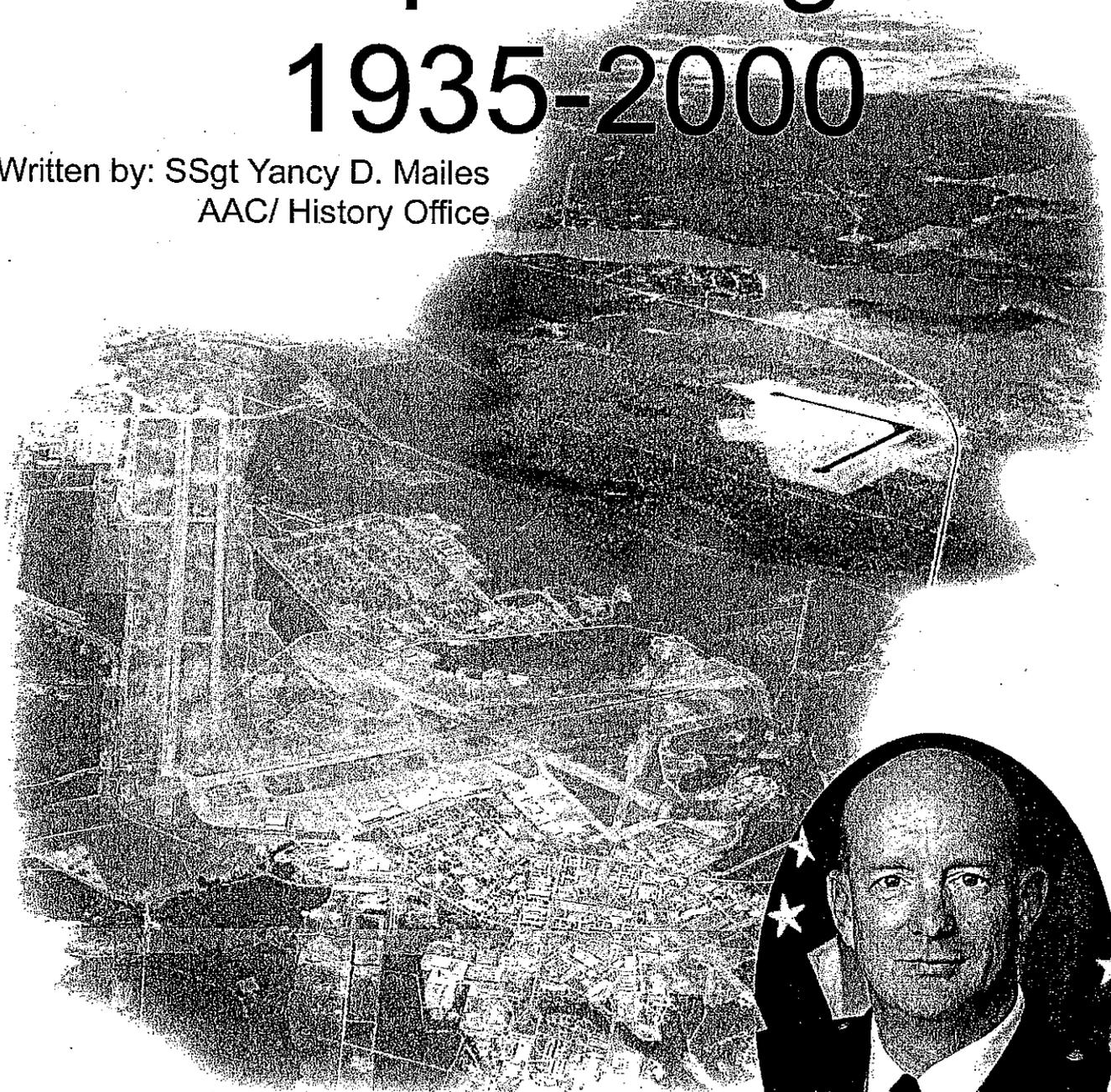


# Eglin AFB Base Operating Units 1935-2000

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# Eglin Base Operating Units throughout the Years

Prior to World War II, the Air Corps prepared its flyers for aerial combat without sufficient aerial gunnery training. Many believed that proficiency in aerial gunnery was the goal toward which all training pointed. If pilots flew fighter planes into combat without the proper training they would not succeed in achieving aerial victory.

But for all fixed gunnery's importance, its practice and theory matured in the United States with baffling tardiness. As late as 1942, after three years of war, after the example of the Luftwaffe in Poland and France, even after the Battle of Britain, General Stratemeyer with alarm complained that,

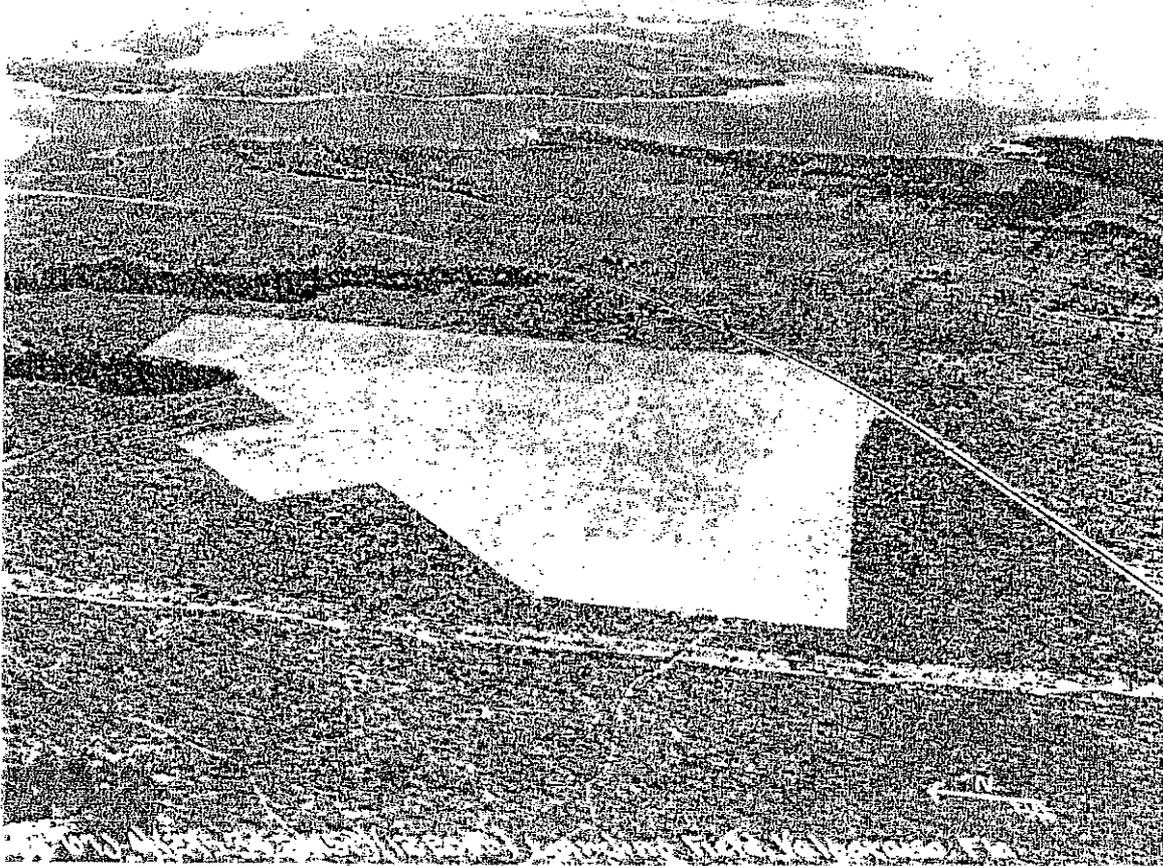
A member of my staff, in recent conversation with a pursuit unit receiving transition preparatory to overseas movement, was informed that none of his officers had ever fired a machine gun in the air; some had never fired a gun of any sort; and their lack of training and proficiency in gunnery was a source of great concern to the individual pilot and seriously affected his confidence.....considerable doubt was expressed as to their effectiveness in combat because of the lack of proper gunnery training.

Almost a decade prior to this letter, with the execution of the Air Corps Act, many air-minded men looked for better ways to train the air corps. The tardiness of the United States in forming a sound doctrine of aerial gunnery or even in forming a just sense of gunnery's importance is particularly odd because of the early development in such advance techniques as dive- and skip-bombing. From primitive gunnery early in World War I, pilots carried sacks of stones to fling into the enemy's propeller and used other battle-driven techniques to overcome the air enemy. Ingenuity developed the Liberty engine, the oxygen mask with telephone connections, cotton airplane and balloon fabric, electrically heated clothing, the wireless telephone for air-ground communications, the automatic camera, and the armored pilot's seat, but with peace and penury, this tumult of advance quieted. Probable then, the tardiness of gunnery development must be blamed on the universal drought of funds, which halted military development everywhere.

## Eglin's history begins.

Born from the need of a bombing and gunnery range, men from Maxwell, saw the potential of the sparsely populated area surrounding Valpariso. In the early 1930's new flying fields sprang up across the United States for the sole purpose of training new cadets in the art of aerial gunnery and bombing. The instructors of these schoolhouses taught the cadets the fundamentals of aerial gunnery, but needed adequate ranges to practice these techniques. In the west, Hap Arnold found such a site located in the high desert of Muroc California. The winds of time had cut a dry lakebed smooth as glass and Arnold felt that it held great potential for an aerial gunnery and bombing range.

offered the use of the landing strip to the Commanding Officer of Maxwell Field for visits. After a fifty-minute trip weekend officers landed on the strip and vacationed in the area.



**Figure 1** Landing Field that eventually became Valpariso Bombing and Gunnery Base later Eglin Field. Note no building on the edge of the field. The headquarters of the VBGB was built 15 Feb 1934.

As talk turned to using the Florida area as a Gunnery and Bombing Range Plew made plans to donate land to the Army Air Corps. In October 1934, the Valpariso Realty Company offered to donate 1,460 acres to the United States for a military reservation, stipulating that funds be provided within a year to prepare the field for a gunnery and bombing base, with quarters for officers and men. This offer languished with the Quartermaster General until 22 May 1935, when a dollar lease was effected by the Valpariso Realty Company to Maxwell Field.

While waiting for the Quartermaster General to agree on the lease, Maxwell's Commanding Officer applied for an Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) grant to pave the runways and build an office, a barracks 30 by 120, a mess hall and kitchen, and an oil storage building. FERA granted the necessary monies and workers began to pave the runways and build the structures.

1-Two inch Well  
2-Paved Runways, 2,000 by 100  
250 Acre Landing Field

After the summer of 1935 Captain Rich sent 25 men at a time to Valpariso from Maxwell for two-week periods. No regular detachment from Maxwell manned the Bombing and Gunnery Base during this period, although the regular presence of a Sergeant Gaspard, who ran the Valpariso detachment in the early days, gave some continuity.

Early gunnery training was desultory and haphazard. Flyers first conducted aerial gunnery firing near Destin over the east past, bombers towed targets while P-12s, B-4s, and B-6s experimented with angles of approach, (and occasionally sank the channel buoys). In early 1936 Lt. Frank Everest, in charge of Buccaroo Point, began to regularize ground gunnery training. Also, National Guard units began to use Valpariso as a training range.

### First "Regular" Gunnery Training

In 1936 General Pratt surveyed the facilities and predicted that the base would be "swapped with requests" for its use. National Guard officers described the Valpariso base as their "best camp in 15 years," and Maxwell, Chanute, Brooks, and Scott Fields as well as National Guard detachments from Michigan, Tennessee, Alabama, and Arkansas soon explored the west Florida airport for a few weeks of gunnery practice and recreation. Throughout most of 1936 and some of 1937, National Guard units visited the Valpariso Gunnery and Bombing base.

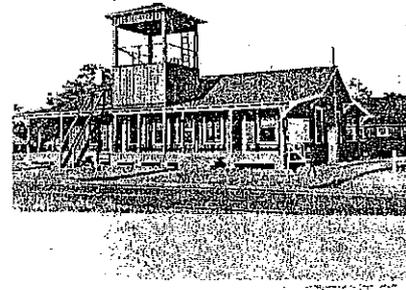


Figure 2 Eglin Headquarters Building,  
Early 1936

Through 1936 and 1937 the story was one of improvement. Gulf Power Company strung a new electric line along highway 10 and the paved runways were increased to 2,600 by 150. A paved parking apron was added and the Forest Service authorized a 2,000 by 1,000 clearing east of the landing strip. Captain Rich increased the detachment to 30 men to supervise roads being cut, and the installation of 15 miles of telephone line connecting the base, Valpariso, and White Point. On 1 September 1936, the detachment reorganized into Section V, Eglin Field Section of the 13<sup>th</sup> Air Base Squadron and continued under that designation until 1 August 1940. As a note the organizational transfers all took place at Maxwell, the men of the Valpariso detachment kept the same duties, but fell under a different Maxwell organization.

In January 1937, Captain Rich became the first officer permanently assigned to the Bombing and Gunnery Range. On 4 August 1937, the Army Air Corps redesignated the Valpariso Bombing and Gunnery Base Eglin Field in honor of Lt. Colonel Frederick I. Eglin, who died in an airplane crash. At the end of the year



The men of Eglin Field provided facilities for gunnery practice to personnel of the Air Corps Tactical School and to National Guard Units from Southern and Middle Western states by making tents, cots, and mattresses available to visiting units. The men of Eglin Field drew supplies from the commissaries of Maxwell or Fort Barrancas, supplemented by daily milk, bread, vegetables, and ice cream service by truck, and by purchases in Valpariso and Pensacola. A Post Exchange, a branch of Maxwell, carried a small stock of tobacco, candy, soft drinks, and toilet articles.

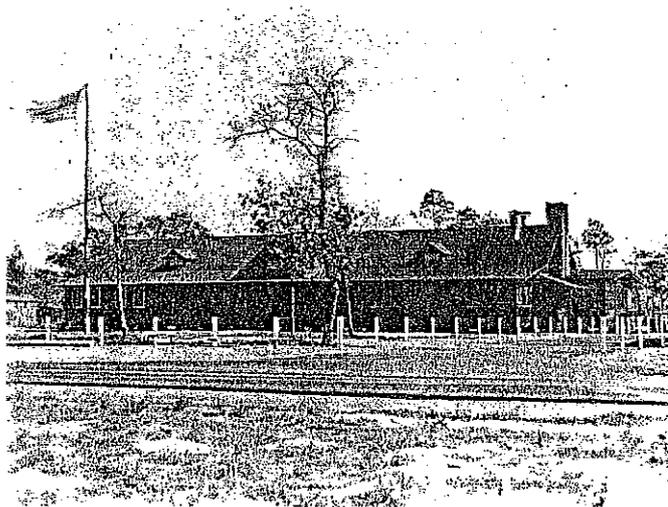


Figure 3 Mess Hall, 1937

On 19 May 1938 Captain Arnold H. Rich relinquished command to Captain George A. Watley, who administered the facilities which Captain Rich had drawn together by main strength and acquisitive guile. Gunnery training continued under Colonel Watley's command and in a November 1938 article he rendered the following account to the citizens of Valpariso.

The following is the report that you requested on your recent visit to Valpariso, Florida of the training activities at Eglin Field from March 1, 1938, to present.

Michigan National Guard, March 1<sup>st</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup>, 22 officers, 110 men; 15<sup>th</sup> Observation Squadron, Scott Field, Ill., March 22<sup>nd</sup> to April 13<sup>th</sup>, 16 officers, 100 men; 12<sup>th</sup> Observation Squadron, Fort Knox, Ky., April 7<sup>th</sup> to 26<sup>th</sup>, 6 officers, 28 men; 16<sup>th</sup> Observation Squadron, Fort Benning, Ga., April 22<sup>nd</sup> to May 6<sup>th</sup>, 9 officers, 23 men; Aviation Corps Technical Students, Maxwell Field Ala., May 8<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup>, 88 officers, 227 men; 22<sup>nd</sup> Observation Squadron Brooks Field, TX., June 10<sup>th</sup> to July 10<sup>th</sup>, 14 officers, 70 men; Indiana National Guard, July 17<sup>th</sup> to 31<sup>st</sup>, 25 officers, 98 men; Missouri National Guard, August 1<sup>st</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup>, 25 officers, 98 men; Arkansas National Guard, August 18<sup>th</sup> to September 3<sup>rd</sup>, 23 officers, 75 men; 16<sup>th</sup> Observation Squadron, Fort Benning, Ga.,



Figure 4 Captain George A. Watley

wanted to use Eglin strictly as Gunnery Range and the Air Corps Board wanted to utilize the vast areas for armament testing. As an indication of the future, in December 1939, the 23<sup>rd</sup> Composite Group of Maxwell field brought two experimental airplanes, single-seat P-37s, to Eglin for Air Corps Board research. Captain D. T. Spivey, later first Commanding Officer of the Gunnery School, and Captain G. W. Mundy, Commanding Officer of Eglin for a short time, conducted the first proof test work at Eglin

On 15 May 1940, Maxwell officers conducted the annual inspection of Eglin, which provoked a recommendation that Eglin be given the status of a post rather than a sub-post. In a letter dated 17 August 1940, the Adjutant General authorized the establishment of an "Air Corps Specialized Flying School," at Eglin giving it the status of a separate post under the Chief of the Air Corps.

On 27 June, a long campaign of maneuver ended in the transfer by the Department of Agriculture to the Department of War of the nearly 400,000 acres of the Choctawhatchee National Forest. By this acquisition, Eglin Field stood ready to expand into the Army Air Corps Proving Ground with enough room to still house the gunnery school.

In July the Army Air Corps designated Maxwell Field as the headquarters of the newly activated Southeast Air Corps Training Center. Eglin became a component of the Southeast Air Corps Training Center and Colonel Weaver, Commanding Officer of Maxwell, assumed jurisdiction of Eglin on 19 August. At that same time the enlisted men of Section V, Eglin Field Section, 13<sup>th</sup> Air Base Squadron were directly attached to the 13<sup>th</sup> Air Base Squadron as a detachment.

### Southeast Air Corps Training Center

In September 1940, the Army Air Corps designated Eglin Field as an Air Corps Specialized Flying School, under the jurisdiction of the Southeast Air Corps Training Center, for the training of student pilots in pursuit gunnery. The commanding General of the Southeast Air Corps Training Center, Major General Walter R. Weaver, determined that the development of a proving ground would not crowd the gunnery training from the Eglin Field Reservation.

On 13 September 1940, Major A.F. Shea assumed command of the newly created Material Squadron, 67<sup>th</sup> Air Base Group located at Maxwell Field. Later that year on 1 October, true support elements activated at Eglin Field: Finance Department, Medical Department, 3d Weather Squadron, 3d Communications Squadron, and the 5<sup>th</sup> Signal Services Company. The enlisted personnel of these units were attached to the Material Squadron, 67<sup>th</sup> Air Base Group.

### Eglin Base Operating Units separate from Maxwell

With the expanded mission of Air Corps Specialized Flying School and after the Air Corps Headquarters careful analysis of the issues, they determined that a series of auxiliary flying fields should be constructed in the outlying areas of the Forest,

Beginning in January 1941, mass construction began on the post. The Forestry Service began clearing and grading seven auxiliary flying fields in the Choctawhatchee Forest, contractors started construction of 100 non-commissioned officer's housing units, and a 100-man mess hall was completed. In March, Brigadier General Carl Spaatz, Chief of Plans Division, Air Corps, recommended that:

- Facilities be immediately available to the 23d Composite Group and the Air Corps Board for conduct without delay of any type test which may be required.
- An Air Corps Proving Ground be created as a permanent establishment and command, embracing the entire military reservation in the vicinity (including the Choctawhatchee National Forest) of Eglin Field, Florida.
- The 23d Composite Group be permanently stationed at Eglin Field.
- Eglin Field be designated as the permanent station of the Air Corps Board.

On 8 April, the Chief of the Air Corps approved the revised layout plan for the Air Corps Proving Ground to expand the facilities to provide for the maintenance and training of approximately 2,000 additional officers and men. They would accomplish these tasks through construction of 63 administrative and housing units, 1 hospital and Medical Corps facilities, 12 technical buildings, utilities, a parking area, taxiways, and fencing around contonment and industrial areas.



Figure 6 Col. Donald  
P. Muse

Between April 1941 and March 1942, four different individuals commanded Eglin. On 17 April 1941, Colonel Donald P. Muse succeeded Major Warren A. Maxwell as Commanding Officer of the Air Corps Specialized Flying School and assumed the duties associated with base commander of Eglin.

## Air Corps Proving Ground

On 19 May 1941, the Air Corps established the Air Corps Proving Ground with headquarters at Eglin Field. The 23d Composite Group transferred from Orlando to Eglin and provided flight-testing activities. In September 1941 the Air Corps Board transferred from Maxwell Field to Eglin Field and a Proof Department organized as the testing agency for the Board. Members of the Air Corps Board, the Proof Department, and the Air Corps Proving Ground Detachment (the former 23d Composite Group) participated jointly in perfecting the testing program and in devising and establishing the requisite testing facilities.

The primary purpose of the Air Corps Proving Ground was to provide common station for the Air Corps Board and the 23d Composite Group for tactical tests of aircraft armament and its accessory equipment and of the tactics and techniques of employment of aviation units. The commanding officer of Eglin Field, Colonel Muse, provided all administrative and housekeeping requirements of the post by utilizing the support elements assigned. Colonel Muse and the personnel assigned under him also furnished ranges, transportation, other facilities, and additional personnel required for the operation of the Proving Ground installations.

On 21 August 1941, Major Joseph H. Atkinson succeeded Colonel Donald P. Muse as Commanding Officer of the Air Corps Proving Ground. By October the station strength consisted of 132 officers and 3,275 enlisted men. In that same month, Major Joseph H. Atkinson relinquished command of Commanding Officer to Major George W. Mundy.



Figure 8 Capt. Joseph H.  
Atkinson



Figure 9 Capt. George W.  
Mundy

In January 1944, Eglin personnel geared up for Operation "CROSSBOW," a major project to determine strategy against German robot bomb installation. Base support units supported the operation with, but not limited to, transportation and Civil Engineering. Building materials were scarce and neither time nor security would permit conventional negotiations for construction priorities. Proving Ground agents rushed construction materials in by air, train, and truck into the secret ranges of Eglin Field. Working in twelve-hour shifts, civilian and military laborers assembled concrete, steel, lumber, brick, and building blocks into a series of key target buildings and entire ski sites.

On the 12<sup>th</sup> day, the contractors turned over the finished product and moved out. The attacks against the replicas of the German installations began. As additional buildings and sites were completed, the success of each type of munition and the effectiveness and vulnerability of attacking aircraft were checked and analyzed by teams of military and civilian experts.

## Air Base Units

One month later on 22 February 1944, the Proving Ground received blocks 600-799 in the proposed reorganization of the Continental Army Air Forces organizations into base units. As a direct result of this, several organizations became part of the extended Air Force Proving Ground organization. This is best illustrated with the example of 608<sup>th</sup> Chemical and Ordnance Test Group. This group, physically located at the Aberdeen Proving Ground, Maryland, still reported to and fell under the jurisdiction of Eglin Proving Ground administration. These organizations activated when the Base Unit or organization came into existence. Base Units 610-618 came under the AFPGC jurisdiction as authorized on General Order 08, AAFPGC, 28 March 1944, effective 1 April 1944.

## 610<sup>th</sup> AAF Base Unit

Assuming the 51<sup>st</sup> Base Headquarters and Air Base Squadron's duties, the 610<sup>th</sup> Army Air Force Base Unit activated on 1 April 1944 and continued until 30 June 1947. The following organizations were disbanded due to the 610<sup>th</sup>'s activation.

- Headquarters and Headquarters Squadron, AAF Proving Ground Command
- 51<sup>st</sup> Base Headquarters and Air Base Squadron, 1<sup>st</sup> Proving Ground Group

The 610<sup>th</sup> AAF Base Unit composed of

- 610<sup>th</sup> AAF Base Unit
  - A-Headquarters Section
  - Administrative
  - Transportation
  - Security
  - Supply and Maintenance
  - Medical
  - Aviation

Boat Squadron. Though the structure of the 3201<sup>st</sup> varied throughout time, its mission always remained the same.

The 3201<sup>st</sup> Air Base Group that activated on 16 September 1964 provided security, transportation, administration, personnel, and services. At times it also had civil engineering and supply functions assigned to it. In the quarter of a century of existence, the 3201<sup>st</sup> Air Base Group represented a significant part of Eglin's History. If the years were marked by the support it provided it would include the deactivation of the 39<sup>th</sup> Strategic Air Command (SAC) Bomb Wing and the activation of the 33d Tactical Fighter Wing in 1965, the arrival of the 20<sup>th</sup> Space Surveillance Squadron in 1966 and the 39<sup>th</sup> Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Wing in June 1971. Additionally, the years marked the activation of the 919th Special Operations Wing at Eglin Auxiliary Field #3 (Duke Field) in 1971 and the Explosive Ordnance Disposal School.

The service provided by the 3201<sup>st</sup> was tangible by the facilities constructed on Eglin: Chapel Two completed in March 1970, a new officers club in April 1971, a NCO Club in December 1971, the opening of the Memorial Lake shopping complex in the spring of 1973, a new gymnasium in 1974, a new Airman Recreation Center in 1975, 300 new homes in the Plew area in 1968 and 150 in the Poquito Bayou area in 1975; and a new Youth Center and major improvements to the Child Development Center.

The years of service of the 3201<sup>st</sup> also touched the lives of many people. In 1970, the Son Tay Raiders trained at Eglin for their daring attempt to rescue American prisoners of war from a North Vietnamese prison camp. In 1975 the 3201<sup>st</sup> served others when it sheltered and processed more than 10,000 Southeast Asian refugees at Field Two's "Tent City." Then in 1980 the men and women of the 3201<sup>st</sup> supported over 10,000 refugees who fled to the United States from Cuba.

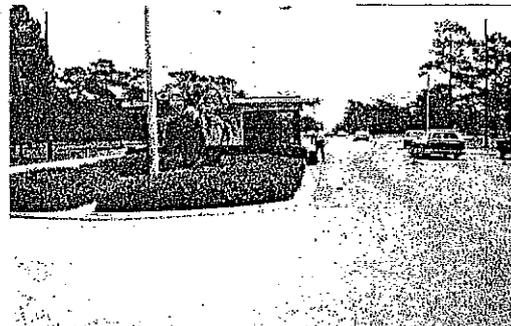


Figure 11 Eglin AFB gate c. 1980s

Transportation Squadron and reassigned from the 3246<sup>th</sup> Test Wing to the 3200<sup>th</sup> Support Wing. The 3246<sup>th</sup> Supply Squadron was redesignated the 3210<sup>th</sup> Supply Squadron and reassigned from the 3246<sup>th</sup> Test Wing to the 3200<sup>th</sup> Support Wing. The mission of the 3200<sup>th</sup> Support Wing expanded to serve the Eglin community as the sole provider for base support, by providing transportation, supply, personnel, hospital, and civil engineering functions.

## 646<sup>th</sup> Air Base Wing

On 30 September 1992, the Air Force redesignated the 3200<sup>th</sup> Support Wing as the 646<sup>th</sup> Air Base Wing. The 646<sup>th</sup> continued the mission of providing major base support to the Air Force Development Test Center and to more than 45 associate units. The wing continually improved the lives of the men and women assigned to Eglin AFB by making great strides in renovating and upgrading dormitories, temporary living facilities, and visiting officer and enlisted quarters. Contributions of organizations such as the 646<sup>th</sup> Air Base led Eglin AFB to be named the 1992 winner of the Air Force Installation Excellence Award, but its tenure at Eglin would be short lived.

## 96<sup>th</sup> Air Base Wing

With the successful campaign of Operation DESERT STORM, dramatic changes in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union coupled with budget decisions and arms control considerations made the SAC mission obsolete. The Air Force began reorganizing to meet its new mission and on 28 September 1991, SAC ended its daily alert operations heralding the successful conclusion of the Cold War. Afterwards, the 96<sup>th</sup> Bomb Wing located at Dyess AFB, Texas, like the Air Force, underwent drastic change. As a direct impact of the Air Force reorganization, the 96<sup>th</sup> Wing inactivated ending 36 years of gallant service.

Concurrent with the inactivation of the 96<sup>th</sup> Wing, the 646<sup>th</sup> ABW located at Eglin AFB, Florida, was afforded the opportunity to acquire the two-digit designation of this historic wing. On 10 March 1994, the Air Force redesignated the 96<sup>th</sup> Bomb Wing to the 96<sup>th</sup> Air Base Wing and five days later activated it at Eglin AFB, Florida.

In 1998, the mission of the 96<sup>th</sup> Air Base Wing continued to provide the Eglin Air Armament Center and associate units with traditional military services as well as all the services of a small city, to include civil engineering, personnel, logistics, communications, computer, medical, security, and all other host services. Critical to the success of Eglin's mission, the 96<sup>th</sup> ABW provided a myriad of base operating support functions. Its people were responsible for material resources, mobility requirements, and meeting the needs of Eglin personnel. The 96<sup>th</sup> ABW equaled more than 4,400

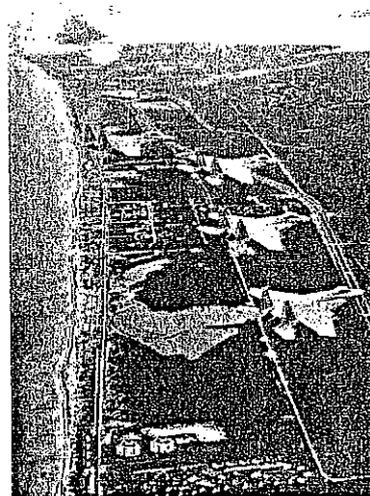


Figure 13 33d Fighter Wing Jets over Destin

Military Equal Opportunity advised senior commanders of assigned host and associate organizations on Human Relations and Equal Opportunity and Treatment (HR/EOT) education, training, and counseling for military, for family members, and for retired personnel. It acted as mediator, consultant, and fact-finder for problems involving discrimination. It enhanced mission effectiveness by conducting Unit Climate Assessments (UCAs) for commanders, assessing the organization's human relations climate while also creating and administering on and off-base proactive programs.

The Base Chapel provided opportunities for the free exercise of religion in the Air Force community through worship, rites, religious education, visitation, pastoral counseling, and a responsiveness to individual religious needs. With a total of eighteen personnel, the base chapel supported several major base wide events including, Operation Care, a program to assist the financially needy, the Christmas Tree lighting ceremony, the Martin Luther King, Jr., Commemorative program, the Singles Ministry, and the National Prayer Breakfast.

With the mission of the 96<sup>th</sup> ABW, the heritage of the 96<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Group lives on through the people of Eglin, thus preserving the lineage and honors of a great organization and continuing the heritage of Base support at Eglin.

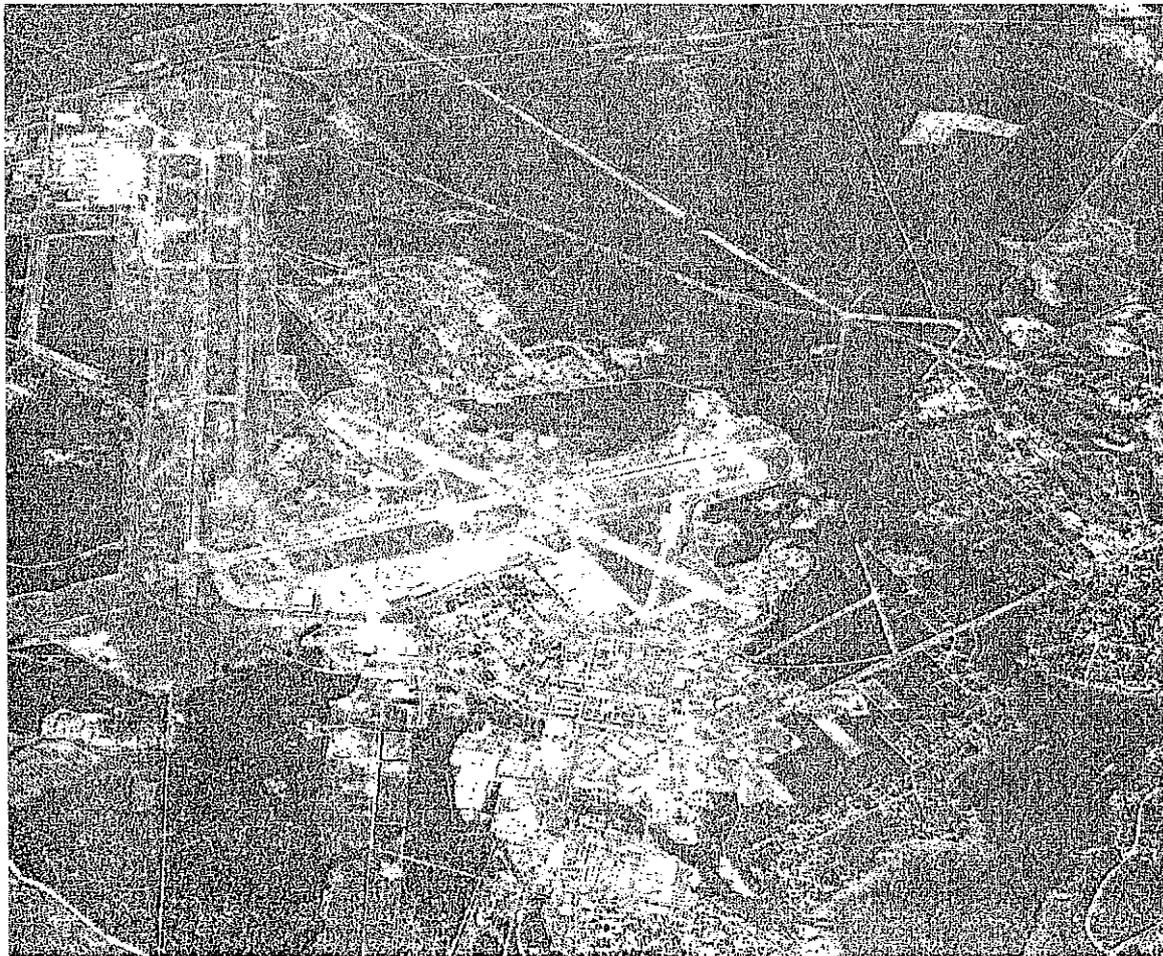


Figure 15 Eglin AFB April 1998