Celebrating a century of flight:
From Albuquerque Airport to Kirtland AFB

The last in a series of articles

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Charles F. Walsh, perched on the wing of his flimsy Curtiss biplane, could see the Rio Grande a few hundred feet below him as he soared south along the valley.

Circling east, Walsh picked up the railroad tracks and followed them back toward town; he soon reached his starting point–the New Mexico State Fair grounds, near Old Town.

This historic occasion marked the first airplane flight over Albuquerque. Late in the afternoon of Oct. 11, 1911, Walsh had traveled 12 miles in 10 minutes, attaining an altitude of 1,000 feet and a speed of 60 miles an hour. In the following days, Walsh repeated this feat many times, causing business owners and patrons alike to rush into the streets to watch the plane crisscross the city.

In the years following Walsh's appearance, other exhibition fliers, barnstormers and occasional military visits brought aircraft to Albuquerque. Charles A. Lindbergh's transoceanic flight in 1927 immediately captured the imagination of Frank G. Speakman and William L. Franklin, who worked for Santa Fe Railway. The partners decided to go into the airport business and leased 140 acres of land on the East Mesa, now Albuquerque's Northeast Heights.

With the help of Mayor Clyde Tingley, they borrowed city road equipment at night to prepare the runways and airport facilities. In appreciation of the city's help, they named it Albuquerque Airport. Opening for business on May 1, 1928, customers quickly arrived.

James G. Oxnard, a New York air transportation promoter, visited the airport the same year and also realized its potential. He bought out Franklin's interest in the airport, furnished money needed to expand it an additional 480 acres, and renamed it Oxnard Field. The first hangars, now the modified Buildings 20348 and 20344, the 377th Logistics Readiness Squadron's Paint and Body shop, soon went up.

In November 1928, Arthur C. Goebel, a nationally known pilot from Belen, sold a Western Air Express official on the benefits of Albuquerque. Our weather, wide-open space, and location proved to help us become a prime stopover point for transcontinental flights.

Additionally, the U.S. Post Office approved a new central airmail route passing through Albuquerque, making it profitable for airlines to operate here.

In early 1929, Transcontinental Air Transport announced Albuquerque would become a regularly scheduled stop on its new combination rail-air passenger and cargo service route.

A rivalry soon developed between the competing airlines. Transcontinental built a combination office and Harvey House lunchroom in what is now part of the Sandia Area Federal Credit Union, Building 20600. Western soon built its own airport on the West Mesa. Just as the airline industry began to blossom, the Great Depression struck.

Congress empowered the postmaster general to redesign the nation's air transportation system to make the industry more rational. The postmaster's plan included an award for a single airmail contract from Los Angeles to New York.

With neither Western nor Transcontinental able to serve the entire postal route, the two companies merged in 1930 to form Transcontinental and Western Air or the famous and now defunct TWA. Winning the contract, TWA moved its operations to the West Mesa airport.

Now that Albuquerque had secured a prominent spot on the nation's airways, the city, along with TWA and local businessmen, decided a third, city-owned municipal airport was necessary for continued growth.

Charles Walsh at the controls of the Curtiss biplane, the "Golden Flyer."

Albuquerque Airport in 1929 (with aircraft lined in a row).

Albuquerque Army Air Base's first commander, Col Frank Hackett with Joe DiMaggio and Mayor Clyde Tingley. DiMaggio's career as a New York Yankee was interrupted in 1943-45 when he was drafted to serve in the Army. Although he was wearing an Albuquerque Dons uniform, he never played for the team.

Albuquerque Army Air Base after it was finished in 1941.

The original hangars constructed at Oxnard Field in the late 1920s. Now Buildings 20344 and 20348, they are two of the oldest still standing today and are presently occupied by the 377th Logistics Readiness Squadron's Paint and Body Shops.

With Works Progress Administration and city funds, construction on the new municipal airport was completed by mid-1939. Located four miles west of Oxnard Field and originally named "Eagles Nest," the name was later changed to its present "Sunport." TWA and Continental Airlines quickly moved their operations to the new field, while Oxnard Field's business declined sharply.

The military's role in Albuquerque aviation emerged when local business and civic leaders reasoned that military aviation could only further benefit the city.

Though it was unlikely anyone at the time could envision what was to come, the city's leaders actively lobbied the Army about establishing a military base near the municipal airport beginning about 1939. The friendship of TWA's regional manager with Maj. Gen. Henry "Hap" Arnold, chief of the Army Air Corps, and efforts that included forming an Air Corps cadet program at the University of New Mexico, proved influential, as did the outbreak of war in Europe.

On Jan. 7, 1941, construction began on Albuquerque Army Air Base adjacent to the Municipal Airport. The air base received its first military aircraft on April 1, 1941, when a lone B-18 bomber piloted by Lt. Sid Young, landed on the north-south runway. The $1.5 million project was officially dedicated on Aug. 8, 1941.

The 19th Bombardment Group, and its attached squadrons and support units, became the first permanent residents of the base. The existing 5,000-foot north-south runaway was lengthened to 10,000 feet to accommodate the group's Boeing B-17 "Flying Fortress" aircraft.

In November 1941, the group began a gradual transfer from Albuquerque Army Air Base to Clark Field in the Philippines. Most of the group's assets and personnel were at the field on Dec. 7, 1941, when the Japanese struck, plunging the nation into war.

Reveille at Albuquerque Army Air Base headquarters, 1941.

With the departure of the bombers, the Army moved its bombardier school from Barksdale Field, La., to Albuquerque. Training personnel began to arrive the week after the raid at Pearl Harbor. To serve the school, bomb ranges covering 2,450 square miles were laid out to the west and southwest of the city.

On Feb. 25, 1942 the base officially became Kirtland Field, named after recently deceased pioneer military aviator Col. Roy C. Kirtland. Arnold, Kirtland's old friend, recommended the name change.

The Army Air Forces soon realized an urgent need for trained pilots, mechanics and air depot service personnel, and relished the thought of having runways dedicated exclusively to military aircraft. In May 1942, the Army acquired Oxnard Field for military use.

The short-lived Albuquerque Air Depot Training Station, unofficially called Sandia Base, was established that same year to train aircraft maintenance personnel. Between 1942 and 1945, the Army trained pilots and crews for gliders, B-17s, B-24s and B-29s at Kirtland Field.

With the war winding down, Kirtland Field became a boneyard for returning warbirds. By 1945, the base was on the verge of extinction.

However, a letter written in 1939 from Albert Einstein to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, explaining the probability that uranium could be used to produce an awesome new weapon, helped assure this new station would become more than just another military site.

Z Division, the old Los Alamos Laboratory Ordnance Division named for its chief, Jerrod Zacharias, was formed at Sandia Base in late 1945. Occupying and building over the old Oxnard Field, it was tasked almost exclusively with atomic weapons development and bomb assembly. In 1948, Z division evolved into Sandia National Laboratory.

In 1949, the Air Force Special Weapons Command, which in 1952 became the Special Weapons Center, was activated at Kirtland. Its mission was to mate the weapons designed at Los Alamos and Sandia with Air Force aircraft and provide nuclear surety and safety through research, testing and evaluation.

The level of military activity and the need for adequate airfield resources and security increased. The city of Albuquerque deeded leased runways and airfield land to the Air Force for one dollar, with the stipulation that commercial airlines would be allowed to use the runway and taxiway facilities.

In addition to Sandia and Kirtland, another new nuclear-related complex began to emerge on the southeast boundary of Sandia Base.

Site Able, referred to as Manzano Base, became functional in 1952 as a secure weapons storage facility. Munitions were stored in underground sites bored into the four hills of the Manzano Mountains.

In January 1963, the Air Force legally transferred the runways and taxiways back to the city of Albuquerque, while providing safety support and thus ensuring joint use. Then on July 1, 1971, Kirtland AFB, Sandia Base and Manzano Complex merged to form one Kirtland AFB–and one TEAM KIRTLAND community.

Many base associates then and now reflect the roles of nuclear support, science and technology, research and development, training and air defense. The Special Weapons Center evolved to become today's more space-oriented Air Force Research Laboratory. Others include the Air National Guard's 150th Fighter Wing, Air Force Operational Test and Evaluation Center (1974), Air Force Inspection Agency and Air Force Safety Center (both in 1993) and the 58th Special Operations Wing (1994).

Normally, a unit on base serves as the "host" and provides support services to the entire base and its associate units. The Special Weapons Center handled that function until its inactivation in 1976. The Air Force Contract Management Division assumed the role of host until 1977 when the 1606th Air Base Wing was formed.

The 377th Air Base Wing, first activated on April 8, 1966, at Tan Son Nhut Air Base, Vietnam, replaced the 1606th in 1993 and has been responsible for all base support functions ever since.

A small private airport carved out of a patch of New Mexico desert was transformed into a 52,000-acre major installation of the U.S. Air Force–who could have possibly imagined it in 1928.

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