

YourAirForce

Top 5 bases

Recreation, low-cost housing make these stations stand out

Stories by Stephen Losey
slosey@militarytimes.com

No matter the service, no matter the era, one of the favorite pastimes of troops has always been comparing duty stations — griping about the lousy ones and singing the praises of the good ones.

Air Force Times is weighing in on this argument with the best tool at our disposal: cold, hard stats. We've looked at 68 stateside Air Force bases and their surrounding communities, and pulled together data on a dozen factors — everything from school quality to the local economy, crime rates to traffic, and climate to on-base amenities, such as commissaries.

And when we tallied up the results, some surprising bases rose to the top of our list. Our top five bases may not get a lot of attention or be as glamorous a posting as, say, Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam in Hawaii. But they are diamonds in the rough and provide good places for airmen to raise families and entertain themselves, as they serve their country.

Here, based on Air Force Times research, are the Air Force's best bases in the United States:



KAREN PETITT/AIR FORCE

Base Operations at Scott Air Force Base. The area has low housing prices, a low crime rate and top on-base services.

1. (tied) Scott Air Force Base, Illinois

One might not imagine that one of the two best bases in the Air Force can be found near the small town of Belleville, Illinois, a bucolic community of 44,000 in a St. Louis metro area of 2.8 million. But that's exactly what Scott Air Force Base is.

"It's kind of a hidden gem out there," said Col. Kyle Kremer, commander of Scott's 375th Air Mobility Wing. "You can pick and choose what works for you and your family. It's unlike any other place I've been stationed."

Airmen stationed at Scott, no matter whether they prefer city life or country life, can find a niche to make themselves at home, Kremer said.

"Depending on what lifestyle you prefer, you have the full spectrum," Kremer said. "You can live to the east of the base, in the middle of corn fields. A number of people who work on base live in downtown St. Louis, particularly young couples without kids, [and] can go see the Cardinals, the Rams, Fox Theater [a performing arts center], all St.



Vargas



Haynes

Louis has to offer. And then there's the typical outstanding suburban life in the Fairview Heights area."

Scott rose to the top of Air Force Times' bases list due to several factors. Home prices there are some of the lowest in the country. Immediately surrounding Scott, the median home cost is \$57,400, about one-third of the

national median home cost of \$170,100, according to Sperling's Best Places. In nearby Belleville, the median home cost is \$76,300.

The monthly Basic Allowance for Housing at Scott runs from \$855 for an airman basic without dependents, to \$2,064 for a colonel with dependents. The monthly rent for a two-bedroom apartment in the St.

Louis area will set you back \$756, on average, according to RentJungle.com.

And boasting a 70-bed hospital, a large commissary, and a large exchange with a mini-mall and a shoppette, on-base amenities at Scott are among the best in the Air Force.

Crime rates also are low, with score of 7 out of 10 — derived by averaging its violent crime rate and property crime rate, with a higher score indicating less crime in each area. Nationwide, the average crime score for Air Force bases is 6, meaning Scott is above-average. Schools within a 10-mile radius of Scott are decent, if not outstanding, with an average GreatSchools.com ranking of 7 out of 10 possible points.

Scott also gets some special visitors from time to time. The St. Louis Rams came to scrimmage on Scott's parade field in 2012 and 2013, and Kremer said they're working on another scrimmage this year. Military members get in free to watch those scrimmages, Kremer said.

Kremer said Scott has typical on-base amenities — pools, a youth

RANKINGS

Air Force Times' ranking of the best bases in the Air Force:

- 1. (tied) Scott AFB, Illinois
- 1. (tied) Wright-Patterson AFB, Ohio
- 3. Joint Base San Antonio-Lackland, Texas
- 4. Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson, Alaska
- 5. Luke AFB, Arizona
- 6. (tied) MacDill AFB, Florida
- 6. (tied) Grand Forks AFB, North Dakota
- 8. (tied) Eglin AFB, Florida
- 8. (tied) Offutt AFB, Nebraska

- 10. Cannon AFB, New Mexico
- 11. (tied) Holloman AFB, New Mexico
- 11. (tied) Schriever AFB, Colorado
- 11. (tied) McGuire AFB, New Jersey
- 14. (tied) Patrick AFB, Florida
- 14. (tied) Nellis AFB, Nevada
- 14. (tied) Dover AFB, Delaware
- 17. (tied) Eielson AFB, Alaska

- 17. (tied) Tinker AFB, Oklahoma
- 17. (tied) Langley AFB, Virginia
- 17. (tied) Minot AFB, North Dakota
- 21. Beale AFB, California
- 22. (tied) Keesler AFB, Mississippi
- 22. (tied) Sheppard AFB, Texas
- 24. U.S. Air Force Academy, Colorado
- 25. (tied) Davis-Manthan AFB, Arizona

- 25. (tied) Robins AFB, Georgia
- 25. (tied) Mountain Home AFB, Idaho
- 28. (tied) Peterson AFB, Colorado
- 28. (tied) Cheyenne Mountain Air Force Station
- 30. (tied) Edwards AFB, California
- 30. (tied) Randolph AFB, Texas
- 32. (tied) Vandenberg AFB, California

- 32. (tied) Dobbins Air Reserve Base, Georgia
- 34. Ellsworth AFB, South Dakota
- 35. (tied) Kirtland AFB, New Mexico
- 35. (tied) Fairchild AFB, Washington
- 35. (tied) Hill AFB, Utah
- 35. (tied) Whiteman AFB, Missouri
- 39. (tied) Little Rock AFB, Arkansas



Thousands of runners — both military and civilian — run the annual Air Force Marathon at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base each September.

center, a golf course, restaurants and outdoor recreation facilities where airmen can rent campers, boats and bouncy castles for the kids. Belleville also sponsors military appreciation days.

"I really believe the people in the Midwest are fantastic," Kremer said.

Capt. Angel Vargas, a group practice manager for the 375th Medical Group at Scott, agrees. Vargas, who is originally from the Chicago area and was previously stationed at Los Angeles Air Force Base, said his first time living in a relatively rural community near Scott was "culture shock" — in a good way.

"It's a tight-knit community," Vargas said. "I could trust my daughter with whoever I meet. You can't do that in the city. There's literally cornfields right across the street from my housing. I'm not used to that. I'm used to concrete traps."

Vargas lives in off-base military housing, and said his paycheck stretches a lot further than it did in L.A. Airmen who live close to Scott can easily find affordable housing, he said, and some even get a few acres of land out in the country for their horses.

"I know a lot of people who have farms," Vargas said. "One is PCSing and is packing up their horses. I don't hear that in L.A."

Want to check out St. Louis' nightlife, but live on base and don't have a car? Just catch St. Louis' MetroLink rail at the Shiloh-Scott station, which borders the base. That's what Airman 1st Class Sarah Haynes, an intelligence analyst at Scott's 375th Operations Support Squadron who lives in an on-base dorm, does.

"I went to the Yankees-Cards game" one night recently, Haynes said. "It's two bucks for train tickets, I saw the Yankees play, the MetroLink drops you off right outside the base. As a single female airman, it's the safest way, I feel, for a night in the city. Once you get out there, there's a ton to do. You don't

really have to go look for them, you just find them."

Scott has a program called the Single Airmen's Initiative, which provides free trips and events for airmen up to E-4. Haynes said she visited Memphis with this program; other trips have taken airmen to Chicago, hiking in the Ozark Mountains, and up in hot air balloons. Haynes, who is on her first assignment, said that the activities sponsored by Scott have a tremendous impact on young airmen like herself.

"I've got single friends at other bases that don't have that [program], and they pretty much just sit in their dorm rooms and play video games all day," Haynes said. "At the end of the day, knowing people want you to have high morale makes a big difference in doing your job."

Airmen can go skiing at the Hidden Valley Ski Area in Wildwood, Missouri, about an hour's drive from Scott. Indianapolis and Nashville are also a few hours' drive from Scott, close enough to spend a long weekend in the city.

Vargas said he enjoys taking his daughter to the St. Louis Zoo — which is not only free, but was recently named the second-best zoo in the country by USA Today. He enjoys museums and watching sports downtown and motorcycling in the country.

Haynes grew up with a strong interest in art in her hometown in Cincinnati. When she moved to Scott, she was pleased to find not only a large number of museums, theaters and a science center in St. Louis, but a thriving arts community in nearby Belleville, which has an annual festival called Art on the Square.

"I think it's really unique for Smalltown USA," Haynes said. "I didn't expect to find that at Scott. I thought it would be the middle of nowhere, but it's not. It's flourishing."

1. (tied) Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, Ohio

Similarly to Scott, Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Ohio enjoys low housing costs, a large commissary, a huge 300-bed medical center, and a large exchange with a mall and a shopette. An above-average crime score of 7 out of 10, and decent commute times — an average one-way trip of 14 minutes, much less than the nationwide average commute of more than 25 minutes — combined to help land Wright-Pat at the top of the list, tied with Scott.

Capt. Matthew Hawkins, an engineer with the AC 130J program office there, said he and his wife, Capt. Caroline Hawkins, have grown to love Wright-Pat during

their three years there.

"Coming to Wright-Pat, you're in the middle of everywhere," Hawkins said. "We are so close to major, larger cities that offer so much more. We can go to Cincinnati, Columbus, Cleveland, Chicago, Detroit, Indianapolis, Louisville — the list goes on and on of places accessible with a tank of gas."

But Hawkins speaks most glowingly of nearby Dayton, and the close relationship its 143,000 residents have with the airmen stationed at Wright-Pat.

The Dayton Dragons minor league baseball team, for example, offer discounted tickets for service members, as does Dayton's Schuster Performing Arts Center. The Hawkinses are associate board members at the local children's science museum, the Boonshoft Museum of Discovery,

which partners with Wright-Pat to get service members' input. "Several people, while we're out and about, recognize us as military and shake our hands," Hawkins said. "They love us."

The Hawkinses enjoy spending time in the Greene Town Center in Dayton, which offers shopping and mid- to high-end restaurants, as well as free concerts on the weekends.

"Being kind of young, we do frequent brewpubs," said Hawkins. Both he and his wife are 30. "Brewing beers is becoming a big local thing in the Miami Valley. There's a lot of new gastropub restaurants popping up in Dayton — a lot of new places to try and eat out at."

Capt. Drew Chaney, who was stationed at Wright-Pat from 2004 to 2009, said the base's gym facilities, exchange and commissary are as

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METHODOLOGY

To compile our ranking of 68 Air Force bases, we collected and analyzed hundreds of pieces of information.

Air Force Times evaluated statistics in a dozen categories: school quality, cost of living, housing costs, commissary size, base exchange size, size of on-base health care facilities, crime rates, commute times, pollution levels, climate, unemployment rates and sales taxes. We then assigned each category a score on a 10-point scale.

■ To come up with a school quality score, we used the website GreatSchools.com, a respected resource for ranking and comparing schools used by real estate agents and real estate websites such as Zillow and Realtor.com. GreatSchools evaluates schools on a 10-point scale based on a combination of their standardized test scores, whether students are improving from year to year, and college readiness, defined as how well students take and score on SAT and ACT tests, and their graduation rates. We searched for all rated schools within a 10-mile radius of each base and averaged their scores to come up with an overall school score.

■ We pulled information on cost of living, housing, crime rates, commute times, pollution levels, climate, unemployment rates and sales taxes from the website Sperling's Best Places, which compiles demographic and other data on communities around the country. We used formulas to convert the raw data from each category into a 10-point scale. BestPlaces.net's crime statistics had low numbers for low crime rates and high numbers for high crime rates. We converted the statistics so lower crime rates would result in higher scores for bases.

■ Sperling's Best Places also provided data it collected on the size and type of on-base commissaries, exchanges and health care facilities, and rankings on a 10-point scale.

Of course, not all categories are equally important to service members. We'd wager school quality, for example, is a greater concern than the sales tax rate. So we weighted each category. Scores for the most important categories — schools, cost of living, housing and commissaries — were tripled. The next most important categories — crime, health care facilities, commute times and exchanges — were doubled in value. And the last four categories — pollution levels, climate, unemployment rates and sales taxes — got no additional weighting.

Finally, we added up the scores and stacked the bases.

Do you think we nailed our rankings of the Air Force's bases? Or were we way off the mark? Visit us online at AirForceTimes.com and sound off! We'll include the best responses in an upcoming issue. □

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|---|---|--|--|---------------------------------------|
| 39. (tied) Hurlburt Field, Florida | 45. (tied) Goodfellow AFB, Texas | 52. Pope AFB, North Carolina | 59. (tied) March Air Reserve Base, California | Bolling, DC |
| 39. (tied) Joint Base Lewis-McChord | 47. (tied) Vance AFB, Oklahoma | 53. (tied) Seymour Johnson AFB, North Carolina | 59. (tied) Laughlin AFB, Texas | 64. (tied) Hanscom AFB, Massachusetts |
| 42. (tied) Altus AFB, Oklahoma | 47. (tied) Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam, Hawaii | 53. (tied) Malmstrom AFB, Montana | 61. (tied) Buckley AFB, Colorado | 66. (tied) McConnell AFB, Kansas |
| 42. (tied) Charleston AFB, South Carolina | 49. (tied) FE Warren AFB, Wyoming | 55. (tied) Tyndall AFB, Florida | 61. (tied) Selfridge Air National Guard Base, Michigan | 66. (tied) Columbus AFB, Mississippi |
| 42. (tied) Maxwell-Gunter AFB, Alabama | 49. (tied) Joint Base Andrews, Maryland | 55. (tied) Moody AFB, Georgia | 63. Travis AFB, California | 68. Los Angeles Air Force Base |
| 45. (tied) Barksdale AFB, Louisiana | 49. (tied) Dyess AFB, Texas | 55. (tied) Arnold AFB, Tennessee | 64. (tied) Joint Base Anacostia- | SOURCE: AIR FORCE TIMES RESEARCH |
| | | 55. (tied) Shaw AFB, South Carolina | | |

YourAirForce

Best

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good as or better than other bases he has visited or been assigned to. And he spoke highly of the base's medical center, which he said had reasonable wait times and even fit him in for laser eye surgery, though he was a low priority.

Chaney said several of his former co-workers finished their master's degrees while at Wright-Pat, attending the nearby University of Dayton or Wright State University. Even the base library is pretty well-stocked, Chaney said.

The average monthly rent for a two-bedroom apartment in Dayton is \$641, according to RentJungle.com. An airman basic without dependents would receive \$864 in BAH each month, and a colonel with dependents would receive \$1,950 a month.

Airmen who are interested in their service's history can visit the National Museum of the United States Air Force for free. The museum in June broke ground on an expansion that will eventually house the former Air Force One aircraft aboard which President Johnson was sworn in after President Kennedy's assassination, as well as a Titan IV space booster rocket, the Lockheed C-130E Hercules, and other aircraft.

Thousands of runners — both military and civilian — run the annual Air Force Marathon at Wright-Patterson each September. The start and finish lines of that race are located at the museum.

Hawkins is likely to spend at most another two years at Wright-Pat before his next assignment. But he expects his work in acquisition will eventually draw him and his wife back to Dayton — and they'll eagerly anticipate their possible return.

"When we leave here, we'll look forward to coming back," Hawkins said.

3. Joint Base San Antonio-Lackland

The Texas heat may be brutal in the summer, but Joint Base San Antonio and the surrounding area have plenty else that landed the base in the top five.

Lackland's medical facilities are among the best in the military — and are about to get better. A new 681,000-square-foot medical treatment facility, to be called the Wilford Hall Ambulatory Surgical



A T-38 "White Rocket" on display in front of the 12th Flying Training Wing Headquarters in San Antonio. Sports fans assigned here can watch the reigning National Basketball Association champions San Antonio Spurs play.

Center, is under construction and projected to be finished next year. The four-wing, three-story facility will serve more than 55,000 patients and house more than 25 outpatient clinics, and the old Wilford Hall will be demolished. Lackland is home to the 59th Medical Wing.

The base's large commissary and large exchange — with a mall and shopette — provide great shopping opportunities for airmen on base. And average commute times of about 12 minutes are some of the lowest nationwide.

Housing prices in parts of the San Antonio area are favorable at around \$69,400, making it one of the most affordable places to live in the country. Monthly BAH for airmen there starts at \$1,038 for airmen basic without dependents, to \$2,091 for colonels with dependents. The monthly rent for two-bedroom apartments in San Antonio averages \$828, according to RentJungle.com.

"When speaking to my NCOs, I've not heard anybody complaining that it's so doggone expensive that they can't find a place, or need to spend extra money beyond what they're comfortable with," Col. Bill Eger, former commander of the 502nd Installation Support Group, said in a July 10 interview. His final day at the 502nd before being transferred to the Defense Information Systems Agency was July 11.

Are you a fan of live music? One of the best music scenes in the country



Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson sits nestled against the Alaskan wilderness. "You're living amongst wildlife," Col. Brian Duffy says. "You've got moose, bear, fox, lynx, coyote, eagles, ravens. It's a lot different than the lower 48."

can be found in Austin, less than a two-hour drive from Lackland. A wide variety of artists — ranging from bluesmen Stevie Ray Vaughan and Gary Clark Jr. to indie rockers such as the band Spoon to country legends like Willie Nelson — have hung their hats there. And Austin's annual South by Southwest festival and Austin City Limits Music Festival bring even more national acts to Lackland's neck of the woods.

History buffs can visit the legend-

ary Alamo and other Spanish missions. Sports fans can watch the San Antonio Spurs play — although scoring tickets may be tough now that they are the reigning National Basketball Association champions — as well as check out the minor league baseball team the San Antonio Missions. And multiple water parks can be found just a few miles away from Lackland, Eger said.

Airmen who want to enjoy the outdoors can bike or hike along the

Howard W. Peak Greenway Trails System, which currently consists of 45 miles of trails winding along San Antonio's creeks. Eger said San Antonio is opening up more sections of the San Antonio River to kayaking and canoeing.

"The city's trying to become like Austin, and create a more healthy living lifestyle," Eger said.

4. Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson, Alaska

One of the northernmost bases in the military is also in one of the most beautiful and unique parts of the country.

"Life in Alaska is a little different," said Col. Brian Duffy, former commander of the 673rd Air Base Wing and Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson near Anchorage. "You're living amongst wildlife. You've got moose, bear, fox, lynx, coyote, eagles, ravens. It's a lot different than the lower 48."

Former Capt. Louise Fode, a meteorologist who was stationed at Elmendorf from 2000 to 2004, said many airmen see the base as a plum assignment.

"Elmendorf is definitely one of the most competitive places to get stationed," said Fode, who still lives there. "A lot of military members are interested in the outdoor life that Anchorage and Alaska has to offer. [And] for a winter location, it's really not that bad in terms of temperatures. We are much more moderate in temps than Fairbanks, or North Dakota, and we get a lot of snow to play in."

Fairbanks, which is 26 miles northwest of Eielson Air Force Base, hits an average January low of 13 below zero, and Minot, North Dakota, hits 4.3 below in January. Elmendorf's average January low of 5.7 degrees is also cold, but at least stays north of zero.

Elmendorf's large commissary and exchange with a mall and shopette provide plenty of affordable shopping opportunities for service members there, helping land it among the best bases in the Air Force.

And in a relatively remote place like Anchorage, those base shopping opportunities are crucial to offset Alaska's higher cost of living.

"Having the commissary is a huge help because the food costs go down, and [service members] have



Fode



AIRMAN 1ST CLASS JAMES HENSLEY/AIR FORCE

A Salute to the Troops concert featuring Jerrod Niemann, The Swon Brothers and Laura Walsh at Luke Air Force Base.

greater access to food," Duffy said. "Everything that comes into the state comes by water or air, driving the cost up. The road system isn't like the [East Coast's Interstate] 95 corridor. The Port of Anchorage is where most things come in."

Alaska has no state income tax, and the Anchorage area has no sales tax, which helps airmen make ends meet.

Airmen who have lived in Alaska for a full calendar year and intend to put down roots can apply for the Permanent Fund Dividend. Eligible Alaskan residents each received \$900 last year — their share of the revenues raised from oil drilling and other use of natural resources in the state.

But Duffy cautions that the Permanent Fund Dividend comes with strings. If an airman receiving the dividend is transferred away and does not return to Alaska after leaving the service, Alaska could recoup the payments made to him.

Fode said bars, clubs, restaurants, museums and other activities can be found in Anchorage, not far off base.

"It's the cultural hub for Alaska — for what that's worth," Fode said.

Elmendorf also has an unusual on-base amenity: the Hillberg Ski Area. Duffy said it's not a huge slope — perhaps a quarter-mile run with a drop of between 200 and 300 feet — but it's a safe place for newly arrived airmen to strap on their first set of skis and learn.

"A lot of people who come from the lower 48 don't know what snow looks like," Duffy said.

The last two years, Duffy said, Elmendorf opened Hillberg to the entire base as the annual holiday party. And more advanced skiers can find faster slopes nearby.

Elmendorf rents fishing boats, which Duffy said is a popular activ-

ity. "A lot of people are chewing their arms off to get out of the office and go fishing," Duffy said.

5. Luke Air Force Base, Arizona

Rounding out the top five is Luke Air Force Base near Glendale, Arizona, which also enjoys low housing costs of about \$71,900, as well as short 11-minute commute times and a solid commissary and exchange.

"From what I can tell, we're in a buyer's market," said Chief Master Sgt. John Mazza, the 56th Fighter Wing Command Chief at Luke. "It's not just one area — the whole com-

munity is pretty desirable. Peoria, Buckeye, Glendale, Goodyear — these are some of the best I've seen."

Mazza said besides offering special deals to military service members, the local communities often ask what they can do for airmen, and how they can spend time with them and learn their stories.

"I've never seen such military support [from the community] in a long time," Mazza said.

Airmen at Luke are within a few hours' drive of the Grand Canyon, the Coconino National Forest near Sedona, Arizona, and Joshua Tree National Park in California.

And two hours from this desert environment, skiing enthusiasts can find slopes in the mountains of Flagstaff, Arizona.

"If you're an outdoors person, you're gonna love Luke Air Force Base," Mazza said. "The landscapes change [as one drives throughout the state]. The cactus disappear, it turns into green, rolling hills. Most folks go up to [Flagstaff] to stay in a hotel and camp and beat the heat and play golf."

Even a weekend getaway in Las Vegas is about four or five hours away, depending on the traffic.

Mazza said one of Luke's biggest attractions is the proximity to every major professional sport. The Arizona Cardinals football team, Arizona Diamondbacks baseball team, Phoenix Suns men's basketball team, Phoenix Mercury women's basketball team and Arizona Coyotes hockey team are a quick drive from the gates of Luke.



Sarvinski

Like Scott, Luke has a Single Airman Program that offers discounted activities. Senior Airman Jenna Sarvinski, who is on her first assignment at Luke, said she went skydiving through the program, which has also offered go-karting and trips to the Grand Canyon.

"It's a chance for people who don't have a significant other or a spouse to get to know other airmen," Sarvinski said. "You get off base and relax and get away from work for a while, but you're still meeting other airmen and enjoying yourselves." □

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YourAirForce

Bases bringing up the rear

Based on Air Force Times research, these are the five least-popular bases — from fifth worst to worst — to be stationed in the Air Force:

5. (tied) Joint Base Anacostia-Bolling, Washington, D.C.

Joint Base Anacostia-Bolling, formerly Bolling Air Force Base, ends up in our bottom five primarily due to the Washington area's abysmal traffic — year after year, ranked the worst in the country — and high cost of housing. The average commute in the Washington area is roughly half an hour, and hits nearly 40 minutes in the area right around Bolling — well longer than the average 25-minute commute nationwide.

A home in nearby Fairfax County, Virginia, has a median cost of \$455,300. And an Arlington, Virginia, house hits a punishing median cost of \$583,400 — well over triple the \$170,100 median home cost nationwide.

Sweltering summers — the average high temperature in July hits an always-muggy 89 degrees — and high crime rates in the District of Columbia also dragged Bolling's

score down. Bolling's crime score was 3 out of 10, much lower than the nationwide average of 6.

Nearby Northern Virginia's schools are popularly known as among the best in the country, and some live up to that reputation. But other schools received low rankings from the Great Schools website, dragging the Washington area's school score into the average range of 6 out of 10 possible points.

5. (tied) Hanscom Air Force Base, Massachusetts

Hanscom Air Force Base near Bedford, Massachusetts, has a lot going for it. In our survey, it ended up with one of the highest school rankings — 8 out of 10 — the lowest crime rates — receiving 9 points out of 10, far greater than the nationwide average of 6 — and lowest unemployment rates — 3.9 percent compared with 6.1 percent nationally.

But the area's high cost of living and housing prices — partly because it is about a 25-mile drive from Boston — landed Hanscom in the bottom five. A home in Bedford will run you a median cost of \$546,500.

In an interview, Debra Westervelt, Hanscom's capital asset manager, acknowledged that the Bedford housing market is "pretty tight," and said many airmen assigned there choose to live on base for that reason. But Westervelt said if someone really wants an off-base home, her office can usually find something for them within 20 or 30 minutes of Hanscom.

As the only active-duty military base in New England, spokesman Justin Oakes said, Hanscom hosts many civilians and service members from other branches of the military, which also leads to a high occupancy rate on base.

"We're pretty full," Oakes said. To help airmen mitigate the cost of living — which Westervelt acknowledged can sometimes make it tough to make ends meet — Hanscom offers an on-base fitness center, Olympic-size swimming pool, bowling alley, movie theater, community center, several playgrounds, and a bank, as well as a commissary and medical clinic.

"Forsuch a small base, we do have quite a lot of amenities," Oakes said. Hanscom has a total workforce of 5,828, including 922 active duty service members and 92 reservists. The rest are civilian gov-



CAROLYN KASTER/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Average commute in the Washington area is roughly half an hour.

ernment employees and contractors.

Bedford is a great place to raise children, said Lisa Pizarro, the school liaison officer at Hanscom. The nonprofit group America's Promise Alliance, which was founded by Colin Powell, has listed Bedford as one of the 100 Best Communities for Young People five times.

And at the end of each school year, Pizarro said, Bedford High School holds a party for students whose families are transferring away from Hanscom, which is attended by base leaders.

"It's more of a celebration," Pizarro said. "You might be leaving, but you're always part of the community."

3. (tied) McConnell Air Force Base, Kansas

Disappointing schools, higher-than-average crime rates, and high taxes combined to place McConnell Air Force Base, located near Wichita, Kansas, near the bottom of our list. The average GreatSchools.com

ranking of schools within a 10-mile radius was 4 out of a possible 10. McConnell's crime score was 3 out of a possible 10, lower than the nationwide average score of 6. And sales taxes there are 7.15 percent, higher than the usual 6 percent.

While McConnell has a large commissary, its small medical clinic and disappointing base exchange also hurt the base's ranking.

And it's hot, too. According to Sperling's Best Places, average July temperatures in Wichita hit a scorching 93 degrees.

3. (tied) Columbus Air Force Base, Mississippi

The on-base amenities for Columbus Air Force Base in Mississippi are disappointing. The base's commissary is small, its only medical facility is a clinic, and its small exchange is just a shoppette. There are 2,744 people assigned to Columbus, including 1,447 military service members, 598 contractors, and 472 civil servants.

The 7 percent sales tax is higher than the nationwide average of 6 percent, and summer hits hard, averaging 92-degree temperatures in July. And if your spouse hopes to find a job in the local community, that's going to be tough — Columbus' unemployment rate is a staggering 12.9 percent, more than

See **WORST** next page

Readers' picks

From paradises to morale killers

Air Force Times opened the floor to its readers to get their thoughts on the best and worst bases in the Air Force. More than 100 readers sent us their thoughts on our Flightlines blog, Facebook page, and via email.

Getting votes for best bases:

■ Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam, Hawaii. Multiple readers named Hickam as their favorite assignment, which one called "paradise." It's easy to see why. Located on the Hawaiian island of Oahu, near Honolulu, temperatures range from an average January low of 65.4 degrees to an average July high of 84 degrees. The legendary beauty of the island's beaches has been immortalized in films like "From Here To Eternity," the Pacific Ocean is warm, the food is outstanding, and there are countless activities.

Why didn't Hickam end up higher on our list? You've got to pay for paradise. The median home cost around Pearl Harbor is \$308,000, and hits \$537,300 in nearby Honolulu — well over the \$170,100 nationwide average — and the cost of living is through the roof. Essentially all food and supplies not produced on Hawaii have to be shipped in 2,500 miles. And some schools are lacking, bringing the overall school rating down.

■ Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Washington. Several readers sung the praises of McChord. "Good mission focus, beautiful surroundings, great weather, happy people!" reader Peter Brown said. "What more could one ask?"

Another reader, Kenny Tussey, said McChord has high morale and a great exchange, as well as

plenty of things to see and do in the area. But another reader felt things have gone downhill since the Army took over McChord Air Force Base in 2010 and it became a joint base.

When we crunched our numbers, McChord ended up in the middle of the list, primarily due to lackluster schools, high sales taxes and a somewhat higher cost of living.

■ Hurlburt Field, Florida. One reader, who signed his name Timothy, called Hurlburt "one of the best-kept secrets in the Air Force." "Sugar beaches, great communities, great housing (on and off), major cities not too far away," Timothy said.

Another, named Terry, also loved Hurlburt. "Absolutely loved the five years I was stationed there," Terry said. "Made so many friends, and even [met] my wife there."

But the high cost of living, a small clinic on base, and high sales taxes kept Hurlburt from climbing higher on our list.

Getting votes for worst bases:

■ Minot Air Force Base, North Dakota. The frigid winters have for years helped make this base a dreaded assignment — the average January low hits 4.3 degrees below zero — and inspired the joke, "Why not Minot? Freezin's the reason!" And several Air Force Times readers agreed.

"There are few (if any) worse places to be stationed than Minot," said a commenter named Don, who was in the Air Force during the 1970s.

"Worst: Minot AFB. No explanation required," said another commenter, who signed his name Ics.

Minot — home of the 91st Missile Wing and its 150 Minuteman 3 nuclear missiles — also is not immune from the nuke force's deep morale troubles, which came to light last year after a cheating and drug scandal emerged. Air Force Secretary Deborah Lee James visited Minot and other nuclear missile bases in January, and said she had "picked up on morale issues" among airmen and officers working on that mission.

So why didn't Minot end up at the

bottom of our list? Living in the middle of nowhere does have its advantages. Housing prices are among the lowest in the nation, and average commute times are a breeze. The natural gas fracking boom of recent years has brought the energy industry to North Dakota, which now has one of the fastest-growing economies in the country. The unemployment rate in the town of Minot is an impressively low 2.7 percent. That means, if your civilian spouse wants to find work, he or she will most likely be able to.

■ Moody Air Force Base, Georgia. Moody is "where senior enlisted careers come to die," a reader named Jack said.

Another reader, who signed his comment R Malone, said he is "still suffering at Moody."

"I thought the rumors couldn't be true about Moody," he said. "The rumors were censored truths about this place."

Malone said Moody suffers from a lack of morale, sense of family

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YourAirForce

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double the nationwide rate. Staff Sgt. Jason Do has been stationed at Columbus for five years and called it “one of the worst bases” in the Air Force.

“I’m realizing more and more that it is just a black hole for enlisted members,” Do said. “Everything closes early on base and around town. It’s so small that there is no chow hall. Columbus is a career-ending base, where many have retired [or] separated due to just being stuck at the base.”

Do said Columbus’ exchange is horrible, and he usually goes to Wal-Mart instead.

“It’s hard to find anything that’ll fit, and there isn’t much selection” at the exchange, Do said. “It’s easier sometimes to ask a friend to get you something when they are TDY.”

Do says that for airmen stationed in Columbus, it’s tough to afford to eat healthily and stay fit. Since there’s no chow hall, he tries to find healthy foods off base. But that food is much more expensive than junk food, he said, meaning he sometimes has to make a choice between eating healthily and making ends meet.

And Do said the Basic Allowance for Housing in the Columbus area — he gets \$807 a month — is far too low for airmen to live on.

“A lot of people have to have roommates just to not live in a bad area, which Columbus, Mississippi, has many of,” Do said. “I also know that a lot of enlisted members have a second job to support their families.”

On the bright side, traffic is light.

1. Los Angeles Air Force Base

It may be fun to have pristine beaches and

Disneyland practically in the backyard of your duty station. It also may drain your bank account.

Cost of living and housing prices are through the roof around Los Angeles Air Force Base, helping to land it at the bottom of our list of Air Force bases. BestPlaces.net’s cost of living score for nearby El Segundo, California, is 218, more than double the nationwide average of 100. The median home cost there is a whopping \$766,000. The 9 percent sales tax and 7.6 percent unemployment rate are also high. And the schools are middling, with average ranking of 5 within 10 miles.

Despite the astronomical costs of living in L.A., BAH rates are surprisingly low. For example, a staff sergeant without dependents in L.A. gets a monthly BAH of \$1,704 and a chief master sergeant without dependents gets \$2,373.

There are at least a dozen other locations where airmen receive more — not just places like New York City and Honolulu, but also West Point, New York; Oakland, California; Fort Monmouth, New Jersey; and New Haven, Connecticut.

Capt. Angel Vargas, a group practice manager for the 375th Medical Group at Scott Air Force Base in Illinois, who was previously stationed at L.A., said that he loved the near-constant 70-degree weather there, as well as all the social things to do. But he estimated food and housing expenses there were easily three to four times as much as in the Scott area.

“That’s more money I can spend on my daughter now, on after-school events,” Vargas said. “It’s better for my family.” □

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and esprit de corps, and said he saw an alarming number of airmen leave the service or get kicked out during his first year at the base.

“I’ve volunteered for [a transfer to] Cannon [Air Force Base], early out, cross-training, base stabilization, you name it, and I’m still stuck here,” Malone said. “With some bases, they have to make it sound worse with changes to their names. Like No Hope Pope [Field in North Carolina], Why Not Minot, Moldyhole [a nickname for Royal Air Force Mildenhall in England], but all you need to say is Moody and people understand.”

Not every commenter left Moody with a bad taste, however. Reader Rebecca Cuevas Novak wrote on our Facebook page that “Moody has the best location, close to everything, yet still far enough away not to get smothered.”

■ Cannon Air Force Base, New Mexico. Malone may want to talk to a few other Air Force Times readers before trying to transfer from Moody to Cannon.

“I only had one bad assignment, and that was Cannon,” said one reader, named Rog. “I feel sorry for the troops that moved from Hurlburt (paradise) to this dump.”

Reader Casey Leavings minced no words

on our Facebook page.

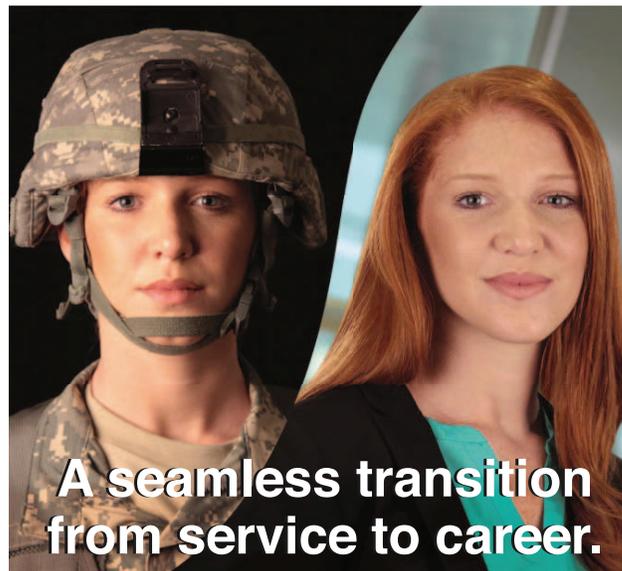
“They should close Cannon and turn it into a bombing range,” Leavings said. “Greedy realtors charging max BAH for substandard housing, an hour and a half to the closest shopping other than Wal-Mart, constant sand [and] tumbledweed storms, and some of the worst ‘leadership’ I’ve ever been subjected to.”

Another reader, who used the alias AC-130, also spoke about the high rent prices and lack of good, newer housing around Cannon. The local community isn’t very supportive of the military, he said, and most businesses there are closed on Sunday. The base, which houses the Air Force’s 27th Special Operations Wing, means airmen there are always working under an intense operating schedule, he said. There are few job opportunities for civilian spouses to bring more income into their homes, he said.

Even the air smells of manure around there, AC-130 said.

“PCSing here kills families’ and individual morale,” AC-130 said. “I literally could go on forever, and I am a pretty optimistic person.”

Low average commute times, relatively low crime rates around the base and a large commissary helped land Cannon higher up on our list. □



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