

The Military at General Mitchell Field – Chapter One: World War II

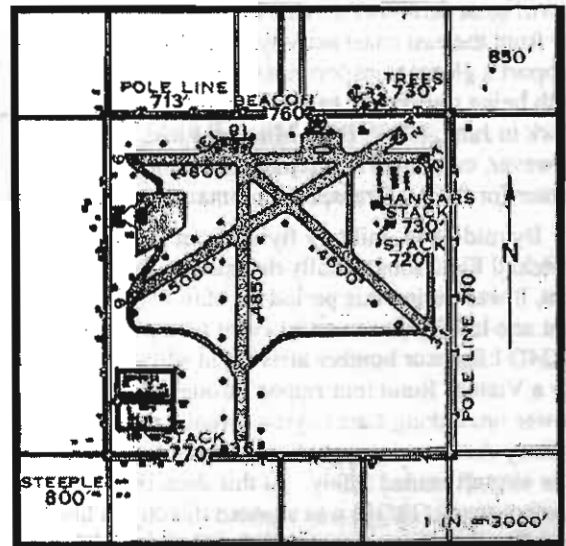
by Bill Streicher

World War II and the immediate period leading up to the U.S. involvement in it, was a significant chapter in the development of General Mitchell Field. The airport was officially given this name by the Milwaukee County Board in March 1941 and became a focal point of military activity in the community. It also resulted in the postwar development of aviation that made the airport an essential part of the local economy. Many of us are familiar with the more recent military presence at Mitchell, including the 128th Air Refueling Wing, Wisconsin Air National Guard, and, until 2007, the 440th Airlift Wing, Air Force Reserve. Another earlier and, perhaps, less well known military chapter began a little over 70 years ago.

Before 1940, there were no military aviation units assigned to Wisconsin. In July 1940, the War Department authorized an observation squadron for the Wisconsin National Guard. This unit, the 126th Observation Squadron, was granted Federal recognition at the Richards Street Armory, Milwaukee, in November. A hangar was obtained at Milwaukee County Airport and three unarmed O-47 and one BC-1A aircraft were received.

In August 1940, plans were begun for the design and construction of a new headquarters and hangar for the 126th at the Milwaukee County Airport. John Messmer, County Construction Superintendent, looked into modeling the proposed new \$400,000 facility after the hangar used by the Illinois National Guard at Chicago Municipal Airport in Cicero. Plans and specifications were drawn up by Col. Henry C. Hengels, Military Architect and Engineer for Wisconsin. The result was a large cream colored brick hanger built along South Howell Avenue, which has since been demolished. The 126th Observation Squadron used the facility for only a short time before it was called to active duty in June 1941 and relocated to Fort Dix, New Jersey.

In May 1942, the U.S. Army assigned the 10th Troop Carrier Group to General Mitchell Field. This Group, with its 1st and 5th Troop Carrier Squadrons based at Milwaukee, conducted operational and transition training for pilots. Various Douglas DC-3 type aircraft were used, including the C-48 (impressed from the civilian airlines for the war) and the C-53 Skytrooper. In September, Milwaukee County leased the airport to the Army Air Force (AAF)



December 1945 diagram of the Milwaukee airfield layout - The road running north/south along the eastern side of the airfield is South Brust Avenue.

for the duration of the war at a cost of \$1 per year. When the AAF moved in, it referred to the airport in its official documents as "Cudahy Field" because of its proximity to the city of Cudahy. The AAF's justification was based on a wish to avoid confusion with Mitchel Field located on Long Island, New York (for more details, see Flightlines, Summer 2010, pg. 2). However, this action resulted in considerable local controversy, which was ultimately resolved when the AAF agreed to rename the base "Billy Mitchell Field."

The AAF soon began a \$2 million building program to improve facilities and to construct a cantonment area that included barracks, administration buildings, a movie theater, and a 75 bed hospital. This area was located on the airfield near the intersection of South Howell and East Grange Avenues, roughly where today the airport freeway spur crosses Howell toward airport parking. Administration of Billy Mitchell Field military

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1945 Army Air Force photo of Billy Mitchell Field, looking north - The AAF cantonment area can be seen in the lower left corner of the airfield. The road along the southern edge of the airfield is East Grange Avenue.

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operations came under the 364th Army Air Force Base Unit of the Air Transport Command.

In September 1942, the 10th Troop Carrier Group was transferred from Billy Mitchell Field to Pope Field, North Carolina. Subsequently, on March 1, 1943, the 10th Ferrying Squadron of the Air Transport Command was relocated to Billy Mitchell Field from Bolling Field in Washington, D.C. The 10th Ferrying Squadron was a focal point for flying missions to all parts of the world. It was soon determined that Milwaukee was too far from the east coast activity to effectively support a global transport mission, resulting in the 10th being transferred to La Guardia Field, New York in June, 1943. Billy Mitchell Field, however, continued as a replacement and training center for the Air Transport Command.

By mid-1944, military flying from Billy Mitchell Field substantially decreased. Despite that, it was during this period on May 11, 1944 that one locally newsworthy event took place. A B-24D Liberator bomber arriving in Milwaukee for a Victory Bond tour ripped through electric power lines along East Layton Avenue near South Quincy Avenue, cutting off power to a wide area. The aircraft landed safely. At this date, the north/south runway (18/36) was situated directly in line with South Quincy Avenue. What remains of that runway today is General Mitchell International Airport's taxiway "D." This B-24 was a veteran of 53 missions with the 8th Air Force's 93rd Bomb Group, stationed at Hardwick, Norfolk, England.



View from atop the newly constructed National Guard hangar showing some of the Douglas C-53 transports used for training troop carrier pilots at Billy Mitchell Field, 1942.

Named "Bomerang" (pronounced "bomber" "ang"), it had participated in the first B-24 mission over the continent and the famous August 1, 1943 attack on the Ploesti, Romania oil fields.

The August 28, 1944 issue of the Milwaukee Journal reported in a headline "Billy Mitchell Field Inactive." Army Air Force flying at the airfield had virtually ceased and, as a result, jurisdiction for the airfield was transferred from the Air Transport Command to the Air Service Command, which was the caretaker for Army airfields. Soon the existing barracks buildings were used to house German prisoners of war. The National Guard hangar built in 1941 was put to use as a temporary manufacturing location for the Signal Battery Company. The war was nearing its conclusion.

After the war, lease of the airport to the federal government was terminated and Milwaukee County regained unrestricted use of the field. Once this occurred, the airport's official name, "General Mitchell Field," was reinstated. Within a couple of years, the 126th Fighter Squadron of the newly formed Wisconsin Air National Guard was established in Milwaukee. The former National Guard hangar was again put to military use and a new chapter was opened at General Mitchell Field.

(Anyone willing to share information or photos about military operations at Billy Mitchell Field during the World War 2 period, please contact Bill Streicher at the Mitchell Gallery of Flight, 414-747-4503, or at wpstreicher@bellx-2.com)



*Wisconsin National Guard 126th Observation Squadron review of troops 1941
Milwaukee Aircraft parked behind the troops are two O-47s and one BC-1A.*