

Ring's Reflections

by Bob Ring

Tucson International Airport's Historic Hangars

I want to correct a mistake I made in the final column in my six-part series on Tucson history (April 18, 2013), in which I said that during World War II Consolidated Vultee Aircraft built three large hangars at Marana Air Base. Three astute readers contacted me immediately, telling me that the hangars were at Tucson International Airport.

Yes, those hangars are still there; I've visited them. Let me tell you their fascinating story.

During World War II Davis-Monthan field was both an Army Air Base and Tucson's civilian airport. Seeing a need to separate military and civilian operations, in 1940 Tucson officials purchased land about five miles southwest of Davis-Monthan for a future Tucson municipal airport. But before the dream of a new civilian airport could be realized, another urgent requirement to support the war effort arose. The U.S. needed a place to modify and outfit long range bomber aircraft before sending them into battle. So in 1942 Consolidated Vultee Aircraft (later Convair division of General Dynamics) built three enormous hangars (and runways) at the new airport site to modify B-24 Liberator bombers.

The hangars were built out of wood because steel was scarce during the war. Each of the three hangars was approximately 750 feet long, 250 feet wide, with curved Quonset-hut-shape roofs and 40-foot high sliding steel/glass-paned doors on each end. The center area of the hangars was open from the floor to the roof structure to accommodate large aircraft, but along the sides there was a second story (mezzanine) for testing of aircraft avionics. Huge 12-foot diameter swamp coolers were placed on the roofs along the sides of the hangars, with wooden ducts to the inside to disperse cooled air. The narrow space between the hangars accommodated a cafeteria and tool cribs.

A firehouse was built about a hundred yards off the northeast corner of the hangar complex. It's still there today too, but in a fenced, no-trespassing area.

Consolidated Vultee designed the B-24 aircraft and built them in their San Diego plant and several other factories around the country. Tucson was one of five sites that modified the new planes. Two types of operations were performed in Tucson as described in the July 1944 issue of *Popular Mechanics* magazine. Twenty five percent of the effort was directed at preparations to get aircraft ready for the particular climate and operating conditions of the theater the aircraft would be deployed to. Seventy five per cent of the efforts involved improvements to the aircrafts offense and defense systems.

Following World War II in 1947 the Tucson Municipal Airport moved from Davis-Monthan field to the new location. Then in 1948 the Tucson Airport Authority was formed as a nonprofit organization whose mission was "development and promotion of transportation and commerce by air; operation and maintenance of airfields in Southern Arizona; and advocacy and support of all projects, activities and legislation for the benefit of commerce by air."

Tucson Municipal Airport operated on the west side of the airfield, alongside the three hangars that were oriented roughly north-south. The airline passenger terminal occupied spaces towards the north end of the east side of the eastern-most of the three hangars (Hangar 1). This hangar-side terminal remained in operation for 15 years until 1963 when the terminal moved to its current location and the airport earned the designation of Tucson International Airport.

Meanwhile aircraft modification work had continued in the three hangars. In 1950, preparing for the Korean War, the Grand Central Aircraft Company leased the hangars to restore and modify B-29 bombers that had been mothballed at Davis-Monthan AFB since the end of World War II. Grand Central also modified new jet-powered B-47 bombers for the Boeing Company. The Grand Central Service Center in Tucson (along with another facility in Glendale, California) was recognized as the largest repair, overhaul and modification station in the country.

From the mid-1950s to 1958 McDonnell Douglas Corporation used the hangars to overhaul civilian aircraft like the DC-6 and DC-7.

In 1969 the newly approved Pima College (later Pima Community College) used the mezzanine of one of the hangars as a temporary campus. Today, the Aviation Technology branch of Pima Community College is located in a modern building just a few hundred yards south of the hangars.

Under the auspices of the Tucson Airport Authority the hangars began a transition from supporting aircraft modifications to warehousing aviation parts and equipment. Today five aviation companies lease space in the hangars to store parts, mostly filling the available (442,000 square feet) of space.

The Tucson Industrial Center hangars are located at 850 E. Teton Road, with access off Valencia or Nogales Highway. For leasing information contact Barbara Hemple, Properties Administrator for the Tucson Airport Authority at bhemple@flytucson.com, 520-573-8100.

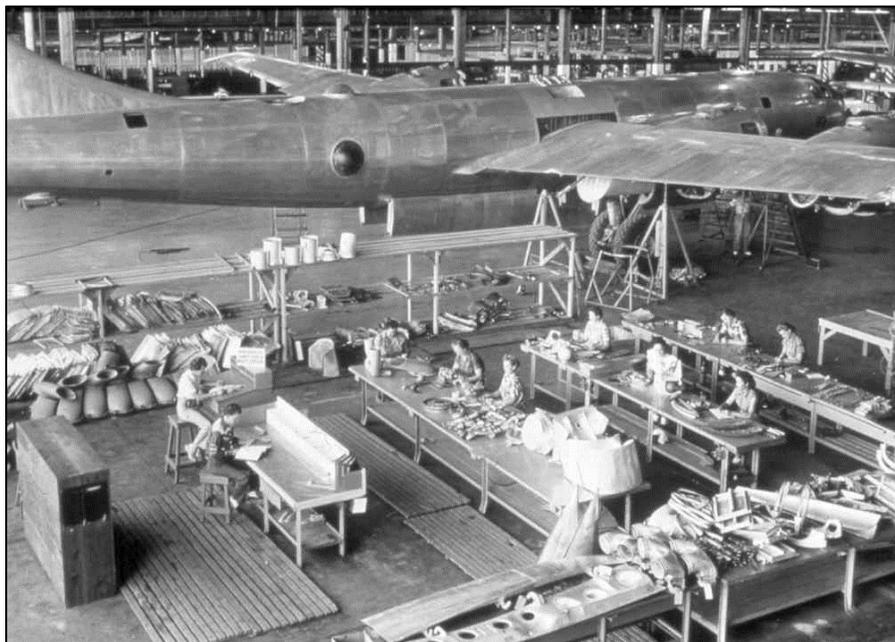
With such an interesting 71-year history, I think the old hangars should be nominated as a national historic site!

Thanks to readers Hal Adamson, George R. Monthan, and Joe Wilcox for pointing out my error on the location of the hangars. Also, thanks to Tucson Airport Authority employees, Viki Mathews and Richard Peterson (retired), and GA Telesis's Mike Miller for providing information on the three hangars and a tour of Hangar 2.

Sources: "A Journey Back in Time Grand Central Air Terminal," (Airport Journals, July, 2009); Brochures: The History of Tucson International Airport, History of Tucson Airport Authority, Tucson Aviation History; "They Make Tomorrow's Planes Today," (Popular Mechanics, July, 1944); Tucson Airport Authority.



Grand Central Aircraft Company modified U.S. Air Force B-29 bombers in the three hangars from 1948-1952. Aerial view, looking south, around 1950. (Courtesy of Tucson Airport Authority)



Tucson's version of "Rosie the Riveter." Women at their B-29 modification stations inside one of the hangars, around 1950. (Courtesy of Tucson Airport Authority)



Tucson's hangar-side passenger terminal with an American Airlines DC-7 shown on the apron off the covered gate ramp. Aerial view, looking west, around 1960. (Courtesy of Tucson Airport Authority)



This is what the three hangars look like today. Note the huge sliding doors. View from hangars southeast corner. (Courtesy of Bob Ring)



The old airline passenger terminal served Tucson until 1963. Note the old circular sign, "Arizona's Airport, Tucson" at upper right-center. (Courtesy of Bob Ring)