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Robert Aldrich

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OFF-LINE AIRPORT PROBLEMS*

ROBERT ALDRICH†

It has been my privilege to attend the meetings of this association for the past four years. Yesterday I was asked why I attended these meetings, particularly since I have had to travel some considerable distance in each case and at my own expense. I can answer this question in a very few words.

Primarily, I am an airport manager. As president of the New York State Airport Managers Association, I have gotten about considerably and found a great many airport managers firmly convinced that the entire aviation business revolved around their own particular airport, and that it went no further than they could see from their office windows. I have been most anxious to keep myself out of this type of rut. I know of no better way of doing this than attending these meetings and listening to your discussions and problems. I appreciate more than I can say your indulgence in accepting me at these sessions and particularly in asking me to address you today.

I manage an off-line airport at Troy, N. Y. This airport has been constructed almost entirely with federal funds, work having gone on continuously since the inception of C. W. A. At the outset, there was no particular program, and I did not appear in the picture until work had gone on for nearly two years. In 1935 I was asked to begin operation of this airport although the landing area was only about one quarter usable. We had some heavy nearby competition, namely the Albany Airport sixteen miles away. Both of these airports had been operating for eight or nine years and had taken care of all of the flying activity in the Albany or so-called Capitol District Area. We opened our hangar doors with not one airplane; there were none owned by any of the 79,000 residents of Troy. This situation reminded me very much of conditions in 1926 and 1927. However, there were airplanes owned by citizens of adjoining communities, and we set out to convince these owners that we had the final answer for the private flyer.

Since Albany has handled all of the airline business through our area, we felt that they were rightly entitled to the continuation of that airline operation and all of the physical, mental, moral, and financial headaches that went with it. Our community was about

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† President, New York State Aviation Association; Manager, Troy airport.

half the size of Albany, and we realized that with the constant cry for bigger and better airports being continually raised that we would be in a much better position if we did not tie our entire program up with a business whose demands we could not control. Therefore we have held out continually that we were a private flyer's airport and will continue to stay as such.

To give the type of service that the private flyer should have and that we thought he should have was a problem especially with a moderately limited budget. We worked out what we have called the Troy Plan of Airport Management. It fits our own particular needs, and several other airports since have investigated and adopted it.

Briefly, it is this. The City of Troy operates the airport 100%. We hire our own mechanics and run our own shops. My assistant is a licensed or rather certificated pilot with a proper instructor rating. We have two night attendants working alternate shifts, and they are thoroughly competent to give any type of normal service at night. This assures us of adequate 24 hour service, something almost impossible to get on other airports operated by cities anywhere near our population.

A local business man was interested in purchasing several proper type ships for instructional and cross country work. These ships in turn were rented to my assistant on a personal contract basis between himself and the owner. This additional personal revenue to my assistant was sufficient to permit us to employ him at a very low base pay, and we specifically implied when he was appointed that he might accept any type of outside work. Naturally this gave us immediate storage of several ships; it provided us with an outlet for gas, oil, and mechanical service. The ship owner paid only for what he got, and it was not necessary for him to have a pilot and a mechanic on a permanent payroll. In this way, we carry on our 24 hour operations, completely, with a total personnel of six men including myself.

In this way, we have adopted a mild form of subsidy of operations which has given us first class service and well satisfied the municipality. At the present time we have fifteen ships in a twenty ship hangar, and the shop keeps two licensed mechanics very, very busy.

We feel in this way we have eliminated many of the growing pains of a fixed base operator. In fact we doubt if we could have secured anyone to come in and gamble his money with what we had to offer and the heavy competition nearby.

All of this work has brought me rather close to the private

flyer. Having been one myself for a number of years, I could readily appreciate his many angles, and problems. I also had the opportunity to act as contact or assist in liaison work to the private flyer so that he could get ideas across and accept as much as possible the meager assistance that has been offered him.

In my travels and attendance at various meetings and conferences, I was privileged to see the many angles of this business that the average private flyer could not even understand. I could see why some things were done to him that he regarded as a death blow in many instances. The public relations work that has been done between the government and the private flyer has been so meagre that it is almost laughable to mention it. I can state now a fact which should be readily understood by all of us here, and that is a little oil of the right kind would have smoothed a great deal of troubled water.

The private flyer is interested in airports and airplanes. Without airports, the airplanes are practically useless to him. We now have a total of 730 publicly owned airports in the United States; of this number about 270 are transport or line airports. This leaves 560 airports, now depending solely on the private flyer for any sort of revenue at all. Many of these have airline and feeder-line hopes, but naturally all of them cannot be fulfilled. This puts the off-line airport in the position of being in the majority, and being in the majority I would say that they constitute a major problem. None of them should be permitted to shut down; in fact, their business must be increased. This is definitely your problem.

With the inception of the Civil Aeronautics Authority a fresh opportunity was opened up for many of us. Here were new minds being applied to a new problem to them. They were not hampered by the tradition of aeronautical lore that is so dear to many of us. They were and are receptive to all constructive suggestion and criticism: Witness Mr. Hester's most frank and non-straddling attitude in answering questions put to him yesterday after his address. *Now* is your opportunity to present yourself to the Authority as a united front. They want it, and they expect it. They expect the same high calibre of decision and resolution as come from this group in urging upon Congress the formation of the type of commission we now have. Six months from now, a year from now will be too late. Others will undoubtedly seize the same opportunity, and possibly not as unselfishly as you would.

I mention these things because the private flyer has to look to you for guidance and leadership. You are his paid representatives.

Most of you have been private flyers yourself and know full well what you would expect in the way of representation. Those of you who have gotten out and done a promotional job know full well who buys your equipment for you and who pays the bills. There may not be much glamour to the private flyer, but there certainly is a lot of him.

It is possible we may have a federal airports program. It is going to have to be administered in the different states. This group has urged this type of program and was practically alone instrumental in having the airports aid section written into the Authority Bill. If this type of genuine leadership is not followed up, you've lost everything you started out for. If you will present a united front to the Authority, there should be no reason why you could not be the administrative agency in your various states. In connection with this possible airport program, may I personally suggest that it would be of advantage to everyone if you would contact Major Berry of Cleveland as president of the newly formed airport managers group. I can imagine nothing more natural than this organization and that organization working together. Off-line airports, as the private flyers' chief interest, constitute our major problem today. In a great many cases, it is *not* a question of whether the runways shall be 3000 or 4000 feet long; it is a question of whether there will continue to be *any* airport in this or that locality at all.

I have wandered a trifle perhaps in this discussion, but that is only because the problems of the private flyer are legion. He lacks voice today because he really doesn't know what it is all about. Any group you could possibly name has held out at one time or other that it was interested in the private flyer, but when the show down came, he was left out on a limb. Some day he is going to get awfully mad, and then we'll have our hands full.

I would like to see a private flying division in the C. A. C. at Washington, a division to which the private flyer could go with his problems and then have them taken directly to the Administrator without having to course up and down too many channels. The private flyer doesn't course well; he must be able to approach his objective as directly as possible; he doesn't have much money, time, or patience. I know his patience is about out now.

May I leave this thought with you? Private flying was here first; it is here now as a major issue or problem; you can make it or break it. The choice is yours.