

FLIGHT-WATCH

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THE LEGACY OF WALKER AIR FORCE BASE

I.

Roswell International Air Center Today

Today, Roswell International Air Center is a sleepy airport in southeastern New Mexico upon which are parked numerous jetliners that have been mothballed or are being broken up for salvage. Located three miles south of the central business district of the City of Roswell in Chavez County, New Mexico, the airport has a unique place in American history.

II.

The Genesis of Roswell Army Airfield

Initially known as Roswell Army Airfield, the property upon which the base was developed was acquired in 1941 from rancher David Chesser. Owing to its excellent flying weather, the purpose of the facility was to provide military flight training and also to serve as a bombardier school. The facility had no less than 4,600 acres along with seven concrete runways. Roswell Army Airfield was complemented by no less than nine auxiliary landing fields to accommodate overflow and tough and go traffic, and the airfield was assigned to the United States Army Air Corps Training Command on September 20, 1941.

Roswell Army Flying School was home to Beechcraft AT-11 twin engine trainers and Cessna AT-17 twin engine trainers, together with Vultee BT-13 and BT-15 training aircraft.

In time, the Second Air Force provided all B-29 Superfortress transition training for the Army Air Forces. On September 12, 1944, Army Air Force Headquarters established B-29 schools for the transition training of crews consisting of pilots, co-pilots and flight engineers. By January 1945, Roswell Army Airfield was home of the 3030th Army Air Force Base Unit (pilot school, specialized Very Heavy) which specialized in training B-29 Superfortress crews.

III.

The 509th Composite Group

The 509th Composite Group was activated on December 17, 1944 at Wendover Army Airfield in Utah. It was tasked with operational deployment of nuclear weapons dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan in August 1945. The Group contained squadrons of B-29s, C-47s and C-54s. It operated *Silverplate* B-29s specially configured to carry nuclear weapons.

The 509th Composite Group led by then Colonel Paul Tibbets returned from its wartime base at Tinian and relocated to Roswell Army Airfield on November 6, 1945. The 509th Composite Group was initially assigned to the Second Air Force under the Continental Air Forces. In the midst of demobilization in late 1945, the 509th Composite Group was reassigned to the 58th Bombardment Wing at Fort Worth Army Airfield on January 17, 1946. Then on March 1, 1946, the 509th Bombardment Group was assigned to the Strategic Air Command (SAC), being one of the first of eleven organizations assigned to SAC. At the time of the formation of SAC, the 509th Composite Group was the only unit that had experience in deploying nuclear weapons. Many historians consider the 509th Composite Group as the foundation for the Strategic Air Command. A sign outside Roswell Army Airfield in 1946/47 shows a mushroom cloud for the 509th Bombardment Group (Very Heavy). With the creation of the United States Air Force as a separate service on November 17, 1947, the group became the 509th Bombardment Wing. Beginning in June of 1948, the 509th Air Refueling Squadron was activated as part of the 509th Bombardment Wing along with the 43rd Air Refueling Squadron at Davis-Mountain Air Force Base in Arizona. With the addition of KB-29M Tankers, the 509th Bombardment Group's aircraft could reach virtually any point on Earth.

In June 1950, the 509th Bombardment Group began receiving the upgraded version of the B-29 known as the Boeing B-50A Superfortress. When the Corvair B-36 joined the Air Force inventory, the designation "Very Heavy" was dropped from the description of the 509th Bombardment Group which was then redesignated as "Medium."

By January 1954, the Boeing KC-97 Aerial Tanker had replaced the KB-29M aircraft, and the Wing entered the jet age in 1955 receiving the first jet bomber, the Boeing B-47 Stratojet.

By June 1958, the 509th Wing had been transferred to Pease Air Force Base in New Hampshire. Today the 509th is located at Whiteman Air Force Base in Missouri where it operates the B-2 Spirit Stealth Bomber.

IV.

A Victim to Base Closing During the Vietnam War

In March 1963, the Base was ordered shut down and operations ceased August 1, 1963. Little remains today to remind visitors of the history enjoyed by this former military base. From 1941 to 1942, it was known as Roswell Army Flying School. From 1942 to 1947, it was known as Roswell Army Airfield. From 1947 to 1948, it was known as Roswell Air Force Base. From 1948 until closure in 1963, it was known as Walker Air Force Base. The last name of the facility was in honor of General Newton Walker, a native of Los Cerrillos, New Mexico, who was killed during a bombing mission over Rabaul, New Britain, Papua, New Guinea on January 5, 1943. After his group scored direct hits on nine Japanese ships, General Walker's aircraft was last seen leaving the target with one engine on fire and several Japanese fighters on its tail. For his gallantry, General Walker was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor posthumously by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1943.

As one walks about the campus of this former military field, the old control tower is still standing as are a number of aircraft hangars, office buildings and maintenance shops. Although the City of Roswell has placed a new fire station on the field, the general appearance of the facility is that of a run-down former military air base, the significance of which is now lost on most Americans. The airfield is littered with what appears to be hundreds of aging jetliners, some in storage and some being broken up for salvage. In short, the old Roswell Army Airfield is now an airplane bone yard.



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