Taken from Casper Star Tribune: Reach Benjamin Storrow at 307-266-0535 or **benjamin.storrow@trib.com**. Follow him on Twitter @bstorrow

The Casper/Natrona County International Airport was nothing but sagebrush and pasture in 1942.

The United States was in the middle of a massive military mobilization that year and, in March, bulldozers rumbled out over the Wyoming prairie to build what would become the Casper Army Air Base. Construction lasted six months, and soon B-17 bomber crews were running high-altitude training missions from the base. The B-17s stayed only a short while and the base became the home for B-24 bomber flight crews.

Casper was still mired in the Great Depression at the time. The town was left reeling from the collapse of the oil industry in the early 1930s and the fall of the agriculture and banking sectors the decade prior.

“Suddenly, the base was a great shot in the arm”, said Tom Rea of Casper, editor of [Wyohistory.org](http://Wyohistory.org), a project of the Wyoming Historical Society.

The base brought an influx of people into Casper. It employed 2,000 to 2,500 Army Air Forces personnel, between 500 to 800 civilians and, at its height, served as training ground for some 3,000 pilots, navigators, bombardiers and other crewman, said John Goss, director of the Wyoming Veterans Memorial Museum.

The economy began to improve and life returned to the town. The base also produced a shift in Casper’s social scene. Some people at the base found marriage partners, and some couples moved away.

The late Frank Kading was a quartermaster from Chicago. He fell in love with a local girl and never left the Casper area. (That local girl, Joye Marshall, became Joye Kading. She still lives in town and helped found the Veterans Memorial Museum.)

“Some stayed, some went, but it changed Casper forever,” Goss said.

And yet, much of the history of the base has been lost and forgotten. Goss, who grew up in Casper, never heard of the old base before he was hired to lead the veterans museum in 2006. He knows of only one article ever written about the base, which appeared in the “Annals of Wyoming,” an academic journal.

Today, the buildings that once housed the base headquarters are gone. The cement stand that once held the base flagpole is empty, as are the old parade grounds, a field of dirt interspersed with clumps of grass.

The rows of barracks remain, though. One serves as a Hertz service station. Another is home to the Wyoming Veterans Memorial Museum. And still another houses something else entirely, something Goss hopes will help rekindle the memories of an old base that changed Casper’s fortunes.

Bob Johnson is a rancher with a penchant for old cars. He owns a 1937 Studebaker Coupe Express, a 1947 Chevrolet panel truck and a 1927 Chevrolet Roadster truck, which his wife drives because it is too small for him.

One day about 10 years ago, Johnson was driving through Casper when he saw an old fire truck parked outside the Carriage Antique House. The truck immediately caught his attention. In particular, he was fascinated by its art-deco grill, a feature of Chevrolet trucks between 1941 and 1946.

“I thought, ‘How cool would it be to have a fire truck with that look?’” Johnson recalled recently. So he bought it and took it home to Lusk with the intention of restoring it. He never did. The old truck sat in his barn until this spring, when it was packed onto a trailer and trucked down to the Veterans Memorial Museum.

The truck is a 1942 Chevy class 135 bomber crash fire truck, one of six former fire trucks on the Casper Army Air Base. It saw plenty of use; 90 planes from the base crashed, 74 of them in Wyoming. The crashes claimed the lives of some 140 men.

The truck won’t be going anywhere soon. It had to be pushed off the trailer and into the former latrine building where it is now housed. After the war, it was bought by the city of Kaycee, used for several decades and then sold to an old-truck enthusiast whose health failed before he had a chance to repair it. It was sold in an estate auction to the Carriage House before Johnson bought it.

Johnson is glad to see the truck return to Casper. He sold it to the museum for $5,000, the same price he paid for it, after a friend connected him with Veterans Affairs.

“I think it’s fabulous that this mechanical veteran of the second world war will be restored to its active-duty condition,” Johnson said. “The old veteran is going home.”

**Rolling billboard**

The plan is to restore the truck to working order and drive it in annual parades such as the Central Wyoming Fair and Rodeo Parade, Goss said.

Its list of needs is fairly short for a truck that rolled off the line in 1942. The engine needs to be rebuilt, as does its pump. It needs new tires, a new driver-side window, which is shattered, and a paint job.

One day it may be on display in a building the museum is planning, but that is five to 10 years away. Goss figures the chances of the museum coming by an old B-17 or B-24 bomber are next to impossible. Few of those aircraft remain. The old fire truck is the next best thing.

“The history of the air base has been lost or forgotten,” Goss said. “This is a rolling billboard for the Casper Army Air Base.”

Reach Benjamin Storrow at 307-266-0535 or benjamin.storrow@trib.com. Follow him on Twitter @bstorrow