

Hickam Air Force Base: the early years

Editor's note: the following is part one of a four-part, monthly features series on the history of Hickam Air Force Base. The next part will appear in the Oct. 31 Kukini.

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Imagine that in place of the carefully laid out "garden city" of homes and buildings you see across Hickam today, you see instead a raw natural habitat of tangled kiawe trees, salt marshes and coral reef.

With that picture in mind you are seeing Hickam as it looked 68 years ago, just before America's need for a major Pacific "aerodrome" spurred construction on the eastern shore of Pearl Harbor.

As early as September 1918, the Army's 6th Aero Squadron operated seaplanes from Luke Field on Ford Island. During the next 20 years, both the Army and the Navy made increasing use of Ford Island's facilities, stretching them to the limit by the mid-1930s.

To solve the problem, the War Department allowed the Navy to take over all of Ford Island and looked for a nearby tract of land to develop for military aviation.

The War Department found an ideal area along the shore of Pearl Harbor's East Loch.

The site that would become Hickam Field consisted of 2,200 acres of ancient coral reef covered by a thin layer of soil, and included fishponds and salt marshes. A jun-



Courtesy photo

Before the softball fields and flightline; undeveloped Hickam Field, circa 1936.

gle of thorny kiawe trees and sugar cane covered the area, providing a haven for mongooses and mynah birds.

The War Department acquired the land in April 1935 from the Bishop, Damon and Queen Emma estates at a cost of more than \$1 million and set to work to build America's largest airfield.

Although clearing the land had barely begun on May 31, 1935, "Hickam Field" was dedicated in honor of Lt. Col. Horace Meek Hickam.

During the early days of construction, an initial cadre of a dozen enlisted men, commanded by 1st Lt. Robert



Courtesy photo

'They paved tent city and put up a parking lot'; Hickam Field's Tent City, now Pacific Air Forces' parking lot, circa 1938.

Warren, moved from Luke Field to Hickam Sept. 1, 1937. Lieutenant Warren thus became Hickam Field's first commanding officer.

Hickam Field was officially activated the next year on Sept. 15, 1938.

During the next two years, hundreds of personnel streamed into Hickam, arriving well before the

buildings were completed. Enlisted personnel lived in large 50-man tents in a temporary "tent city" awaiting construction of the massive multi-winged barracks. By the time workers applied the last coat of paint Sept. 30, 1939, the "Hickam Hotel" was fully occupied by "the largest body of troops ever placed under one roof."



Courtesy photo

Home is where the 3,600 airman are; Hickam Field's barracks, B-18s in background, circa 1940.