

BROOKS AIR FORCE BASE, BUILDING NO. 175
(Brooks Air Force Base, Bionucleonics Laboratory)
2484-2486 Gillingham Drive
San Antonio
Bexar County
Texas

HABS TX-3521-K
HABS TX-3521-K

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
SOUTHWEST SYSTEM SUPPORT OFFICE
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
PO Box 728
Santa Fe, New Mexico

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
BROOKS AIR FORCE BASE, BUILDING 175
(BROOKS AIR FORCE BASE, BIONUCLEONICS LABORATORY)

HABS No. TX-3521-K

Location: 2484-2486 Gillingham Drive
San Antonio
Bexar County
Texas

~~USGS Southton, Texas Quadrangle (7.5')~~

~~Universal Transverse Mercator Coordinates: 14.553044, 3246445~~

~~Google Earth Lat/Long 29.34731800, -98.453889~~

Present Owner: Brooks Development Authority (BDA)

Present Occupant: Air Force Research Laboratory (AFRL) and University of Texas Health Science Center

Present Use: Environmental health laboratory

Significance: Building 175 (Bionucleonics Laboratory) was the center of biological and nuclear medical research at the U.S. Air Force School of Aerospace Medicine (USAFSAM) at Brooks Air Force Base (AFB). Building 175 housed both a biological and a nuclear laboratory which performed critical research involving viruses and radiation in relation to space. Scientists at Building 175 helped to determine the maximum allowable radiation dosage for each astronaut and devised protective gear to limit exposure. The bionucleonics laboratory of Building 175 contributed other crucial research that was essential to space exploration, as well as military effectiveness. Current uses for Building 175 include an Environmental Health Laboratory and the University of Texas Health Science Center.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date(s) of erection: 1964
2. Architect: Smith, Hinchman & Grylls Associates, Inc.
3. Original and subsequent owners: Air Force
4. Builder, contractor, suppliers: Unknown
5. Original plans and construction: Original plans are on file with BDA, 8030 Challenger Drive, Brooks City-Base, Texas.

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6. Alterations and additions: Building 175 has suffered various minor alterations of interior finishes and spatial arrangements. No major additions have been made.

B. Historical Context:

Building 175 was among six buildings erected during the second phase of construction (1961-64) at USAFSAM, Brooks AFB. The multiple-building complex represented the base's expanding role and mission as one of the largest aerospace medical research centers in the world. With research and development goals ranging from space to warfare, USAFSAM has played a central role in the mission of the Air Force as well as NASA. Though the USAFSAM campus was constructed in 1959, the history of Brooks AFB has involved multiple missions beginning with the training of Army pilots in World War I to reserve flight training during the Cold War.

Establishment of Brooks Field and Early Aviation Training, 1917-26

Established on an 873-acre tract of land in San Antonio, Texas, in November 1917, Kelly Field No. 5 grew out of the increasing wartime need for cadets and trainers. In February 1918, the airfield was officially renamed Brooks Field in honor of Cadet Sidney Johnson Brooks, Jr., a San Antonio native who died in a plane crash at Kelly Field No. 2 in 1917. The new commander of Brooks Field, Major Henry Conger Pratt, oversaw the installation's mission of preparing up to 5,000 airmen for wartime service in Europe. In addition, Brooks trained flight officers as teachers of a new British training regimen known as the Gosport System, which utilized innovative controls and speaking tubes to improve communication between instructors and cadets while in the air. The use of the Gosport system at Brooks Field convinced the War Department in October 1918, to incorporate the experimental system at Brooks Field into all Army airfields.¹

In May 1919 the Observation School at Camp Ben Wise in San Antonio, which trained cadets in the use of aerial observation, moved to Brooks Field. As one of five national balloon observation schools, Brooks Field provided surveillance along the U.S.-Mexico border utilizing the 16th Airship Company and the 4th and 5th Balloon companies. The balloon and airship program at Brooks Field, despite the initial investment of manpower and expense, proved to be a short-lived experiment for the San Antonio region. Several accidents involving explosions forced the school to close in 1922.²

The decision to remove the Balloon and Airship Observation School was part of a 1920 Army Reorganization Bill which stipulated that all flight training for the country would be centered in San Antonio air fields, including Brooks Field. By June 1922, Brooks Field was classified as the only Primary Flying School in the country as a result of the consolidation of two former flying schools in California and Florida. From 1922-31, Brooks Field earned the reputation of being one of the premier aviation training sites in the country and was responsible for developing the young Army Air Service at a crucial period of its growth.

The system established in 1922 required all military aviators to begin their basic flying training at Brooks Field, with the graduating class moving on to the Air Service Advanced Flying School at Kelly Field. The graduating classes at Brooks later formed the basic structure of the Air Corps for decades to come. The school graduated numerous important aviators including Charles Lindbergh, Frank M. Hawks, Nathan

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Twining, Jimmy Doolittle, and Barney Giles. Instructors at Brooks were among the most experienced and talented aviators in the country, including Claire Chennault of the famed "Flying Tigers," Russell Maughan and Elwood Quesada.³

In addition to its celebrated graduates and instructors, Brooks Field was also the site of important advances in aviation. In April and September 1929 Brooks Field held public demonstrations of one of the earliest paratroop warfare experiments. In 1930, Colonel William C. Ocker devised a device allowing pilots to fly "blind" with the use of instruments inside the cockpit.⁴

School of Aviation Medicine (SAM), 1926-31

In 1926, SAM was relocated from Mitchell Field, New York to Brooks Field in an effort to improve pilot performance and to learn firsthand from pilots about the medical factors affecting flight. From 1926-31, flight surgeons at SAM generally acted as physicians first and teachers second; their main responsibility was to direct physical examinations to determine the condition of cadets for flying.

In 1931, SAM and the Primary Flying School moved to the newly created Randolph Field in San Antonio, Texas, ending Brooks Field's important aviation training mission. In the 1930s, Brooks was designated a center for observation training and housed several observation squadrons. Escalating tensions in Europe led to the establishment of an Air Corps Advanced Flying School in early 1941, which focused on training pilots in observation skills using single-engine aircraft. Because of lessons learned early in World War II, the Army Air Corps reassessed the importance of aerial observation, placing greater importance upon bombing and pursuit aircraft training. As a result, in 1943, Brooks Field began a training program for the new B-25 bomber, which greatly aided the war effort. Brooks Field became Brooks AFB in 1948 and assumed a new postwar mission as a reserve flight training center which it maintained until 1960 when all flight activities ceased.⁵

SAM: the Space Program to Vietnam, 1959-69

In 1959, SAM, now known as the School of Aerospace Medicine (SAM) was reassigned to Brooks AFB as part of a new Air Force mission to consolidate its aviation and space medicine efforts at one base. From 1959-69, Brooks AFB, as part of the Aerospace Medical Division (AMD), played a key role in providing NASA and the Air Force with innovative and important space medicine research, ensuring the success of the country's efforts in space exploration. Research at Brooks AFB utilized a range of laboratories and research facilities to perform experiments ranging from altitude and pressure experiments to space food nutritional studies. In addition to direct contributions to NASA's Mercury, Gemini, and Apollo programs, Brooks focused much of its space medicine efforts on the Air Force's military space program, the Manned Orbiting Laboratory (MOL). By the mid-1960s, researchers and physicians at Brooks AFB increasingly became involved in the Vietnam War, forcing SAM and AMD to manage dual missions of space and warfare.

The USAFSAM Campus

In 1952, with its intention to relocate the crowded facilities at Randolph AFB to Brooks AFB, the Air Force required a new master plan accommodating the new "Aeromedical Center." Early in the planning

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stages, officers of the Air Force Headquarters in Washington, D.C., had a clear notion of the type of facility they wanted, distinguishing it from other Air Force installations: "Consideration should be given to permanence and preeminence of this facility as an academic institution . . . The quality of construction should be comparable to that of the leading medical institutions in the United States."⁶ In designing the master plan for such an institution, officers of the Headquarters of the Air Force made an unqualified recommendation for the St. Paul, Minnesota firm of Ellerbe & Company, which already had two years experience with an earlier Brooks AFB master plan:

The Ellerbe Company, because of the design over the past twenty-five years of the varied and highly specialized diagnostic research and hospital facilities for the Mayo Clinic at Rochester, Minnesota, is considered eminently qualified to continue this project.⁷

As early as 1952, the Air Force had foreseen the need to divide construction of the new USAFSAM facilities into at least two phases. An "Analysis of General Master Plan, Brooks Air Force Base, Texas" notes that once the first segment of building was complete, the aeromedical program activities would be able to continue without disruption while additional facilities are added. Older structures, including World War I and II temporary buildings, were used to augment the first five buildings while waiting for completion of the complex. In 1956, Colonel Frese, Commander of the Air University at Maxwell AFB, Alabama, suggested that the USAFSAM complex might ultimately be augmented by 50% more buildings than were stipulated for the first building phase. In April 1958, a memo produced by the Ad Hoc Committee on Aeromedical Expansion (presumably made up of scientists and department heads from the Randolph AFB School of Aviation Medicine) noted facilities already in the planning stages for the second phase of construction. These included a clinical and experimental research dental building, a library, biometrics and records repository building, a vivarium, and a primate testing, holding and breeding facility. Committee members were urged to identify any special facilities they would need for their work. By June 1959 the Air Force completed a documented titled "Construction Project Justification Data," outlining proposed requirements and purposes for a number of new buildings. Of seven proposed structures, six were built.

Design work on the second phase of building began soon after the first five buildings were occupied by USAFSAM during the summer of 1959. The six buildings, including Building 175, constructed during the second construction phase, from 1961-64, were designed by the firm of Smith, Hinchman & Grylls of Detroit, Michigan. No records of contracts between the firm and the Air Force have been located, and indeed, Smith, Hinchman & Grylls may have been yet another subcontractor to Ellerbe & Company, which was still involved with base-wide planning for Brooks AFB. Smith, Hinchman & Grylls (today known as SHG Incorporated) was founded in 1853 by architect Sheldon Smith, and is Michigan's oldest architectural firm. Prior to their involvement in the USAFSAM project, the firm had designed numerous prominent buildings in downtown Detroit, including the Penobscot Building (1928), the forty-floor Guardian Building (1929), and the J.L. Hudson Company Department Store (1948). In 1952, the firm built three major buildings for the University of Michigan campus at Ann Arbor: Mason Hall, Haven Hall, and Angell Hall Auditorium. Smith, Hinchman & Grylls' work at Brooks AFB may have been a major point of departure for the firm, which later became well-known for laboratory designs, including the Los Alamos National Laboratories in New Mexico, the Naval Air Warfare Center Advanced Systems Integration Laboratory in Maryland, and numerous university laboratory facilities.

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The buildings designed by Smith, Hinchman & Grylls for the second phase of construction at USAFSAM include: Building 140 (Biosystems Research Laboratory); Building 150 (Professional Building); Building 155 (Research Library); Building 170 (Bioastronautics and Biodynamics Laboratory); Building 175 (Bionucleonics Laboratory); and Building 185 (Vivarium Support facility). All the buildings conform with the precedent set by C.H. Page & Son, using steel construction with brick veneer and extruded aluminum fenestration in the International Style.

Building 175

Building 175 was constructed in 1964 in order to aid the Air Force in understanding the medical effects of biological and nuclear agents upon Air Force crew and personnel. Divided into a Biological Laboratory and Nuclear Laboratory, Building 175 was the first military laboratory of its kind when constructed and “received enthusiastic support and assistance in preparation from [the] Division [of] Biology and Medicine of the Atomic Energy Commission.”⁸

The smaller Biological Laboratory wing of Building 175 consisted of two environmental test chambers, laboratories, inoculation rooms, incubation rooms, autopsy rooms, and exposed animal rooms. Research in the biological section focused on studying the effects of altitude, pressure, and temperature on bacteria, viruses, and other agents, in addition to human’s resistance to infection. To realize research goals, scientists utilized infected animals in order to study the effects of biological agents on Air Force personnel.

The larger Nuclear Laboratory wing of Building 175 consisted of numerous laboratories related to biochemical and nuclear studies, including a reactor control room, whole body counting laboratory, hot [irradiated] animal holding room, isotope storage room, biochemical analysis laboratory, and a chemical dosimetry laboratory. Researchers examined the effects of nuclear components consisting of “weapons effects, weapons components, handling of nuclear materials, including industrial and medical isotopes from aircraft propulsion systems, nuclear power sources, and accidental and natural radiation including cosmic and extra-terrestrial sources.”⁹ Similar to the Biological Laboratory, researchers used animals to examine the effects of nuclear radiation upon human personnel. To support such experiments, a small vivarium was included in the Nuclear Laboratory to house animals injected with radioactive materials.

A key element of research performed by scientists in Building 175 included space radiation studies, which examined the possible hazards astronauts would face in a space environment. Since scientists had begun examining the potential hazards of spaceflight, a consistent concern was radiation exposure. With the Air Force planning missions lasting up to a month or longer on the MOL, astronauts would be exposed to potential radiation hazards from solar flares, the inner Van Allen belt, and galactic particles. Scientists at Building 175 helped to determine the maximum allowable radiation dosage for each astronaut and devised protective gear to limit exposure. The spacesuits designed by USAFSAM for the Gemini and Apollo programs were greatly aided by space radiation studies performed at Building 175. In addition, NASA utilized much of the space radiation research in the planning of its missions.

Overall, studies at Building 175 enabled the Air Force to better understand the effects of biological and nuclear agents and represented one of the first military laboratories pursue such studies. Currently, no equipment remains from the Biological Laboratory. Current uses for Building 175 include an

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Environmental Health Laboratory and the University of Texas Health Science Center.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: Building 175 is one of six buildings designed by the Detroit, Michigan-based architectural firm of Smith, Hinchman, and Grylls, Inc, during the second phase of construction at USAFSAM. The building shares common features with the other buildings designed by the firm: a flat roof with gravel guard edge; treatment of facades as flat planes; tall, narrow windows with light blue metal panels, and a recessed foundation wall. The main facade faces Gillingham Drive on the north. Character-defining features of Building 175 are the courtyard and breezeways between the east and west wings.
2. Condition of fabric: The building is in good condition.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: Building 175 is 315'-6" x 110'-9" overall, and is 13'-5" from finished first floor to top of roof structure. The building consists of a single story and is constructed in two sections, separated by a courtyard. The east wing is 192'-6" by 110'-9", the courtyard measures 33'-0" by 110'-0", and the west wing is 90'-0" by 110'-9".
2. Foundation: The building rests on a concrete pier-and-beam foundation. The first floor sits approximately 3' above finished grade. Building 176 has a distinctive foundation design. The face of the foundation is set back 1'-6" from the facade, giving the building a floating appearance.
3. Walls: Exterior walls are face-brick veneer with structural clay tile backing.
4. Structural system, framing: The first floor consists of a concrete slab with one-way joists. Wall and roof framing is steel wide-flange beams and open-web bar joists.
5. Porches, stoops, balconies, bulkheads:
 - Covered breezeways, located at the northern and southern ends of the courtyard, connect the east and west wings of Building 175. Four brick columns support the northern breezeway roof and the southern breezeway roof rests on a brick wall and two brick columns. The breezeways are paved with concrete.
 - The main entrances to both wings are at opposite ends of the northern breezeway. A set of open-riser steps leads from the sidewalk to the north breezeway and a ramp leads from a parking lot to the south breezeway. A concrete porch and steps is at a

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secondary entrance to the building on the east facade of the east wing. An exterior concrete stairway, leading from grade level to the roof of the west wing, is a character-defining feature of Building 175. Three concrete pylons support the three-flight stair. It has open risers and an aluminum handrail and stanchions.

6. Chimneys: None.

7. Openings:

- a. Doorways and doors: The main entrances to the building are opposite one another under the north breezeway. Both entrances have single 3'-0" x 7'-0" aluminum-and-glass doors incorporated within an aluminum frame storefront panel. Exterior aluminum-frame-and-plate-glass vestibules are a later addition. Building entrances are also found at either end of the south breezeway. A pair of hollow metal doors provides access to the east wing and a single hollow metal door leads to the west wing. A secondary entrance on the east facade of the east wing has a pair of hollow metal doors.
- b. Windows and shutters: Building 175 has narrow aluminum sash-and-frame windows with fixed-glass and porcelainized steel panels that extend the height of the facade.

8. Roof:

- a. Shape, covering: The roof is flat with built-up roofing.
- b. Cornice, eaves: A cant strip with a sheet metal gravel guard defines the roof edge.
- c. Dormers, cupolas, towers: Each wing has a mechanical penthouse. The east wing's penthouse measures 61'-6" x 41'-2" and the west wing's penthouse is 41'-0" x 41'-2". Both penthouses have flat roofs with built-up roofing. Exterior walls are steel frame construction with insulated metal siding. A pair of hollow metal doors provides interior access to each penthouse.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans:

- a. First floor: The east wing is partitioned into a conventional arrangement of offices, laboratories, and service areas served by three double-loaded corridors. The west wing is in the process of being renovated and consists of a U-shaped pattern of double loaded corridors providing access to environmental testing chambers, laboratories, and study carrels.

2. Stairways: There are no interior stairways.

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3. Flooring: Typical flooring in most areas is vinyl tile on concrete.
4. Walls and ceiling finishes: Typical wall finishes are smooth plaster, glazed structural units and glazed ceramic tiles. Most ceilings are acoustical panels in a metal suspension system.
5. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: Hinged solid-core flush wood doors are typical.
 - b. Windows: There are no interior windows.
6. Decorative features and trim: Building 175 has no character-defining decorative features or trim.
7. Hardware: Standard commercial-grade hardware with brushed chrome finish is used throughout Building 175.
8. Mechanical Equipment:
 - a. Heating, air conditioning, ventilation: Building 175 has central air conditioning and heating.
 - b. Lighting: Typical lighting in Building 175 is recessed fluorescent troffers.
 - c. Plumbing:
 - East wing: The east wing of Building 175 has a men's toilet with four water closets with flush valve, two urinals, and four lavatories. The women's toilet has two water closets and two lavatories. In addition, there are four rooms in the wing equipped with a single water closet, lavatory, and shower. Laboratories are also equipped with sinks.
 - West wing: Men's and women's toilet rooms are located in the southwestern corner of the building, and shower, toilet and locker rooms are in the northeast corner. The men's toilet room contains one water closet with flush valve, one urinal, and one lavatory, while the women's contains one water closet with flush valve and one lavatory. The men's shower room has three showers, and the nearby toilet room has one lavatory and one water closet with flush valve. The women's shower and toilet room is identical.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: Building 175 is situated at the southwest corner of the intersection of Dave Erwin Drive and Gillingham Drive. The immediate setting of the

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building includes the historic street pattern, landscaping composed largely of lawn and trees, and paved parking lots.

2. Historic landscape design: Original architectural drawings and early photos of Building 175 reveal no significant landscape features.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

- A. Original architectural drawings: Original plans for Building 175 are on file with BDA, 8030 Challenger Drive, Brooks City-Base, Texas.
- B. Early views: Some early views of Building 175 and surrounding buildings (mainly aerial) are available in the archives of the Edward H. White, II Museum of Aerospace Medicine at Hangar 9, Brooks City-Base, Texas.
- C. Interviews: N/A
- D. NOTES

¹ Martha Freeman, "Appendix L: Historic Context: Brooks Air Force Base, An American Flying Field, 1917-1946." in *Brooks Air Force Base – Historic Preservation Plan* by D.E. Peter, M.B. Cliff, J. Freeman and K.L. Kane. Geo-Marine, Inc., Plano, Texas, L-3.

² Brooks Air Force Base, *The First Seventy-Five Years*, (n.p., 1992).

³ Brooks Air Force Base, *Commemorative Program, Pride in the Past, Faith in the Future – Brooks Air Force Base, 1917-1992*, (San Antonio Press, 1992), p. 9.

⁴ Freeman, "Historic Context," L-23.

⁵ *Commemorative Program*, 1992.

⁶ Department of the Air Force, HQ, Washington DC to Chief of Engineers, Department of the Army, (June 5, 1952), Edward H. White II Museum of Aerospace Medicine in Hangar 9 at Brooks City-Base.

⁷ Department of the Air Force HQ to Chief of Engineers, Department of the Army, Revision of "Advance Planning FY53" Document. Various Minor Changes, (June 12, 1952), Edward H. White II Museum of Aerospace Medicine in Hangar 9 at Brooks City-Base.

⁸ Department of the Air Force, "Department of the Air Force, Construction Project Justification Data, June 19, 1959," Edward H. White II Museum of Aerospace Medicine in Hangar 9 at Brooks City-Base, p. 4.

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⁹ Ibid., p. 3.

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“Department of the Air Force HQ, Washington DC to Chief of Engineers, Department of the Army.” June 5, 1952. Edward H. White II Museum of Aerospace Medicine in Hangar 9 at Brooks City-Base.

“Department of the Air Force HQ to Chief of Engineers, Department of the Army, Revision of ‘Advance Planning FY53’ Document. Various Minor Changes.” June 12, 1952. Edward H. White II Museum of Aerospace Medicine in Hangar 9 at Brooks City-Base.

Department of the Air Force, “Department of the Air Force, Construction Project Justification Data,” June 19, 1959.

2. Secondary and published sources:

Freeman, Martha. “Appendix L: Historic Context: Brooks Air Force Base, An American Flying Field, 1917-46.” Geo-Marine, Inc., Plano, Texas, 1995.

E. Likely sources not yet investigated: The archives at the Edward H. White II Museum of Aerospace Medicine in Hangar 9 at Brooks City-Base contain a wealth of documentation that merits further exploration.

F. Supplemental Materials: N/A

PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

A. Federal Agency:

Air Force
311th Human Systems Wing
Brooks City-Base
San Antonio, Texas.

B. Project Causing Adverse Effect: The Brooks City-Base project is a cooperative partnership between the Air Force and the non-federal community in which the physical assets of the

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former Brooks AFB have been transferred from the Air Force to BDA, a local municipality under Texas statute. Under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) of 1966, as amended, and its enabling regulations 36 CFR 800, the transfer of Federal property is an adverse effect that must be mitigated via a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) between the lead federal agency, the State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO) and other consulting parties invited to participate in the consultation.

In consultation with the Texas SHPO, the Air Force determined that seventeen buildings at Brooks City-Base were eligible for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places. The Air Force developed an MOA in consultation with the Texas SHPO, City of San Antonio and BDA to mitigate the adverse impact that transfer would have on the seventeen historic properties at the former Brooks AFB. The MOA was also signed by two concurring parties, the San Antonio Conservation Society (SACS) and the Brooks Heritage Foundation (BHF). The MOA stipulated multiple measures, including preparation of a Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) Level II documentation report. The Air Force, through the 311th Human Systems Wing, hired Earth Tech, Inc. to oversee the preparation of HABS documentation. Under contract to Earth Tech, HHM Inc. of Austin, Texas, gathered historical and architectural information and prepared a historic context and the HABS forms.

The following individuals contributed to this report:

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