Our History

The property on which DeKalb Peachtree Airport is now located was formerly a part of the site of Camp Gordon, a World War I Army training base. After World War I, the government disposed of Camp Gordon property at public auction and it was purchased by T.R. Sawtell, a real-estate man who began selling parcels of the property for farm land. At this time, however; a number of aviation enthusiasts in the Atlanta area banded together and formed the Atlanta Aero Club. This club recognized the fact that a portion of the old Camp Gordon property would be ideally satisfactory for an airport. They prevailed upon Mr. Sawtell to retain intact approximately 300 acres of fairly level land which they hoped could be developed into an airport. During the late 1920's and early 1930's, the Atlanta Aero Club, mainly through the efforts of its president, Mr. Jesse Draper, sought to arouse public interest in the building of an airport on the Sawtell property.

In 1935, Charles A. Matthews, who was then the DeKalb County Commissioner, signed an option to buy the 300 acres from Mr. Sawtell in order to build a county airport. Unfortunately, Mr. Matthews died before the purchase was made and no further steps were taken until 1939, when it became apparent that DeKalb County could obtain WPA assistance in the construction of an airport. During the next year of 1940, the County did purchase the property and construct dirt runways which were completed in early 1941. The first plane ever to land at the DeKalb County Airport touched down on a dirt runway on February 12, 1941. Paving of the runways was done a short time thereafter.

In 1940, the U.S. Navy acquired a small tract of land at the airport and in March 1941, the field was officially commissioned as a U.S. Naval Reserve aviation base. Within a few months, however, as the United States' World War II defense effort began to gain momentum, it became apparent to the Navy that it would need to broaden its activities at the Naval Air Reserve training base, and the Navy began negotiations with the County for acquisition of the entire airport property, having in mind its exclusive occupation by the Navy. A lease was negotiated with the County for the entire property (consisting of approximately 333 acres) in June, 1941 at the rental of $18,000 per year plus maintenance of the runways, hangars, lights and other airport facilities.

By the end of 1942, the base had been enlarged to the point that it was commissioned as a full-fledged Naval Air Station. During the war years, the Navy continued to expand its facilities and acquired from private owners, by purchase and condemnation, a considerable amount of property directly to the west of the airport, on which was erected additional permanent buildings.

Many young men, not only from Georgia but from all over the United States, began their flying careers during the next few years while the Navy was using the airport for pilot training. An interesting sidelight of the airport's history is the fact that several well-known

persons such as Tyrone Power, Robert Montgomery and Wayne Morris received part of their flight training at the field.

Following the end of the war in 1945, there was considerable uncertainty as to whether the Navy would continue to lease the airport or give up the DeKalb County facility. During the next few years, there was much negotiating between the County and the Navy concerning the airport, and in 1950 the Navy seriously considered buying the entire airport from the County. The County offered to sell the airport to the Navy for $2.25 million. This offer was refused, however, and as business, industrial and private aviation requirements of the County began to expand, there was an increasing need for returning control of the airport to the County. In 1957, an agreement was reached with the Navy whereby private aircraft could, under certain conditions, use the field. This was "a foot in the door"; however, due to the red tape and military conditions, only a few brave civilian pilots made use of the newly available facility.

As time went by, the Navy developed a need for facilities more suitable to its modern jet fighter aircraft and large patrol bombers. They subsequently built and moved to permanent Naval Air Station adjoining Dobbins Air Force base near Marietta, Georgia, in order to share the use of its longer Air Force runways.

Control of the DeKalb County airport was returned incrementally to the County and in 1959, the airport became totally available for civilian use.

In February 1959, the County, under Mr. Claude Blount, DeKalb County Commission Chairman, hired H.F. Manget, Jr., as its first airport manager and William E. Jayne as the chief air traffic controller. DeKalb Peachtree Airport had become a full-fledged department of DeKalb County government.

Under their supervision, the flight operations increased very rapidly, and the airport qualified for a Federally operated air traffic control tower within the first year. It was not until 1963, however, that the Federal Aviation Administration furnished personnel and equipment to take over control of the air traffic.

During the next several years, improvements were made as rapidly as funding became available. World War II wooden barracks were torn down to make room for new hangars and aircraft tiedown aprons. In 1966, the 25 year old Navy control tower was replaced by a new and modern facility. In 1968, a new 5,000 foot all-weather runway was completed, providing a parallel runway system. Sites were leased to private corporations whereby approximately $2.5 million was spent on leaseholder improvements.

By 1972, over 300 aircraft were based at DeKalb Peachtree Airport, and this number increased to over 400 in 1975. A total of 48 corporations had established their

headquarters or representatives on the field by this time. By 1986, based aircraft had increased to 530.

In 1980, an independent study of the airport by Hammer, Siler, George Associates showed that DeKalb Peachtree Airport produced a total annual economic impact of $74 million to the DeKalb County and Atlanta areas.

During that same year, DeKalb Peachtree Airport commissioned its instrument landing system (ILS) to Runway 20L. This device gives extremely precise horizontal and vertical guidance to the pilot so that he may approach the airport with a much higher degree of safety. This is especially important to a pilot who may be landing under adverse weather conditions.

In addition, all of the airport runways now have visual approach slope guidance indicators (VASI) which provide pilots with a visual glide path to the runway in use.

The first phase of construction in the airport's north terminal area was completed in August, 1981. This consisted of grading and paving of approximately 12 acres for aircraft tie downs and taxiways. This allowed additional aircraft parking and provided aviation building sites for business and industries wishing to locate in DeKalb County.

During 1982 and 1983, additional hangars were constructed and approximately two million cubic yards of dirt were placed at the south end of Runways 2R and 2L. This fill eliminated a sixty-foot drop off and added an extremely important safety overrun for aircraft utilizing the two runways.

In 1988, an extended 1000 foot displaced threshold was added to Runway 20L, the instrument runway, providing 6000 feet for take-offs. Also, the FAA completed a new $2 million one hundred and thirty foot free standing air traffic control tower in 1988.

In the 1990's the airport completed many projects to update and improve the facility, including a new helipad, an airport lighting upgrade and improved navigation and weather measurement facilities.

Presently, DeKalb Peachtree is the second busiest airport in Georgia in number of flight operations per year, ranking only behind Atlanta Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport. In 2007, a total of 220,576 flights were recorded by the airport.

The airport has three large aviation services companies (FBO's) - Signature Flight Support, Epps Air Service, and Atlantic Aviation. Pilot training is furnished by numerous fixed-wing flight schools on the field. One helicopter FBO is also located on PDK, and there is helicopter flight training also available. Many nationally and internationally known corporations operate flight departments on the field.

The airport consists of approximately 700+ acres which include four runways, twenty-five large hangars, 90 T-hangars, rotating beacon, high intensity runway lighting and a medium intensity approach lighting system. Approximately 590 aircraft are based at the airport with approximately 50 corporate jets. The airport has a 24-hour security patrol and also a continually manned crash-fire and rescue facility with emergency medical service including up-to-date, modern equipment. (more info about present day PDK)

edited May 2008 by: C.L. Remmel

Explanation of NAS Atlanta's Logo

One of our very own at Pensacola's National Museum of Naval Aviation History