

Butler Aircraft Spotting Tower

By Tom Riley

The first Aircraft Warning Post in the Butler area was organized by the Army Air Corps in 1941. Civilian volunteers watched the sky for enemy aircraft in two-hour shifts, 24 hours a day. Observers initially worked out of an old car parked on a hill on the Van Wyck Estate (now Camp Vacamas) in Apshawa. The telephone in a nearby home was used to call in reports to Mitchel Field on Long Island. In 1942, Charles Kochka, the American Legion Commander, donated a trailer with a telephone connection and, when war came at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, the Aircraft Spotting Service was staffed by well-trained capable observers.

All observers were photographed and fingerprinted by the Butler Police Dept. and every Monday evening, Mr. and Mrs. Robert Ordish conducted required aircraft recognition classes in the Butler High School auditorium. Lucea Ordish, Chief Observer and Recognition Officer, had been trained by the Army using silhouettes of enemy aircraft.

It was found that the Apshawa location was difficult to reach in the winter when the roads were icy, so a more accessible location was selected in Kinnelon at the intersection of Kiel Avenue and Ricker Road. This site was rejected by the Army, so the post was moved again, this time to a lot adjacent to Mount Calvary Cemetery on Bartholdi Avenue in Butler. Leo Lust (Excelsior Lumber) designed, constructed, and donated much of the material for a small building to get the observers out of inclement weather. The building was later raised on stilts twenty-five feet off the ground to present a better view.

Over three hundred men and women served as observers from 1941 to 1943 when aircraft spotting was discontinued. The last meeting of the Butler Post took place on March 27, 1944.

The observation tower was dismantled after the war in 1945.

With the outbreak of war in Korea in June 1950, President Truman ordered the reactivation of the Civilian Ground Observation Corps. Les Carlyon, Butler's Civil Defense Director, and Lucea

Ordish gathered a group of volunteers and "Post Alpha Mike Three Zero Red" was back in operation. At first, the concrete apron in front of the Bartholdi Avenue Firehouse was used and observers stood their two-hour shifts exposed to the elements in all kinds of weather.

In July 1952, under the auspices of the U.S. Air Force, (created in 1947) the Butler Post was ordered to go into 24-hour operation. There were not enough volunteers in Butler, so Civil Defense officials in Bloomingdale, Kinnelon, Riverdale, Pompton Lakes and Pequannock were asked for help. According to Mrs. Ordish, those were trying times. "The graveyard shift was especially hard to fill and observers were often asked to work double shifts."



It soon became apparent, as it did during World War II, that in order to operate efficiently on a 24-hour basis, the post needed a building to provide shelter for the observers during bad weather.

All six participating municipalities contributed \$350 toward the construction of a new 30-foot tower which was built on the Bartholdi Avenue side of the Mount Calvary Cemetery across from Saint Anthony's Church. Horace Brannin of Butler was awarded the contract to build the tower for \$1,900. The installation of electricity and heat, as well as the painting of the structure, was done by volunteers. According to Mrs. Ordish, the new building went into operation in November 1952, "just in time to avoid the frozen feet and cold hands of previous winters."

The tower had large windows all around and a deck for outside observation. Inside, there was a stove, a desk, ledgers for recording sightings, and direct telephone lines to Trenton, Harrisburg, PA, and Baltimore, MD, where Air Force control centers were located. The routine was to record and telephone a report about every aircraft that was sighted. The type of plane, single or multi-engine, its elevation, high or low, and the direction it was flying were noted. Anything unusual about the plane was also reported. Butler observers staffed the tower on Saturdays and Sundays, Kinnelon volunteers took over on Mondays, Pompton Lakes covered Tuesdays, Pequannock on Wednesdays, Bloomingdale Thursdays, and Riverdale Fridays.



When the fighting in Korea ended in 1953 the Observation Corps remained active because everyone feared the Cold War was heating up between the US and the Soviet Union. In 1955, the Soviet's ability to fly 1,000 jets 4,500 miles without refueling threatened more than 11 million Americans in 39 major cities. Nuclear weapons made Operation Sky Watch and the Ground Observation Corps more important than ever before.

In 1956, a sophisticated listening device was installed on top of the Butler tower. It looked like a plexiglass covered barrel with an inner cylinder containing a receiver. Its range during poor visibility was approximately 4 miles. Used mostly at night, it sounded an alarm to alert observers of approaching aircraft.

The Butler Post had an outstanding service record and won a number of awards, In 1952, it received the "G.O.C. Skywatch Award" from the State of New Jersey. The "Most Outstanding Post in the State of New Jersey Award" was presented to Butler in 1955. In 1956, the Air Force presented Butler with its "Outstanding Service Award" and the Post was recognized as one of the best in the country. On July 14, 1957, Mrs. Lucea Ordish was the only observer from New Jersey to be awarded a Aircraft Warning Service "Certificate of Recognition."



One of the more than 16,500 Ground Observer Corps (GOC) observation posts manned by some 400,000 active civilian GOC volunteers during the '50s. The observer corps network known as "Operation Skywatch" was disbanded in 1959 when SAGE eliminated the need for visual surveillance (U.S. Air Force Photo)

By the late 1950's, great strides had been made in the development of long-range high-altitude radar. According to the U.S. Defense Department, the skies above our country and Canada could be protected by the new technology. As a result, on January 26, 1958, all 17,000 Ground Observation Posts across the country were ordered by President Eisenhower to stand down. He sent the following message to the 380,000 observers that had participated in the program.

“Our country is indebted to you for your steadfast and unselfish service in a cause of vital importance to our defense. I salute you on this occasion for a job well done and ask you for a continuation of your devoted service in meeting the challenges of the future. I hope that you will continue to provide leadership in other fields of civil defense and by your example stimulate many other Americans to share in the tasks required to sustain our democratic way of life.

*Dwight David Eisenhower
President of the United States*

The Butler G.O.C. Post had the distinction of being one of the few Posts in the nation to never miss a shift over its seven years of existence. The civilian volunteers had freed up hundreds of

military personnel that were then available for other duties. At its final meeting on January 26, 1958, Air Force representatives recognized all the local G.O.C. leaders, as well as officials of the six towns that supported the program. All observers received a certificate of recognition from the Continental Air Defense Command, an observer's pin showing the number of hours they served, and a copy of the letter from the President. U.S.A.F Lt. Colonel Jerome Schwickert presented medals to the observers with the highest number of hours served. Mrs. Ora Sebald of Butler served 1,750 hours, 1,500 hours were served by Dr. Elliot Cort of Pompton Lakes, and 1,000 hours were served by Mrs. Dorothy Mandeville of Riverdale. In 1959 all observers, including my brother, Joel Riley, received Honorary Life Memberships in the U.S. Air Force Air Defense Team.

The independent Aircraft Spotting Tower on the hill behind the Railroad Station that was staffed by American Hard Rubber Company employees, was also discontinued on January 26, 1958.



It is a good thing, because it means our area was never threatened by an aerial attack, but with all the effort of hundreds of volunteers, and thousands of hours of observation over 10 years, Alpha Mike Three Zero Red, never spotted an enemy aircraft. It is also good to know that during the dark days of World War II, the Korean Conflict, and the Cold War, our friends and neighbors were watching the skies to help keep us safe.



Sources

Butler New Jersey In Story and Pictures

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Paterson News Dec. 15, 1952

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Suburban Trends Aug. 13, 1963

Joel Riley's Personal Items