



MOFFETT FIELD

The Army Days Remembered

by Peter M. Bowers

The Spring 1984 issue of the Journal contained a very good article about Moffett Field written by Chuck Hansen. However, the presentation was 100 percent Navy; the Army's seven-year tenure was acknowledged by a single eight-line paragraph. Army airplane activity was mentioned, but not lighter-than-air. In response to a comment on this fact, the editors gave the author, an AAHS charter member, this opportunity to present some of the Army story out of his own experience with Moffett Field in this first-person account.

As a resident of Los Altos, California, I had been familiar with the construction of the Naval airship station at nearby Sunnyvale since the work started early in 1932. After the U.S.S. MACON was stationed there my family, through friends, became acquainted with Commander Herbert Wiley, skipper of MACON, and we visited socially. Because of this inside connection I was able to get farther inside the hangar than the roped-off visitors' area and was even allowed to sit in the cockpit of a Curtiss F9C-2 Sparrowhawk—pretty heady stuff for a high school sophomore. I built a Cleveland three-quarter-inch scale model of one

with proper markings, but Lt. Miller, the pilot, politely declined it as a gift. The loss of MACON in February 1935 ended that entree to the base.

The next one started when "a new kid," Richard H. Lober, joined some of my Palo Alto High School classes later in 1935, after the Army took over Moffett. Our mutual interest in model airplanes and aviation in general quickly formed the basis of a lasting friendship and much mutual visiting at each other's homes. It turned out that Dick's dad was Major Clarence B. Lober, the new Army C.O. of the base and also of the newly resident 19th Airship Squadron.

When the Army took over Moffett Field (it seemed that none of the locals I knew called it that at the time—it was still "Sunnyvale" or "The Base"), it also took over the old 1920s blimp, the J-4*. This was soon joined by what was then the most modern airship in the U.S. inventory, the TC-13. There were also some free balloons on hand for training, along with the 9th Air Base Squadron, which seemed at the time to

*I am absolutely positive that the J-4 had ARMY tail stripes on it when the Army had it. Some latter-day historians believe that it retained its original Navy stripes during that time. Does any AAHS member have a J-4 photo taken during its Army use that would settle the question either way?

The author, then 18, and his Corben Super Ace gas model on the main runway at Moffett Field in June 1936.

be without airplanes.

Back in the middle 1930s the Hearst newspapers sponsored a youth organization called "The Junior Birdmen of America" and held large regional model airplane contests. There were separate indoor and outdoor contests, and the indoor events were held inside the big airship dock at Moffett Field. This practice continued under Army occupation.

A little-known oddity of the big silver hangar is worth mentioning here. The building was so big, and contained such an uninterrupted volume of air, that it had its own weather system. After sunset on a warm high-humidity day, it would actually cloud up and rain inside the hangar! Not much, but a clearly observable indoor meteorological phenomenon.

This captive weather system had a surprising effect on one of the Junior Birdmen contests. One of the hand-launch-glider experts was consistently getting mathematically impossible durations. A change of stop watches and timers brought the same results. Obviously there was no cheating, so the scores stood.

The base meteorologist finally figured out what did it. The concrete floor of the hangar was warm, and the orange-peel doors at each end of the hangar were open slightly, allowing a current of cool outside air to flow in. As this current flowed over the warm floor, portions of it were warmed more than others and started to rise, exactly as cold-front air passing over warm ground rises in the form of the "thermals" that delight soaring pilots and free-flight model builders. Moffett's indoor thermals were small and weak, but they did have a thoroughly recorded effect on the hand-launched glider times at that particular contest.

Dick and I often flew our small models in the mostly empty hangar. Sometimes, when we were feeling particularly ambitious, we would climb the stairs to the top catwalk, 185 feet above the floor, and launch gliders from there. One of mine took a minute and 45 seconds to reach the floor—my unofficial world's indoor glider record!

Another crazy thing we did—we'd stand under the J-4 and throw hand-launched gliders forward into a half loop so they'd hit the side of the blimp. The object was to see how far out they would bounce. . . .

As Dick, I and others in the Bay Area got involved in gasoline-powered models early in 1936, suitable flying sites became a problem. Moffett Field was a natural, and we got permission, on an individual basis, to use it. This flying was on the main gravel runway on Sundays, when there was no flying activ-

ity. As author Ernest K. Gann pointed out, you could steal the flagpole on a U.S. Army base on Sunday. The guard that waved us through the front gate in the morning was the only military person we'd see all day until we saw another guard on the way out.

Because of the increasing model activity, Major Lober had the Post engineer build us a 50 x 200-foot runway of our own on the far side of the main runway. This remained in use until 1938, when we had to move to the inside of the north mooring circle. This was straight upwind of the hangar and several gas models, mine included, stayed up a bit too long and drifted far enough downwind to hit the hangar.

In 1937 the Army gave up airship operations and turned all its blimps over to the Navy. The Lobers departed and my model activity slowed somewhat, so I was no longer as frequent a visitor to Moffett as I had been. There were various Army airplane

squadrons based at Moffett in the late 1930s, but they were inactive on Sundays. No planes were on the ramp and I did not bother to go into the hangar just to see what was in it. I did take a few photos of planes with the trusty size 120 Brownie that I was using then, but lost them all, with other stuff, when my house burned down in 1939.

I moved across the bay to attend Boeing School of Aeronautics at Oakland Airport and didn't visit Moffett Field at all from mid-1939 to September 1941. Too bad, because the 55th, 77th and 79th Pursuit Squadrons were there with P-36As from November 1939 to September 1940. By this time my airplane photo activity had increased because of the opportunity. While

Vultee BT-13 40-984, representative of Bowers/Larkins photos taken at Moffett Field in September 1941. The letter M identifies trainers based at Moffett.



Although this BT-13A was shot from the shadow side, reflected light from the silver hangar softened the shadows and produced a photo that appeared in Jane's for 1941.



The first surprise of the December 6, 1941, visit to Moffett Field was this 0-49B ambulance conversion of the well-known 0-49 observation plane. Note the modified rear portion of the cabin, which opens to allow placement of litters.

Most shooting at Moffett was without filters, but an amber filter and Super-X (panchromatic) film almost washed out the red rudder stripes of this Beech F-2 of the 4th Photo Group.



cruising the airport ramp one day in 1940 looking for suitable targets, I met Bill Larkins, who was also looking for planes to photograph. This encounter, too, was based on mutual interests and led to a deep and lasting friendship.

By dumb luck, my new camera, a second-hand Kodak Junior 616, was the size used by all the active airplane photo buffs and traders, and Bill soon had me properly integrated into the activity. Up to that time I had been a complete loner. Some of our subsequent joint activities, now that we look back on them more than 40 years later, seem audacious and even preposterous, but we were dead serious then. Three that involve Moffett Field are recounted here.

Both Bill and I had had several magazine articles published over our names, and found the bylines to be wonderfully effective keys for opening normally closed doors between the public and interesting photo

The second and overwhelming surprise was the arrival of this North American P-64, requisitioned by the Army from a shipment bound for Thailand (Siam).



A lineup of BT-13As, with 41-1706 in the foreground. An oddity of the BT-13s and 15s was that, contrary to specifications, they tapered the vertical blue rudder stripe proportionally to the taper of the rudder.

There were plenty of AT-6s at Moffett when we visited in December, but we only shot this transient because of its red-and-white striped cowl. The letter X identified trainers based at Luke Field, Arizona.

targets. In mid-1941 we both knew that Moffett Field was now a big Army basic training center and had some interesting planes around, thanks to conversations with Moffett pilots who visited the Oakland Army Reserve hangar with their Vultee BT-13s.

So, why not try for a photo visit to Moffett? We prepared for this by my writing to a good friend, the editor of *Flying Aces* magazine, and asking him to send us a letter asking us to visit military bases for the purpose of getting airplane pictures for the magazine.

We then contacted the Public Relations Officer at Moffett and received permission to visit and take pictures under escort. What the guy must have thought when he saw two college kids with folding 616 cameras he never said. Bill looked a little more professional with the 3.25 x 4.25 Graflex that he



The 9th Air Base Squadron's Grumman OA-9 at Moffett in December 1941, still in blue and yellow paint. Only primary and basic trainers, plus amphibians, were still being delivered in those colors at that time.



Army serial numbers were supposed to go on the tails of most Army planes starting in January 1942. Since uncamouflaged types still had rudder stripes, the numbers had to be condensed onto the fin. 115897 translates to 41-15897 on the nearest of these Luke Field AT-6As.

More non-combat planes were in camouflage in March 1942, so we were glad to be able to shoot this Beech C-45A because of its change of color.



had along, but most of his activity was with his trusty 616.

The magazine with our credit lines that we brought along must have made the right impression. We had wonderful cooperation and the PRO even gave us some of his file photos. In spite of the amateur appearance of our equipment, we did get publishable pictures. We not only supplied *Flying Aces* but we both got some of our shots into *Jane's All the World's Aircraft* for 1941, and free copies of what was then a \$20 book. Needless to say, bylines in that book were truly golden keys beyond price!

That September trip to Moffett was so successful for us that we decided to try for another. The same PRO was still there in December, and was glad to grant us a return visit. This turned out to be a Cloud 9 operation beyond our wildest dreams.

It should be pointed out that aircraft industry and some Army Air Corps public relations activity was minimal in those days.

Many of the first-published pictures of a new airplane model were taken by the eager hobbyists; neither the manufacturers nor the Army bothered to publicize variations on standard models even though security was not involved.

So, when Bill and I revisited Moffett on December 6, 1941, we got two very pleasant surprises. There was a Stinson O-49B in the hangar. Because of its new configuration and characteristics, the O-49 (later L-1) had been well publicized in the aviation press for a year or more, but this was the O-49B, a notably different ambulance conversion complete with big Red Cross markings. It was indoors, but the PRO quickly got a crew to push it outside for us and position it in the clear for our photos.

While shooting the O-49B near rows of BT-13s and some North American AT-6As, we spotted what we thought was a camouflaged AT-6 enter the pattern but didn't think more about it. Our apathy vanished

when it taxied in and parked near us—it wasn't an AT-6 at all, it was a North American NA-50A (as so far publicized; actually it was an NA-68) export fighter with foreign camouflage and U.S. Army markings! We didn't know that the Army had such things, and of course didn't know the Army designation.

Without bothering to find that out, we only asked our escort if we could shoot it. The answer was affirmative and we started cranking film before the pilot even had a chance to turn off the engine. Then we found that it was a P-64, one of six requisitioned right off the boat from a shipment bound for Siam because of the prevailing arms embargo. It was of no use to the Army as a fighter, but was given a P designation because it was a single seater. The six were distributed to various western training bases for use as advanced trainers.

After the O-49B and P-64 coups, we took a few half-hearted shots of more BT-13s, the 9th Air Force Base's Grumman OA-9, Beech AT-7s, and a pretty transient AT-6A from Luke Field that had a red-and-white striped cowling. We had plenty of AT-6s in our files but shot that one for the marking.

The first published photo of a P-64 was in *Flying Aces* and earned me the magnificent sum of \$1.00 (*Flying* magazine was then paying \$3.00 for published prints). One of Bill's P-64 shots made the 1942 *Jane's* along with my O-49B.



Since new Kodacolor color-negative film had just come out, Bowers tried some on this blue and yellow BT-13A at Moffett in March 1942. Black-and-white prints can be made from the same negative, as here.

Big surprise of the March 1942 Moffett visit was this Douglas A-33 taken over by the Army from a Norwegian order. Note that the Army serial number (4)213594 has been put on the vertical fin in two lines. We never did find what base was represented by the letter Z.

The fact that we were now in the war didn't faze us from trying for still another Moffett excursion in 1942, and we were welcomed back on March 7. Again, most of the planes on hand were routine, but there were changes of color and markings to justify shooting the same models over again. To our great pleasure, lightning managed to strike again! There was another transient on the field, Northrop-cum-Douglas 8A-5, a higher-powered export version of the Army Northrop A-17A. A bunch of these had been built for Norway, but because of the German occupation of that country the Army took them over, gave them the designation of A-33 because of their attack configuration, and used them as advanced trainers.

Needless to say, we both got into print with the A-33, too. However, that was to be our last scoop at Moffett Field. The Navy took the facility back the following month and has used it ever since. Bill has been back many times since the war to photograph Navy planes but I, no longer a resident of California, have never set foot on that scene of so many happy memories. . . .

