

# AVIATION IN HAWAII



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## CHAPTER THREE

### The United States Army Air Corps

THE World War brought Hawaii its largest organized flying unit, the United States Army Air Corps,, and from its inception it has remained a large and important factor in the development of flying in Hawaii.

Even prior to the war the island of Oahu, in the Hawaiian group, was rapidly advancing as a military center and was recognized as a key point to the defense of the western coast of America. Army coast defense had already been developed to such proportions as to earn the island the title of "The Gibraltar of the Pacific." Mid-island was the largest U. S. Army post and Schofield Barracks, with infantry and field artillery, would serve as a secondary defense. The importance of Pearl Harbor as a supply and fueling base necessitated this heavy armament.

On May 13, 1917, the first Army Aircraft unit arrived in the Hawaiian Department, becoming known as the Sixth Aero Squadron of the Aviation Section, Signal Corps. It was stationed at Fort Kamehameha and consisted of three N-9 seaplanes. Captain John B. Brooks was its first commander. There is no record in the army files of any flying being done at that particular time.

Later in the same year Ford Island was purchased by the government for use as an airport. This island, in the middle of Pearl Harbor, though covered with brush, was level and had a low shore line that made it accessible to seaplanes. The work of clearing a landing field and constructing suitable buildings was begun at once.

By November 1918 work on Ford Island had progressed to the point where the field was considered usable and the Sixth



Aero Squadron was transferred from Fort Kamehameha to what was then known as Ford Island Air Station. The total equipment at that time consisted of two double seaplane hangars with concrete runways, a small motor repair shop and one warehouse. A narrow strip of land had been cleared for land planes.

In September the first flight was made from the new field in one of the N-9 planes brought over from the Fort. A second flight was made in an H-S 2-L plane which had arrived more recently. The first mishap came at that time when a DH 4, which had just been assembled, crashed, killing one man.

In the spring of 1919 the government decided to make a permanent project of the Ford Island Air Station. Too, the field was given a name that has been an inspiration to every army airman.

Lieutenant Frank Luke, Jr., in honor of whose memory the field was named, had, in less than three weeks at the front, a career that was never equaled by any flier of the allied armies. Before his career ended at Murvaus, France, he had brought down eighteen of the enemy. This, in seventeen days. On September 29, 1918, he engaged eight enemy planes in combat, single-handed, and evading them, braved the anti-aircraft batteries, destroying three enemy observation balloons. Forced to land behind the lines of the enemy, he came down fighting and raked the streets of Murvaus with machine gun fire. Even when on the ground he did not surrender and the French inhabitants of the town later told of how he shot six Germans with his pistol before he, himself, fell dead. His citations are too numerous to mention here and Hawaii is singularly fortunate in having a field named in the memory of such a man.

The next year at Luke Field was devoted more to construction than flying. However, several patrol flights were made and the routine practice flying was done. During this time more planes were being shipped in and by 1919 there were nearly 150 ships at the field.

It was during this year, too, that the first inter-island flights were made. With a Curtiss R-6 seaplane, Major Harold M.

N-9  
H-S 2-L  
DH 4

Clarke and a mechanic flew to the island of Hawaii, but were forced to land on the slopes of Mauna Kea, an army report states that "they did, however, gain considerable knowledge of the island after landing as they wandered about the island for one whole week finding their way to civilization."

About one week later Lieutenants R. H. Wooten, J. T. Lanfall and L. Maitland (who was later to make the first Coast-Hawaii flight) flew three H S 2-L's to Molokai and Hawaii. This was the first round trip made between the islands.

When Major Sheldon Wheeler assumed command of Luke Field in early 1920 it was already taking on the appearance of an established airdrome. In January the Fourth Aero Squadron arrived with twenty officers and one hundred and nine enlisted men, making two squadrons in the Second Observation Group which had by that time been established. Construction continued and more planes arrived, including a shipment of training planes. During this year, too, the Third and Twenty-first Balloon Companies arrived. These companies were assigned to Coast Artillery Forts but they were to be transferred to Luke Field and become the Fourth Observation and Sixth Pursuit Squadrons in 1922.

Planes now assumed their place in the military maneuvers of the Hawaiian Department. Artillery adjustments were made from the air and troop movements directed; machine gun and bombing practice took place and a photo section arrived. The first night flight to take place over the island was made by Captain Oldys in July, 1920.

During the same year ten planes complete with crews and equipment flew to the island of Molokai and established a base there. Haleakela, the famous volcano, was photographed from the air by an army plane. Planes appeared at the Maui County Fair and put on an exhibition; planes flew out to sea to greet notables arriving on incoming ships and when a schooner was lost army planes went out as far as a hundred miles in search of it.

Aviation history was being made but the army took it in its stride without fan-fare and without show. While tactical flying is usually of little interest to the layman, the flying the army

R-6



was doing between the islands of the Hawaiian group was of great interest and importance to the commercial community. They were being shown that the solution to a geographical problem lay in the air—that inter-island flying was possible on a commercial scale. Also, there was a sense of security to be gained in seeing a well-trained air armada in flight over Honolulu.

On July 13, 1921, Major Wheeler, the Commanding Officer of Luke Field, was killed in a crash and in 1922 an airdrome was established at Schofield Barracks and named Wheeler Field in his honor. New squadrons and more planes were coming in and from a tactical point of view the new field was essential. From the nucleus of the early Luke and Wheeler fields grew an air force that is recognized as one of the most efficient under the American flag.

Since the making of history is a routine thing for the army, accomplishments that would be considered major elsewhere are ignored by them. From 1922 until the present time it is doubtful if any area comparable in size has witnessed as many events of historical importance. Certainly in no spot so remote as Hawaii has the airplane become so much the life of man. For chores of mercy and emergency the army stands ready. It has brought the dangerously ill from the outside islands to the hospitals of Honolulu by air. From the air it has sought lost ships on the sea and lost men in the mountains.

Aviation has become such a fixture in the lives of our modern children that many can name the various types of planes as they fly over—children less than a century from the primitive.

When the time came for the first flight to be made from the Pacific coast to Hawaii, it was almost to be expected that it would be done by the army or navy. Indeed it turned out to be almost a collaboration of the two services. Commander Rodgers, flying for the navy, had on his almost successful flight, blazed the trail.

It was only seven years after he had made the first complete inter-island flight when Lieutenant Maitland accompanied by Lieutenant Hegenberger brought the army's giant

Fokker into Wheeler Field from the coast. It is also to be noted that the next two fliers to negotiate the Pacific were army trained men and members of its Reserve Corps, Lieutenants Emory Bronte and Ernie Smith.

When other Coast-Hawaii hops were made, the fliers landed at army fields and their planes were cared for by army mechanics.

The world's glider record was brought to Hawaii by Lieutenant William A. Cooke of Wheeler Field. He remained aloft, over Oahu, for 21 hours, 34 minutes and 15 seconds in a motorless ship. During that time he had traveled over 600 miles.

Under Department Commander Major General Hugh A. Drum, the Army Air Service has received a new impetus. He, perhaps better than any other, has summarized the tactical value of air defense for the Hawaiian islands and the Pacific coast. Hawaii, he describes as being the outside point on a triangle that is formed by the Panama canal and Alaska. With the great cruising radius of fast bombers it is obvious that no city on the Pacific coast would be outside of striking distance and that Hawaii holds the key to destruction or defense of western United States.

It seems as though Hawaii, from the beginning, was destined to not only be the "Crossroads of the Pacific," but the "Crossroads of the Air" as well. That the army recognizes this is proven by the laying out of a new airdrome, larger than any in the Department.

Undertaking the largest peacetime construction job in its long history, the Army Quartermaster Corps, has before it the task of turning 2200 acres of cane field and algaroba thicket into a modern airdrome. The following figures are indicative of the size of the project: there will be 200,000 yards of concrete poured; 20 miles of road constructed; 90 miles of cable laid; all that goes into the making of a modern city and much more. At this field will be repair shops capable of handling the repair work of the entire department. The name of the new airdrome is Hickam Field and it will cost in the neighborhood of \$15,000,000. Its location is at the mouth of Pearl Harbor.



When it is completely garrisoned, Hickam Field will be the base of operation for a Wing and an Air Depot. A Wing consists of two groups having one Headquarters Squadron, four Bombardment Squadrons and a Service Squadron each. The plane component of a group consists of fifty-seven bombardment planes and four cargo ships. The Air Depot does the repair work.

Little has been said about the training of army pilots so perhaps the activities of one group would show just what the army does in Hawaii. Climatically Hawaii is the finest school of the air in the world. Partly due to these conditions every pilot of the Eighteenth Pursuit Group had, in the first half of 1935, completed 150 hours of pilot time, more than is required for an entire year. The total for the group was 8,098 hours. Inter-island flights are made once a month by the entire unit and pilots are enabled to study conditions at each airport and emergency field in the islands. Once a month, too, these pilots are required to make an altitude flight, going from a seventy above temperature, at the field, to a zero temperature at 25,000 feet, where oxygen is required.

During the year the pilots fire gunnery and bombing courses and, as a whole, have made better records than those made at other army fields on the mainland. Besides all of this, they work on tactical problems with the troops on the ground and practice at repelling landing parties. It is doubtful if in a lifetime most civilian fliers acquire so much experience, under such a wide range of conditions, as these army pilots do in an ordinary month of their routine work.

The group mentioned is but one of many with duties so various as to defy description.

Bombers of the Army Air Corp in Hawaii have been able to turn their instruments of destruction into instruments of salvation in one of the most unique bombardments ever known to man. In early 1936 Mokuaweoweo, an active volcano on the island of Hawaii, overflowed and the molten stone began to pour down lava tubes toward the city of Hilo at a rate of five miles a day. Destruction of the city seemed inevitable until the army, with large bombers loaded with live bombs and,

with Dr. Jaggar, the government volcanologist, directing operations, began to pit man made explosives against nature. After one day's bombardment man won and the lava flow was diverted from its course of destruction.

Aside from the military protection that the Army Air Service affords Hawaii, there is a debt to the army that will remain for long unpaid. The army pioneered the air efficiently for the commercial companies which followed it, and set an example that has demanded a continual high standard. Barnstormers gave Hawaii its first haphazard flights, but the army taught it that flying need not be haphazard. It established what is now a Hawaiian tradition—a tradition that has won Hawaii its enviable place in the world of aviation.