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Miller Army Air Field Historic District

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The significance of Seaplane Hangar No. 38, the Elm Tree Light, and the Fire Control Tower lies in their direct association with early aviation history, history of the coast defenses of New York, and the lighthouse service. The hangar appears to be of a unique type of design.

The establishment of Miller Army Field was largely the product of studies made by the Joint Army and Navy Board on Aeronautical Cognizance. The Joint Board had concluded shortly before World War I that a system of aerial-coast defense stations should be constructed to supplement the existing coast defenses. Appropriations for the creation of such air stations were made before the war, but it was not until August 1, 1918, that the construction of seven hydroplane stations on the Atlantic Coast was authorized by the Secretary of War.

The first site selected for the New York area station was at Fort Hancock, Sandy Hook, New Jersey, but this site was found to be unsuitable. After a thorough survey, a second site was selected, at New Dorp on Staten Island, which was approved by the General Staff by October, 1918. This 175-acre tract on the eastern shore of Staten Island was known as the Vanderbilt Farm. It was acquired in the spring of 1919 and construction of the installation began the following winter. On January 5, 1920, the Air Service Coast Defense Field at New Dorp was officially designated Miller Field, in honor of Captain James Ely Miller, a native of New York City, who was the first aviator serving with an American Unit to be killed

in combat in France. Captain Miller was killed in a dogfight with two German airplanes on March 9, 1918, while serving as the commander of the 85th Air Squadron.

The new field was well located for harbor defense purposes, as it was centrally situated and within close range of Fort Wadsworth and Fort Hamilton, on either side of the Narrows, Fort Hancock, on Sandy Hook and newly-established Fort Tilden on Rockaway Peninsula.

The first use of Miller Field came in July, 1920, when the Air Service provided airplanes and pilots from Mitchell Field, on Long Island, to take aerial photographs of the International Cup Races at Sandy Hook. The photographs, which were taken by employees of the Gaumont and Pathe Film Companies, were developed for test purposes in a mobile dark room at Miller Field. As the landing field there was considered too rough to use a year later, it seems likely these tests were conducted with seaplanes.

The field, including approximately thirty-eight structures, was turned over to the Army Air Service by the Quartermaster Department on July 20, 1921. Major Henry Abbey, Jr. of the Air Service, was the first commanding officer. Shortly afterward, Miller Field was made a subpost of Mitchell Field and garrisoned by Flight "A". 4th Squadron, Air Service, commanded by First Lieutenant William Moore. By January, 1922, Miller Field's garrison consisted of one flying officer and twenty-three enlisted

men of Air Park #6. In addition, there was one medical officer and two corpsmen, three Signal Corpsmen and one Quartermaster Corpsman. However, by March of 1922, the Air Service detachment at Miller Field was relieved by a howitzer company of 22nd Infantry, and the field was transferred as a subpost to Fort Wadsworth. By September, the 1st Tank Company was stationed at Miller Field and its commander, Captain H.W. Bolan, became commanding officer of the field. Another Regular Army detachment, the 1st Ordnance Company, was stationed at Miller Field shortly afterwards, as was the 102nd Observation Squadron of the New York National Guard Air Service. Thus, by October, 1922, when Miller Field became an independent post, the Army had withdrawn all Service personnel and replaced them with land troops, and the National Guard squadron was the only air detachment at the field. This marked the beginning of a long period of confused and sometimes strained relations between the nonflying Army garrison and the National Guard. The cause behind the removal of the Air Service garrison was a gradual reduction of active Army Air operations in the postwar years. By shifting from Mitchel Field to Miller Field, the National Guard unit would be able to provide air support from Miller Field during maneuvers and exercises. The Army Air Service did retain the right to resume activities at Miller Field should such action be warranted.

In addition to regular exercises and aviation meets, the National Guard Observation Squadron at Miller Field participated in joint maneuvers, such as those held on Defense Day, September 12, 1924. In the course

of a simulated invasion of New York City, five planes piloted by members of the 102nd Observation Squadron bombed the coastal defenses at Fort Wadsworth with flour bombs.

In 1923, one of the first of a series of tests made at Miller Field by private aircraft manufacturers was conducted by the Remington-Burnelli Aircraft. The airplane, which was being tested for the Army, crashed at the field, but following repairs made there in one of the hangars, continued to be tested. The hangars, at Miller Field were also used by the Bellanca Aircraft Corporation in the summer of 1928. In the spring of the following year, the American Aeronautical Corporation assembled and tested two Italian seaplanes, one SS-55 twin-hulled Savoia-Marchetti flying boat and one S-62 Savoia-Marchetti flying boat, also at Miller Field.

Due to its proximity to New York City and its location on the east coast airway, Miller Field was visited by several of the popular flying heroes. One of the first of these famous visitors was Lieutenant Erik Nelson, who together with Lieutenant Lowell Smith, made the earliest flight around the world, between April 24 and September 28, 1924, each in his own Army Air Service Douglas amphibian. Following the epochal flight, Nelson flew to Miller Field where he received a grand reception and gave demonstration flights. Nelson was a member of the Stockholm Club, which was located on Cedar Grove Avenue, just south of the airfield.

In 1926, Miller Field was the scene of a training session for eight Army Air Service pilots who were preparing for a goodwill Pan-American flight through North, Central and South America. At least one of the planes to be used, a Loening Amphibian, was tested at the field as well.

Two noted fliers who were associated with Miller Field are Admiral Richard Byrd and his fellow Artic pilot, Floyd Bennett. Reportedly, Byrd's airplane to be used in his Antartica flight was tested at Miller Field.<sup>1</sup> Floyd Bennett arrived at Miller Field in the spring of 1928, to begin preparation for an emergency flight to rescue downed fliers on Greenly Island. The plane to be used in the flight was a Bellanca, built in the Bellanca factory on Staten Island. Bennett and his party left Miller Field on April 19, for the Ford factory in Detroit. As a result of a case of pneumonia contracted during the flight, Floyd Bennett died in a hospital in Quebec later that month.

In the years of joint occupancy of Miller Field by the National Guard fliers and the 1st Tank Company, the seaplane hangars (Building 38) were used by the National Guard and the land plane hangars (Building 33) were used to house the light six-ton tanks. In 1926, the National Guard recorded seven Wright engine airplanes in operation and five out

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1. Dorothy Smith, Staten Island, Gateway to New York, (Philadelphia Chilton Book Co., 1970) pp. 218-219.

of operation. In 1928, the 1st Tank Company listed twenty-four tanks stored in Building 33.

In 1927, it was decided to establish a meteorological station at Miller Field. Not only was the field located on the air route between Philadelphia and New York, but its proximity to lower New York Bay, where the weather varied greatly and fog was prevalent, made local weather reports especially valuable. This station was maintained by three Signal Corpsmen for almost five years, until the establishment of a teletype service for reporting the weather obviated the small station.

The Elm Tree Light was in operation through the 19th century and part of the 20th century. It took the place of the Elm Tree, a large tree standing at the foot of New Dorp Lane that was a mark during the late 18th century for vessels leaving and going from New York, Middletown and Brunswick. The light station was abandoned in 1924. Although the story of the light is not too clear, it is likely that the Elm Tree Light actually served a useful navigational purpose and that, after the acquisition of the land by the Army after 1924, the lighthouse was allowed to remain on its site to the rear of the hangars at Miller Field. It probably was a useful beacon in landings and takeoffs at Miller Field.

On June 18, 1928, the Army Air Service announced that it was no longer considering any use of Miller Field except for emergency landings. Two

months earlier, the Army had set forth conditions under which the National Guard could use the field, but these conditions were not agreed upon for another year. The Army continued to garrison Miller Field until June 18, 1931, when the Regular Army turned the field over to the 27th Division of the National Guard. By October, 1931, however, Miller Field again became a subpost of Fort Wadsworth, and the 1st Tank Company and the Headquarters Company, 1st Brigade were assigned there. In the following years, the field's facilities were used to house any overflow of personnel from Fort Wadsworth.

In 1935, the records for Miller Field indicate that the Army Observation Squadron for the Second Corps area was to be stationed at Miller Field. In the same year Works Progress Administration work began on Building 38. In 1936 and 1937, the Vanderbilt Mansion, water tower and barns were razed to allow for an expansion of the landing field to the west. In 1938 and 1939, a second phase of WPA work was carried out in which the majority of the facilities were improved. It was at this time that a field lighting system was installed to allow for night flying.

As the prospect of another major war became greater, Miller Field's status as a facet of the coast defense increased. In the Army document "Annexes to Harbor Defenses of Sandy Hook," compiled in 1937-1938, Miller Field is listed as the primary operating air field in the New York area. It was equipped with two observation flights of three observation planes.



each to furnish observation and surveillance for the batteries at Fort Tilden and Fort Hancock. By 1944, a fire control tower and a searchlight were constructed, and four 90 millimeter anti-aircraft guns had been emplaced on the beach at the field. However, aside from conducting patrols, the garrison at Miller Field saw no action. Once again the post was used to house any overflow from Fort Wadsworth, including troops, POW's and refugees.

Following the end of World War II, the entire harbor and coast defense system began to be dismantled. By 1950, there were no longer any batteries in the New York area and no need for supporting aircraft. Miller Field was gradually deactivated over along period of time, with the flying activities being the first to cease.

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