

## Forbes at 50: Forbes Field in Topeka Celebrates its 50th Anniversary

Produced by Jim Kelly

Narrator: ON JULY 13, 1949, THE TOPEKA AIR FORCE BASE WAS RENAMED FORBES AIR FORCE BASE, IN HONOR OF WORLD WAR TWO VETERAN AND TEST PILOT DANIEL H. FORBES. MAJOR FORBES, A NATIVE OF CARBONDALE, DIED IN IN A CRASH IN 1948, DURING A TEST FLIGHT OF THE YB-49 "FLYING WING" BOMBER.

Narrator: IN JULY OF 1999, A B-2 STEALTH BOMBER, A DESCENDANT OF THE ORIGINAL FLYING WING, ARRIVED IN TOPEKA TO HELP CELEBRATE THE 50TH ANNIVERSARY OF FORBES AIR FORCE BASE, WHICH WAS FIRST OPENED AS THE TOPEKA ARMY AIR CORP BASE IN 1942.

GREG HOOT, LOCAL HISTORIAN/EDITOR OF THE "FLINT HILLS SPECIAL"

"Forbes Field, or Topeka Army Air Corp Base was built as a training base for pilots who would be going overseas during WWII. It was conceived actually, just months after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, and it was constructed by the Army Corps of Engineers and was in place and had a full fleet of aircraft by August of that year."

Narrator: FOLLOWING THE WAR, THE TOPEKA ARMY AIR CORP BASE WAS CLOSED. IT RE-OPENED IN 1948 AS THE TOPEKA AIR FORCE BASE, AND A YEAR LATER, THE BASE WAS RENAMED AFTER MAJOR FORBES.

HOOTS - "Interestingly, eleven days after being named for Daniel Forbes, the Air Force gave orders to close Forbes Field for a second time. And within a month and a half the base was closed with only a very small skeleton crew, a dozen individuals left on the base."

Narrator: FORBES REMAINED CLOSED UNTIL 1951. BY THAT TIME THE UNITED STATES HAD ENTERED THE COLD WAR, AND FORBES WAS DESTINED TO BECOME ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT, ONE OF THE MOST POWERFUL AIR FORCE BASES IN THE WORLD.

HOOTS - "And it was reopened as a part of the Strategic Air Command, or a SAC Base. And that really breathed new life into the air base because the Strategic Air command, it was a bigger operation and there were several different segments of the Strategic Air Command that were operating here." "There was a long-range bombardment wing that operated out of Forbes Field that had long-range bombers with a range of almost 6500 miles. There were two strategic recon wings, the 55th and the 90th that operated spy planes out of Forbes at this time."

PROFESSOR RAY SPRING , WASHBURN LAW SCHOOL, USAF (RET.)

"I came up to Forbes to fly B-29's. I had come out of the combat crew training in San Antonio at Randolph Field and our assignment was to Forbes to B-29's strategic recon wing. And was doing that until 1954, when both wings at Forbes were converted to B-47's."

"Once they converted to B-47's, they were flying up over the poles. Our advance base, one where we spent four months in 55' was in Alaska. And they flew up over the poles and occasionally met some unfriendly folks up there."

Narrator: IN 1960, FORBES AIR FORCE BASE MADE INTERNATIONAL HEADLINES WHEN ONE OF ITS RECONNAISSANCE JETS WAS SHOT DOWN BY THE SOVIET UNION. THE INCIDENT CLAIMED THE LIVES OF CAPTAIN WILLARD PALM AND THREE MEMBERS OF HIS FIVE MAN CREW.

Narrator: AS THE COLD WAR ADVANCED, SO DID THE TECHNOLOGY FOR WAGING WAR. IN 1961 THE AIR FORCE ACTIVATED THE 548TH MISSILE SQUADRON AT FORBES. NINE ATLAS-E MISSILES ARMED WITH NUCLEAR WARHEADS WERE CLUSTERED AROUND THE CITY OF TOPEKA IN UNDERGROUND BUNKERS KNOWN AS COFFINS.

BOB HOOD , USAF (RET.) "I was a team member starting out, on a repair and checkout team, that checked out the missiles from the erection until it would be fired to make sure that all systems were 'go'. We were also responsible for transporting the missiles and putting them into the coffins, and setting them up so the launch crew could fire the missile."

"There was some uneasiness but for the most part I think people were proud that they were here. They felt like the Government was including them in the defense of their country. And so they were really pleased that they were here. But there was still, some uneasiness because they knew that this would be a target for Russia, or anybody else that would want to fire missiles on us."

HOOTS - "And while one would assume that ICBM's with nuclear warheads would be a huge secret operation in the Air Force, quite the contrary was true. Actually, between 1959 when the ICBM program began, up through 1961, when the missiles were actually put in place, there were over 200 stories in the Topeka newspapers speaking about the construction, showing aerial photos of construction of the missile silos. When one of the missiles came to town, it was not in secret, it was brought right downtown. The Air Force had an open house at Gage Center, the Topeka Fire Department came down and washed the missiles."

HOOD - "There was a lot of publicity and I think that was done for a reason. It was to let Russia know that we had the missiles and that they weren't secret at all."

Narrator: WHILE IT SEEMS UNLIKELY THAT THE RUSSIANS WERE READING THE "TOPEKA CAPITAL-JOURNAL", IT'S PROBABLY SAFE TO SAY THAT OUR COLD WAR ENEMIES WERE VERY MUCH AWARE OF FORBES AIR FORCE BASE.

HOOD - "I'm sure they were, because we always played war games, penetration games. And SAC headquarters always had a team that would go around to the Air Force Bases and try to penetrate the security on the base. Crawl through the sewer tunnels to get under the fences and things of that nature."

HOOTS - "Forbes Air Force base was the most powerful Air Force Base in the world during the cold war. During the SAC years. There were no other bases that had two reckon wings, a strategic bombardment wing and an ICBM wing. And there was more firepower generated out of this base, than any other base in the entire world."

Narrator: THE ATLAS-E MISSILES WERE OBSOLETE BY 1965 AND THE NINE LAUNCH SITES WERE ABANDONED. THAT SAME YEAR THE STRATEGIC AIR COMMAND PULLED OUT OF FORBES AND WAS REPLACED BY TAC, OR THE TACTICAL AIR COMMAND.

HOOTS - "But it was still a very significant base. C-130 cargo planes flew in and out of here daily. It was a major supplier of troops and equipment for troops to Viet Nam as well as other places where the military had operations."

Narrator: FORBES AIR FORCE BASE CLOSED FOR GOOD IN 1973. AND WHILE IT'S IMPORTANT TO ACKNOWLEDGE THE BASE'S PAST AND IT'S ROLE DURING THE COLD WAR, WE SHOULDN'T FORGET THAT FORBES FIELD STILL PLAYS AN IMPORTANT ROLE TODAY.

HOOTS - "The facility is still very important to the military. In fact, the 12,600 ft runway that was constructed in 1955, at that time the longest runway in the U.S., is still very important for the Air Force reserves that operate out of this base."

HOOTS - "The 190th Air Refuelers, of course, operate all around the world, and they're stationed here at Forbes Field. And it still is very important now."

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