AMERICA'S AIRCRAFT BONEYARDS

WHEN THE BEST YEARS HAVE PASSED

SPECIAL: THE SMELTING PLANTS AT WALNUT RIDGE ARKANSAS

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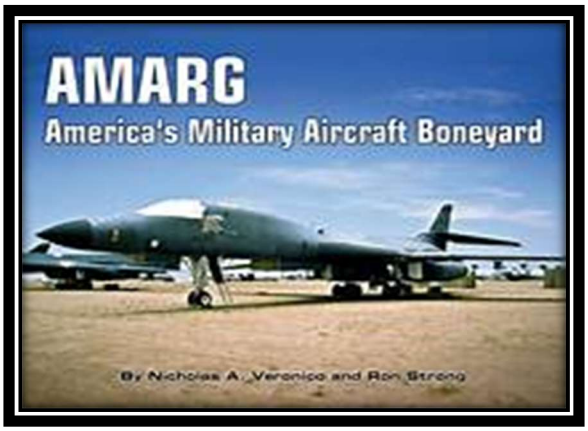

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Retired B-52's

In November 1946, a little over one year after the end of World War II, RKO Pictures and Samuel Goldwyn released the movie "The Best Years of Our Lives", which won seven Oscars at the 1947 Academy Awards.

If you haven't seen it, you should. For those of you who don't know, it's the story of three returning veterans and the difficulties they faced returning to civilian life. One of the actors, Harold Russell, had never acted before, yet he won the Oscar for Best Supporting Actor, playing Homer Parrish, who had lost both of his hands in the war.

Retired U.S. Air Force Boeing B-47 Stratojet bombers at the MASDC, Davis-Monthan Air Force Base, Arizona (USA), in the 1960s. Some 1,500 B-47s were retired in about six years.

Russell knew the part well – as an instructor with the 13th Airborne (which ironically never saw action during the war), Russell was handling an explosive during the making of a training film: a defective fuse caused it to prematurely explode, costing Russell both hands.

One of the other main characters of the film, former Army Air Corps Captain Fred Derry (played by Dana Andrews), was a highly decorated bombardier on a B-17. Before the war, he was a soda jerk. Showing symptoms of what we now call "PTSD", Fred returns home to a tightened job market – the only job he can get is his old one behind the soda counter of a burger joint. He also has serious marital issues. Almost at his last straw, Fred wanders into a vast field covered in the remains of various WWII planes.

Aerospace Maintenance and Regeneration Center at Davis-Monthan Air Force Base.

Seeing a partially gutted B-17, Fred takes the bombardier's position and mentally relives some of his missions. As he breaks out into a sweat, a man yells from outside the plane and tells him to get out – the plane is being hauled away as scrap. Fred tells him that he used to serve on a B-17 and that it's a shame that the plane is being taken to a junkyard

The man (another veteran) replies that the bomber and the others there are being taken apart and used to help build new homes for vets. Fred asks the man for a job, and we're left with the impression that Fred's life is about to turn around.

An aerial view of some of the more than 2,500 aircraft from all services

In the film, the planes were used to build new homes for vets, but unfortunately, most of the planes that helped win the war weren't put to such good use. Most were stored in what is colloquially termed "aircraft boneyards".

It is rare for any technology to become obsolete "overnight", but with the development of jet technology, the vast numbers of propeller-driven fighters and bombers of WWII became virtually useless to the military of the United States. Both Great Britain and the United States had developed jet fighters during the war, though the American P-80 arrived in the theater too late to see combat. The Soviets entered the jet age shortly after the war's end in 1946.

The U.S. Military did find some uses for otherwise obsolete planes such as this A-26A of the 609th SOS in 1969, Vietnam.

The United States built nearly 300,000 planes for a variety of military uses in the period 1940-45. Most of these planes still existed when the war ended (about 70,000 were lost during the war: most of these were not combat-related: they were lost in transport ships sunk by U-boats and/or in ferry or training accidents). Many had not seen use for years (having become obsolete with the entrance of newer, better aircraft).

Some of these planes had gone to allies - the Soviet Union and Canada received many of them.

After the war, a fairly large number were sold/given to other nations - many of them in Europe to counter any possible Soviet moves (Greece and Turkey were the beneficiaries of hundreds of planes).

Some were auctioned off to civilians/private companies – the Douglas C-47/DC-3 had a post-war life as a passenger/transport aircraft. Many other roles were filled as well. Still, that left thousands upon thousands of aircraft. Thus, the "boneyard" was "born".

Boeing B-52s in storage or awaiting dismantlement in Arizona

The biggest post-WWII boneyard was in Arizona, at what is now the Davis-Monthan Air Force Base. The first residents were B-29 Super fortresses and C-47s. Today, Davis-Monthan is the home of the 309th Aerospace Maintenance and Regeneration Group and still houses old or defunct planes. Their use is almost the same as it was in 1946: they are used for spare parts or sold off whole or in parts.

Unlike their WWII predecessors, many planes are kept here for possible future use – in reserve storage, either on a short or long-term basis. The weather in Arizona combined with the altitude of the base helps keep rust and other weather-related damage at a minimum. Another base in Arizona, Kingman, was also used to house WWII aircraft, as were bases in California, Texas, New Mexico, Oklahoma, *and Arkansas.*

What happened to the planes of WWII? Fortunately, a small number were sold to private individuals over the years (either whole or in parts), and today they fly as living reminders of the great conflict. Others reside in museums such as the Smithsonian.

***"Salvage and melt"* meant that the planes would be stripped of engines, armament, instruments, and radios (which would be sold in lots or individually, or re-used, in the case of many .50 caliber machine guns). The air-frame and any other metal parts would be melted down. Most were made from aluminum, which was needed around the world after WWII. The metal was shaped into ingots, like gold, and sold worldwide. Many of the planes went into rebuilding Western Europe through the Marshall Plan. In a way, they helped save Europe twice.**

LARGE BONE YARDS IN THE WESTERN UNITED STATES

Located in Arizona, California, and New Mexico are seven major airplane boneyards, each located in dry, low-humidity desert environments and offering long runways and extensive storage areas. Shown below is a list of these boneyard facilities.

Airfield or Facility Name	Purpose or Type	City	ST	Runway Length
Southern California Logistics Airport - SCLA (VCV)	Commercial airliner storage, maintenance & disassembly	Victorville	CA	15,050'
Davis-Monthan AFB (DMA)	Military boneyard and storage facility	Tucson	AZ	13,643'
Roswell International Air Center (ROW)	Commercial airliner storage, maintenance & disassembly	Roswell	NM	13,001'
Mojave Air and Space Port (MHV)	Commercial airliner storage, maintenance & disassembly	Mojave	CA	12,503'
Phoenix Goodyear Airport (GYR)	Commercial airliner storage and maintenance	Phoenix	AZ	8,500'
Pinal Air Park (MZJ)	Commercial airliner storage, maintenance & disassembly	Marana	AZ	6,849'
Kingman Airport (IGM)	Commercial airliner storage and maintenance	Kingman	AZ	6,827'

WALNUT RIDGE ARMY AIR BASE IN ARKANSAS

A POST WW2 "CRUSHING GROUNDS"

A FACILITY THAT FEW ARKANSANS TODAY EVER HEARD OF

Base Operations at the Walnut Ridge Air Field in Arkansas during World War II
(Walnut Ridge Army Flying School Museum)

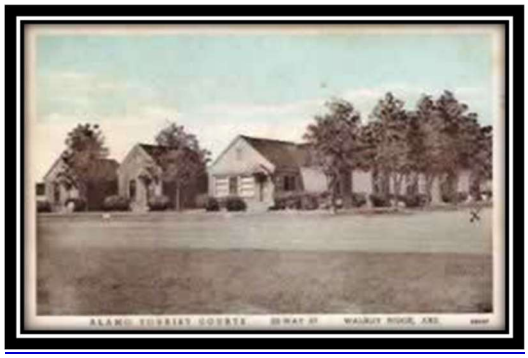
Walnut Ridge is located in northeast Arkansas, about 25 miles from Jonesboro, at the intersection of U.S. Highways 63, 67, and 412.

It is about 90 miles northwest of Memphis, Tennessee, and about 125 miles northeast of Little Rock. To the north of Walnut Ridge is the town of Pocahontas.

CONSTRUCTION OF WALNUT RIDGE FIELD AND USAGE DURING WORLD WAR 2

In response to satisfying World War II requirements, the U.S. government decided to create an Army Air Forces Flying School. It originally picked a location in Dyersburg, Tennessee, but a Board of three Army Air Forces Officers continued the search.

Their flight brought them over an area just northeast of Walnut Ridge, Arkansas, which looked promising. Returning by car the next day, the Board looked over the site and checked on the schools, housing, utilities, and transportation. The Board was favorably impressed with the Walnut Ridge location, and on April 15, 1942, recommended it be substituted for the Dyersburg site. The Dyersburg site was unfeasible due to the millions of cubic yards of dirt that would have to be moved to construct the runway.



Housing during the construction of the airfield was at a premium. Residents opened their homes to workers, motels were full. Seen here: Alamo Tourist Courts, Walnut Ridge, Arkansas

The Board's recommendation was approved, and on May 12 the War Department directed the Army Corps of Engineers to construct a Basic Flying School at Walnut Ridge with three runways and plan for more.

The 3,096-acre site chosen was about 6 miles northeast of the town of Walnut Ridge. Construction of the airbase began on June 20, 1942. The new airfield brought new prosperity to most people in Lawrence and Randolph Counties as more than 1,500 workers moved into the area to handle the construction.

Designed for 5,114 military personnel, and 976 civilians, the Walnut Ridge Air Field had three 5,000-foot runways, a huge apron covering over 63 acres, four large hangars, a base engineering building, and a fully equipped 203-bed hospital.

Aerial view of the Walnut Ridge Air Field during World War II
(Photo courtesy of Walnut Ridge Army Flying School Museum)

The flying school officially opened on August 15, 1942, and began training its first class of cadets. Over the next two years, pilots were trained to fly BT-13s.

In the last year of the war, the airbase was also used to hold German POWs. The Army Air Force's use of the airbase officially ended in 1944, when it was traded to the Marine Corps, becoming the Walnut Ridge Marine Air Facility.

POST WORLD WAR 2 YEARS @ WALNUT RIDGE

Once peace was assured, the military found itself with a huge surplus of aircraft. The United States had manufactured about 294,000 aircraft for the war effort. A study was conducted to determine the most cost-effective way to dispose of planes; it was determined that too many man-hours were required to dismantle planes for parts, and the cost of storage areas for the parts was too high.

So, the method of "salvage and melt" was adopted. Main components such as engines, armament, instruments, and radios were removed from each plane. The remainder of the aircraft was cut into pieces and pushed into a large furnace or smelter. Aluminum was the prime metal sought after, melted and poured into ingots for sale and shipping.

Four thousand, eight hundred and seventy-one (4,871) of the aircraft stored at Walnut Ridge, primarily fighters and bombers, were sold to Texas Railway Equipment Company in September 1946 to be scrapped. The bid price was $1,838,798.19. On the southwest corner of the ramp, two giant smelters were constructed to melt the scrap aluminum, which was formed into huge ingots for shipping.

Demolished aircraft parts are fed into the smelting furnace

On the other end, the aluminum ingots are produced.

The two smelters used to melt the aircraft at Walnut Ridge were torn down in 1952.

Planes were then assigned an airport, at places like Kingman in Arizona and Walnut Ridge for short-term storage and subsequent disposal, or Davis-Monthan AFB in Tucson or Pyote AAF in Texas for longer-term storage.

Walnut Ridge was an ideal site for surplus aircraft storage because of its large land area and large parking ramp.

As many as 250 airplanes arrived each day. An estimated 10,000 to 11,000 warplanes were flown to Walnut Ridge in 1945 and 1946 for storage, sale, or scrapping.

Curtiss P-40 Warhawks stacked on their noses to save space at Walnut Ridge, Arkansas after World War II.

Aerial view of B-17 Flying Fortresses in storage at Walnut Ridge, Arkansas, in November 1945

Convair B-32 Dominator bombers stored at Walnut Ridge, Arkansas, after World War II
Of the 118 B-32s that were built, 67 of the Dominators were sent to Walnut Ridge.
(Walnut Ridge Army Flying School Museum)

The Mitchell B-25s wait their turn for destruction

Among the other aircraft types and quantities shipped to Walnut Ridge for storage or smelting were:

TYPE OF AIRCRAFT	NUMBER
C-47	191
C-54	86
C-46	369
B-17 Flying Fortress	1,211
B-24 Liberator	1,148
B-25 Mitchell	512
B-26 Maruder	261
P-38 Lighting	100
P-40 Warhawk	462
P-47 Thunderbolt	347
P-51 Mustang	102
B-32 Dominator	65 *(many straight from the assembly line in Fort Worth)*

Some called *it "The Death of an Air Force* "Between 1945 and June 1947, approximately 34,700 WWII aircraft were sold for flyable purposes*... and 26,900, primarily combat types, were sold for scrapping.*

Walnut Ridge was also a ***major maintenance facility***, servicing C-47s, P-40s, P-51s, B-17s, and B-29s.

TO VIEW THE VIDEO OF THE STORIES OF WALNUT RIDGE BONEYARD

COPY AND PASTE THE BELOW LINKS INTO YOUR BROWSER

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bb3DcrnfyZg

MODERN-DAY WALNUT RIDGE MUNICIPAL AIRPORT

In 1947, the United States government formally turned the base over to the City of Walnut Ridge. Part of the airbase was converted into a municipal airport. Southern Baptist College, now known as Williams Baptist College, took possession of 122 acres of the land, using it for student housing and educational buildings. The rest of the former air base was converted into an industrial complex.

Today, Walnut Ridge Municipal Airport (IATA Code ARG) remains an active 1,800-acre facility. It features three runways ranging in length from 5,000' to 6,000'. A group interested in preserving the airfield's history created in 1999 a museum commemorating the air base and the people who served there. The Wings of Honor Museum - Walnut Ridge Army Flying School Museum is located nearby today.

Base Operations at the Walnut Ridge Air Field in Arkansas during World War II
(Walnut Ridge Army Flying School Museum)

The tens of thousands of proud warbirds that had survived the enemy fighter planes and fierce anti-aircraft fire could not escape the smelters at Albuquerque, Altus, Kingman, Ontario, Walnut Ridge, and Clinton.

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