

Mt. Vernon Outland Airport flourishes with activity

BY EMILY ROTH • Sentinel News Staff

The Mt. Vernon Outland Airport grew and flourished within the past year, to which Airport Director Chris Collins described as "a hub of activity."

According to airport assessments, not only has the airport increased in recent activity, but it underwent renovation and was host to numerous events including the LSA (light sport aircraft) Expo, Kelly Miller Circus, and Balloons Over Mt. Vernon.

Phase One of the long awaited redevelopment of the southwest quadrant was completed," stated Collins in his discussion of airport achievements. "A \$511,600 state and federal project removed old building foundations, distressed pavements, and returned the areas to level grade green space. The project also involved the construction of a new aircraft ramp/taxiway and a new vehicular roadway makes the southwest quadrant an attraction for aviation and non-aviation businesses. The redeveloped southwest quadrant is now known as Innovation Park."

"Phase One of Innovation Park also included one new locally constructed aircraft storage hangar and corporate office structure. A large portion of the financing for Hangar One was secured privately, the airport's first foray into public/private financing. The total cost for Hangar One was \$490,316."

He then extended recognition to the Jefferson County Hall of Honor and The Colonel R. D. White Veterans Museum, two complimentary memorials to American veterans. The Hall of Honor started in 2009 after an EAA fly-in event. R. D. White thought that it would be a good idea to do something for veterans. His idea was to put pictures of veterans on the walls of the airport with information about the veteran contained in the picture. Before long, personalized tributes were being made for veterans of all walks of life. As the Hall of Honor began picking up momentum, individuals started to donate historical items they received from veteran relatives or friends.

"The Jefferson County Hall of Honor made headlines ... in April 2014 when United States Congressman Bill Enyart dropped by to present the Presidential Unit Citation to the family of a local World War II veteran," stated Collins. "Due to the research of volunteer graphic artist Cliff Christensen, the family of TWC5 Walter Chesney was informed that Sgt. Chesney's unit was awarded the Presidential Unit Citation in July 2011. Since Sgt. Chesney passed away in 1989, the family had no way of knowing their loved one was eligible for the award. The 672nd Amphibious Tractor Battalion, Sgt. Chesney's unit, participated in the Los Banos Internment Camp Raid 25 miles behind enemy lines. When completed, over 2,145 allied lives were saved. The Los Banos Raid was one of the largest POW liberation operations in U.S. military history."

Collins also noted the airport drawing in the Kelly Miller Circus for the first time, an event which not only highlighted the airport, but brought tourism dollars to Mt. Vernon.

"The Kelly Miller Circus rolled into the airport over Easter weekend," he continued. "Large crowds turned out for two shows conducted under the big top in beautiful spring weather. The airport and event organizers worked out an agreement for the circus to stay two nights, includ-

ing Easter in Mt. Vernon. With over 100 additional guests, the local tax base benefited with the circus at the airport."

The airport is also home to Wilkey's Airport Cafe, a restaurant located inside the Kozlara Terminal. The restaurant is currently owned and operated by second generation Wilkey family members. Third generation Wilkey family members assist during busy periods and on Sundays.

AIRPORT OPERATIONS

According to Sentinel archives, during February's Mt. Vernon Airport Authority Board of Commissioners meeting, Airport Director Chris Collins presented the Annual Aviation Report, declaring the facility "vibrant."

"We had 220 jet operations, that's more than the previous year of 194," stated Collins. "We also had more military ops in the year that just ended than in the previous year, although out previous year number was probably in the basement as far as military operations. I think we have a real vibrant airport, and the numbers show it."

In 2014, total operations for the airport equaled 24,190, down from the 24,720 total of the year before. In 2013, the amount of jet operations was 194, and there were only 68 military operations. Overall, there is a growing trend of total operations, as 2010 through 2012 had numbers of 21,254, 22,928, and 23,050 respectively.

"As far as base tenancy is concerned, I have a list of all the base tenants here," Collins continued. "Forty-eight total aircraft are registered out in the field, 36 single engine, nine multi-engine, and three helicopters. We did lose a couple airplanes, obviously you know one that we lost on Jan. 2. We also had another single engine airplane sold. The good news is we have two replacing them very soon, so we'll be right back at 50 based aircraft here within the next month."

Collins also expressed optimism that the current low cost of aviation fuel at approximately \$4 a gallon would encourage more aviators to fly.

"It's kind of been a steady increase from 2010 until now," said Board Chairman Mike Ancona, "which that's encouraging to me, because that tells me that commercially we're stepping out. The other biggie is the military. I think these numbers are good for the airport. I think it reveals that the airport is healthy."

Ancona commended Collins for the airport's growth over time, recognizing his work as a director.

"I think the airport's in really good condition," Ancona continued. "At this time in history I think that all the parts are in place and Chris has certainly put our name out there and the things that we're doing like the LSA (light sport aircraft) show and so forth. I think anything's possible. Things that we never even thought about is possible, I think it could happen."

USA EXPO

The Midwest Light Sport Aircraft (LSA) Expo at the Mt. Vernon Outland Airport has had another successful year of putting together aircraft buyers and aircraft suppliers in Sept. 2014.

When asked about this year's Expo, Collins said, "The weather has kind of played a role."

He explained that the extreme heat and humidity of the first two days created an obstacle.

Collins did note that although the heat drove Expo

attendees indoors, it did allow the indoor exhibits and the forums to flourish as a result.

"It wasn't quantity, it was quality," commented Collins about the crowds at the LSA Expo. "Everybody that was here was focused shoppers."

He explained that serious aircraft buyers came from all over the nation. Collins said people came from Washington, Texas, Utah and Massachusetts.

He commented, "The marketing is doing what it's supposed to do."

Collins said that there was a good amount of diversity among the aircrafts showcased at the LSA Expo. He also said that Short Takeoff and Landing (STOL) aircrafts were very well represented at the Expo.

"We have the two best in the country here," stated Collins.

He also expressed his thanks for the volunteers at the LSA Expo.

Collins said, "We couldn't do it without the volunteers, and if you talk to any of these exhibitors, that's the first thing they say is that they have never been treated better anywhere else."

Collins said that the Expo volunteers are "great ambassadors for Southern Illinois."

"We're having a good time," concluded Collins. "That's what it's all about."

There were a multitude of different light sport aircraft at the Expo, and each one catered to the needs and preferences of different consumers.

One of the more intriguing aircrafts at the Expo was the MVP model 3.

Mike Lynds explained that MVP stands for "Most Versatile Plane."

He said, "The reason is you want to be able to take your plane and get in and out of anywhere and utilize it on your destination."

Lynds explained that the aircraft is fully amphibious. The aircraft features amenities like a fishing chair, a small deck, a tent and a hammock.

The MVP isn't ready to fly yet though. Lynds said that from the water level down is still in development.

He stated, "We're about a year and a half out from a flying prototype."

One of the volunteers at the LSA Expo showed off his aircraft and informed attendees about an affordable side to aviation.

Steve Watts exhibited his Quicksilver MX28 aircraft, which has the appearance of a hang glider with motors and seats. Watts said that the aircraft is one of the cheapest on the market and only takes 10 hours of flight time to learn.

"Low and slow," was how Watts described the flight of the aircraft. He said that the open air cockpit was "just like riding a motorcycle."

Watts said, "We're here to help people realize that there are planes out here that people can afford."

HALL OF HONOR INDUCTEES

HALLIE LEWIS

The past year saw several noteworthy additions to the Hall of Honor. The highest honor bestowed by the nation of France was awarded to a Mt. Vernon man and World War II veteran in April as Hallie Lewis, age 90, accepted the French Legion of Honor medal.

The award ceremony was held in the Kozlara Terminal Lobby at Mt. Vernon Outland Airport where Lewis not only received the medal, but also commendations from Cong. Bill Enyart, Rep. John Cavalletto and Mt. Vernon Mayor Mary Jane Chesley.

Accompanying Lewis' medal was a certificate which stated in French, "The Republic of France, order of



DRAWING A CROWD — Area residents began to gather after gates opened at the airport for Independence Day. The crowd at the Mt. Vernon Outland Airport's annual Salute to Freedom only grew larger as time passed.

the National Legion of Honor, the President of the Republic of France, the Grandfather and National Order of the Legion of Honor name Monsieur Hallie F. Lewis, veteran of the World War II United States Army Cavalier de la Legion d'Honneur."

Lewis spent three years of service overseas, which included time in Sicily, Italy, Germany and North Africa as well as France. He earned seven combat stars and a medal bestowed upon him by General George S. Patton for his participation in the Sicily campaign. In Sicily, Lewis moved ammunition to the front lines. He was also awarded the Soldier's Medal in Munich, Germany, for bravery.

"I was in a time bomb explosion," explained Lewis, "and helped pick up 42 kids. It went off at 12 noon. What the Germans had done was left a time bomb on the railroad yards in Munich, Germany, and these people were injured getting food out of the cars when the bomb went off."

The bomb is one of two major memories for Lewis. The other comes from his experience during the liberation of the Dachau concentration camp.

"The two things I remember was the time bomb explosion and going through Dachau. When we went through there they had people

in railroad cars and were getting ready to take them in and cremate them. The war was over, I have pictures of all that."

Not all of the medals he was entitled to were received, as Lewis' records burned in the 1972 National Personnel Records Center fire in St. Louis.

Lewis reached the rank of Private First Class. "I was a young pup," he said. "I graduated in June and went into the Army that year, December of '43. They gave me weeks to get ready and I went out on Jan. 12."

Lewis believes that it is important for the young people of today to know what the young people of his time accomplished.

"To this day I remain firm in my belief that the younger generation of Americans need to know about the suffering that my generation endured to keep our country free," writes Lewis and a friend from Olney in a statement. "I want them to be aware of and appreciate the sacrifices made by American soldiers. They must value their daily freedoms because once they are lost, they may never be found again."

The medal recipient encouraged those younger than him to study history from those who remember it. "Here I was a kid, and when I was a kid, I was surprised by what I had seen," explained

Lewis. "I'd never seen anything like that before. ... There's so much history that's been lost because of the veterans who have passed away after World War II."

These days Lewis keeps himself busy with his hobby of photography, as he owns a variety of cameras and enjoys taking pictures of the outdoors, particularly barns.

BILLIE GENE BULLOCK

On Sept. 9, the Mt. Vernon Outland Airport recognized their 500th inductee into the Jefferson County Veterans Hall of Honor.

Navy Seaman Billie Gene Bullock, age 90, was issued a tribute in recognition of his service in World War II to be placed on the walls of the airport. Next to Bullock in the Hall of Honor are his sons Torpedoman Second Class Billie Dale Bullock (Navy) and Specialist Fourth Class David R. Bullock (Army). He was also given his own tribute to keep.

Collins gathered with members of the Hall of Honor Committee, veterans, and others to celebrate the occasion. "We've gathered everybody here for something that we think is a very significant occasion," said Collins. "Today we're celebrating the 500th tribute to the walls of the terminal. I did a little research this morning and

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when we were given approval in October 2009 ... and January 2010 was when we started putting up the first tributes. If you do the math from January 2010 to this week in September, I think it's 247 weeks. With the 500th tribute that averages out to two tributes a week. ... It's a pretty significant milestone. When all of us first met we thought 500 tributes would probably be in 2020 or something like that."

Collins stated that the committee members were just as surprised as he was at how fast the tribute has grown. The tribute with pictures of Bullock with his service information was made by graphic designer Jona McReynolds.

"I'm very very appreciative of the Greatest Generation," continued Collins.

He said that he has all the veterans who served in World War II sign his copy of *The Greatest Generation* by Tom Brokaw.

Bullock wrote to Collins, "Providence, R.I., 1943. I was loading on a troop ship and your grandpa Collins was in formation onshore. I yelled 'Hey Collins!' And he smiled at me and waved. He was the last person I saw from Mt. Vernon before heading into the South Pacific."

Bullock was a member of the United States Construction Battalion, also called "Seabees" for the initials CB. Bullock served from 1943 to 1946.

The Hall of Honor Committee is currently seeking new members. According to Collins, all that is required of them is a love of history and an appreciation for the service of veterans.

"I appreciate everybody doing this," said Bullock to the committee, Collins, and McReynolds.

When members of the committee told Bullock that he had earned the honor of having his name on the airport wall, his reply was, "no more than anybody else."

WALTER CHESNEY

In April, U.S. Cong. Bill Enyart presented the Presidential Unit Citation to Mt. Vernon resident Gary Chesney, son of the late Technical Sergeant Walter Chesney, at the Jefferson County Hall of Honor, located inside the Mt. Vernon Outland Airport.

According to an airport

INCOMING FLIGHT — Airport Director Chris Collins directs an incoming aircraft, the second of three, during an airlift conducted by the military in June. The National Guard stopped at the Mt. Vernon Outland Airport to eat and refuel before heading to Kansas. Troops from the Illinois Army National Guard boarded Lockheed Martin C-130 Hercules transports during the airlift. The transports, based in Peoria, touched down in Mt. Vernon to refuel before the soldiers boarded. Two airlifts occurred on June 11, one in the morning and another at midday. Three planes were used during the midday deployment. This was the second airlift the airport has helped facilitate, the first one occurring in 2012.



press release, Technical Sgt. Chesney, a member of the Army's 672nd Amphibious Tractor Battalion, was part of a team that liberated over 2,000 allied prisoners of war in the Philippines during World War II. The liberation of the Los Banos Internment Camp occurred 25 miles behind enemy lines.

In late 2013 Gary Chesney presented documents and photos of his father to the Jefferson County Hall of Honor to have an individually constructed Tribute created and placed on display. During his research, volunteer graphic artist Cliff Christensen discovered the Presidential Unit Citation was awarded to the 672nd Amphibious Tractor Battalion in July of 2011 for the Los Banos Raid. Because Sgt. Chesney passed away in 1989, the family did not know that their loved one was eligible for the award.

Gary Chesney, a Vietnam veteran, accepted the award on behalf of his father. "My father seldom spoke about his service," said Chesney, "If he was here today, I am sure he would have said that it was our duty, as so many veterans do."

The Army's announcement reads, "For outstanding performance of duty in action at Luzon, Philippine Islands, on 23 Feb 1945. ... The 672nd Amphibian Tractor Battalion demonstrated exceptional courage, resourcefulness and determination in skillfully undertaking a coordinated thrust 25 miles behind enemy lines, which made possible the liberation of 2,147 Allied civilians and prisoners of war interned at Los Banos Internment Camp, Los Banos."

The Jefferson County Hall of Honor is a permanent memorial dedicated to area veterans on display in the Mt. Vernon airport.

"As a veteran myself, I am humbled to be able to pres-

ent Sgt. Chesney's family with the Presidential Unit Citation, a true honor for anyone serving in our military," said Enyart. "The designation of this honor shows how courageous and fearless the 672nd Battalion was that day in the Philippines."

Several graphic artists composed tributes for the Hall of Honor and Christensen, "was the volunteer that took on the project of doing the tributes for Gary and his other relatives," explained Collins. "Gary brought three different packets for us to do. Cliff did the research and the tribute for Walter."

MUSEUM RECOGNIZED

In December, former Gov. Pat Quinn announced that the Hall of Honor and Military Museum at Mt. Vernon Outland Airport won a Governor's Hometown Award.

The Hall of Honor was one of 15 groups awarded in the 32nd Annual ceremony at the Illinois State Library in Springfield.

"We worked with Bonnie [Jerdon] and the mayor," said Collins. "And we went through the applications process ... in August."

Jerdon, Mt. Vernon Convention and Visitors Bureau director, Mayor Chesley, Collins, and Hall of Honor Committee member Don Davis traveled to Springfield for a judging committee in early September.

"We thought we had a really good chance because all the visitors that come out to the airport tell us that there's nothing like that, nothing like our Hall of Honor in the entire country," stated Collins. "Nothing's ever seen anything done like the way we do it where we do individual tributes and every one of them is completely different."

Collins reflected that R.D. White, a World War II veteran and Hall of Honor organizer

who died in 2012 would have enjoyed seeing what he worked on earn prestige from Springfield.

"It feels really good to win," said Collins, "and like we were all saying in the van on the way home, every one of us that was in there knew R. D. White really well. Wouldn't it have been great for him to see it?"

According to the governor's office, award recipients were selected by volunteer judges who review and rank applications based on a variety of factors, including local need, volunteer participation, use of resources and the results achieved. The projects are judged within their population categories as well as within their assigned project categories. The project categories include services and mentorship, beautification and sustainability, parks and recreation, memorials and monuments, and history and historic preservation.

The Hall of Honor was submitted under the memorials and monuments category.

"We knew that [the Hall of Honor] is a great remembrance for the veterans," continued Collins, "but the way the community took hold and got involved was very surprising, and what I mean by that is how fast it grew. At one point there were five of our tribute making volunteers, and we were cranking out anywhere from five to 10 tributes a week when it was really going strong. And we're still doing one to two a week."

Collins reported that the panel of judges asked if those involved would be willing to spread their Hall of Honor idea to other towns and counties.

"That was one of our main focuses when we started this," said Collins, "we hope that our efforts might be copied somewhere else."

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