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Cover Page Footnote

Jack C. Fisher MD is Prof. Emeritus of Surgery, UC San Diego and former Head of its Division of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery. Following retirement, he earned an MA in U.S. Political and Economic History from UCSD. Stopping the Road: The Campaign Against Another Trans-Sierra Highway is his third historical narrative, a labor of love for the Eastern Sierra.

BAAF: Bishop's Contribution to the 'Greatest Generation'

Jack C. Fisher, M.D.

Some of you might consider my title obscure so I will begin with a derivation. The 'Greatest Generation,' both a phrase and the title of a book, refers to the millions of American citizens and soldiers who won World War II, the personal stories of many appearing in a best-seller written in 2004 by NBC's Tom Brokaw. 'BAAF' or "BAF" stood for Bishop Army Air Field. The Army preferred BAF because it considered airfield to be one word. The Navy, on the other hand, has always used "Air Station" for naming aviation facilities. Bishop locals simply called it the airfield.¹

I have previously spoken at this conference about an historic fishing trip, my title: 'Gone Fishing: Military Brass in the High Sierra,' an authentic tale about two members of our nation's high command who found time for needed relaxation at a critical point in WWII. Bishop's airfield played a subsidiary role in that rendering but it serves as lead player in today's story. I might find opportunity later to once again refer to that fishing story.²

I will spare you a detailed history of aviation yet remind you that it was in 1903 that the Wright Brothers successfully completed the first controlled flight in a heavier-than-air, motorized device. Those flying machines, as they were originally called, were safe enough by the 1920s for landing fields to appear throughout the nation including the Eastern Sierra: outside of Inyokern, just south of both Olancho and Lone Pine, northeast of Independence, and right here in Bishop. Some years later Big Pine would have its own airfield. Most were prompted and initially financed by...you can probably guess...Los Angeles Water and Power, both a revered and later a reviled agency after it began extracting water from this region in 1917 with the opening of a 370km aqueduct considered the engineering marvel of its day. For those interested in historic comparisons, the longest recorded Roman aqueduct was a mere 240km.

Use of the term 'airport' or even 'airfield' in the 1920s exaggerates the reality of what were at the time basic dirt strips, only a few benefitting from oiled surfaces to keep the swirl of dust at a minimum. There were no enclosed terminals, and few beacons or other navigation aids. Bishop's first airport, south of the city, was short-lived because its runway was too short to accept the valley's first offer of scheduled commercial service. So, a new site two and one-half miles east of the city was selected by combining adjacent portions of two ranch properties so that minimum specifications could be met, a landing strip 2500 ft. long and 100 ft. wide.

¹ Brokaw, Tom, *The Greatest Generation*, New York: Random House, 2000.

² Fisher, Jack C., "Gone Fishin': Military Brass in the High Sierra," *Eastern Sierra History Journal*, vol 1(2020) <https://scholarship.claremont.edu/eshj/vol1/iss1/4/>

Work proceeded according to schedule, allowing Bishop's new airfield to commence operations on Sept. 18, 1929, in time to receive a Lockheed Vega operated by newly established Nevada Airlines. Regular air service from Reno to Los Angeles with a planned stopover in Bishop took four hours and cost \$60.00 (\$850 in current dollars). The Vega represented the latest in single wing aircraft, highly praised for its speed and exceptional range. After selecting the Vega, Amelia Earhart became the first woman to fly solo across the Atlantic and Wiley Post was the first pilot to climb high enough to confirm the existence of a jet stream.

Regrettably, Nevada Airlines and with it, Bishop's inaugural air service, failed to survive a stock market crash occurring soon after the airport opened. Nonetheless, advances in aircraft reliability throughout the 1930s encouraged the advent of recreational flying and a unique brand of entertainment: barnstorming. An expanding brigade of freelancing daredevil pilots traveled from one airfield to the next, easily attracting crowds of onlookers gaping at stunts performed in increasingly maneuverable aircraft. In 1932, Bishop's airport became the site for a memorable movie stunt: the pilot landing his plane, passing through a vacated hangar, bursting out of the backend, then taking off again. With multiple cameras rolling, the scene was shot in a single take for the movie, 'Air Mail,' thus establishing instant fame for the novice pilot, Paul Mantz.³

As the early warnings of another European war became apparent near the end of the decade, a new purpose was found for airfields throughout the nation and in time the Eastern Sierra. Our military leaders were fully aware of Germany's purported civilian initiative producing thousands of capable young pilots. But these were nothing less than clandestine military training academies, officially forbidden by the 1919 Versailles Treaty. Realizing this nation's need for well-trained pilots, the Army secured President Roosevelt's backing for a flight training program in America. First defined in Dec. 1938 as the Civilian Pilot Training Program (CPTP) it was initially targeted to enroll 20,000 college students for basic flight training. In time, the project grew to involve more than 1400 training sites whereby war's end 435,000 pilots received primary flight certification. Bishop's airfield trained classes of 60 at a time. Students quickly noticed they were taking off over a cemetery, a lasting reminder to remain alert to aerodynamic principles.

The Dec. 7, 1941, Pearl Harbor attack changed everything in America including the Owens River Valley where most of its landing fields became sites for pilot training. Even more would be added, one of them built directly across the highway from the Manzanar Internment Center with a 5300 ft illuminated runway for aircraft as large as B-24s to practice landings and takeoffs day and night. The CPTP became War Training Service (WTS) under the direction of the Army Air Corps. The Bishop Air Field, leased by the Army from Inyo County effective June 10, 1942, was

³ See on YouTube: 'Air Mail the movie'; barnstorming flight sequence begins at 21 minutes.

designated a tactical military facility that required the lengthening and reconfiguration of its runways for handling sudden changes in wind direction.⁴

Completed in Dec. 1942, these modifications included completion of three major runways: 12/30 at 7,498ft by 100 ft., 17/35 at 5600ft by 100 ft., and 8/26 at 5,567ft by 100 ft. Bishop Army Air Field at this moment in history could boast a runway longer than Mines Field in Los Angeles (we know it today as LAX). For the first time, Bishop was capable of receiving major bomber aircraft like the B-17 Flying Fortress built by Boeing in Seattle and the B-24 Liberator assembled by Consolidated Aircraft in San Diego: at the time a big deal for this small town.⁵

Trivia lovers might appreciate knowing that LAX today has four east-west runways at 9,000, 10,000, 12,000, And 13,000 feet in length. More trivia? Longest commercial airport runway in the U.S.? Denver International at 16,000ft (elevation 5,000ft). Longest outside the U.S.? In China... , Lhasa, Tibet at 13,000ft (elevation 12,000ft). And the longest military runway in the world? Hint...it's in the Eastern Sierra or to be geographically precise, in the Mojave Desert. Yes, it is Edwards AFB with a 7.5-mile runway (39,000ft) still maintained for NASA Shuttle landings.⁶

Why the sudden build-up of these inland landing strips? Immediately following Japan's surprise attack on American territory, there was widespread fear that Japan might invade one or more of our western cities, thereby placing coastal air facilities in jeopardy. This all might seem an overreaction now, but apprehensions of this kind served as the basis for strengthening as many inland air facilities as quickly as possible. They included March Field in Riverside, Latimer Field in Ontario, the San Bernardino Air Depot, Muroc Field in the Mojave Desert, Tonopah Airfield in Western Nevada, and in Reno, the Reno-Stead Airport as well as all usable airfields within the Owens River Valley.

As an aside, the reality of this invasion risk would cease a mere six months after Japan's attack with the astonishing naval victory near Midway Island in the Pacific, resulting in the devastating (for Japan) loss of four of its aircraft carriers, one-half of the Pearl Harbor attack force. Remembered as the great Battle of Midway on June 6, 1942, Japan was no longer capable of planting its flag anywhere in the world beyond where it had already done so. Although this reality was understood by our strategic planners, the American public was never informed of the alleviation of risk...but that is a story for another time.⁷

⁴ We can only imagine the constant racket from touch downs and takeoffs endured by the many internees at Manzanar just across the highway.

⁵ Not the B-29 Superfortress, however, still under development by Boeing Aircraft. B-29s would require a 2-mile runway (10,560ft). Wendover Army Airfield in Utah became the designated site for preparing B-29 crews to deliver a special weapon, their training initiated before anyone knew if nuclear bombs would become a reality.

⁶ See Wikipedia for myriad runway lengths.

⁷ Symonds, Craig, *The Battle of Midway*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Meanwhile in Bishop, California, a new training objective was established for the newly activated military airfield. Most of our nation's pilot training was taking place in climate-friendly southern states, often close to sea level. But taking off and landing at higher altitude is a more challenging proposition. BAAF lay at 4000 ft. with numerous 11,000 ft. Sierra Nevada peaks close by. Given certain weather conditions, the airfield could function aerodynamically as if it were at 8,000 ft. And so, the new challenge for the BAAF was to receive pilots trained at sea level and prepare them for high altitude deployments.

Historians of WWII look back today and attribute the allied victory to three factors: the British bought time by holding off Hitler from dominating all of Europe including the UK; The USSR sacrificed lives...at least 20M counting both military and its citizenry; and America provided the war winning materiel. For example, American industry launched 110 aircraft carriers in addition to battleships, cruisers, and destroyers. It would by war's end build 276,000 aircraft flown by its 435,000 trained pilots, many of them graduates of the early CPT programs, several hundred receiving their certification at Owens Valley training centers.⁸

Now, for a brief reprise of that fishing story. The colonel in command of BAAF received a surprise visit on Aug. 6, 1944, from a Sgt. Waldron representing General Henry Arnold, known as 'Hap' to all who were close to him. California born and raised, Arnold was familiar with the state's geography including the Sierra Nevada, also a pioneering WWI airman. Arnold had risen quickly in the ranks to command March Field in Riverside, CA. Given the task of identifying more land suitable for a test bombing range, he negotiated the largest military purchase of land to date, 301,000 acres (470 square miles) surrounding the Muroc Dry Lake Bed, thus establishing Muroc Airfield, which after WWII became Edwards Air Force Base. It was Arnold who persuaded FDR to support the civilian pilot training program, and soon after Pearl Harbor, he was given command of Army Air Corps operations throughout all theaters of combat.

Accompanying Sgt. Waldron that day was U.S. Forest Service (USFS) Ranger Joe Booth, a longstanding friend and frequent fishing buddy of Arnold's who had received from the general a message indicating that "...it was time for a little mental relaxation from arduous duties, preferably in the High Sierra." Booth knew exactly what the general had in mind, but unaware of who might be accompanying Arnold.⁹

Moving the story forward, I'll describe for you a pre-dawn scene in Bishop on 24 August 1944, only a few weeks after the Normandy invasion in France. Waldron and Booth are enjoying breakfast at a cafe on Main Street when they hear the drone of an approaching aircraft. Jumping

⁸ Roberts, Andrew, *Masters and Commanders: How Four Titans Won the War*. New York: Harper Collins, 2009.

⁹ Author grateful to Sierra packer, Lou Roeser, for providing Joe Booth's recollection of this backwoods adventure with the two generals; quoted extensively in my essay, "Gone Fishin..."

into their car, they race to the airport, arriving just as a Douglas C-54 Skymaster lands on time to the minute after flying through the night nonstop from the nation's capital. Standing in formation on the tarmac are the field's commanding officer together with his ranking staff. Behind them stand hundreds at attention and saluting, in other words, everyone currently assigned to the Bishop facility.

Stepping off that plane beside General Arnold, to the amazement of all present, was Chief of Staff George C Marshall, in command of all American military forces deployed throughout world. Although the BAAF is prepared for a comprehensive base inspection, all watch as the generals offer a respectful wave and promptly depart ...according to General Marshall's orders: no diversions and no delay. And so, the fishing party proceeded through Bishop and up the Sherwin grade, pausing only after they reached the ranger station in Mammoth Lakes where they were joined by another guide and the all-important trail chef. They would enjoy several days of successful fishing in High Sierra lakes before returning to their critical wartime duties.

What was happening at the BAAF while military brass visited? A Marine Corps invasion of sorts: 200 USMC pilots on special deployment to work out a technical problem involving a newly built pursuit fighter, the F-4U Corsair. Designed specifically for carrier-based operations, the aircraft's landing gear was experiencing an undesired "bounce problem." The issue was in time resolved in Bishop with refinements made to landing procedures, as well as to the "tail hook," the device on every carrier-based aircraft to this very day that grasps the deck cable and brings a landing jet to a sudden halt, just one of the many wartime innovations perfected on airfields throughout the nation, including the BAAF.

Victory in Europe came on May 8, 1945, and in the Pacific on August 14, 1945. What happened next for the City of Bishop's distinguished airfield? Nearly all aviation personnel departed in short order, taking the assembled aircraft with them, of course, and leaving the field in the hands of federally employed caretakers. Now categorized by the Air Technical Service Command as a "storage airfield," the airfield lay dormant without any storage functions visible. Months passed while Inquiries from local citizens were forwarded to Congressman Claire Engler, yielding only a wait and see response from the 'Peacetime Reduction Mission' of the 'War Assets Administration.' Finally, Bishop Army Airfield was declared surplus and on 2 May 1949, returned to Inyo County Administration, operator of the airport to this day.

Despite these developments, the airport did serve an adjunctive Cold War function; 4.76 acres were leased by the army to performance test helicopters intended for Vietnam and other deployments. These leases were maintained from 15 Nov. 1965 to 19 June 1971 and again from 25 Nov., 1980 to 30 Sept., 1985.

In closing, let's look at aviation today within the so-called Inland Empire and especially the Eastern Sierra. Beginning down south, I'll cite once again March Field in Riverside, which after WWII became March AFB, a strategic command base during the Cold War (San Diegans driving up to Mammoth can recall the sinister-looking dark gray bombers positioned for immediate takeoff in case of a nuclear threat). Latimer Field in Ontario, a test site for Douglas Aircraft, is now Ontario International Airport. San Bernardino's airfield became Norton AFB but now operates as a logistical airport. Edward's AFB is the USAF's Test Center and Test Pilot Training Center, the site where America's first jet aircraft, the Bell XP-59 Aero-comet was tested, also where Chuck Yeager famously broke the sound barrier for the first time in a Bell X-1, and finally where the Space Shuttle has often landed.

Working our way northward, what became of Inyokern's air field? During WWII, Cal Tech needed a test site for its rocket research. The Navy was concurrently seeking land for testing longer range artillery. From these requirements would come the government's purchase of nearby China Lake, another dry bed, together with surrounding lands encompassing 1.1 million acres, equivalent to 19,600 square miles, an area larger than the State of Rhode Island that extends into three counties, all for what now operates as the China Lake Naval Air Weapons Station (NAWS) and its partner, the Naval Ordnance Test Station (NOTS). These facilities, representing 85% of the Navy's land worldwide, fill 12% of California's usable airspace. Commercial aircraft are diverted when weapons are tested inside this zone.¹⁰

On to the Owens River Valley: In both Olancho and Big Pine, there is no trace of their airfields. Lone Pine Airport is currently operated for general aviation. The long landing strip across 395 from the former Manzanar Internment Camp lies abandoned but can be easily found. The Independence airfield is now maintained by the USFS for fire surveillance.

As for Bishop's Airport today, memories of its wartime use abound but also something tangible, a precise replica of the control tower used during WWII, built to scale by local citizens who were either directly involved at the time or can recall the magnitude of BAAF military operations.

¹⁰ Historical museums can be found today in (1) Riverside, CA: March Airfield Museum at the March Air Reserve Base; (2) Ridgecrest, CA: China Lake Museum; and (3) Edwards Air Force Base: Air Force Test Museum.