Buffalo County Historical Society

Opposite page, clockwise, upper right: Airmen arriving in Kearney by a Union Pacific troop train, 1945. Buffalo County Historical Society

Wedding ceremony at Kearney AAF Regimental Chapel, about 1944. Buffalo County Historical Society

Women mechanics performing maintenance work on a B-17 bomber at Kearney AAF. The base was a major engine repair facility for B-17 and B-29 bombers. Buffalo County Historical Society



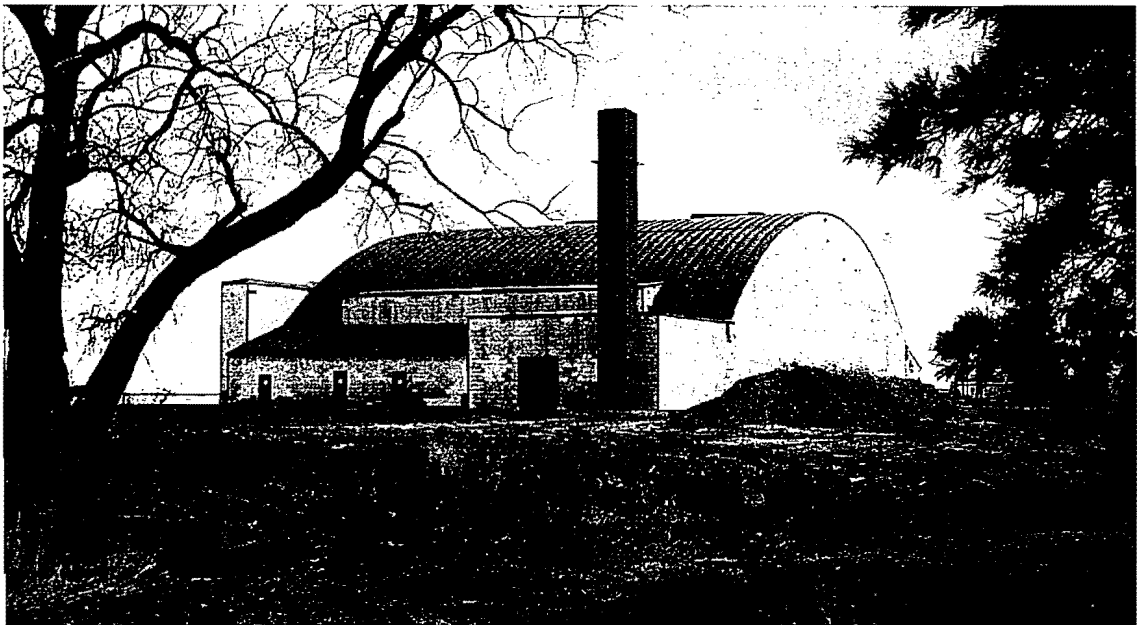
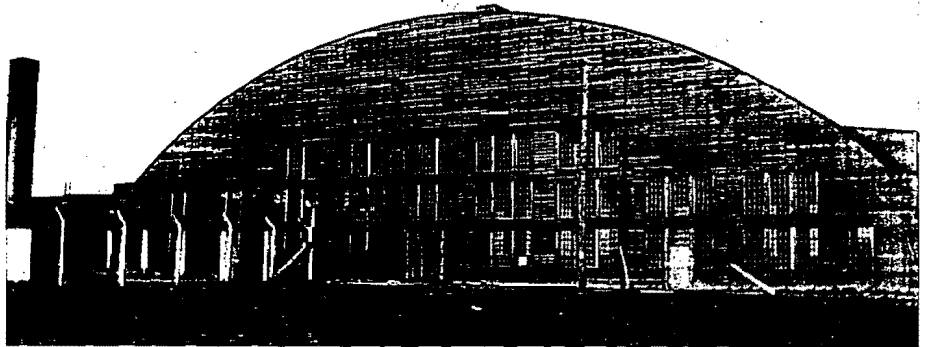


**513rd Bombardment  
Squadron  
Harvard AAF 1945  
Grand Island AAF 1945**

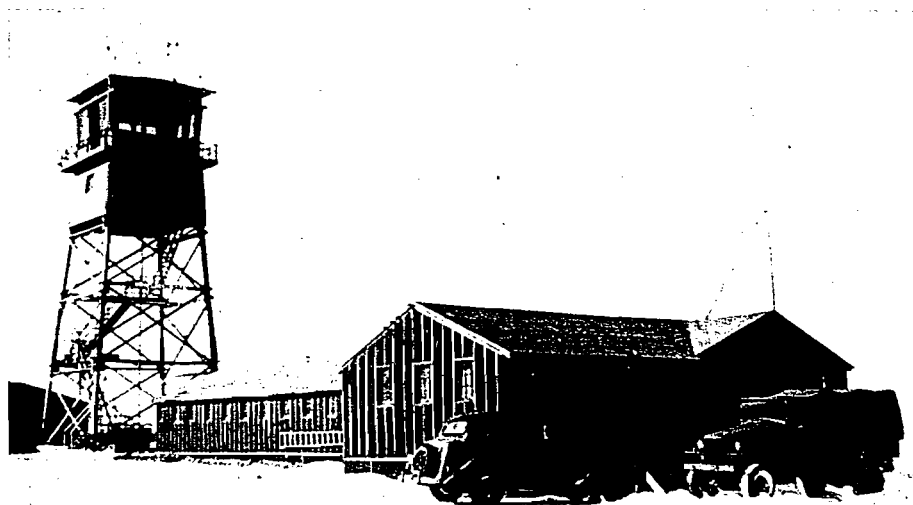
Harvard AAF squadron hangar was used to repair B-17, B-24, and B-29 engines and airframes. NSHS-A989-5

At Harvard AAF a tent city alleviated a barracks shortage. The base was activated in December 1942 as a satellite of Kearney AAF, but within two months became a major training center and the Eighth Heavy Bombardment Processing Headquarters. NSHS-A989-20

A fire in 1983 destroyed three of four hangars at the former Harvard AAF. The remaining hangar is used for grain storage. Robert Hurst, NeSHPO 9103/36-7, 1991

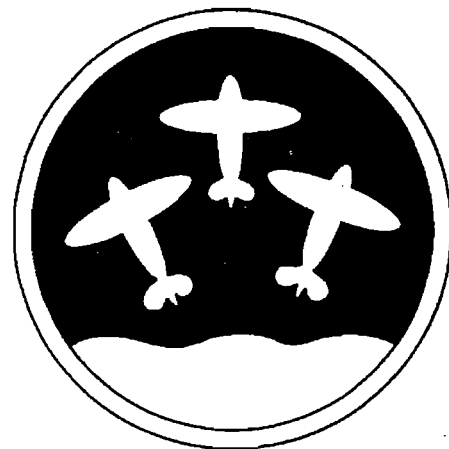
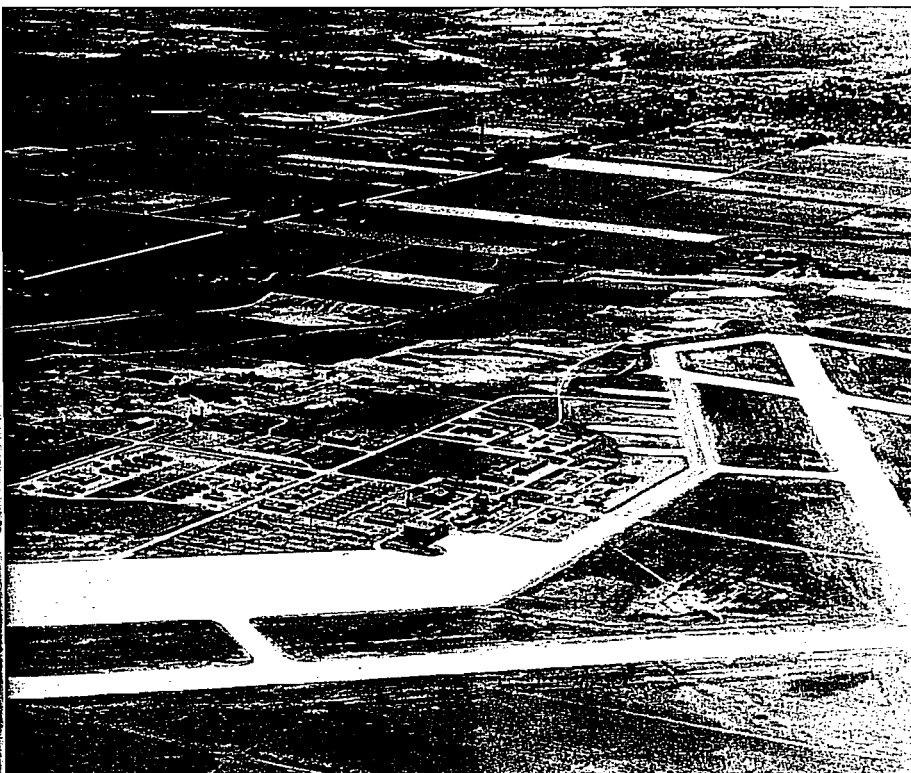


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Right: Scottsbluff AAF aircraft control tower and base operations building. The base was constructed on 1,755 acres in ninety days and displaced twenty-eight farm families. North Platte Valley Historical Association

Below: In the early part of World War II Scottsbluff AAF was a satellite field of Casper (Wyoming) AAF, training B-17 and B-24 bomber crews. In 1944 it became a satellite of Alliance AAF, training C-47 and glider crews. The field also had camouflage and radio maintenance schools. North Platte Valley Historical Association



**402nd Bombardment  
Squadron  
Grand Island AAF  
1944-1945**