

“IT WAS LIKE A BIG PEARL”

BY JEFF COWART

Photographs by David Galen

IF WASHINGTON DULLES INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT COULD SPEAK, SHE MIGHT TELL YOU HOW LONELY LIFE WAS AS A CHILD.

She was born beautiful in 1962, with her characteristic wing-like roofline rising up from the quiet farmland pastures of Loudoun. With her glistening glass panels angling skyward from ground to ceiling, with remote airline terminals connected by passenger lounges that rolled on wheels, with three long runways stretching out for literally miles, she was almost the stuff of science fiction. She bore little resemblance to her more traditional airport siblings around the country.

In short, she was ahead of her time, the nation's first “jet airport designed in anticipation of a developing new technology,” even though the first commercial jets had yet to be built when

she opened her doors.

But, she was also way out in the sticks, 26 miles west of Washington, DC, somehow seeming a bit awkward and out of place in the middle of 10,000 acres of what was still prime pastureland, surrounded by still more pasture and farms. Loudoun County's population back then was less than 25,000. Fairfax's was 275,000 and the now-bustling planned community of Reston was only a blueprint. Ashburn was just a country store.

In her first full year of operations in 1963, only 52,846 passengers came and went and seven of the 12 airlines that made Dulles home—Braniff, Eastern, Lake Central, Na-





WASHINGTON DULLES INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT BY NIGHT

tional, Northeast, Pan Am and Piedmont—no longer exist.

What a difference four decades makes.

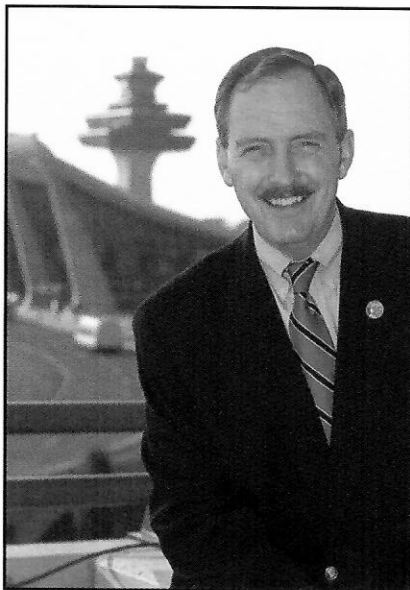
Today, more passengers pass through Dulles Airport in a single day (55,000) than during that entire first year of operations—generating more than 20 million travelers annually. Twenty-eight major airlines and four regional airlines, along with scheduled air cargo operations, account for nearly 400,000 flight operations a year.

In direct and indirect impact, the most recent economic study data shows that Dulles accounts for about \$4.1 billion of the \$6.5 billion pumped into the local economy by it and companion Ronald Reagan National Airport. More than 16,000 employees are on payrolls associated with work at Dulles, not including an estimated 5,000 or so temporarily engaged in ongoing construction and expansion projects. Nearly 90 percent of the Washington, DC region's air cargo moves through Dulles.

"It is difficult to calculate the precise impact the airport has on the Loudoun County economy, but clearly it is significant," says James Wilding, president and CEO of the Metropolitan Washington Airports Authority (MWAA), the policy and oversight governing body for airport operations.

In those earliest days not long after airport construction had begun and back when the airport was still known as Chantilly International, James Wilding was a fresh graduate of engineering school who signed on to work on the project in 1957.

Wilding remembers that earlier attempts to



KEITH MEURLIN,
AIRPORT MANAGER

build a second airport in the DC region on a 3,000-acre site in Burke, VA had been beaten back by angry residents and derailed by land speculators. When aviation proponents in the federal government tried again several years later, they undertook a more thorough study, spent time doing their political homework, and settled on a 10,000-acre site, 75 percent of which is in Loudoun and 25 percent in western Fairfax.

"Given the background in Burke, they looped through both of the counties and local officials said 'we would welcome the airport,'" Wilding says. "From the outset, I think officials saw the airport as a shaper of at least eastern Loudoun and perhaps the whole county."

Even after his more than 40 years of association with the airport, Wilding remains impressed with the accuracy of the forecasting of those first planners. "There was real vision among those in the Department of Commerce who foresaw the need for a new international airport on the scale that was being proposed," he says.

When President John F. Kennedy officially dedicated and opened the airport on November 17, 1962, it was the culmination of just over a decade of work. Actual construction from start to finish took only four-and-a-half years.

"President Kennedy spoke very movingly," says Wilding, who was in attendance. "The theme of his address was that this airport is a gateway to the United States and people are often controlled by their first impressions. He said this airport would be a wonderful way to tell the world about our country."

Former President Dwight D. Eisenhower was at the ceremony as well, primarily to honor his Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, for whom

distinctive passenger terminal, nor marveled at the three long runways that were 150 feet wide and stretched out for a collective 33,000 feet, surrounded by 25-foot wide paved shoulders to ensure that those new jets would not suck up dirt and debris.

And, what about that distinctive terminal and control tower?

Even today, 40 years later, that captivating profile and presence on the Loudoun landscape re-

look like a line of parked airplanes. Saarinen and Boyd collaborated on the mobile lounge, which would allow the building of a passenger terminal made for passengers and another place made for airplanes, with the lounges transporting people back and forth."

In those early days, when passengers tended to fly in suits and finer clothes, the lounges even came fully equipped with hostesses and bars.

Overall, Wilding says the collection of creative

EVEN TODAY... THAT CAPTIVATING PROFILE AND PRESENCE... REFLECTS THE ARTISTIC ARCHITECTURAL VISION OF ONE MAN.

the airport is named. Dulles was one of the strongest personalities in public service during the pre-Kennedy era and was a principal designer of post World War II foreign policy for the United States.

Perhaps equally important in the airport's name is that John Foster Dulles was surely among the nation's first frequent fliers, logging 479,286 air miles as Secretary. He died in May 1959, three years before the first Eastern Airlines Super Electra commercial flight from Newark, NJ ushered in a new era in aviation at the airport that bears his name.

John Foster Dulles had not witnessed the excavation of 11.5 million cubic yards of earth at the construction site, nor watched the rise of the

flects the artistic architectural vision of one man. The selection of Eero Saarinen and Associates of Hamden, CT as the designer of the terminal building and control tower was fortuitous in that it connected a man of incredible artistic vision with a project wherein he sought to find "the soul of the airport" in his design.

As a byproduct of searching for the soul, Saarinen and associate Boyd Anderson pioneered the unique "mobile lounge" or people-mover concept that—love it or hate it—is distinctively Dulles.

"They really pioneered the air side, land side concept in this country," says Wilding. "Saarinen wanted to build a signature building that did not

talent and vision that produced Dulles Airport is even more remarkable considering that the conventional wisdom of the day was that the jet airplane would play a limited-use role in aviation, much like the Concorde does today.

"The jet was seen as a premium form of transportation," Wilding says. "When the term 'nation's first jet airport' settled on Dulles, that's what a jet airplane meant. Not at all what we think of today.

"As a consequence, when the planning and design team was assembled, they were kind of shooting for an upper piece of the aviation airport. It was not envisioned as an everyman's airport. Those same people were smart enough to

THE VIEW FROM THE MID-FIELD CONTROL TOWER





A LANDMARK



BACKSTAGE PREPARATIONS

know what they didn't know. In those days, a 10,000-acre site was triple huge. While they had a certain vision of jet aviation as a high-end product, they said that might not be the way it works out in the future so let's just do a plan that has a huge amount of flexibility in it," Wilding explains.

Today, the flexibility afforded by that vision has helped make Dulles the fastest growing airport in the country and allowed for the luxury of expansion planning on-site.

Keith Meurlin, vice president of the Metropolitan Washington Airports Authority and Dulles Airport manager, has been associated with the airport since 1977. He points out that the size of the Dulles site—to which another 1,000 acres of land was added in 1999—and the foresight of the original planners provides Dulles growth options to carry it forward with demand easily for the next 25 to 30 years.

Ultimately, Meurlin says, the airport has the capacity to add two more runways, handle a projected 55 million passengers a year, and conduct 750,000 flight operations.

Equally important, Meurlin says, is that as Dulles has grown to meet demands, the size and flexibility of the site has allowed expansion and will allow expansion that is compatible with surrounding residential areas.

"Our relationship with the community from the earliest days has always been a good one," says Meurlin. "We have 8,000 feet off the end of the runway before we even get off our property. We've consistently worked with the county to establish easements above the homes to accommodate air travel. Homeowners receive disclosures and notifications that there is an airport nearby when they consider buying homes."

Good relationships with the community remain important, and truly are rooted in the airport's beginnings when nearby residents and airport officials were on a first-name basis.

Wilding fondly recalls the story of neighbor Betty Armel, who actually lived within the airport's 10,000-acre perimeter west of runway 1Left, which is the north-south runway on the west side of the airport.

"She had a little radio and she would listen to the pilots talking on their radios," Wilding says. "She got to know pilots by their voices. Pilots would be taxiing and Betty would come on the radio and say, 'Good morning, Hank. How are you this morning?' Everybody knew Betty."

Today one of the airport's VORs, essentially a high-frequency vector beacon that pilots use to help in guidance and navigation of the aircraft to the airport, is known as the Armel VOR.

In 1966, a group of interested neighbors and

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“THAT NIGHT IT BECAME A BUILDING FOR THE FIRST TIME.”

citizens got together to form the Committee for Dulles, a not-for-profit, member-sponsored organization dedicated to representing the interests of businesses and individuals in the growth and development of the airport.

“People in the community realized after the airport sat there like a white elephant for about four years that we should do something to help support and promote it,” says Mary Waters, vice president of the organization. She has been associated with the committee for 26 years.

Members of the committee have testified before Congress and the Virginia General Assembly in support of the airport, and worked directly with federal, state and county agencies on a host of issues vital to the interests of the airport and those who work and live in the surrounding area. The group annually gives the Tower of Dulles Award to someone who has made a significant contribution to the airport and, among other activities, it hosts an annual gala, which in November will celebrate the airport’s 40th year.

THE NATIONAL AIR AND SPACE MUSEUM UNDER CONSTRUCTION

Wilding says that in a political world, the reality of existing as a good citizen while expanding “rests totally on the willingness of your neighbors. And, that is what really distinguishes Dulles. It may be the premier airport in the world in terms of being at peace with its neighbors.”

As for the future, Dulles is certainly an airport on the move.

One of the first important upgrade projects

was the widening of the jet parking ramp, completed in 1977. Since then, a variety of critical projects have been completed, including parking expansion and aircraft terminal expansion. The mobile lounges will ultimately be replaced with an underground rail system.

One of the most visible upgrade projects was the 1996 expansion that completed Saarinen’s

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original vision. Painstaking care was taken to match construction materials to seamlessly integrate the old and the new.

According to the MWAA, between 1995 and 1998 the number of passengers passing through Dulles grew by 28 percent. In 1999, Dulles was the fastest growing airport in the country with an annual growth rate of nearly 26 percent, compared to an industry average of about three percent. The air traveler can reach 23 different foreign destinations and 69 U.S. cities from Dulles.

More than the facts and figures of operations, Dulles Airport is a window into aviation history and community connection.

Residents who were around in the mid-80s will likely never forget the awe-inspiring sight of the space shuttle, bolted to the crown of a Boeing 747, landing in Loudoun County. There is still a shuttle on the grounds, stored in a hanger, waiting for display at the Smithsonian Institution's National Air and Space Museum Center at Dulles that is scheduled to open in 2003.

Others may remember fondly the day when two supersonic Concordes landed simultaneously, one from France and one from Great Britain. They rolled up nose to nose at the bottom of the control tower, American flag in the background, creating another piece of aviation history.

For Wilding, his most vivid memory goes to a night about a year before the airport opened, when the terminal floodlights were turned on for the first time.

"I remember I was in a construction trailer up north of the terminal building," Wilding recalls. "It was during the winter so it got dark early. Everybody knew there was going to be lighting tests that night. There had been individual lights turned on before. But, when they turned on all the lights, the entire site just grew quiet. It just jumped out at you. Before that, the building had been individual columns and individual things. That night it became a building for the first time."

Meurlin remembers those lights as well, though it was later when Dulles was young, open and operating, but still lonesome in those earliest years with mostly Loudoun County crops and livestock for neighbors.

"I was flying for the Maryland National Guard and we would take off and look west of Washington and it was just one big light," he says. "It was beautiful. It was like a big pearl out there."

A big pearl.

In so many ways, Meurlin's description is right on target.



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