

2018

## Wings Over Tampa - And Florida (part 2)

H. Wayne Bevis

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/sunlandtribune>

---

### Recommended Citation

Bevis, H. Wayne (2018) "Wings Over Tampa - And Florida (part 2)," *Sunland Tribune*: Vol. 11 , Article 8.  
Available at: <http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/sunlandtribune/vol11/iss1/8>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Sunland Tribune by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact [scholarcommons@usf.edu](mailto:scholarcommons@usf.edu).



**Drew Field administration building became aviation hub following World War H.**

## **Part Two**

# **Wings Over Tampa - And Florida**

**By H. WAYNE BEVIS**

Part one of our story took us from the earliest fumbling efforts to make flight a reality to the end of World War II, with its overwhelming emphasis on air power. Let's review, very briefly, that part of the story.

The early gestures in man's conquest of the air - that era of "frail wings and stout hearts" - were largely individual accomplishments or small-scale organized efforts. Not until

the end of the global conflict did the public begin to accept flying as a sensible means of going somewhere, so that in the late 1940s the great majority of people had not gone up in an airplane. Basic problems had been worked out, and sound aeronautical principles established; but general acceptance was still limited to those whose duties required air travel, or to progressive



**New terminal opened in 1952, inadequate in space almost from the beginning.**

business men willing to accept the inconveniences of flying 1935-style.

Along this line, a fascinating look backward is found in the July 1938 issue of Fortune magazine - an impressive, picture-laden publication featuring an article on "Tomorrow's Airplane." Their look at the future was a mixture of bold imagination and acceptance of (supposedly) insurmountable limitations. The article envisioned a flying time from New York to London of 15 hours, reduced to 12 IF the cabin could be sealed and the flight was at really high altitudes. Flying boats were still very much the leaders in design calculations, and no mention was made of the possibility of jet power. Great dirigibles were given prominent display as the answer to air travel needs, despite the "Hindenburg" disaster of the previous year. Supersonic flight was not even mentioned. And the projected fare for trans-Atlantic passengers, interestingly

enough, was not too different from today's reality.

But enough of chuckling at outmoded prognostications. Our own ideas of the future will probably be just as ludicrous, 50 years from now.

Before we take off into the post-war chronicle, a quick look at two items left out of the 1984 Sunland Tribune. One relates to the XS-1 - the first transonic plane - tried out first as a powerless super-glider released from a "mother ship" and later equipped with an engine for true transonic flight. These tests took place over central Florida, starting in 1946. And, very quietly, the final training for (then) Major Jimmy Doolittle's "Tokyo Raiders" was done at Drane Field, southwest of Lakeland. This bombing raid on the Japanese capital took place in April 1942, and as the first retaliation for the shame and loss of Pearl Harbor meant much



**Capt. Dick Merrill pulled his share of records, stunts**

more in terms of American morale than in actual damage inflicted.

So, on with the narrative. Tampa's experience at the end of World War II was quite typical, in that the government offered Drew Field to the City of Tampa as the nucleus of a municipal airport; and this time the city fathers, ready to face the future, took up the offer.

Peter O. Knight, the close-in and attractive little airport on Davis Islands, was changed to general aviation use only, and commercial flight operations - then consisting of a few flights per day by National and Eastern air lines - moved to what had been an Air Corps training field in May of 1946. The wooden buildings were converted, after a fashion, to commercial use, and Tampa Municipal Airport was on its way.

The reader, incidentally, is asked to forgive a strong personal involvement in the "rest of

the story." Your narrator was transferred back to Tampa by Eastern in February of 1946, and was based here, in various management capacities, until retirement in 1971, with the title of "Disney Project Coordinator." Also, since Eastern's activities and statistics are better known to me, there will be an inevitable tendency to write of that company's doings in the local aviation picture.

Operations at the converted Air Corps base were very much on the "make-do" side, but change and growth were in the air, and plans were already being discussed for a new terminal on the south side of the field.

A Douglas DC-4, relieved of military duties, was the first four-engine passenger plane at the "new" terminal, and was delayed when the ground crew plugged in an old-style battery cart and shorted out its entire electrical system. One of our supervisors, with unexpected resourcefulness, got on the public address system and told "greeters and gawkers" that the public would now be allowed to take a walk-through of the big, unfamiliar airplane. They were properly impressed.

One more reference to the former Air Corps buildings: About 1950, running down a wooden ramp in the rain to catch a flight, your scribe slipped and made a spectacular three-point landing on the unyielding surface. After picking myself up and boarding the waiting plane, I found blood dripping in both sleeves. The livid bruises covering my backside from waist to mid-thigh faded after several weeks, but the cut nerves in my elbows still twinge occasionally, reminding me to appreciate present-day escalators and covered boarding chutes.

As the air transportation industry expanded in the postwar years, there was vigorous competition for new customers. New routes were controlled by the Civil Aeronautics Board, as were allowable fares; and many of the airlines yearned to tap the Florida market, itself growing rapidly as air transportation was accepted and air conditioning became more common.

Since the Florida-based carriers had to bring their equipment back south for maintenance anyway, they developed elaborate promotional programs or "package tours," with air fare, resort accommodations, and ground transportation all for one total price. The response was gratifying, bringing thousands of visitors to Florida for the first time and establishing the formula by which many of them came back for longer and longer stays, finally becoming full-time residents. Another permanent result of these continuing promotions is the "two-peak season," which has abolished the summer doldrums in most of the state.

The first interstate carrier added to the long-established duo of Eastern and National was also the first "foreign" air carrier to offer regular service to Tampa - TransCanada Airlines, now known as Air Canada. A minor, but intriguing, newcomer was Cayman Airways, which made a valiant effort to sustain service between Tampa and the Cayman Islands.

The newly formed Hillsborough County Aviation Authority, looking toward the future, began to plan for a new and (relatively) splendid terminal. This became a reality in 1952, and, like many other airport terminals before and since, was inadequate before construction could be completed. At the dedication ceremonies, Capt. Eddie Rickenbacker offended some proud officials by pointing this out in his customarily

outspoken manner. Nonetheless, with its glamorous Bartke's restaurant on the second floor overlooking the busy ramp, and its space for various auxiliary offices, the terminal was a source of pride to citizens of the area for several years.



**Fashion shows aboard plane helped attract new flying travelers.**

In 1957 and 1958, a deluge of new carriers was added to the local picture by the Civil Aeronautics Board. Most of the major air carriers achieved their long-cherished wish to have Florida routes, while Northeast Air Lines was suddenly expanded from a New York to New England carrier by an award of runs into Washington and Florida. It was perhaps too much too soon, for after a few

years Northeast was taken over by Delta. The competition resulting from these awards was intense to the point of ruthlessness, while the soaring public acceptance of air travel hardly kept pace with the sharp increase in the number of seats offered to Florida's major airports.

About this time jet propulsion of aircraft began to evolve - first in the form of "prop-jets" such as the British "Viscount" and the Lockheed Electra; then in true jet-propelled planes, of which the Boeing 707 was the first spectacular success. (Some 707s are still in use 25 years later, no longer fuel-efficient in comparison to later aircraft but still sturdy and dependable.) The

equipment costs involved in the change-over to jets were staggering, but competition drove the airlines to make the switch, even at the cost of submerging themselves in debt.

In an aviation history written in 1961, Miami was cited as having more passengers than all the other air terminals in the state combined, boarding or deplaning a total of over four million passengers per year. To glance "ahead of the text" for a moment, consider that in 1984 the Tampa airport handled more than eight million passengers, or more than the total for the whole state in 1961.



Strange passengers boarded planes as airlines emphasized freight

In all the rush of corporate growth and competition, the air transportation industry was not without its colorful personalities in the '60s. Dick Merrill, the jaunty Eastern pilot and public relations figure, was still flying as naturally as he breathed, going strong after such exploits as making the first round-trip crossing of the Atlantic. His plane had the wings filled with ping-pong balls in case of being forced down at sea; and on other trips he carried a lion cub as a pet. Actress Toby Wing was his wife, notables all over the world were his friends and admirers, and his only vice was gambling. Many local aviation buffs remember Dick's favorite stunt with the graceful Lockheed Constellation. He flew repeated passes over the field, in full view, with first one engine, then two, and finally three engines shut down - buzzing the field with one motor doing all the work. There was no other flyer like him. Dick died in 1982, at the age of 88.

Another picturesque aviation figure was George Haldeman, a Lakeland boy who first gained wide fame in 1927 when he tried to pilot actress Ruth Elder across the Atlantic. They were forced down at sea, but rescued by a Dutch freighter. A pilot since 1917, George became a consultant in aviation with the U.S. government, and later served on the Aviation Council of the Tampa Chamber of Commerce until his death in 1984.

Also among local notables was diminutive, nerveless Betty Skelton, several times winner of the national women's stunt-flying championship and an Eastern reservations agent between flights.

As new and improved airplanes came into use, the airlines put many of their older models into freight service. The Tampa area generates some exotic air freight items, ranging from gladioli and tropical fish through winter strawberries to occasional

"special handling" shipments like "Gentle Ben," the performing bear, and porpoises destined for distant aquariums.

One memorable night, "Gentle Ben" didn't care for the noisy power unit near his loading door, and took off across the ramp, dragging a couple of struggling handlers after him by his lead rope.

There were also interesting experiments with convertible planes, offering normal seating by day and stripped-down cargo space by night; and with great "cargo canoes" slung under the fuselage of the Constellations. One of these won wide publicity by hauling a couple of tons of winter snow from New York non-stop to San Juan, where it afforded a novel (if brief) delight to hundreds of local kids seeing their first snow.

The late 1950s and early 1960s witnessed titanic battles for new transcontinental routes. This was before the dubious benefits of deregulation had been decreed by Washington, and route applications had to be fought at great length by impressive arrays of attorneys and witnesses.

One local side-effect was the rivalry between Tampa and St. Petersburg for additional flights as aviation drew more and more public support and boarding figures increased. A half-dozen airlines served the St. Petersburg-Clearwater airport at its peak, but most of them moved as competition tightened. Eastern, unwilling to forfeit the support of the well-organized transportation department of the St. Pete Chamber of Commerce, stuck it out as more and more flights gravitated to the busy and centrally-located Tampa airport.

The death blow to the St. Petersburg-Clearwater facility was the

completion of the Howard Frankland bridge in 1964. A very substantial portion of passengers at the Pinellas airport came from Pinellas County; but the boardings there showed a quick, irreversible decline from the time the new bridge opened, giving ready access to Tampa International and its better selection of airlines and flights. The situation prevails to this day.

The late 1960s and the 1970s can be summarized quickly. Full acceptance of jet-powered equipment - continued growth of international travel as the world experienced an uneasy peace - impressive safety records despite the snowballing increase in air traffic and the screaming headlines on rare crashes of jumbo jets.

1971 saw the opening of the present Tampa International Airport - one that proved the exception to the "rule" that airports were obsolete before they were finished. The built-in capacity for a 50% increase in passenger-handling ability is already proving its merit, as the Hillsborough County Aviation Authority approves plans for a new airside building, to be devoted primarily to international flights.

Those of us who have seen many of the airports of the world think of Tampa International as the most civilized air terminal, in both appearance and function, in the world. As the landscaping matures, it will be even more pleasing to the eye; and its principles of passenger handling will continue to pay off in the smooth flow of millions of additional passengers per year. As mentioned earlier, Tampa International, already has well over eight million arriving and departing passengers every twelve months.

Another big event of 1971 for Florida, with some side effects on the Tampa area, was

the completion of Walt Disney World and its opening on October 1st of that year. The resultant air traffic finally spurred the reluctant Orange County authorities to begin work on a new terminal, which in its completed state bears some resemblance to Tampa's airport and is handling ever-increasing numbers of visitors from every state and many foreign countries.

International service, we must admit, has up to now been the weakest aspect of Tampa's flight pattern. Flights to and from Canada, Mexico, and more recently Jamaica plus (with a stop but no change of planes) Great Britain, will hopefully respond to our improvements in customs and handling facilities in the new airside building.

Charters and seasonal service add to the total, but many of this type of flights use the St. Petersburg-Clearwater airport, with its long runway extending into the bay and its relatively uncrowded approaches. MacDill Air Force Base with all its tremendous economic benefits to our community, does unquestionably add to air traffic congestion in the area.

So here we are, moving toward the last decade of the twentieth century, with lots of aviation history behind us. There is no way to predict the future accurately, but we can be sure of one thing - that the changes we have seen will be modest compared to those awaiting us in the next century.

Supersonic air travel, while difficult to justify in the world of business or pleasure journeys, is with us to stay. Ways must be developed to provide it without intolerable waste of our limited fossil fuels - remember that the Concorde burns four times as much petroleum-based fuel as the Boeing 747, while carrying only one-fourth as many passengers. Perhaps nuclear fusion (not

fission) can be perfected to a degree of safety, and the apparatus made light and compact enough, to qualify as a propellant for planes. And certainly, as the world's skies become more crowded, collision avoidance systems must improve in range and reliability.

Another important aspect of the aviation picture is that of regulation vs. the "free market" concept which now prevails. The benefits to air travelers between large traffic-generating points, in the form of lower competitive fares, are at least partially offset by less service to smaller cities, undependable schedules brought on by ceaseless changes and the disappearances of the drop-outs among competing lines, and the losses to investors resulting from inexperienced or over-optimistic entries into the "dog-eat dog" competitive picture. We are witnessing - magnified a thousand times - the chaotic situation which prevailed in the 1930s and brought about the creation of the Civil Aeronautics Board in 1938. In any event, it seems inevitable that in the course of time we will be served by fewer - and larger - airlines, with a fringe of satellite services to bring mail and passenger flights to smaller communities.

Among the things of which the aviation community in Tampa can be proud is the sponsorship and nurture of the annual Tony Jannus Award Banquet. Launched in 1964 as an observance of the 50th anniversary of the first scheduled heavier-than-air flight, from St. Petersburg to Tampa, this has grown into a world-class event attended by air transportation notables from all over the world.

The 1984 recipient was Edward C. Wells, the unassuming mainstay of Boeing's design team - just retired after several decades of engineering accomplishment that made him

largely responsible for scores of safety and comfort features of modern aircraft. The presentation of his award, "in recognition of outstanding contributions to scheduled air transportation," was made by the director general of the International Air Transport Association, Knut Hammerskjold - himself the award winner in 1983.

Other recently designated recipients include Manuel Sosa de la Vega, president and chief executive officer of Aerovias Mexicana; and J.R.D. Tata, who founded Air India and made it a success.

The annual banquets are generously covered by the international aviation (and general) news media, and have been fortunate in having as a guest each year a surviving member of the original Tony Jannus team - former "line boy" J.D. Seale, who despite the encroachments of more than 90 years enjoys them hugely.

Latest statistics from the county Aviation Authority indicate that Tampa International is now served by three "commuter" airlines and 26 which cross state lines. Seven of the latter provide international service without a change of planes; and as noted above the upcoming airside building, slated for construction beginning this fall (1985) should stimulate additional activity by international carriers.

Our Aviation Authority will be ready to handle an anticipated 11 million passengers yearly by 1990. To encapsulate Tampa's aviation history, our airport will then be handling in an hour, around the clock and every day of the year, as many passengers as Tony Jannus and his pioneer airboat crew did in their entire first season.

Thus, "the old order changeth, giving place to the new." And, in the dazzling light of

recent (and now-planned) achievements in space exploration, it is no longer appropriate to say "the sky's the limit." Perhaps we should wonder instead, as the 20th Century draws to a close, if there are indeed any limits to man's accomplishments -except the lethal limits of his own capabilities for self-destruction.