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Between Pyosis and Pyralidan

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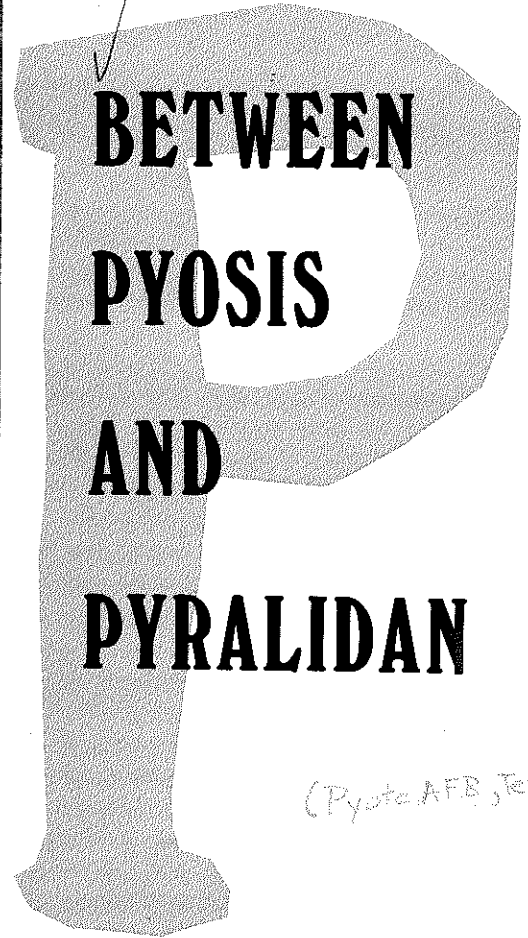


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by Maj Tim Brady

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1. AIRBASES--U.S.

All of us who fly know the names of the great military airfields which have contributed something to aviation history. Langley Field, Maxwell, Randolph, Brooks, Kelly, and Pyote, to name just a few. But, have you ever considered . . . Wait a minute . . . Pyote? What or who (or maybe where) is a Pyote?

If you looked in Webster's handy desk type word thing, you'd expect to find it listed between pyosis and pyralidan. But, of course, you wouldn't find it between these two obscure words, or anyplace else in the dictionary. Where you would find it is between Monahans and Pecos, not too far from Penwell. Texas, that is. And until 1953 it was an active Air Force base. But the chances are, you never heard of it, right? OK, let's see if we can change all that.

During the war, Pyote was used to train crews in B-17s

and B-29s. One can imagine that after spending a few months in training and taking in the excitement of the nearby town of Pyote, population 420, the crews viewed the war as a welcome respite. Especially considering that the chief agricultural products of the area were mesquite trees and rattlesnakes.

After the war there were vast quantities of aircraft which, though direly needed yesterday, were an abundant surplus today. To those leaders planning for the future of the Air Force, it presented a two-pronged problem. First, they didn't want to see the slump shouldered defense posture which existed in the twenties and thirties exist again. And second, with so many airplanes stockpiled, the plans for a modern air arm could be frustrated. Thus, it became necessary to dispose of many aircraft, retain some for operational objectives, and store the remainder. And

that's where Pyote enters the picture again.

Beginning shortly after the war and extending into the early fifties, Pyote was a storage site for World War II aircraft. The dry West Texas climate made it ideally suited for that purpose. And indeed, to anyone driving by, the sight of seemingly horizon to horizon aluminum gave Pyote the appearance of an unexpected, shimmering lake in the middle of an arid, dust-choked plain. It ranked as the third largest storage area behind Kelly and Tinker, and at one time reached a capacity of over 2000 aircraft. P-51s, P-63s, A-26s, C-47s, B-29s, B-25s, B-17s, AT-7s, L-4s, and L-5s made up the lot.

But the desert-like terrain and bone dry climate of Pyote didn't solve all of the problems of storage. Corrosion was still a problem but a corrosion control process viewed as a panacea was on the horizon. Cocooning.

The process involved placing dehumidifying agents inside the aircraft and then tape was applied in gridwork fashion over the entire exterior surface of the aircraft. Next, a solution containing a webbing agent was sprayed over the whole mess followed by several applications of a webbing coat. Then came an asphalt layer and finally, the process was completed by topping off with an aluminumized coating.

"One slit with a knife and the cocoon can be pulled off an aircraft like the skin from a banana, leaving the aircraft unharmed and the plane almost ready for flight . . . After ten years in storage, these reserve warplanes could be airborne on a few hours notice." Such was the statement concerning cocooning which appeared in a popular aviation magazine of the day. The truth, however, was more than slightly removed from that optimistic view.

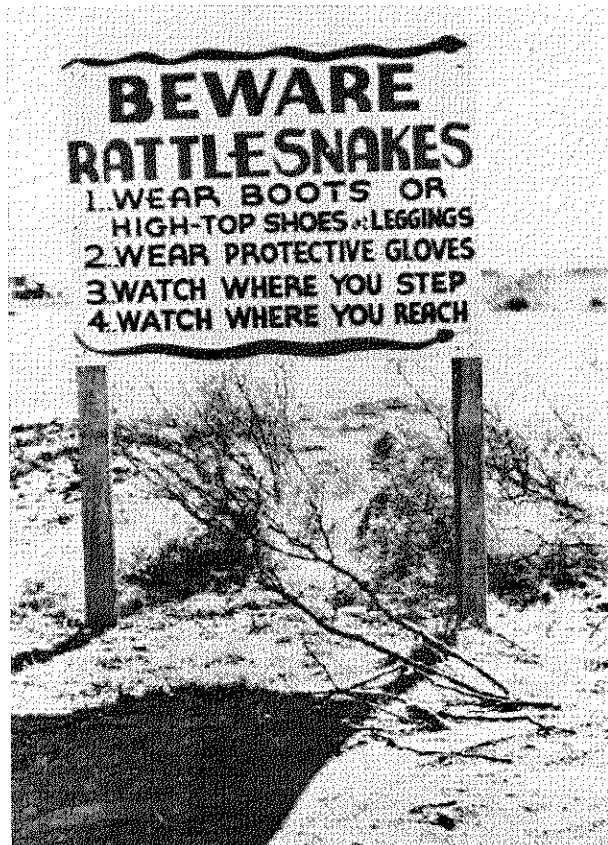
In cool weather the removal process ran more like 600 hours per aircraft and in some cases as many as 1000 hours per. Rarely did it average less than 350 manhours regardless of the temperature. It was somewhat more complicated than a mere slit with a knife. Many processes were tried, ranging from large quantities of chemical solvents to hot water and steam sprays. And one thing they all had in common . . . gook. Stuff that got on everything and into everything.

At Pyote alone, some 601 B-29s were scheduled to be cocooned but when the facts about the process became known, the Air Force eased out of the contract after only 73 of them had been completed.

Some of the aircraft which were stored at Pyote have impressive histories. For instance, the Enola Gay was there for awhile. As you remember, the Enola Gay was the B-29 which virtually brought an end to the war in the Pacific on 6 August 1945, when it was used to drop the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima.

Another famous aircraft stored at Pyote was the

Swoose. This aircraft was one of 35 B-17Ds based at Clark Field in the Philippines on that 8th day of December, 1941, when the Japanese struck, wiping out twenty of the aircraft. The remaining B-17s were lost in rear guard actions over the Philippines and Java, except for the Swoose. It was the sole survivor. Both the Enola Gay and the Swoose are now charges of the Smithsonian. History, however, awards no such fame to Pyote.



This sign posted on Pyote tells it all.

Probably the factor which most contributed to its demise was its location. You can imagine that during the late forties and early fifties Pyote was not the greatest of assignments. The field was about thirteen miles from town and the town was about a hundred miles from nowhere. Understandably, it was an unlikely spot to attract and hold employees. Civilian employees were hard to retain because of the attractive offers made by oil companies in the area. Several plans were attempted to keep Pyote an active storage area, but each failed. In 1953 Pyote closed.

A few of the buildings are still there, pieces of the ramp and runways still exist, but most of what was that nothing little place lives only in the minds of those who had some part in it.

And its history, unimpressive as it might be, belongs to all of us.