



## U OF M FLIGHT FACILITY ENDS 45 YEARS SERVICE AT ANOKA

Years of top-notch flight training, atmospheric research, medical outreach and air ambulance service had deep roots

by Richard A. Coffey

It's hard to follow the roots of the big trees, they spread out so far and wide, and when John Akerman left the Mohawk Aircraft Company in 1928 and came to the University of Minnesota and lectured to Engineering students on the subject of aircraft design, he planted the seed of an aviation institution that grew tall and broad with roots that touched the lives of most Minnesotans — one way or another.

And today I am standing in Waldo Anderson's offices at the University of Minnesota Flight Services, at the south end of the field at Anoka County Airport. I'm looking over the shoulder of Waldo's administrative assistant, Diane Mahon, who has done a masterful job of gathering the history of the

University's flight department. Diane's putting it all together for a reason: On June 30 the University of Minnesota Flight Services will be closed and Waldo will

retire — sort of.

Diane has gathered some good stuff, but one of the items brings me up short. It's a 1942 letter from my grandfather to the War Production Board laying out the need for building materials to put up some hangars at the University Airport. The roots have touched me. W.C. Coffey was President of the University during World War II, and he taught me to raise sheep. He

*Productive Sheep Husbandry*, my grandfather wrote about building a sheep barn: "Any sheep barn which does not keep the feet and the coats dry is practically a failure." And in 1942, in a letter to the War Production Board, he wrote: "On the University Airport, in Ramsey County, at the present time there are some forty-five pilot training airplanes used in our programs which are staked out and tied down

at the airport, but exposed to the weather. This is not the best way to care for airplanes, especially in Minnesota winters."

Sheep or airplanes, you gotta keep 'em dry. He got the building materials.

All the fuss started four years before, in 1938, when America was worrying about the dangers of a new war in

Europe. President Roosevelt ordered the launch of a pilot training program in colleges. Roosevelt wanted 20,000 pilots trained each year to "man the mighty



The University of Minnesota's Flight Services facility at ANE.

was a sheep husbandryman, drafted from the Agriculture School to the Office of the President during the war, but he was a sheepman pure and simple. In his book,

armada against the danger of a new world war."

The University of Minnesota was ready. John Akerman's students were flying at Wold-Chamberlain. U of M Flying Club president, Herman Erickson, persuaded The National Aeronautics Association to create National Intercollegiate Flying Clubs "to raise the average level of private flyers and to prove through organization and careful supervision that safe and sane flying is not dangerous." The Clubs had a gentleman's agreement that there shall be no flights of any kind when a student is not in the best of condition. "There shall be no crashes as a result of flights the morning after the night before."

Akerman organized a University Flying Club in 1933, and after a trip to Europe in 1935 he told a Minneapolis Star reporter: "When I saw what Germany, France and other nations are doing, I realized it was important that we in the United States adopt some kind of a training program." From Akerman's point of view, the University of Minnesota was ready to "man the armada and create a great national reserve of skilled airmen" with 350 aeronautical engineering students enrolled and 60 already flying. The University was selected as one of seven schools in the America to launch Roosevelt's armada. Professor Akerman was pleased. The University of Minnesota's Flight Facility was born and engaged in flight training during the summer of 1941 on a 260 acre site donated by Lawrence Stiener, the president of American Aviation, Inc.— just east of the Anoka County Airport at the junction of County Road J and 'old' highway 8. In 1941, 280 students were enrolled, and by 1943 the U of M Airport based about 40 airplanes, a maintenance hangar, and the wooden edifice I'm standing in, a temporary classroom and administrative building which was moved to the Anoka County airport in 1952.

After the war, the University Airport was an active field with two blacktop runways, 22,800 square feet of hangars, a Beech 18, five Cubs, a Seabee and a glider. The U's Department of Aeronautical Engineering offered an accredited "single-engine flight course" and the University of Minnesota's Flying Club resumed its intercollegiate flying competition. In 1950, the Metropolitan Airports Commission and the



**Thousands of Minnesota pilots have written an exam or listened to a lecture in the University's temporary administrative building.**

University of Minnesota worked up plans to create a new airport two miles west, in Blaine, and two years later the Anoka County airport was opened and the U of M's administrative building was moved. ROTC and AFROTC programs were launched and university students were offered an elective to take flight training for credit.

The University Flight Facilities staff gave flight instruction, flew U of M charters and flew chase support for balloon



**Waldo Anderson: at ANE since 1959.**

research projects, many launched by Physics Professor Edward Ney, sponsored by NASA and the Office of Naval Research. The upper atmosphere balloon projects, which began at the old airport, were key to America's entry in the space race and Ney's work - to study the solar corona and zodiacal light - was often in collaboration with the likes of astronaut Scott Carpenter.

In 1959, a twenty-five year old com-

mmercial pilot from Greenbush, Minnesota joined the U of M Flight Facility. Waldo Anderson spent hundreds of hours aloft chasing Dr. Ney's balloons. The University flew well over 500 flights in support of altitude research projects.

By the mid-sixties, the University was enjoying the boom in flight training that would last through the mid-1970s.

"Those were incredible times," Waldo Anderson remembers. "We were flying all the time. We had six full time instructors and three part-time," Waldo said. The U had a fleet of ten to fourteen airplanes in the 1960s including six Champs, two C-170s, a Tri-Pacer and a Bonanza. The Beech 18 stayed on and earned its keep as a charter airplane. In 1965, the U bought six Cherokee 140s to serve the growing number of University staff and students who were flying. In the late sixties a Piper Aztec was added to the fleet and a C-90 King Air. Before the flight training heyday declined in the mid-1970s, Waldo was designated a pilot examiner by the FAA. In thirty years Waldo has issued over 3,000 certificates and given dual to many more thousands of pilots who carry his signature in their logbooks.

Just as the boom in flight training began to subside, the University launched on-call air transportation for the U's Organ Transplant Program in 1976, and Flight Services began flying routine missions throughout the midwest. In 1983 Flight Services started an on-call air ambulance service for the neonatal unit of the University Hospital, transporting premature babies — and sometimes their mothers from outstate facilities to Minneapolis.

The University's flight training program came to an end in 1989, the design-

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nated Written Test Center gave it's last exam in 1995, but Waldo was flying and giving checkrides and will continue to give specialized flight instruction and checkrides to certificate aspirants.

When the University started it's Medical Outreach flights in 1995, the U of M's Hospital became the Flight Services major customer. Medical Outreach doctors and nurses were flown to hospitals and clinics in outstate Minnesota to consult with patients who would otherwise have to travel long distance to consult with specialists.

Early this year Waldo and Diane were told that the U of M Flight Services would be closed on June 30. The U's flight needs will be handled through private charter companies.

For the remaining staff, Waldo and Diane, the end is sweet sorrow. Waldo, nearing retirement age, hasn't lost his love for flying and he plans to stay involved. Diane, who has been Waldo's right hand since 1982 will leave ANE with warm memories and work for another department in the University system. "I can't remember a day that wasn't fun," Diane said as we looked over her historical research. "Waldo was fun to work with and we never knew what would happen around here. I've met famous people (the President) and I've worked with great flight instructors, doctors and students. People in aviation are really great."

And there are a bunch of us who will want to take a last walk through the old temporary admin. building. We've taken written exams in the classroom, we've listened to lectures there, and watched more than one thunderstorm threaten a checkride. Most of us have Waldo's name in our log book, and many of us have students who sweated out an oral at Waldo's desk and watched with great anxiety as he typed, one finger at a time, a pass or fail notice at what may be the last electric typewriter on the field.

On Friday, July 12, you are invited to attend Waldo Anderson's Retirement party at the U of M's Flight Services Building at ANE. The visit to the past starts as early as 2:30 p.m. and a program will be given at 4:00 p.m. Give Diane a call to RSVP: (612) 784-1444.



U of M Flight Services: 1952-1996