

BRIEF HISTORY OF WHEELER AIR FORCE BASE

In February 1922, construction work began on a new airfield in Hawaii, located at Schofield Barracks on the island of Oahu. It was named Wheeler Field on 11 November 1922 in honor of Maj Sheldon H. Wheeler, former commander of Luke Field on Ford Island, who died in a plane crash on 13 July 1921. Wheeler Field became a separate permanent military post on 31 August 1939. By that time it had developed into a large and productive air base where constant training was conducted for combat units stationed there.

Wheeler was the site of several major historic aviation events, including the first nonstop Mainland-to-Hawaii flight by Army Air Corps Lieutenants Lester J. Maitland and Albert F. Hegenberger in 1927; the Great Dole Derby air race from California to Hawaii, also in 1927; the first trans-Pacific flight from the United States to Australia, by Australian Squadron Leader Charles E. Kingsford-Smith in 1928; and the first Hawaii-to-Mainland solo flight in 1935 by Amelia Earhart, who flew from Wheeler Field to Oakland, California.

When the Japanese attacked military installations in Hawaii on 7 December 1941, twelve pilots assigned to the 15th Pursuit Group at Wheeler (predecessor of the 15th Air Base Wing) succeeded in getting their P-36 and P-40 aircraft off the ground, engaged the enemy in furious dogfights, and scored some of the first American victories of World War II (10 downed enemy aircraft). Casualties at Wheeler totaled 33 killed and 75 wounded. Of the 233 aircraft assigned to the Hawaiian Air Force, 146 were in commission before the attack; afterward, only 83 were in commission (including 27 P-40s), and 76 had been totally destroyed.

During World War II and until 1949, Wheeler was assigned to the Seventh Air Force (former Hawaiian Air Force) and successor commands. In 1948, Wheeler Army Air Base was redesignated Wheeler Air Force Base. The following year, the installation was placed on minimum caretaker status; however, with expansion of the Air Force during the Korean conflict, Wheeler AFB was restored to fully operational status in 1952.

On 24 February 1952, the 1508th Support Squadron was organized to provide administrative and logistical support to activities at Wheeler AFB. The unit was redesignated the 6487th Support Squadron on 1 April 1955, then inactivated on 1 November 1971, concurrent with activation of the 15th Air Base Squadron. A subordinate unit of the 15th Air Base Wing, the 15 ABS served as the host organization at Wheeler AFB, which consisted of approximately 1,389 acres of land and facilities valued at over \$37 million. Responsibilities of the 15 ABS included providing munitions service and support to all Air Force activities within the Hawaiian area, in addition to operating a small arms firing range where personnel of the Air Force, US Customs, and local law enforcement agencies were certified.

In August 1987, the Secretary of the Interior designated Wheeler AFB as a National Historic Landmark, recognizing it as a site of national significance in the history of the United States and, in particular, World War II in the Pacific.

The 15th Air Base Squadron inactivated at Wheeler on 31 October 1991, one day before the US Army assumed operational control of the installation in accordance with a memorandum of understanding signed by the Commander in Chief, Pacific Air Forces, and the Commander, US Army Western Command. On 1 November 1991, the Army held a simple ceremony to signify their takeover of the base, then changed the sign at the main gate to "Wheeler Army Airfield." The installation, however, remained on the real property records of the 15th Air Base Wing until 15 March 1993 when an Action Memorandum signed by the Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Air Force (Environment, Safety and Occupational Health) and the Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Army (Installations and Housing) authorized the exchange of Wheeler AFB for Fort Kamehameha Military Reservation.