

Aviation played a part in local history

By Pam Johnson

Twenty-three years after the Wright Brothers made their famous first flight, Capt. George Haldeman landed his aircraft on Nassau Street to deliver strawberries to tourists staying at the Hotel Venice. That day, Jan. 13, 1927 marked the first known flight to Venice.

Eight years later, the Civil Aeronautics Authority and the Works Project Administration began construction of what would become known as the Venice Downtown Airport. The single grass-strip runway, situated just about where the Intracoastal Waterway runs behind the high school today, would be one of the first economic drivers since the Great Depression for Venice. The field was completed in 1935 and dedicated the Fred Albee Municipal Airport in 1939.

Dr. Fred Albee, a nationally renowned orthopedic surgeon, and his wife, Louella, arrived by train in the Venice area in 1917 with his cousins Ellis and Lillian Albee Nash. Together, the two couples invested in several acres of property owned by Bertha



Capt. George Haldeman is believed to be the first pilot to land an aircraft in Venice on Jan. 13, 1927.



The Fred Albee Municipal Airport, also called the Downtown Airport, was a grass strip built in 1935. The runway is seen in the upper right corner.

Honore Palmer's Sarasota-Venice Company.

In Venice-Nokomis, they found raw land surrounded by pristine waters. By 1923, the Albees with their young son, Ted, were moving into their Florida home, Point of Palms and developing the area known as Albee-Nash subdivision. The new house was intended for the family's winter use.

Albee's practice was still in New York. People in the medical field and other elite visitors from across the eastern seaboard gathered there for parties on its lawns. By 1921, Fred's brother Stephen, moved with his wife, Isabel, and their son, Stephen Jr., from California, to help oversee the Albee holdings in the Venice area.

Dr. Albee's nephew, Stephen Jr., attended Kentucky Military Institute and was developing an interest in flying.

Dr. Albee paid for

Stephen's flying lessons and bought a Stinson Reliant aircraft. In this town of about 500 people, Stephen Jr. and his best friend, James "Jimmy" Cousins (whose father served as mayor in 1944-45) started the Venice Flying Club. Its first president was James Darby. Other members included Elizabeth "Betty" Hauser Arnall (who would become the city's first historian), her father, George Hauser, George Surls, Finn Capsersen, and Mae and Tom Wrede Jr. Cousins later became an Eastern Air Lines pilot, retiring as an L-1011 captain.

Once Stephen Jr. had his pilot's license, Dr. Albee saw the advantage of flying in and out of Venice. Not only could he decrease his travel time between Venice and New York, but now he could have his patients flown into Venice for treatment at his Florida Medical Center.

The center was located in

the former Hotel Park View, the ownership of which reverted to Albee after the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers left town in the late 1920s.

The Park View Hotel was located on West Venice Avenue where the current post office sits. The medical center was one of the reasons Venice became well known to people in other parts of the country.

Like the Albees, Olaus and Freda Caspersen, his brother Finn, and the couple's sons, Finn II and John, were winter residents of Venice. They frequently traveled between Venice and New Jersey. The couple started Beneficial Loan Society, which grew into an international finance company, Beneficial Corporation. During the 1930s, they accumulated a sizable amount of land in Sarasota and Hardee counties, and had extensive holdings on the south side of Venice along the beach.

While the elder Finn Caspersen lived on Harbor Drive across from City Hall, a favorite focus of his attentions in Venice, O.W. and Freda had a beautiful home on a large lot on Granada Avenue.

On March 4, 1941, Finn Caspersen sent a telegram offering the government 3,000 acres for an army campsite. More than a year later, Col. A.M. Nicholson landed on the grass strip in Venice to check out the offer. The Army built the air base on 1,660 acres.

In 1942, with World War II in full force, the United States government came to Venice to look at the land. Several training airfields

were being built around the state, which was known for its year-round flying weather and flat land making it good for the fast training of pilots that the war demanded. Today's airports in Avon Park, Sarasota, and Lakeland all began as Venice did - training fields to support the war effort.

Venice resident, Melvin Johns remembers when his father, Albert got a job building the new airfield.

"We were living in Manatee City, which later became Bradenton," Melvin recalled. "My dad and two or three others came to Venice, stayed during the week and came home on the weekends. He was a laborer and a carpenter. He worked at the new airfield for about nine months. During his off times, he and his friends would go to the beach, about where Sharky's is today, and watch the planes doing target practice. They had some targets out in the gulf and aircraft from McDill (Air Force Base in Tampa) would come down to use them."

"My dad was injured on the job and was taken to see Dr. Albee at the Florida Medical Center. When I was 5 years old or so I took my first trip to Venice, to see Dr. Albee. Later, we brought a neighbor's child to see the doctor. It took us all day to drive down and drive back, so we brought a picnic to have at the beach," Johns said.

By July 1942, the 37th Service Squadron, 27th Service Group arrived from McDill Air Base to begin construction on the airfield and living quarters for up



The Venice Flying Club, a group of aviation enthusiasts, was formed at the Albee Airport in 1939. From left are flight instructor, James "Jimmy" Cousins, George Hauser, the club's first president James Darby, Helga Roess Siede, Albert Moreman, Ann Dorso Moreman, George Surls, Mae Wrede, George Surls, Finn Caspersen, Tom Wrede Jr., Jack Wilkinson and Claude Archer.



H.J. "Doc" Chiddix is seen with the aircraft he used to train pilots at the Fred Albee Airport.



James Cousins inspects his training airplane at the old Downtown Municipal Airport where he learned to fly in the late 1930s. After the war, Cousins was a captain for Eastern Air Lines.



Army Air Base main entrance gate located at the intersection of The Rialto and San Marco Drive. Construction of the base began in June 1942 in the area bounded by US 41 on the east, San Marco Drive on the north, the Gulf of Mexico on the west and Lemon Bay on the south comprising 1,699 acres. The original Army personnel were the 37th Service Squadron of the 27th Service Group. This photo is believed to have been taken around 1942.

to 900 personnel. The following year the first combat aircraft arrived with the 13th Fighter Squadron, 53rd Fighter Group for pilot training. The 14th Fighter Squadron followed. Aircraft that were used included the Bell P-39 Aircobra, Curtis P-40 Warhawk, Republic P-47 Thunderbolt and the North American P-51 Mustang.

January 1944, about 400 Chinese-American airmen arrived for training. According to Barbara Smith, a member of the Venice Area Historic Society, the idea that these were nationalist Chinese pilots sent to the U.S. for training by Madam Chiang Kai-shek is a myth. Much like the Tuskegee airmen, these were American citizens who were racially segregated as the 14th Army Service Group.

In his book, "Americans First: Chinese Americans in the Second World War," K. Scott Wong says these soldiers came from varied backgrounds all over the United States. Some spoke

only English, some spoke Mandarin, Cantonese or one of the many Chinese dialects known to their families.

"The 14th ASG took shape in Venice, Florida, in 1944, but the move to create all-Chinese American units began earlier." Wong wrote. The object was to train Chinese Americans to serve in China in support of Gen. Claire Chennault's Flying Tigers efforts in the China-Burma-India Theater, Wong said.

Therefore, they were not pilots, but part of the support team. From Venice, the 14th ASG was eventually deployed to China.

On Oct. 18, Sarasota resident Owen Swartz reported to VAAB for duty. Just back from flying in the South Pacific, his next job would be training pilots on fighter aircraft.

"I went to check in and they asked me what kind of airplane I flew," Swartz recalled. "That's when they said, 'Go out and take number so-and-so air-

plane and fly it up to Meridian, Miss.'" Swartz said. A hurricane was expected to hit the next day and the field was being cleared.

"I said, 'where is Meridian, Miss.?' They said, 'Just follow the other airplanes, they'll get you there,'" Swartz said.

The next day, Venice resident Mike Flanagan arrived. He'd been told to report to VAAB by his superiors at Jacksonville Naval Air Station two days before. How to get there - that was for Flanagan to figure out. He hitch-hiked to Naples and spent the night in the jail - the only place available to sleep. The next day he arrived to find VAAB completely empty.

He learned everyone had been evacuated to the Sarasota High School for the hurricane. He went to the school, where he stayed for more than a week.

When they returned to Venice, there was quite a bit of wind damage, but nothing substantial. "We lost a tower. Some of the airplanes they couldn't fly out -- well, they just put the gear up and left them on the ground and none were damaged too badly," Swartz said.

Flanagan and members of his 598th Engineers, 382nd Service Group were at the base for only a month before being transferred. "We stayed in little plywood huts they had on the base," Flanagan recalls. "We used to go into to downtown and busses took us to Sarasota to go to Lido Beach."

Swartz stayed and continued to train fighter pilots until the air base closed.

I used to fly Col. (Vincent) Dixon to Miami and help him get his flying time in," he said. In 1946, he helped close the base down, disperse the property and turn the airfield over to the city.

He vaguely remembers the Argentine airmen training there. "One of the Argentine airmen became the head of the Argentine Air Force," he said.

He remembers the 200 or so German prisoners as well.

"At one time, I was in charge of the motor pool. Most of the German prisoners were older and good mechanics so I had them work on our vehicles. They pretty much lived in the barracks. We didn't worry about them escaping. They didn't want to leave," he laughed.

Like so many WWII veterans, Swartz remembers where he was when he learned the war was over.

"I was flying aerial gunnery off of Longboat Key and we got the call to come back to the base. They made us quit flying before they told us. They didn't want us all to go crazy," he said.

And his time in Venice paid off in another life-changing experience. "While I was stationed here I met a girl in Sarasota. About a year later we were married."

Mayor Louis Suter accepted the federal government's gift of the army air base in 1946. While the airfield was dismantled, several of the buildings were shipped around town. A former military chapel was placed on Tampa Avenue to serve as the first Epiphany Church.



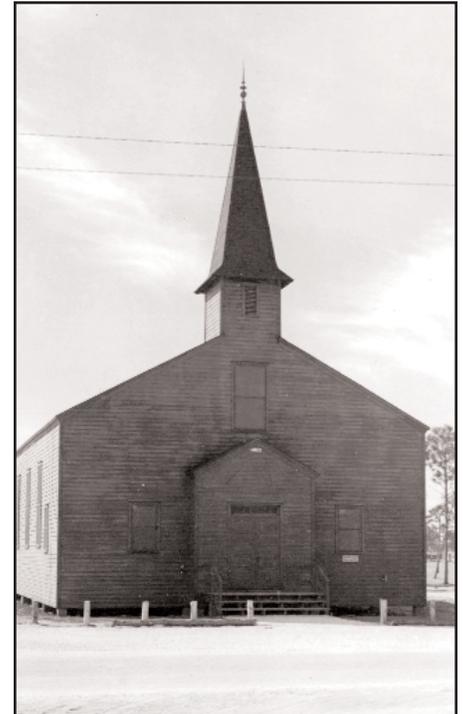
World War II fighter aircraft are parked on the tarmac at Venice Army Air Base in the 1940s.

The mess hall was moved to downtown where it served as city hall for a short time and in 1958 was moved across the street behind the tennis courts. Another building was used on the airport as the first Venice Little Theatre.

O.W. Caspersen purchased another building and placed it on East Venice Avenue to serve the Veterans of Foreign Wars. The army's sewer plant was refurbished to serve the city for the next 50 years.

Stephen Albee Jr. returned to Venice after serving in the U.S. Army for 20 years. In 1975 he was working as the city clerk. In an interview that he said of the legacy of VAAB, "That was perhaps the biggest kicker the city has ever had. It really got it off the ground and introduced it to thousands of other people who came here for training and wouldn't have otherwise seen it."

Soon after the transfer of



The chapel that served the Venice Army Air Base became the first place of worship for Epiphany Cathedral when the Army Air Force left Venice.

the former army air base to the city, Dr. Albee's grass strip airport was shut down.

Steve Albee III, the great-nephew of Dr. Albee, remembers living in Golden Beach in the 1960s when the federal government used the airfield to test missiles.

"It happened every Wednesday at 5 p.m. right around where Sharky's restaurant is today. It would be the loudest noise you ever heard. Jets came in from Eglin Air Force Base to shoot them down. We just accepted it as part of living here. Actually, we thought it was kind of cool," he said.

Albee said it was not uncommon for people to fly to Cuba from Venice before Castro took over. "We'd go down for lunch and fly back," he said.

Over the next several decades the small, general aviation airport would see aviation enthusiasts come and go. John and Rae Ingram, along with their 8-month old baby, David, moved to Venice from Mobile, Ala., in 1969. John brought with him his dream of learning to fly. First, he started a successful roofing company, but at 45, he got his pilot's license.

David, who grew up in the aviation business, remembers those years fondly, especially since his parents passed away in 2005.

Around 1978, a flying school, Sun Air, was located about where the airport administration office is today, David recalled.

When John finished taking flying lessons, he said to his



In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the United States Air Force used the Regulus II target missiles as target drones for anti-aircraft training at Eglin Air Force Base. The drones were launched from the Venice airport, not far from where Maxine Barritt Park is today, for the target practice. The 50-foot long missiles with 21-foot wingspans were manufactured by Chance-Vought Aircraft Inc. in Dallas, Texas.

instructor, "I guess the next thing is I buy an airplane."

"Sun Air is for sale," the instructor replied. "Buy it and you get five airplanes."

David remembers one of his dad's favorite flying jokes,

"How to make \$1 million dollars in aviation: Start with \$2 million."

"Dad and a partner bought the business. But his partner wanted out after two years, so they sold it. The day they sold the business, Dad got in the truck and said, 'This is the worst mistake I ever made in my life.'" David remembered.

A short time later, he bought Fette Aviation from Vince Fette. He changed the name to Ingram's Air Service and then five years later to Air Venice. The business was a Cessna dealer, did charter flights, sold fuel, had a training school and a hangar with two or



Venice firefighters fill the tank of this Dromader with water to fight a brush fire in the Carlton Preserve in 2000. The airport was the staging area for the aerial attack on the fire.

Photo by Pam Johnson

three main mechanics.

It was a full-service fixed-base operator. John built the building that is now Suncoast Aviation. Rae kept the books, while David did various jobs, starting with that of lineman. At any given time, the business employed 10 - 15 people, David said.

"They didn't make a lot of money in the aviation business. The thing my parents got from that was good will," Ingram said.

"My dad flew a lot of people places they needed to go. When you think about it, it is farther for those of us who live in Southwest Florida to cross a state line than just about any other place in the country. Flying greatly opened the rest of the country to us."

John and Rae were active in their church, flew an Agape flight mission to Haiti and were always ready to help people seeking medical treatment.

"We had people on standby to ship organs ready for transplant. I remember people would come in with Igloo coolers and you knew it was an emergency. The donor organ had to be delivered in a timely way to benefit someone waiting for it," David said.

"We also transported a bank courier, who would gather all the bank's checks and take them to Tampa every week," David said.

"We actually had a scheduled airline here when we had the FBO," David said. "A small airline was flying between Cuba and Miami. On the first day it was supposed to come to Venice, something big happened in Havana, so the airline took some reporters from Miami to Cuba and didn't show up here for its grand opening."

"One thing I learned is that flying in here makes a lasting impression of Venice and (the impact of) that is hard to quantify," David said.



Sun Air served as the airport's fixed-base operator in 1971.

Around 1989, Ingram sold the business to Greg Huffman, who also bought Air Venice, a flying service based in the building that now houses Honoluana restaurant. Since then, the FBO has passed through several hands.

Today, it is Suncoast Air. Like its predecessors, it provides flight training, fuel, tie downs and other aviation services.

Another FBO was started in 1971, Jacque Ring recently wrote.

"My now deceased husband, Bud Flowers, and I started the original Sun Air Aviation Inc. It offered a full range of services: Piper dealership, fuel, ground school, flight training, air charter and air ambulance. Bud's brother, Grover Flowers, talked us into opening it after he got out of the service and came back home.," Ring said.

"Grover managed it and was also one of the pilots. Grover had been a helicopter pilot in Vietnam, then a flight instructor while in the Army. There were

two other pilots who had been pilots in the service, also a receptionist/bookkeeper and a part time service person. Our first plane was a small high-wing two-seat Cessna that Grover owned before we purchased the trainers. We had five Piper trainers and leased larger planes as needed.

The airport was a thriving airstrip with other related businesses and many planes there. The convenient location of the airport was a factor to many people moving here."

Although Ring and Flowers would fill in sometimes at the front desk, they both had other full-time jobs.

"We met and made friends with many nice people along the way. Pilots are a special breed, from all walks of life. The FBO remained under the name of Sun Air for several years after we sold it," she said.

Ring, who grew up in Venice is a descendant of the pioneer Higel family.

In 2012, Venice Municipal

Airport -- its call letters are VNC -- is a general aviation airport that is home base to 220 aircraft. There are an estimated 60,000 take offs and landings a year. Businesses on the property, such as Sarasota Avionics, employ many the property, such as Sarasota Avionics employ many people, while the community benefits from the services of the Sarasota County Sheriff's helicopter stationed there. Angel Flight and Agape are organizations that serve those in need. These are just a few of the leases in 2010 that paid about \$106,000 in property taxes.

Although the airport is owned and operated by the City of Venice it uses no ad valorem tax revenues, but has its own enterprise fund that receives its revenue from land leases and other sources such as fuel flowage fees and special event fees. The quit-claim deed that transferred the ownership to the city in 1945 stipulates that the field be used for aviation or it will revert to the federal government.

Unless otherwise stated, all photos are courtesy of the Venice Museum and Archives.



Venice Municipal Airport is part of the nation's transportation system as a general aviation airport.

Photo by Pam Johnson

