

Three airfields and a swinging downtown

By John Young, Waco Tribune-Herald

Recent stories about new life for the Roosevelt building — the former Regis/St. Elizabeth, now being converted to multiple use — focus on jobs and new business activity.

When Margaret Allison reads them she can only think about what was behind a certain door. Every time she drives by on Fourth Street the sight transports her to one of the most magical times of her life, and downtown Waco's life.

Nondescript, the door had nothing written on it. It was the entrance to the Cadet Club.

"The first time I entered that door I was on the arm of the best-looking cadet in Waco," she said.

The Army Air Corps cadets were training to become pilots at one of two training sites, Waco Army Air Field (where Texas State Technical College is today) and Blackland Army Flying Field, where Waco Regional Airport is.

During the war years these servicemen gave an already robust downtown an extra bustle. Add furloughed infantrymen from then-Camp Hood and sailors from Texas naval stations. Having two air bases "gave Waco a special tone," she said.

If you want tone, consider how John Allison first set foot in Waco. He got off a train with fellow cadets at the Katy station downtown, got into formation and marched — all the way to Waco Army Air Field (again, today's TSTC). Margaret's father, supervisor of carriers at the post office on Franklin Avenue, watched the spectacle from the loading dock. He didn't know his future son-in-law was in formation.

How did she and the cadet hook up? Well, you might say she saw him coming, literally.

"You could spot an aviation cadet a mile off. Every girl wanted to date them."

One evening she, then a Baylor student, was waiting for a girlfriend on a front porch on South Fifth Street when John and a pal came up the street and entered Baylor Drug Store.

Nothing would have come of this, except that Margaret, her parents and her girlfriend were going out for dinner. Margaret lobbied for her dad to ask the cadets if they'd like to join them.

He did, marching right into Baylor Drug to introduce himself. And so, out in the family car, John and Margaret met. Four months later "to that day" they would be Mr. and Mrs. John Allison.

Love could have blossomed in any setting, but the Cadet Club at the Roosevelt Hotel accentuated any bloom.

"There was no feeling like it in Waco," she said, a room of cadets and their dates, enjoying the music of the day and a break from danger and thoughts thereof.

"Walking in that door, you were on the arm of a very brave young man who was risking his life every day."

The danger omnipresent when training was multiplied many times later when drills became war. Second Lt. Allison piloted a P-47N fighter in Okinawa and elsewhere in the Pacific.

After the war he attended the University of Tennessee and studied air conditioning technology. A wide world beckoned, but his newlywed's lobbying skills, and likely her father's persuasive powers, got them back to Waco. Here he had a long career with the electric company and they raised a family.

Call it magic, but when ill health took John from her two years ago at age 83, says Margaret, he was still the best-looking enlistee in town.