

# A History of Aviation in Lee County



By  
Prudy Taylor Board  
and Esther B. Colcord

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May 1983  
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Wing walkers.

Barn storming.

Daring pilots in bi-planes lowering rope ladders to even more daring lady acrobats riding in touring cars who climbed the ladders while the planes circled the field and then descended to the touring cars.

Tri-motor Ford aircraft made of corrugated aluminum and nicknamed "tin geese."

These exciting machines, these dare devils and their feats were part of the early history of aviation that held the entire nation in thrall.

The residents of Lee County were no exception. Cautiously, intrepid local pilots landed in grassy meadows, trying--not always successfully--to avoid ruts and stumps. The list of those pioneer "flyboys" reads like a Lee County who's who: Carl R. Roberts, C. Franklin Wheeler, Cliff Zeigler, Carl Dunn and the Holladay brothers--Warren, Randolph and Richard.

In Lee County, the recorded history of aviation begins in 1918 when a landing strip was built at Fort Myers Beach, then called Crescent Beach. Two airstrips had been constructed at Carlstrom Field in Arcadia by the Federal Government for the purpose of training Army Air Corps pilots during World War I. Student pilots would fly from Arcadia to the landing strip on the beach on their days off to sun, swim and watch the girls.

Not all the aviation history was that light hearted. On March 2, 1920 occurred an event that was described by *The Fort Myers Press* in a headline that read, "MOST APPALLING TRAGEDY EVER KNOWN IN LEE COUNTY OCCURS NEAR EVERGLADES."

The article reported that Capt. Richard Channing Moore Page, piloting a Curtiss Sea-Gull, was transporting G. Hunter Bryant, tax assessor, on County business. With him was Thomas H. Colcord, his "mechanician." According to an interview with eyewitness George Storter written up by Nell Colcord Weidenbach in 1988, "After completing the tax assessments at Naples and Marco, they headed for Everglade, where they could land on the nearby Barron River.



"The hydroplane was maneuvering in a circle in order to land on the river...the plane hit a dreaded air pocket and suddenly swerved. It sideslipped and fell to the earth from a height of some 50 feet." The three men were killed.

### **Terrible Accident**

Recounting the day of the terrible accident, the *Fort Myers News Press* of March 3, 1920 told of the editor's conversation with Page the morning of the flight. "We'll probably encounter some bumpy weather and some air pockets, but we'll try to make it all right."

Before he hurried out the door, Capt. Page turned to the editor of this newspaper, a personal friend, and laughingly remarked: "And listen, Mort, cut that 'hero stuff' when you write a piece about the trip. If anything happens be sure to write a good story about it. So long."

Page was a World War I hero both highly respected and well liked in the community. Born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in 1893, he'd graduated from the University of Virginia and had come to Lee County with his parents in July of 1915.

When the war broke out, Page had walked ten miles to Fort Myers to enlist, but was rejected. He went to Memphis, Tennessee to join up, but was again rejected because he was underweight. Next, he traveled to Washington, D.C. where he asked Florida Senators Fletcher and Drane to intercede on his behalf. They did and he became the first Floridian to join the Army Aviation Corps.

Page was also the first Floridian to receive a commission as an officer in that branch. Officially, he'd been credited with bringing down three German planes on the western front during World War I and, according to the *Press*, was "known to have two other *boche* (German airplanes) machines to his credit."

In 1918, Page had received the Distinguished Service Cross, the *Croix de Guerre* and other citations. His loss was keenly felt in the small community.

The next significant event in the history of aviation in Lee County occurred on November 1, 1924 when the City of Fort Myers acquired a quarter of a section of land south of Fort Myers for \$18,000 from Charles A. Stadler, president of the Stadler Realty Company.

The City intended to use the land as a municipal golf course. That wasn't to be and a portion of the land, now known as Page Field and so named decades later to honor Channing Page, was used as Lee County's first airport.

By 1926, the airport consisted of two runways, 300 feet wide which formed an L along two sides of the city-owned quarter section off the Tamiami Trail.

The Chamber of Commerce, interested in bringing daily air service to Fort Myers, invited Reid M. Chambers, president of

Florida Airways Corporation, to a dinner meeting on February 15 at the Royal Palm Hotel. Chambers told the audience that in order for his planes to fly into and out of Fort Myers on a regular basis, the runways at the municipal airport must be widened, smoothed and an additional 2,000 feet of air approach provided.

The main problem, he explained, was that the ground was uneven and full of snags, palmetto roots and ruts. The large planes needed to attain a take-off speed of 60 m.p.h. and a landing speed of 56 m.p.h. When the planes, which had balloon wheels, struck roots and snags, they veered and it was hard for the pilots to keep them on the narrow runways. Major Chambers, making a difficult decision, said no more Florida Airways planes would land here until these problems had been corrected. He feared another accident would negatively influence public opinion nationwide.

He cited the fact that the landing fields were too small for the "gigantic machines" as the reason for the many delays and accidents to the planes on the way here from Detroit.

Chambers added, "The field is excellent for ordinary sized aircraft, but for the flying monsters that will be used in the air service, it is inadequate."

Chambers was accompanied by E. LeRoy Pelletier, advertising manager for the Rickenbacker Motor Company. The men had flown into town in their sister airships, the "Miss Miami" and the "Miss Tampa," creating quite a stir and luring a sizable turnout of local citizens who gathered at the field to see them land and take off. The event warranted front page coverage in the *Fort Myers Tropical News*.

Among interested spectators that day were Thomas and Mina Edison. When asked about flying, Mr. Edison replied, "I am of the earth, earthy. I don't know anything about airplanes," he admitted. "I shall wait for a helicopter, if I ever do go up." However, his curiosity prevailed and he examined the plane inside and out.

When asked if Henry Ford liked to fly, Edison responded, "No. He likes to stay on the ground just as I do."

Mrs. Edison and the ladies in their party climbed aboard the "Miss Tampa," and according to the *Tropical News*, "sat on the comfortable cushioned seats which could be transformed into couches, peering into the cockpit where the pilot sits, and exclaimed over the odd appearance of the inside of the wings in which the gas tanks are located."

The Fort Myers City Commission was supportive and realized the landing strips were inadequate. In a meeting the following day, the city commissioners voted to authorize City Manager C. P. Staley to go ahead with the construction of a 30-acre landing field and to clear the field for a runway. However, it was clearly brought out by Commissioner A. E. Raymond and others, "that this was a temporary measure and would not interfere with the municipal golf course which had been planned for the property."

At a special meeting on February 26, City Commissioners authorized Don W. Wilkie, secretary of the chamber of commerce, to travel to Tampa to learn exactly what upgrading needed to be done and to make a "satisfactory arrangement" with Chambers.

Chambers demanded a triangular airfield which meant the airfield would take more than half of the quarter section off the Tamiami Trail which the city had set aside for a municipal golf course. The *Tropical News* of March 4, 1926 gave the date of April 1, 1926 as the official deadline for having the field ready. To put the land in excellent condition, Chambers suggested putting a railroad rail between two tractors and dragging it across the field.

## **Daily air service inaugurated**

With fanfare and great excitement, daily air mail service was introduced into the Fort Myers area on April 1, 1926. Postmaster J. F. Brecht announced that a specially designed cancellation stamp would be used for all air mail dispatched from the city that day.

The circle imprint read "First Flight Inaugurating Contract Air Mail." In a smaller circle inside the larger one were printed the words, "Fort Myers, Fla. 8:45 A.M. (or 12:30 P.M.), April 1, 1926."

S. O. Goodman, President of the Fort Myers Chamber of Commerce, raved about the new service saying, "The inauguration of the cross-state air route is without a doubt one of the greatest accomplishments this state has experienced, while the beginning of air mail service today has a value which cannot be estimated in dollars and cents."

Several hundred local citizens who came out to witness the historic event watched as Mayor O. M. Davison and Postmaster Brecht climbed aboard the "Miss Miami," a Ford all-metal plane belonging to the Florida Airways Corporation. A bag containing 4,000 pieces of mail from local citizens was put aboard the plane for northern destinations. Brecht would travel as far as Tampa, the plane's next stop.

Air service to Fort Myers was short-lived. Within weeks, problems had surfaced. According to the minutes of the Fort Myers City Commission dated April 16, 1926, Stanley Colquitt appeared to report he had been told by "one of the men operating the air mail planes that on account of the inadequacy of the field, they could carry only half the passenger capacity they could under favorable conditions."

## **Famous aviator visits**

The year 1927 saw Fort Myers visited by Clarence Duncan Chamberlin, one of the nation's most famous aviators. The *Tropical News* reported on July 16, that Chamberlin was "on an inspection tour of a new airline that will connect both coasts of Florida with New York." Only six weeks earlier, Chamberlin had made history.

In 1919, New York hotel owner Raymond Orteig had announced he was putting up a \$25,000 prize "to the first aviator who shall cross the Atlantic in a land or water aircraft (heavier than air) from Paris or the shores of France to New York or from New York to the shores of France without stopping."



The prize had excited several pilots of the day. Admiral Richard Byrd, Charles Lindbergh, and several others, including Chamberlin had begun to prepare.

Chamberlin, who decided to take a navigator, was ready five days before Lindbergh; however, the navigator, Lloyd Bertrand, demanded they take along heavy radio equipment.

Charles Levine, managing director of the Columbia Aircraft Corporation which had built the Bellanca plane Chamberlin would fly, felt the extra weight could be a problem since every pound was critical. He vetoed the idea of taking Bertrand. Bertrand sued and the litigation delayed the flight.

Lindbergh, of course, became the first to cross the Atlantic nonstop; but within days of his triumph, the Brooklyn (New York) Chamber of Commerce offered \$15,000 to anyone who could better the "Lone Eagle's" (Lindbergh's nickname) record.

This time, Chamberlin was ready and determined to go without a navigator. At the last minute, Levine offered an additional \$10,000 if Chamberlin would take him along.

On June 4, 1927, Chamberlin and Levine, sitting on oil drums with life preservers for seat cushions, commenced the long journey to Berlin. Fortytwo hours, 31 minutes and 3,911 miles later, they landed their small plane, the "Miss Columbia," in a wheat field about 70 kilometers from Berlin.

They flew on to Paris and London where they were greeted by enthusiastic crowds, an enthusiasm that culminated in a ticker tape parade in New York City.

This was the man now visiting Fort Myers. His stopover in Lee County had no immediate impact, but later he returned to retire on Fort Myers Beach where he lived with his wife, Louise, until his death in 1976.

By August 30, 1927, Florida Air Ways was no longer operating out of Fort Myers. Local aviators Roy E. Larson and Philip A. Roll appeared before the City Commission to request "use of the 160-acre tract which the City had prepared for the Air Mail Service, but which later proved inadequate." They wanted to establish a flying school and later a municipal airport.

Petitions were signed and various aviation figures appeared before the City Commission, but it was to no avail. In February of 1928, City Manager Staley, "stated he realized the advantages of having an air-port but did not at this time favor an expenditure such as it would take to put this field in Class B condition." His reason was simple. If the airport were to be improved, important street work would have to be abandoned.

Air mail service continued. It was unreliable since planes would have to fly over and not stop in rainy weather when the runways were muddy. Not until July 1937, would the need to provide air passenger service to Lee County again become a high priority for the airlines.



## National to the rescue

In 1937, National Airlines, a fledgling airline established in 1934, expressed an interest in bringing passenger service, air mail and air express to the Fort Myers area.

According to the October 1969 issue of *The National Reporter*, a trade magazine published by National Airlines, "George T. Baker had a dream in 1934 amid the dark clouds of America's greatest economic depression. The National Airlines System, as it was called then, operated two secondhand Ryan monoplanes on a mail route between St. Petersburg, the airline's base, and Daytona Beach." The Ryans each could carry four passengers.

Now Baker was ready to expand. At a meeting of the Fort Myers City Council, Baker explained that the present airport and hangar accommodations would be adequate for the Stinson trimotor planes which would be serving this area. However, by November 1, National would be using the new Lockheed Vega Highspeed passenger planes. By that time, the runways would have to be much longer.

Baker was accompanied by H. C. Whitney, Director of the Aviation Division of the State Road Department. Whitney recommended construction of a 4,000-foot runway made of shell covered with asphalt.

On July 16, less than two weeks later, although the runways were not completely hard-surfaced, they were sufficient for an intermediate stop on the initial flight of National Airlines between Tampa and Miami. Mayor Dave Shapard, joined by Postmaster Walter Walters, greeted the planes.

The first airmail and passenger plane arrived at the Fort Myers Airport at 8:25 a.m. and left carrying more than 25,000 letters to be returned to stamp collectors all over the country. Shapard and Walters were passengers for the flight over the Everglades.

On July 17, 1937, the *Fort Myers News Press* reported, "Mayor Shapard returned enthusiastic over the airmail and passenger service and said a project had been worked up to make the Fort Myers Airport thoroughly modern. This would mean the construction of two black surfaced runways 4,000 feet long to accommodate fast airships."

In the same article, the fares were listed. One-way to Miami was \$7.50; round trip was \$13.50. The fare to Tampa one-way was \$7.95 and round trip was \$12.95.

According to Karl Grismer writing in "The Story of Fort Myers," National began making regular stops at the Fort Myers Airport on August 4, 1937. "Later the airline was forced to cancel many flights because of wet grounds and late in the year officials threatened to discontinue service until concrete runways were provided."

It wasn't that the City didn't want to comply with National's requirements. The problem was a lack of money. The area was still in the throes of the depression. Finally, in 1939 in order to qualify for Federal monies from the Works Projects Administration

(WPA), the City of Fort Myers deeded the airport to Lee County and on November 7, 1939, voters approved a \$75,000 bond issue to pay the local share of the cost of the improvements.

Work on the three concrete runways was commenced January 1, 1940 by the WPA. Soon, the project was taken over by the Civil Aeronautics Authority (CAA) and finally by the U. S. Army.

The airport was described in the November 28, 1940 issue of the *Fort Myers News-Press* as approximately square and as "level as a ping pong table" with a few exceptions.

The planned expansion included two hangars and an administration building including quarters for the CAA and the weather bureau. It was expected that, once completed, this airport could become an auxiliary base for the U.S. Air Corps and perhaps for a civilian air training base. The paved 8,000 foot runways would be long enough for the fastest flying aircraft. This \$250,000 project had January 1, 1941 as a completion date, which was met.

## **The attack on Pearl Harbor**

Sunday, December 7, 1941 was sunny and peaceful in Lee County. The news that the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor stunned the nation.

Our country was quick to respond. On February 19, 1942, the 618-acre field was leased from Lee County for use as a base and quickly gained the nickname "Palmetto Field" for then obvious reasons.

The first Army Air Force unit to occupy Page Field was the 98th Bombardment Group which was equipped with B-24s. They arrived March 31, 1942, traveling from Barksdale Field, Louisiana in 18 railcars which carried 400 men and supplies. The unit was known as Col. H. A. Halverson's "Halpro." They were met at the station by Mayor Sam Fitzsimmons, County Commissioner Harry W. Stringfellow and Dave Shapard, now representing the Chamber of Commerce.

According to "The History of Page Field-1942," seventyfive of Fort Myers' "local belles" entertained 400 soldiers of this field at a dance held at the former municipal pier on April 3. "Early in the morning of April 4, 1942, the citizens of Fort Myers were awakened by the mighty throbs of B-24s on their first flying mission."

The first major problem the 98th faced was the discovery by the Ordnance Detachment that Lee County sand was too light. Our sand, when poured into the shell of a 100-pound practice bomb, would constitute a weight of only 85 pounds. The problem was solved by trucking sand from Avon Park.

After six weeks of training the 98th was replaced by the 93rd Bomber group, headed by Col. Ted Timberlake.

On May 21, 1942, the Lee County Commission adopted a resolution changing the name from Lee County Airport to Channing Page Field. Although the community, according to the military history, "had changed the name of the field to Page

Field, this was not acceptable to the Army which continued to operate under the name of the Fort Myers Army Air Base."

Meanwhile, National Airlines had once again appeared on the scene. Once the runways had been lengthened, National reinstated regular flights. This is not to say wartime travel was simple for civilians. While National's service was commercial, W. H. Marcum, retired manager of Page Field, remembers that National also carried supplies needed for the military and its planes were allowed to land on runways there.

Commercial passengers were often bumped because of military priorities. Military passengers were identified as AA (which was just one step below Air Force One) down to DD which identified military family members.

The thrust of the training program at Page Field was changed on February 12, 1943 when P-39-1s arrived transforming the base into a training ground for "high tech" pursuit fighter planes. Hundreds of P-39s were sold to the Russians and many Russian flight instructors came to Fort Myers to receive their training.

Two days later, on February 14, 1943, work on the target range at Sanibel was started.

## **Invasion!**

Page Field was invaded in May of 1943. But not by enemy soldiers. The enemy, in this instance, bore the Latin name of *peticulosus humanus*, more commonly known as the bed bug. "A steam chamber was set up and all bed clothing, equipment and hutments were thoroughly steamed, scrubbed and made thoroughly sanitary," according to the History.

The battle of the bedbugs lasted about two weeks and by this time, the soldiers had still another problem to face--dive-bombing mosquitoes.

Any person not sleeping under a mosquito net or having to work after sundown was seriously affected. The Medical Corps attacked the problem, started a drainage program, issued mosquito repellent and gave instructions on the care and use of the mosquito net.

A boost to the morale came in late January of 1944 in the form of a visit by the famous boxer Max Baer who was now a sergeant in the Army. He arrived to referee local boxing matches and to look over the physical training program at the base. On January 29, baseball great Leo Durocher and movie comedian Danny Kaye "motored over from Miami" where they'd been appearing at the Homestead base.

## **Secret Mission**

Page Field was also the site of an important and top secret development in the war against Japan. Col. Carl Creel, who returned to Fort Myers to live after WWII, was the commander of the 310th Aviation Squadron, an all-black squadron stationed in Fort Myers. He remembered it well.



In an oral history done for the Fort Myers Historical Museum, Creel related how war hero Gen. Jimmy Doolittle and his crew worked at Page Field to strip a B-25 to "practically nothing." Anything that wasn't absolutely essential was eliminated to lighten the plane's load and thus increase the plane's flight range.

While at Page Field, Doolittle and his crew also practiced taking off on short runways. The pilots were training to take off from the decks of carrier ships.

After months of covert training, Doolittle led the squadron of B-25's that took off from the deck of the USS Hornet on the first bombing raid on Tokyo. That raid carried off on April 18, 1942 was successful and, for the first time, the Japanese realized that they were decidedly vulnerable to U. S. air raids.

Fatalities at Page Field were not unusual. In August of 1944, Second Lt. Robert Winslow, Jr. fatally crashed on a routine training mission and Private Joseph Kotlarchick of Squadron O was instantly killed when struck by lightning while walking in the squadron area.

The following month two more pilots died. Second Lt. Robert F. Dustman died instantly in a mid-air collision while piloting a P-40 in a training mission off Pine Island. His death was attributed to pilot error. Nine days later, Second Lt. Lawrence C. Meader was killed when he crash landed following engine failure on take off.

With Page Field now a military installation, a separate air field was needed for private and commercial planes coming into Lee County. The chosen piece of property was a strip just south of the Farmer's Market bounded by Ford and Canal Streets and Edison and Palm Avenues in Fort Myers.

The runways were short, but the field was adequate for use until Page Field would again be available. Known as the Municipal Airport, it was well used by the local pilots.

## **The Dawn Patrol**

One of the more colorful flights out of the Municipal Field was the delivery of the morning papers to the islands, a service started in 1939. Reporter Joyce Turner, in an article in the *Fort Myers News-Press* edition of January 16, 1949, wrote of "this unique service which gives residents and visitors to Sanibel, Captiva, Boca Grande and Useppa islands today's headlines with their morning coffee."

She described the pilot, Perry Snell, flying the Dawn Patrol, as "swooping low to deposit the papers between two rows of houses on the water's edge." Early risers often came out to wave and watch their morning paper fall from the sky and with uncanny accuracy land on their "drop spot."

In later years, Dawn Patrol pilot Buddy Bobst delivered not only papers but other necessary items unobtainable on the islands. For \$5 a passenger could ride along, leaving Municipal

Field just before dawn and enjoy a "bird's eye view" of the sun coming up over the horizon.

The opening of the Sanibel Causeway on May 26, 1963 linked Sanibel and Captiva to the mainland and made possible ground delivery of papers and groceries. It also spelled the beginning of the end to the Dawn Patrol for after that Bobst flew mainly to the outlying islands of Useppa and Boca Grande.

The Dawn Patrol provided an essential service to the area for more than two decades. It was phased out in 1965.

## **The Frost Patrol**

Along with the Dawn Patrol, another group composed of many of the same pilots, flew what they called the Frost Patrol. This hardy band of aviators climbed out of bed way before dawn, and because the planes had no electrical systems, flew without lights to the gladiolus fields. They flew low back and forth over the fragile plants, stirring up the wind to keep the frost from settling on them and killing the blooms.

Pilot Perry Snell recalls the "worst part of the job was that you knew in the semi-darkness someone else without lights was flying over the next field."

But the business of war was proceeding apace. In February of 1945, the first German prisoners of war arrived. Twentyfive were assigned to Page Field and put to work completing a stockade and preparing quarters for 200 more prisoners who were to be assigned here.

August of 1945 was a difficult month for the men stationed at Page Field. It was marked by tragedy when Second Lt. Robert L. Cochran was reported missing from a routine flight. After an intensive three-day land, air and sea search, he was declared dead. Furthermore, as a result of Japan's surrender, change was once again in the wind and the personnel at Page Field were being reduced in number.

First Lt. James M. Rodgers, Jr., historical officer for the base, summed it up when he wrote, "It is now September 1945 and on the 30th of this month, Page Field, with the exception of a skeleton crew of post engineers, will have become completely inactivated--stripped of its aircraft, a mere memory to the men who trained here and gone out to win the victory that is ours."

During this time, the Army Air Corps had built longer runways, expanded the field by buying more land, and put up many buildings, some of which served as housing for the men and are still standing today. After the war, some of the buildings were sold to veterans for homes; others were sold for commercial use and indeed an industrial park exists at this writing at Page Field.

## **Buckingham Gunnery School**

Simultaneous to the development of the Army base at Page Field, headquarters were being set up for the Army Air Force's Gunnery School in a wasteland area of dead pine trees and palmettos, ten miles east of Fort Myers.

According to Grismer, the site at Buckingham was obtained by Lt. Col. W. A. Maxwell, commandant at Tyndall Field, Panama City who arrived in Fort Myers on January 19, 1942 with a "board of Army officers."

Maxwell said the Army Air Corps needed a large tract to establish a flexible gunnery school. Conferences were held with Stringfellow and Fitzsimmons. Within three days, contracts were signed for 6,500 acres at Buckingham.

These Fort Myers and Lee County officials purchased the site and leased it to the U. S. Government for \$1 per year for the duration of the war with the stipulation that the Government would return the land and the improvements.

According to the U. S. Army Air Force history of Buckingham Gunnery School, "On May 5, 1942, Major Richard W. Duggan, then a captain, arrived in Fort Myers and set up his offices in the Collier Arcade...Furniture for the office was borrowed from local business men. Edward Allen, accountant, lent a typewriter and desk and Harry McWhorter and Harry Wood, real estate men, both gave a desk. Police Chief Charles Moore arranged parking space for the office and the city and county officials gave numerous mops and other office equipment to help the new gunnery school."

Four days later, Col. Delmar T. Spivey arrived from Maxwell Field where he had been serving as project officer for the field for some time.

Colonel Spivey described the area as what "may be the ugliest field in the entire nation." He tempered his remark with the added words, "but it is the best Army post that I know of."

Construction of the field would ultimately cost \$10 million. On March 29, 1942, according to Grismer, "an advance detail of 650 men of the 323rd Air Base Group and 348 Materiel Group arrived with General Walter H. Franck, commander of the 3rd Air Force, in charge."

Work began May 25 and the buildings were divided into two types--tar paper buildings, built in 75 days, or the more permanent buildings built in 110 days. At the peak of the work, 3,000 to 3,500 men were employed on the post, and a majority of the buildings were in serviceable condition when troops began to arrive.

Accommodations were less than desirable, with outdoor privies, little drinking water, and a tar paper covered lunch stand.

The post was formally activated on July 5. Three weeks later, the first cadre of men arrived from Tyndall Field.

The runways were completed and training began September 5. Within seven months, Buckingham airfield was turning out gunners who were able to fire on enemy targets from the domed turrets and small windows of the giant bombers. Veterans who had fought off Zeros and Messerschmitts were sent to Buckingham Field to train others in the ways of enemy warfare. With six runways, each a mile long, paved and suitable for all types of weather, the sky over the Caloosahatchee River was filled with B-17 and B-24 bombers.



In December of 1942, the Central Instructors School was established and all the instructors in the nation's six aerial gunnery schools were required to go through the training course at Buckingham.

At its peak, the 6,500 acre base housed 16,000 men. By the time Buckingham was shut down in September of 1945, 50,000 soldiers had been trained there as air crew gunners.

After the war, the barracks at Buckingham were used as the Edison College which closed down in the summer of 1948.

Even though the mosquitoes were a menace, the soil sandy, the summers miserably hot and the fields laced with palmettoes, many of the men who trained here found something of value for they returned after the War. They made their homes here and many became community leaders.

## **Red Tape Sale**

On June 27, 1947, the *Fort Myers News Press* carried an item headlined, "BIG BUCKINGHAM SALE ON TODAY." The article announced that a "red tape free auction sale" was to be held and that "anyone can buy and take immediate possession of a building with whatever permanent fixtures it may contain."

These included plumbing, heating, electrical and refrigeration systems, toilet fixtures, water pipe, and boilers, as well as thousands of board feet of lumber all of which had to be removed from the site. The structures included barracks, school buildings, warehouses and mess halls, ranging in size from 6 feet by 8 feet to 100 feet by 125 feet.

Today the area where the Buckingham Gunnery School was located is a pastoral setting with charming homes, many of which have attached hangars so that the homeowners can park their privately owned aircraft next to their houses. In that sense, Buckingham today retains its connection with aviation.

## **Post War Aviation**

As peace returned to the nation and Southwest Florida, the pace slowed. The streets now seemed empty with the thousands of soldiers gone. The skies were quiet.

National continued its regular passenger service as the only major airline here and in 1955, a new \$25,000 terminal was opened at Page Field. Ed Wilson, founder of Fort Myers Airways at Page Field in 1953, remembers that in 1960, Lee County doubled the size of the terminal and, a scant five years later in 1965, again doubled its size.

On December 15, 1965, Fort Myers entered the jet age. According to the *"National Reporter,"* the airline introduced jet air transportation to the city of Fort Myers with the inauguration of daily Boeing 727 flights to and from New York's John F. Kennedy Airport. The northbound jet also provided service to Boston. The plane, called "The City of Fort Myers," was on its inaugural flight.

It was a momentous occasion and National President L. B. Maytag, Jr. presented a plaque praising Fort Myers for its "community endeavor to promote progress through aviation." Accepting the plaque were Lee County Commission Chairman Julian Hudson, Fort Myers Mayor Paul Myers and Fort Myers Chamber of Commerce President Walter O. Sheppard.

As air traffic increased, the need for adequate fire protection at the airport became essential. In 1965, Bryant Baker, Airport Manager also wore the hat as Fire Chief and was the first Fire Chief of the Airport Fire Department. Although several obsolete fire trucks had been parked at Page Park (the residential community adjacent to Page Field), there was very limited fire fighting equipment at Page Field. The employees of the Airport were also given firefighting responsibilities as well as performing their primary job functions to provide staffing for the services. In 1965, the first new fire truck was purchased by the county and the department was formally organized.

In 1971, the County decided to establish its own fire department and George DeTar was appointed by the Board of County Commissioners as Administrative Director of Lee County Division of Protective Services. The Airport Fire Department was incorporated as a department of the County Fire Service Division. The need to add personnel to the firefighting crew prompted expansion of the department with professional firefighting personnel who were hired and trained in compliance with the new State standards at that time.

## **The Sundowners**

No history of aviation in Lee County would be complete without mention of the Sundowners, a community service club started in November 1965 by a group of local pilots and boaters including Simon Martin, Bob Hampton, John Langan, Dale Regnier, Lewis Staerker, Don Anderson, Walter Horn, George Cartwright and Lou Beasley. They were all from the Civil Air Patrol and, in the beginning, used the CAP plane to make search-and-rescue flights along the coastal areas in Lee County.

CAP had the priority use of the plane so before long, the men decided to form a separate organization and purchase their own aircraft.

Still active today, pilots devote weekends and holidays to their mission. They fly from Page Field, about 90 minutes before sundown, searching for stranded boaters which they report to the U. S. Coast Guard. Each flight, manned by a pilot and a lookout, takes about 1-1/2 hours, and encompasses a 125 mile route. That route traces a path from the mouth of the Caloosahatchee River along Matlacha Pass, around the tip of Bokeelia, around the coast of Pine Island, Sanibel and Captiva and then down to Bonita Beach.

The planes fly at an altitude of about 500 feet and are equipped with a radio, personal floatation devices and a six man life raft.



Clarence Chamberlin

*Photo courtesy Mrs.  
Clarence Chamberlin*

Fort Myers Municipal  
Airport on Edison Avenue,  
used by private aircraft  
when Page Field was  
taken over by the Army Air  
Force for World War II.

*Photo courtesy  
Perry Snell, Jr.*





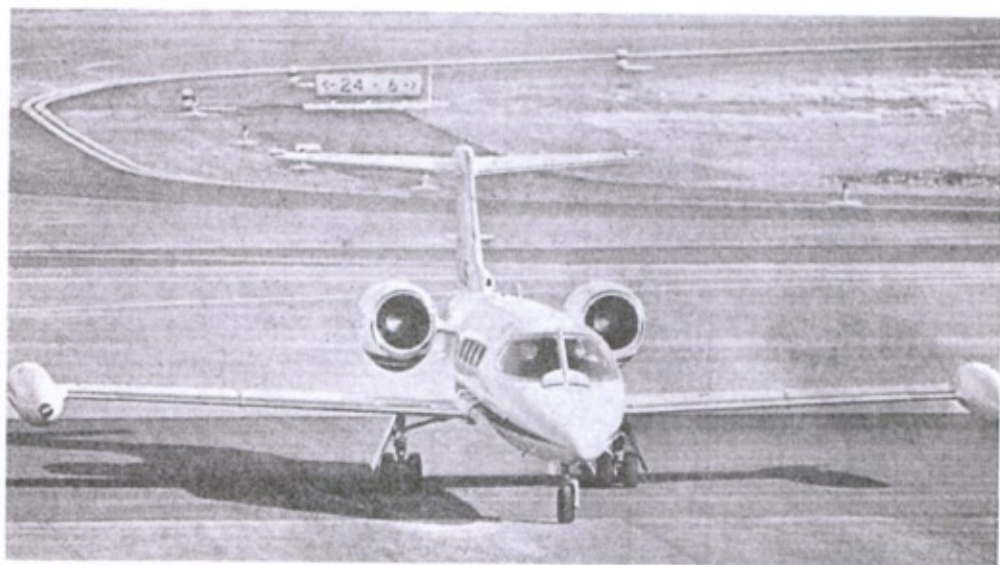


Channing Page



National Airlines began scheduled airmail service into Fort Myers in 1937 using the Ryan planes pictured here.

*Photo courtesy Fred Bryant*



Jet South plane, with Gary LeTellier, Airport Manager, and FAA officials on board, tests the runways prior to receiving their certificate of operation.

*Photo courtesy Fort Myers News-Press*



Station agent and pilot Perry Snell, Jr. stands at the National Airlines ticket counter ready to welcome 1947 tourists.

*Photo courtesy Perry Snell*



Two Piper J-3 Cubs fly over the concrete apron and nose hangars from World War II. Fort Myers Airways now uses the ramps but the hangars are long gone.

*Photo courtesy Perry Snell*





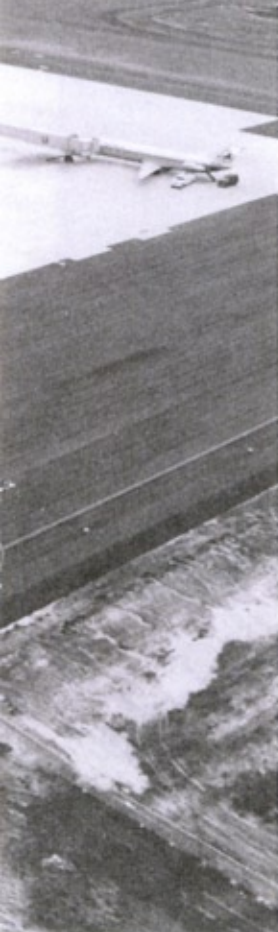
An aerial photo view  
taken in June 1983  
shows loading ramp,  
terminal and runway  
as it began  
operation.

*Photo courtesy  
Lee County Port  
Authority*



Southwest Florida  
International Airport,  
April 13, 1993.

*Photo by  
Clement  
Photographic  
Services*





World War II bombardier in training at Buckingham Gunnery School.  
*Photo courtesy Oscar Corbin*





May 15, 1955, the new \$25,000 Page Field terminal is dedicated. Cutting the ribbon is Miss Fort Myers, Sue Marcum, daughter of Station Master W. H. Marcum. Behind her are Wilson Pigott, Chairman of the County Commissioners; Heard Edwards, Mayor; John L. Morris, Vice President of Public Affairs for National Airlines; and Dr. John S. Steward, Chairman of Rotary Club Aviation Committee.

*Photo courtesy W. H. Marcum*

Roger Sitkin, first passenger to arrive at Southwest Regional Airport on Delta flight 1677, May 14, 1983, was greeted with flowers and champagne.

*Photo courtesy Fort Myers News-Press*





First Officer Diane Powell, a native of Lee County, flies for Northwest Airlines.

*Photo courtesy  
Richmond Powell*

Captain Beverly Bass, American Airlines pilot, brought American's inaugural flight into Fort Myers. Bass received her first flight training at Fort Myers Airways.

*Photo courtesy Fort Myers  
News-Press*





The new airport ready for the cocktail party celebrating the opening of the new Facility May 14, 1983.  
*Photo courtesy of Fort Myers News-Press*



Two days before the opening, invited guests sip champagne as they admire the new terminal at Southwest Florida Regional Airport.

*Photo courtesy of Fort Myers News-Press*





From the second floor concourse, the escalators carry passengers as they look down on the spacious lobby of the new terminal building.

*Photo courtesy Fort Myers News-Press*



Waiting areas at the departure gates give ample seating and generous walkways for incoming and outgoing passengers.

*Photo courtesy Fort Myers News-Press*

The Sundowners receive no government support and are financed almost entirely by contributions from individual boaters and fund raisers put on by the organization.

It's a community service and Ed Wilson, who still owns and operates Fort Myers Airways, still provides the club with free tie-down space, storage and meeting rooms for their training seminars at Page Field.

As Page Field grew, Fort Myers Airways' business also grew, but Wilson's first love remained teaching and training. Hundreds of students, young and middle aged, earned the right to solo and become pilots under his tutelage. Wilson recalls, "The heyday (of general or private aviation) around here was in the mid 1970s. People were learning to fly on the GI Bill and we were selling airplanes."

## From county to regional

By 1973, the population explosion taking place in Southwest Florida made it obvious that the present facility was inadequate. Studies indicated the terminal at Page Field was too small, the 6,400 foot runways were too short to handle the modern jets. Something had to be done at once and even as Lee County Commissioners authorized construction of a new \$850,000 terminal at Page Field, they realized this would not be sufficient for long.

According to former County Commissioner Harry Rodda writing in the October 17, 1984 edition of *The Newspaper*, "The concept of a regional airport was conceived in 1973 by a group of local citizens, most notably Malcolm Schroeder."

The Metropolitan Fort Myers Chamber of Commerce had formed an Airline Services Committee with Schroeder, then president of First Florida Bank, as chairman.

The committee's mission was to determine whether to expand Page Field or build a new airport. The committee was also to determine whether there was need for the area to be served by another major carrier.

It was time for a move, but any and all changes were subject to the approval of the Civil Aeronautics Board (CAB) and the CAB had declared a moratorium on new routes in 1969.

Schroeder initiated discussions with officials at Eastern and Delta Airlines.

According to an interview with Schroeder published in *Gulfshore Life* magazine in May of 1986, "Delta said if Fort Myers could prove that the growth of the area indicated a need for more airline service, and the potential for airline profits was there, it would try to get CAB approval."

The article, entitled "Flying High" and written by Cheryl Koenig, continued, "The studies also showed that commercial air passenger traffic had increased 100 percent every three years since 1938.

"All of this established a community in need," Schroeder told Koenig. "We were able to show that this was a very large

metropolitan area and the only one that didn't have access to Atlanta, the only gateway to the Southeast."

Once the need was established, Delta, Eastern, Southern and United Airlines filed to serve Fort Myers. A hearing held in 1975 awarded Eastern the route and Eastern started service on December 10 of the same year.

### Choosing the site

Rodda wrote, "With the support of the Lee County Commission, a committee was created that included representatives from Charlotte and Collier Counties to explore, first, the feasibility of a new airport and, second, the best location that could be found."

Ben Pratt, former Lee County Transportation Director and a major player in this part of the project, conducted these studies with input from financial consultants, planners and the Federal Aviation Authority (FAA). "All in all," he said in an interview for this history, "they looked at about 27 different sites, from Six Mile Cypress to a place called Grimy Gulch."

Both Charlotte and Collier counties decided not to participate. However, Lee County persevered and a site was chosen off what is now I-75 and Daniels Road.

The airport master plan was developed with the input of many experts including the firm of R. Dixon Speas/Brevard Engineering, the project's consulting planners and engineers.

Eastern Airlines had been awarded routes into Fort Myers so they were now included along with National Airlines in the decision-making process.

Besides the participating airlines, it was necessary to have the approval of the FAA and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). A study of the soil by consulting engineers indicated it was satisfactory. Safety, and accessibility factors were approved and even those of the environmental community who had earlier disputed the project agreed. Together with the Board of County Commissioners, the FAA and the airlines, the project was approved to move ahead.

In his article, Rodda recalled, "The project was the responsibility of the Lee County Commission...to have the project designed, built and financed including the selection of the engineers, architects and contractors along with the acquisition of land.

"A financial consultant, Smith Barney, was chosen to provide a financial plan. (The firm of) Howard, Needles, Tammen and Bergendoff was selected as the designing engineer, and ultimately, the project managers. They, in turn, selected the terminal architects as a part of their contract, and they chose the local firm of William Frizzell and Associates. An individual named George Smith of the firm Business Smith, Inc. was hired to develop the Airport Use Agreement which would eventually bind the airlines to Lee County and vice versa. He also did the original financial feasibility study."



Metric Constructors, Inc. of Tampa were the construction contractors.

"The Lee County Commission," Rodda continued, "surrounded itself with the best expertise it could find. After all, of all the players, FAA, the airlines, the engineers and other consultants, the only amateurs were the commissioners themselves and their staff.

"In fact, in terms of totally new airport facilities, it is questionable as to the expertise of anyone. Since 1970, and the adoption of the Airport and Airways Development Aid Program (A.D.A.P.) regulations, only two new airports have been built from the ground up--Dallas/Fort Worth and the Southwest Florida Regional Airport."

## **Action elsewhere**

While the Commission and the FAA were moving ahead, other factors were falling into place that would affect the new airport. Both Daniels Road and I-75 were under construction. The new \$850,000 terminal at Page Field was also under construction and, on the national scene, the CAB deregulated the air industry which meant airlines were now allowed to select their own routes. With its projected growth, Lee County was deemed by many airlines to be a profitable and desirable route. It wasn't long before Delta, United and Northwest Orient joined Eastern and National in their bid to serve Lee County.

Construction of the new regional airport was a complicated project. The master plan for the new airport was developed by Howard, Needles, Tammen & Bergendoff. Funding, of course, was of prime concern. On November 4, 1974, Lee County received a \$195,000 federal grant to enable them to find the best site for a regional airport. On June 13, 1975, the Daniels Road site was selected and the estimated cost of construction was set at \$31 million dollars.

In the meantime, it was also in 1975 that Gary LeTellier had come to Fort Myers to take the post of manager of Page Field. Prior to coming to this area, LeTellier had been assistant director at Daytona Beach Regional Airport.

LeTellier had a solid background in aviation. He'd received his pilot's license at 17, before becoming a student at the University of California. While there he had been drafted and sent to Vietnam where he flew helicopter gunships. Returning from Vietnam, he worked for United Airlines for three years before attending Embry Riddle Aeronautical Institute in Daytona Beach where he earned his degree in aeronautical science and engineering.

LeTellier felt that the Airport Fire Department should be removed from the Division of Protective Services. He asked County Administrator Lavon Wisher, to make the department a separate division to be funded solely by airport operating funds. Wisher brought this proposal to the county commission and at the annual budget meeting in October of 1975, the change was made.

On November 26, 1975 Billy Clemons, an active firefighter since October 26, 1972, was appointed Fire Chief. Under Clemons, the department received delivery of a rapid intervention vehicle and two 1,500 gallon crash fire fighting vehicles. This brought the airport to full compliance with the Federal Aviation Administration's requirements for airport firefighting and rescue services. The specialized flammable liquids firefighting equipment and advanced rescue and extrication equipment were used to respond countywide.

In 1977, the Aviation Safety Institution, devoted to the protection of air travelers throughout the world, presented the Lee County Airport with an award in recognition of its outstanding Crash/Fire/Rescue and Medical Preparedness and Response. In 1979, the Lee County Airport received the Aviation Safety Institute Award.

## **Airport forms its own Police Department**

More than 100,000 passengers had arrived and departed Page Field during the month of March 1978 and it was clear the security needs were greater than the Lee County Sheriff's Department could continue to meet.

Faced, too, with the projection of a million people passing through the airport by 1979, LeTellier worked quickly. On March 15, 1978, the new airport police department was formed. Personnel consisted of twelve uniformed men, one dog and the first chief, Jim Woodby, a veteran of the Fort Myers Police Department.

Woodby hired experienced, certified law enforcement officers who had previously worked at either the Fort Myers Police Department or the Lee County Sheriff's Department.

Cost for the 13 men was estimated at \$189,258. Their duties were to include security screening, gate security, traffic control and crowd control.

On October 2nd the Airport Fire Department became the Lee County Port Authority Crash Fire Rescue Department, a name which was much more descriptive of the services performed.

## **Groundbreaking!**

Friday, April 11, 1980 was a significant day for finally after years of work and planning and delay, groundbreaking ceremonies were held. Spirits were high despite the controversy surrounding the cost.

Hundreds of business people and county employees turned out to gather beneath the pine trees on the 3,500 acre site, to sip cool drinks and watch as Commissioners Dick Steele, Roland Roberts, Wade Scaffe, Harry Rodda and Doug Taylor,--appropriately decked out in construction helmets-- shouldered shovels for the groundbreaking ritual. After that, everyone gathered under an over-sized canopy for a barbecue lunch.

Estimated cost was now \$53,000,000 and LeTellier, promoted to aviation director that June, had been instructed to "get the airport back on course."

Between May 1979 and January 1980 the size of the proposed terminal had reportedly increased from 158,000 square feet to 276,000 square feet, and from 12 to 14 gates.

Funding was still a concern and Ben Pratt credits Rep. L. A. "Skip" Bafalis for working with the FAA in Washington to obtain a \$7,500,000 grant from the government. FAA could not make a commitment for more than one year at a time so local officials launched forward on faith and bond issues that would be repaid by rental and other fees from airlines using the airport.

By 1982, airport construction costs were estimated to be in excess of \$93 million, or triple the original figure. Cost overruns became a major issue in media coverage and fueled fiery debates as to why costs had soared and who was to blame.

Actually, the costs were not errors in estimating. In addition, to the expansion of the terminal and the number of gates, an apron where the planes were to park that was originally to be constructed of asphalt was changed to concrete at the insistence of the airlines and a Florida Power and Light right-of-way had to be relocated. All of these added to the cost..

Perhaps the biggest cost increase was due to the unexpected high cost of land acquisition. The price of the land, which had been in the neighborhood of \$1,200 to \$2,000 per acre in that area had more than doubled by the time the County was ready to go to purchase contract. Condemnation suits, with legal and appraisal fees on both sides, raised the actual land cost to more than \$5,000 per acre. Other increased costs included major drainage changes and, at the request of one of the airlines, the construction of a fuel farm--the three huge tanks where fuel would be stored.

## Sinkholes

Work on the runways was progressing smoothly until disaster struck on October 28, 1981. The driver of a dump truck fully loaded with sand slammed on the brakes and brought his truck to a stop at the eastern end of the runway. The driver jumped out of the cab as his truck listed to one side. Dismayed workers watched as the runway opened up and the truck sank down to the rear left axle in the first of several sinkholes that would open up on the runway. The hole was about three feet in diameter and three feet deep.

Later, when the area was excavated, the hole was found to be cone shaped with a diameter of approximately 30 feet underground. A second sinkhole appeared on January 26, 1982, an indentation only one inch deep but 10 feet in diameter.

Dr. George Gowers, a geologist and the county's sinkhole consultant, recommended the property be monitored against changes in the water table. In March, another sinkhole developed on the runway right in front of the terminal.



On July 8, 1982, the FAA ordered Lee County to tear out and reconstruct 700 feet of the 8,400 foot runway.

On July 9, 1982, *The Fort Myers News-Press* reported, "The county sinkhole consultant reported the collapse was caused by nearby construction drainage and was not expected to happen again."

Besides the cost of the repairs, which was projected to be approximately \$4.2 million, it was now feared the repairs would delay the airport opening which Commissioners had counted on to take place May 1, 1983. The delay would create a serious financial problem. The due date for the first \$1,000,000 bond payment was May 14 and, if the airport did not open, Commissioners would not receive the revenues needed by that date.

## **Trendsetter**

Despite the many problems and obstacles, the Southwest Florida Regional Airport had become a "trend setter." Not only was it the nation's first full-scale new airport since the opening of the Dallas/Ft. Worth Regional Airport in 1974, it was the first airport to be built in compliance with National Environmental Protection Association (NEPA) regulations. NEPA was an organization established to environmentally protect not only the airport site, but also the community surrounding the airport. These new regulations, in a heretofore uncharted area, were responsible for additional research and construction costs.

Active participants in the planning and decision-making process of the construction of Southwest Florida Regional Airport emphasize that what were commonly known as cost overruns, were actually due to additional environmental and physical protective measures, and the additional facilities required by moving from Phase 1 into Phase 2 of the airport's master plan ahead of schedule because of the increased volume of air travel here.

Unforeseen problems with land acquisition and runway repairs were all necessary costs and were ultimately reflected in the landing fees which, for a time, were the highest in the nation. As air traffic increased and new carriers arrived, those fees were reduced.

Paul Doherty, Executive Director of the Lee County Port Authority, emphasizes with satisfaction that, "No county taxes were used in the airport construction or operation."

## **Chamberlin Drive**

In the meantime, Commissioners faced the task of naming the long, serpentine drive off Daniels Parkway that millions of people would use to approach the airport. Many names had been submitted, but LeTellier recommended Chamberlin Drive. Commissioner Roland Roberts had heard Chamberlin speak and was also impressed with the internationally famed aviator who

had made Fort Myers Beach his home. Thus, on March 9, 1983, commissioners voted and made it officially Chamberlin Drive.

The work was accelerated. Repairs were made, runways were finished. However, while the opening of the new airport on May 14 would be a momentous occasion, May 10 was probably every bit as exciting to LeTellier.

On Tuesday, May 10, at approximately 5:55 p.m., a Lear jet rented from Jet South and carrying three reporters, a television cameraman, Gary LeTellier and FAA air traffic manager Gerry Norris took off from Page Field and flew to the Southwest Florida Regional Airport.

In a matter of seconds, the jet--piloted by Donald J. Vecchie and Buddy Cardullo--flying at altitudes of 1,000 to 1,500 feet approached the new airport. It was about 6:10 p.m. when the jet touched down on the black asphalt.

LeTellier's face, according to reports in the *News Press*, broke into a large grin. That touchdown marked the culmination of a dream that had at times been a nightmare, but was now at last reality.

After this historic first, it was back to business--airport business, of getting approval from the FAA to issue a certificate of operation to open the complex to commercial flights, of flight checks as the jet made 10 to 12 test landings, of checking the runways for smoothness at various speeds. Some of these test rides were made after dark to assure that the navigational lights along the runway were working correctly.

An added safety factor was that the runways were grooved making them more secure and giving better traction to prevent slipping in rainy weather. These were the first runways to be constructed in this manner and LeTellier was pleased to find the grooves did not make the ride any bumpier.

On May 11, 1983, employees were treated to a sneak preview of the new facility. From 10 a.m. till 8 p.m., airport employees, their families, contractors and people in the tourism business toured the facility enjoying complimentary refreshments. By midafternoon, more than 2,000 people had been served.

A musical group comprised of Eastern Airlines employees and named "America's Favorite Way to Fly" entertained with foot tappin' country and western tunes.

## **Gala opening**

At a cocktail party held May 12, 1983 celebrating the new airport's grand opening, more than 5,000 invited guests toured the 300,000-square foot, two-level terminal, noting that comfort, convenience and safety were high priorities. Clutching gold-embossed invitations, they attended the semi-formal gala.

Although the invitations read 7 p.m., by 6:30 p.m. cars were six deep at the parking lot entrance. By 7 p.m. Fifty people were waiting in line for champagne. A lavish buffet included 400 pounds of boiled shrimp and 200 pounds of crab claws. A dessert table six feet long held a tempting array. Lee County had come a

long way from the days when celebrations were observed with a barbecue or a fish fry.

At 8:10 p.m. on May 13, 1983, less than 6 hours before the first plane was to arrive, FAA Certification Specialist Bill Ward issued the certificate of operations.

The long-awaited moment finally arrived and at 1:40 a.m. on Saturday, May 14, 1983, Delta flight 1677, nicknamed the "Owly Bird" because it was a night-owl flight, became the first commercial flight to land at Southwest Florida Regional Airport.

Capt. Charles Winstead was the pilot of that first flight and officials from the Greater Fort Myers Chamber of Commerce presented him with a key to the city.

Roger Sitkins of Fort Myers, returning from Atlanta, was the first passenger off the plane. He was presented with a bouquet of flowers, champagne and other commemorative items. The remaining passengers received red carnations and souvenir cards commemorating that first flight into the new airport.

By the end of that first day, commercial flights numbered 60 ending at 10:48 p.m. when Continental flight 714 arrived from Houston, Texas.

## **Police Department moved, too**

The Lee County Port Authority Police Department, formerly at Page Field and now staffed by 32 sworn officers under the direction of Chief Lee Clark, moved to Southwest Florida Regional Airport.

Due to the phenomenal growth in this area, law enforcement at the airport had increased in scope. Because travel had changed, bombs, hijackings and hostage negotiations were situations airport police departments had to be equipped to handle and the Lee County officers were trained and ready. An explosives and hazardous device team was on staff, along with an expert bomb squad.

Starting in 1985, award winning canine teams would routinely check for marijuana, cocaine, heroin and other drugs, but only after completing a minimum of 400 hours of training in a practice school conducted by the U. S. Customs Service.

The Crash Fire Rescue Department had shared facilities in a staff house with the police department for more than a year before the airport opened to provide necessary Police and Fire Services. The new facility for Crash Fire Rescue was one of the most modern in the nation and all personnel were anxious for the move.

In the field of emergency rescue, the Crash Fire Rescue Department provided with high tech equipment and rigid, comprehensive training programs that resulted in high quality aircraft crash rescue and structural fire protection services. The firefighting crews were also trained to handle hazardous materials and as radiological response teams.



## **Two Lee County women made aviation history**

Lee County natives Beverly Bass and Diane Powell had flown as student pilots out of Page Field. Bass went on to become the first woman captain for American Airlines and in 1984 piloted American's inaugural flight into Southwest Florida Regional Airport. Powell is a First Officer, flying for Northwest Airlines.

On August 19, 1987, Lee County aviation enthusiasts got a treat when the supersonic jet, the Air France Concorde, landed in Fort Myers. A tour put together by AAA Travel Agents included a trip to London on the Concorde.

Two of the travelers, Wayne and Mavis Miller of Fort Myers, were excited about the trip. Their bulkhead seats, they were told, had previously been occupied by Prince Philip and Queen Elizabeth of England.

According to the Millers, the plane had an instrument panel on the passengers' side of the bulkhead that permitted passengers to chart their way through the Mach stages so they could follow the route until the plane broke the sound barrier.

The pilot of the Concorde informed his passengers that when he took off he would circle the airport at low altitude so everyone could get a good look at the plane. In the last 60 minutes of the flight, passengers were invited in small groups to come to the cockpit to ask questions and enjoy a pilot's view of the landscape.

## **Customs opens an office**

In 1984 and 1985, Southwest Florida Regional Airport began to serve its first Canadian charters. (That first year, incidentally, 8,000 Canadians came into our area on charter flights. By 1992, that number had swelled to 88,000 Canadians.) In those early years, the Canadian visitors were pre-cleared through Toronto. As the numbers soared, officials with RSW petitioned U. S. Customs to provide a Federal Inspections facility here to function not only in the area of Customs, but also immigration, public health and agriculture.

It was agreed the office here would be a user fee facility, meaning all expenses would be paid out of Airport Operations Revenue. On July 14, 1987, a Federal Inspections station opened here.

At this writing, U. S. Custom agents William Frazier and Allan Pedrazas handle any problems that arise locally with passengers or cargo. Any private yachts or vessels coming into the area, U. S. boats from a foreign country or flying a foreign flag also fall within their jurisdiction for clearance.

## **Formation of the Port Authority**

By 1987, airport growth had been so rapid and the operation of the airport had become so involved and complicated, aviation matters required more time and attention than could be allocated

during regular County Commission meetings. To solve this problem, on August 11, 1987 the Lee County Commissioners voted to establish a special committee to handle airport matters. They named themselves as its members.

The newly formed Board consisted of Bill Fussell, Chairman, Donald Slisher, Vice Chairman, Charles L. Bigelow, Jr. Porter J. Goss and Mary Ann Wallace. Each member was then to pick an advisor to form an Advisory Committee. This committee which had no voting powers, consisted of Heard M. Edwards, chairman; Malcolm Schroeder, vice chairman; Sam Comparetto, Brant Donalson and Howard Lang.

## **Airport Police make history, too**

By 1991, the Lee County Port Authority Police Department, under the leadership of Chief Gary R. Grosser (he had taken over after Clark retired earlier in 1991) had been formally recognized as the 176th internationally accredited agency by the Commission on Accreditation for Law Enforcement (CALEA). It was also the first Airport Police Department anywhere to attain that accreditation.

A state-of-the-art training facility has been completed for the Police and Fire Departments. This facility includes an indoor gun range for the police and one of the nation's largest flammable liquids burn structures for fire training.

The Crash Fire Rescue Department provides structural firefighting and emergency medical tech level response. A strong working relationship with area fire departments is maintained. The community's entire firefighting rescue and medical services may be called up in a major aircraft crash situation.

## **A new name, a new identity, a world to serve**

Southwest Florida Regional Airport will receive a special birthday present this year--a new name reflecting its emerging international status. The new name, Southwest Florida International Airport, becomes official on May 14, 1993, the date that marks its first ten years of operation.

While the airport has served international passengers - primarily those traveling on Canadian charters - since 1984, the Lee County Port Authority has launched an expansion program that will allow the airport to accommodate direct and nonstop transcontinental as well as transatlantic international flights.

In November of 1992, construction began on a 55,000-square-foot terminal addition which will house a new Federal Inspection Station and additional passenger ticketing and waiting areas. Not only will the facility increase the number of passengers to be handled by customs from 150 to 400 per hour, it also will allow the dual use of existing gates for both international and domestic flights. Construction activity is proceeding full-tilt and the structure already has begun to take shape.

The expansion design blends with the existing terminal while adding approximately 260 feet to its west end. Limited remodelling of the second-floor departure area and some roadway work are included in the project which has an estimated cost of \$6 million.

The Lee County Port Authority is acting as its own construction manager for the project. Other members of the construction team include Burns & McDonnell of Miami providing architectural and engineering services and Holder Construction Company of Atlanta as general contractor.

A second project important to the international effort is scheduled to begin with summer. Work will begin to extend the airport's runway from 8,400 feet to 12,000 feet. The additional length will allow the airport to increase the flying range of wide-body passenger aircraft to include transatlantic flights. The design/engineering facet of the project was undertaken by CH2M Hill of Fort Myers. Federal Construction Company of St. Petersburg serves as the construction manager and the Dayco-Astaldi Construction Corporation of Florida, based in Miami, is the general contractor. This \$20 million project is scheduled for completion in the fall of 1994.

The new customs facilities and the runway extension will prepare Southwest Florida for entry into other international passenger and cargo markets, initially through charter flights. Traditionally, charter flights are the first step toward scheduled service.

Funding for the airport expansion projects comes from a variety of sources including the FAA, the Florida Department of Transportation and other airport revenues. No ad valorem taxes are used for airport construction or operation.

One relatively new source of construction funding was made available to the Lee County Port Authority last November when the FAA granted approval for the collection of Passenger Facility Charges (PFCs) at Southwest Florida Regional Airport.

The PFC, a provision of the Airport Noise and Capacity Act of 1990, is a user fee that generates funding for specific projects. It allows the people who use the services to pay for them and gives airports the flexibility to proceed with construction projects on a more timely and economical basis.

Each passenger flying from the airport pays a Passenger Facility Charge of \$3. PFCs are collected by airlines and travel agents as part of ticket prices. PFC collection at Southwest Florida Regional Airport will generate up to \$258 million during the next 30 years; the money will be used for 19 specific, FAA-approved projects including the airport's runway extension, terminal expansion and land acquisition.

The year 1992 was noteworthy also because Air Force One flew into Southwest Florida Regional Airport on November 11, 1992 bearing then U. S. President George Bush and his wife. Earlier, on August 5, 1992 British Air Concorde flew into this airport.



## Another First

In February, Southwest Florida Regional Airport became the first airport in the nation to obtain a line of credit to the Port Authority allowing faster progress on airport expansion projects. The credit line also will help to generate matching state and federal funds months ahead of schedule.

The runway extension project recently received a vote of confidence from the FAA in the form of an \$8.2 million grant generated from the FAA's Airport Improvement Program for the lengthening of the runway. While approximately \$3.1 million of the grant is entitlement funding, based on the number of passengers flying from the airport in a given year, the remaining \$5.1 million is discretionary funding awarded for projects that the FAA determines to be high priorities in developing the national aviation system.

## Long-term Planning

When Southwest Florida Regional Airport opened in May 1983, the original airport master plan projected that the airport would serve three million passengers annually by 1995. Like most early growth projections for Lee County, it fell drastically short of the mark. This three-million-passenger milestone has been surpassed every year beginning in 1988.

During 1991, the airport was the 59th busiest in the nation and the 120th busiest of 373 reporting airports world wide. Last year, the airport served more than 3.4 million passengers and current projections predict six to nine million each year by 2005.

The 1993 Lee County Port Authority consists of John Manning, chairman; John Albion, vice chairman; Doug St. Cerny, Ray Judah, and Franklin B. Mann. Their appointees to the advisory board are Mike Geml, Chairman, Bill Smith, Malcolm Schroeder and Gately Daniel with one vacancy to be filled.

To accommodate this continued growth, the Lee County Port Authority is keeping the long-term needs of the airport in mind. Work is under way to acquire land adjoining the airport to provide buffers and room for future expansion. By purchasing the land adjoining the airport while it is still undeveloped and relatively inexpensive, the Port Authority gains the advantage of flexibility in planning for growth.

Another project being considered to accommodate future growth includes a second runway to be built south of and parallel to the existing runway to handle additional flights. A midfield terminal, built between the parallel runways, would increase the airport's capacity to handle more flights and would heighten airline efficiency by reducing taxi time and consequently lowering fuel costs.

As Southwest Florida comes into its own as an international destination, the airport will be ready to serve passengers from around the world.

The ghosts of those wingwalkers and barnstormers would surely be impressed this month Southwest Florida Regional

Airport observes its tenth birthday. But they, too played an important role in Lee County's aviation history. Pioneers like Channing Page, Clarence Chamberlin, Buddy Bobst, and those servicemen who trained at Page and Buckingham Fields left a legacy we all benefit from today.

## **Acknowledgments**

As with any work of this type, authors are dependent upon the generosity of the pioneers responsible for helping make the history. In this instance, the authors are also sincerely grateful to the members of the LEE COUNTY PORT AUTHORITY for giving them the opportunity to explore and write about this facet of our area's history.

Individuals who were of invaluable assistance included Susan Sanders of the Lee County Port Authority and Laurel Smith of Gravina Associates, along with their staffs.

Additionally, we wish to thank: former Mayor Oscar M. Corbin, Jr., former County Commissioner Harry Rodda, former National Airlines Manager William H. Marcum, Perry Snell, Fred Bryant, the *Fort Myers News-Press*, Malcolm Schroeder, Ed Wilson, Richard Beattie, Patti Bartlett and the staff at the Fort Myers Historical Museum, Mrs. Louise Chamberlin, Gary LeTellier, Lavon Wisher, Ben Pratt, Chet Perry, Marie Adams in the Fort Myers City Clerk's Office, Wayne and Mavis Miller, Dr. Warren Compton, Ed Fink, Lee County Port Authority Executive Director Paul Doherty, Don Vecchie and Bill Rivers.



LEE COUNTY  
PORT AUTHORITY