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Jul, 27, 2009

Flight museum seeks details on Bellingham's WW II airfield

DEAN KAHN / THE BELLINGHAM HERALD

Thanks goodness for pack rats.

During a remodel at Bellingham International Airport a few years ago, someone saw a stack of blueprints from the 1940s about to be tossed in the trash.

The person grabbed the documents and offered them to Kate Simmons, program director at the Heritage Flight Museum, a military aircraft museum by the airport.

She accepted them, but didn't give them much of a look until several weeks ago, when she began researching the history of aviation in Whatcom County for an upcoming exhibit.

It turned out the blueprints are a treasure-trove of plans for the U.S. Army airfield that occupied Bellingham's airport during World War II.

Simmons - who calls herself a "perpetual student pilot" and has three grandparents and a brother who were pilots - is determined to flesh out the history of the Army operation. Details are hard to find, due, in part, to wartime censorship and to the short lifespan of the busy airfield.

She also hopes to win approval to clear brush and trees from the Army airfield's deserted taxiways, aircraft parking stands, and 14 bomb-storage sites on the west side of the airport property.

"There's a lot of clearing work to be done," Simmons said. "The airport has changed significantly, but the west side is pretty much untouched."

The airport's first runway was installed about 1940, with two more runways added soon after, according to "Aviation History of Whatcom County," a 1976 booklet by Susan Wolff.

After the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941, the 39th Pursuit Squadron spent a month at the airfield flying antisubmarine patrols in their P-39s before being assigned to combat in the Pacific Theater.

That wasn't the end of activity at the airfield, however.

According to the blueprints, most of them by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the airfield soon had a collection of facilities next to what is now Williamson Way.

The blueprints show 10 barracks; four officers' quarters; a control tower and a fire station; a shop, classroom, hospital and mess hall; and two latrines, one for officers and one for everyone else.

Blueprints also show the taxiways were designed to handle a Boeing B-17 Flying Fortress, although it's not clear the big bombers ever used the airfield.

Simmons isn't sure how many people were stationed at the airfield, or what they did.

One theory is that the airfield was a stopping point for lend-lease flights to the Soviet Union. Lend-lease was the program by which the United States supplied its allies with war materials.

Another theory is that the airfield was a place where women pilots flying northward were replaced by male pilots, because female pilots were not allowed on international flights.

A third theory is that the airfield was a backup facility for Everett's Paine Field.

Simmons consider the wartime airfield an important part of local aviation history. She also figures the Army understood the value of a field by the border and near open waters leading to Northwest cities, shipyards and other military installations.

"It had to have been a strategically important airfield," she said.

IF YOU GO

If you have information about the Army airfield in Bellingham during World War II, or other aspects of early aviation in Whatcom County, contact Kate Simmons at the Heritage Flight Museum, 733-4422.

The museum will host the Arizona Wing Commemorative Air Force's B-17 "Sentimental Journey" Aug. 14-17. Hours: noon to 5 p.m. Aug. 14; 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Aug. 15-16; and 9 a.m. to noon Aug. 17. People can view the B-17, and can book flights in advance at arizonawingcaf.com or at (877) 201-7305, or when the aircraft is in Bellingham.

Reach DEAN KAHN at dean.kahn@bellinghamherald.com or call 715-2291.