

A BRIEF HISTORY OF WR-ALC AND ROBINS AFB

originally written in 2001

[Author's Note: The following article is designed to remind all those who work at Robins AFB that on 1 September 2001 , the Center and Base will celebrate their 60th anniversary. This article is about the history of the Warner Robins Air Logistics Center and Robins Air Force Base and their role in the 60 years of Air Force History. It is presented by the History Office for the members of Team Robins Plus, not only to celebrate the 60th anniversary but also to remind us all of the major role that the men and women of this installation have always played in the defense of our country.]

It was the day after Easter Sunday, 26 April 1943 . The weather was perfect in Middle Georgia. A light breeze introduced the spring day to the thousands gathered around a temporary stage and podium erected at one end of a newly constructed runway; there were generals and VIPs of every kind, all present to dedicate the new Army Air Force facility in honor of its namesake, Brigadier General Augustine Warner Robins, one of the Army Air Corps' first General Staff Officers and commander of the Fairfield Air Intermediate Depot (FAID), Ohio from 1921 to 1928, Deputy Commander of the Materiel Division, Wright Field, Ohio, from 1931 to 1933 and Commander from 1935 to 1939.

When the War Department gave official approval for the construction of an Army Air Depot in Georgia on 14 June 1941 , leadership believed it would be part of a long-range plan to prepare American defenses in case of war. Instead, the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor gave urgency to the construction of this vital military base. Construction had officially begun on the new Georgia Air Depot, located 16 miles south of Macon , Georgia , on 1 September 1941 . Bordered by the Ocmulgee River on the east and the sleepy little Southern Railroad whistle stop of Wellston , Georgia , on the west, the flat former dairy farm tract soon began to be reshaped into what is today the largest industrial installation in Georgia .

Known as the Georgia Air Depot during the early days, it was re-designated as: the Southeast Air Depot, Wellston Air Depot (WAD), Wellston Army Air Depot, Warner Robins Army Air Depot (WRAAD), Warner Robins Air Depot Control Area Command, Warner Robins Air Service Command (WRASC), and Warner Robins Air Technical Services Command (WRATSC) during World War II. At the end of War, as its function changed and satellite bases were closed, the name changed again and it became the Warner Robins Air Materiel Area (WRAMA). Its designation finally changed to its present form in April 1974 when its new world-wide responsibilities led it to be renamed the Warner Robins Air Logistics Center (WR-ALC).

Spurred on by the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor and American entry into World War II, the new airfield's industrial and cantonment areas were completed by 31 August 1942 . The second and third phases were completed by 10 April 1943 .

As a rule, parades and military celebrations were held to a minimum during World War II, particularly in the early years when the outcome was still in doubt. Neither the President nor U.S. military leaders deemed it appropriate to hold formal military ceremonies since nothing had been won as of April 1943. However, in the case of Warner Robins Army Air Depot (WRAAD), the local citizenry were so enthusiastic and so insistent that the Depot Commander, Col. (later Maj. Gen.) Charles E. Thomas, agreed to hold the dedication ceremonies anyway. An earlier example of this local enthusiasm had been the willingness of Wellston city fathers to rename their town Warner Robins on 1 September 1942, which allowed Thomas to name both the Field and the depot after his mentor and friend, the late Brig. Gen. Augustine (pronounced with a silent e) Warner Robins.

On 26 April, participants and spectators began gathering at Robins Field about 0900 hours. At 1000 hours troops marched onto the field in mass formation. They were reviewed by Maj. Gen. Walter H. Frank, Commander of the Air Service Command, Maj. Gen. Walter Reed Weaver, Commander of the Technical Training Command, and Col. Thomas. As Master of Ceremonies, Thomas declared, "We have assembled here today to pay honor to a distinguished American soldier, Brigadier General Augustine Warner Robins." He also noted that such ceremonies were "a little unusual when the country is at war." But he added that "the keen interest and pride...displayed by our local citizens...is ample justification...for this dedication."

Chaplain Charles E. Lunn's invocation was followed by the principal speaker, Maj. Gen. Weaver. In his speech, entitled "General Robins As I Knew Him," he proclaimed that Gen. Robins was "an outstanding Air Corps officer who, along with others, laid the foundations for all that you see today." He described him as "human" and "all that you would like to know as a man." He concluded by charging those present to "take General Robins as your example," for if they did, "there would be no fears of the success of this installation..."

Macon Mayor Charles L. Bowden followed by officially presenting the deeds for the Depot property to General Frank and the U.S. Army Air Force. In receiving the site in the name of the Commanding General of the AAF, Frank declared that:

[This field and station are dedicated today] in memory of my very dear friend, General Warner Robins,... He was unrestrictedly a gentleman. This city and this state should feel proud in the legacy of his name for this station. Not only was he an efficient, outstanding man, a devoted husband and father, but with it all he was a leader of men. I hope this depot, as a monument to him, will be as outstanding as was his stature.

Colonel Thomas concluded by recounting the general's career, and noting:

It was my special privilege and pleasure to be closely associated with General Robins for a period of about six years. I came to...admire him profoundly.... I cut my teeth and experienced my growing pains under his fatherly and inspiring influence. It is common knowledge among all of his friends that one of his outstanding qualities was his ability to inspire his men with unquestioned [loyalty and devotion].

Thomas also asserted that, "I doubt that any single individual has had any more to do with the development of what we now know as the Air Service Command than Brigadier General Augustine Warner Robins." He concluded, "It is most gratifying that such an important project bears the name of one who held supply and maintenance functions so close to his heart, and who inspired so many improvements in the performance of these functions."

At 1400 hours that same afternoon, ceremonies moved to Macon where the AAF Band offered a band concert and then a parade from Central City Park, through downtown, to the Municipal Auditorium. More speeches followed given by Col. Thomas, Gen. Frank, and Mayor Bowden. These were augmented by comments from City Attorney J. Ellsworth Hall, and Chamber of Commerce President Cubbedge Snow. That evening the officers' wives held a reception, followed at 1930 hours by the annual Macon Chamber of Commerce Banquet held at the Hotel Dempsey. General Frank was the featured speaker. The honored guests were Mrs. Augustine Warner Robins (Dorothy Gretchen Hyde), and the General's three daughters, Mrs. Frederic (Dorothy Robins) Gray, Elizabeth "Betty" Warner Robins, and Helen Hyde Robins.

The previous morning they attended memorial services to honor Gen. Robins. Betty, representing the family, presented to Chaplain Lunn a family altar cloth sewn by Mrs. Robins' mother, Louise Gretchen Hyde. Known as a Fair Linen cloth, it was presented to the chapel as a Robins family gift to honor the General. Among Mrs. Robins' most vivid memories was the "sweet and cordial" way she was treated by Generals Frank and Weaver as well as the spectacle of low flying B-26s, B-24s, and P-40s. She recalled that "Steve's (Col. Thomas') speech was splendid...he is the ideal choice as First Commanding Officer of Robins Field." After concluding the afternoon and evening activities in Macon, they returned to Col. Thomas' home.

The next day as Gen. Robins' family departed, Mrs. Robins recalled that, "I couldn't describe adequately how completely delightful everything was. It couldn't have been better. This model, modern field is a wonderful glorious memorial to our Warner and to his many years of conscientious attention to his duties as an Air Corps officer."

ROBINS AFB SINCE WORLD WAR II

Today the Warner Robins ALC and Robins AFB, led by our Center Commander Major General Dennis G. Haines, is the state's largest industrial facility employing 5,253 military and over 12,749 civilians employees. Robins is home to over 50 organizations including the Warner Robins ALC, Headquarters Air Force Reserve (HQ AFRC), the 78th Air Base Wing (78ABW), the 19th Air Refueling Group (19ARG) or "Black Knights", 5th Combat Communications Group (5CCG), 93rd Air Control Wing (93ACW) (E-8C Joint STARS), and the 116th Bomb Wing (116BW) of the Air National Guard (B-1B).

Throughout its existence the Center's mission and responsibility have always been the supply of parts for maintenance, repair, and storage of aircraft vital to the nation's defense. The major change in this mission has been in the enormity of its growth and its technical complexity. In World War II, the personnel at Robins AFB maintained various and numerous warplanes as well as trained and dispatched over a quarter of a million maintenance, supply, and logistics field team members to every theater of war.

But things were not always so good. After World War II, the number of military and civilian employees dropped dramatically until in March 1946, it reached a total of only 3,900. However, the critical role that Robins AFB and its repair and supply personnel played in the Berlin Airlift (Operation Vittles) 1948-1949 caused the work force to grow to 11,000. This trend continued with the advent of the Korean War. Once again the nation took notice of the essential role of the Depot—then known as the Warner Robins Air Materiel Area (WRAMA). In one of their finest efforts, workers at the Center literally unwrapped and refurbished hundreds of "Cocooned" Boeing B-29 Superfortresses. Understaffed and working around the clock, they made sure that United Nations forces in the Far East had the necessary tools to fight the North Korean invaders. This was particularly true with the key role B-29s played in bombing Communist supply lines and staving off the enemy's assault on Allied forces pinned down inside the Pusan Perimeter.

The lesson of Korea was not lost on policymakers in Washington . Ever since, though numbers have fluctuated slightly, both the Air Force and Department of Defense have always ensured that Robins AFB has been adequately staffed. This, of course, has paid off since Robins AFB and the WR-ALC played enormous roles in the Viet Nam War through the resupply of troops and materiel known as the Southeast Asian Pipeline. Among the weapons systems managed by WRAMA personnel during the Vietnam War was the B-57 Canberra used for night raids along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The modification of AC-119G and K Gunships were managed entirely by Center personnel in the late 1960s. It proved to be the Allies' primary "truck killer" during much of the Second Indochina War. Also playing a vital part in war were the AC-130 Gunship, various helicopters, the C-141, the C-130, the C-123, and the C-124 cargo aircraft—all serviced and maintained at WRAMA.

In the 1970s, WRAMA and Robins AFB personnel once again found themselves on the world's center stage as they surged to resupply America's important Middle Eastern ally, Israel, in the 1973 Yom Kippur War. During Operation Nickelgrass dozens of C-141s managed by WRAMA provided the Israeli military with critical supplies to prevent defeat in its war with its Arab neighbors. In October 1983, WR-ALC-managed C-130s and gunships supported U.S. ground forces during the invasion of the tiny Caribbean Island of Grenada.

In 1990-1991, Desert Shield and Desert Storm once again challenged the WR-ALC and Robins AFB work force to provide supplies, parts, repairs, and personnel to Coalition forces in the Persian Gulf wresting Kuwait from the clutches of Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein. Personnel at Robins and throughout the Air Force airlifted more supplies and aircraft to the Persian Gulf Theater of War in 14 weeks than the Allies had airlifted in 14 months to West Berlin during the Berlin Airlift. Of course, everyone is familiar with the vital roles that the F-15 Eagle and the E-8A (now E-8C) Joint STARS played in bringing the Iraqi Army to its knees.

Of course, most of us still recall the tense days of March-June 1999. We learned new names like Kosovo, Bosnia, and Serbia. We also heard the name of a new tyrant Slobodan Milosevic. Unfortunately, the scenario was all too similar—genocide, brutality, and the strong oppressing the weak. Again the Air Force played the decisive role in putting an end to this dictator, while the WR-ALC and the other organizations at Robins AFB played a major role in supporting our warfighters with surge items, manpower, and even operational aircraft such as the E-8C Joint STARS. The success of Operation Allied Force was unprecedented in history and eventually led to a restoration of relative peace and democracy in the region. Robins AFB continued to support American Air Power as demonstrated in the recent successful campaigns Enduring Freedom, Noble Eagle and Iraqi Freedom.

In addition to its combat role, the WR-ALC today supports several of the most vital Air Force weapons systems, the C-5 Galaxy, the F-15 Eagle, the C-141B/C Starlifter, the C-130 Hercules, Special Forces (SOF) gunships, the 93ACW's E-8C Joint STARS, the U-2 Aircraft, Air Force vehicles, numerous helicopters and many other key missile, avionics and aircraft systems. It is one of the most important avionics centers in the Air Force, the integral manager of several important Foreign Military Sales (FMS) programs, the Small Arms Center for the Air Force, and a major location for the military development of high technology and automated industry. Since 1958, Center personnel have managed programs for 30 to 77 countries worth between \$200 million to \$3 billion annually.

Robins AFB, Georgia, has been visited by numerous dignitaries, and people of international fame including: numerous U.S. cabinet and sub-cabinet level officials such as recent former Secretary of Defense William Perry and recent former Air Force Secretary Dr. James G. Roche, former Air Force Secretaries F. Whitten Peters, and Dr. Sheila Widnall and, several senior military officers from every branch of service such as former Air Force Chief of Staff (CSAF) General Ronald

Fogleman, current CSAF General Michael Ryan, as well as numerous Georgia Governors, current Senator Saxby Chambliss, former Senator Max Clelland, former Senator Sam Nunn, the late Senator Paul Coverdell, the late former first lady of China Madame Chiang Kai-shek, the late Egyptian President Anwar El-Sadat and his wife, the late Prime Minister of Israel Menachem Begin, former Vice Presidents Dan Quayle and Al Gore, the late powerful Georgia Congressman Carl Vinson, and many many more. Five former presidents have also visited Robins, specifically— Lyndon Baines Johnson, President and Mrs. Richard M. Nixon, President and Mrs. James E. "Jimmy" Carter Jr., who housed Air Force One at Robins AFB during trips to their home in Plains, Georgia, and Ronald Reagan and William Jefferson Clinton, both of whom flew into Robins AFB on campaign trips to Macon and other parts of Central Georgia. Nearly each day, it seems, CEOs, Mayors, State officials, and senior officers from every service and from dozens of foreign nations visit Robins AFB.

One of the most important recent missions to originate from Robins AFB came about in 1994, when Senator Nunn, former President Carter, and former JCS Chair, Collin Powell, at the bidding of President Clinton, traveled to Haiti and averted a major crisis. Their mission, which began and ended at Robins, not only avoided war between the U.S. and the Haitian military junta, but helped bring peace and democracy to that beleaguered island nation.

As for Robins AFB itself, it has gone through many changes. It has been buffeted by a major tornado in 1953 and squeezed by growing pains throughout. Originally, Robins Field consisted of just over 3,000 acres valued at one million dollars. The original construction cost just over \$20,000,000. Today Robins AFB is situated on 8,722 acres of an upper coastal plain, of which 2,300 acres are natural wetlands and 1,150 acres are timberlands. Wildlife and vegetation are plentiful and lavish. Birds, alligators, the Florida Panther, and various insects make up the animal population, while magnolias, oaks, and loblolly pines (many planted during the New Deal programs of the 1930s) are among the wide ranging species of vegetation. Center environmental personnel and professional archaeologists have uncovered 36 sites and recovered numerous artifacts for display in the Robins AFB Museum of Aviation exhibit "Windows To A Distant Past," thus proving that Robins was once a major Native American settlement.

Today, Robins AFB has 14,297,809 square feet of facilities. There are 3.9 million square feet of maintenance shops, 1.7 million square feet of administrative space, and 3.4 million square feet of storage space at Robins AFB. The flightline runway is 12,000 feet long and 300 feet wide with two 1,000-foot overruns. Up until the early 1990s, it also has 13 miles of railroad tracks a link to its origins in World War II. Its landing area is not only the largest runway in Georgia, but it is capable of accommodating the largest aircraft in the world including the C-5B Galaxy and the NASA Space Shuttle piggybacked on a Boeing 747. Robins has dormitories for 1,415 single members as well as 1,465 family housing units. In addition, it has a major medical facility, a large base chapel which serves the religious needs of Catholics,

Protestants, and Jews, a fully accredited elementary schools, 180 acres of diversified recreational facilities, first class Officers' and Enlisted Clubs, numerous restaurant facilities, a base theater, base exchange, base post office, airline ticket office and commissary. Replacement value for all Robins AFB land and facilities in 1999 was almost \$5 billion.

Of particular note is the Museum of Aviation at Robins AFB which began in 1981 with a directive from the AFLC Commander, and when Dr. Richard W. Iobst, then Museum curator, obtained the photographic collections of Georgia World War I aviator Lt Guy O. Stone. The first buildings opened in 1984, and with the dynamic leadership of its former director Ms. Peggy Young it became the world class facility it is today. It has four major structures on a 43-acre site and 90 historic aircraft on display. These include the SR-71, U-2, P-47, B-52, and even a MiG fighter. The Museum has become, in 20 short years, a major southeast regional educational and historical resource with over 550,000 people visiting annually. Over the past several years this trend has continued with the addition of numerous educational programs and exhibits.

Not only has Robins AFB and the WR-ALC been important to the Air Force, but its impact on the state and region has been dramatic. Roughly only 500 of the over 19,000 members the Robins AFB work force come from outside the 25 counties of Middle Georgia. Between \$200 million and \$400 million in annual contract awards have been presented to Georgia businesses each year over the past decade. Overall Robins AFB contractors have awarded between \$2 billion and \$4 billion in contracts each year during that same period. Robins AFB's total economic impact on Middle Georgia was \$3.1 billion in 1998.

The sleepy little whistle-stop known as Wellston changed its name to Warner Robins on 1 September 1942 . Since that time, it has grown to 52,400 citizens, while Houston County now has a population near 107,000. But Warner Robins has not been the only beneficiary of the Base's employment of over 19,000 military and civilian workers. Perry, Cochran, Fort Valley , Byron, Macon , Forsyth, Hawkinsville, Eastman, and the other regional towns of Middle Georgia's 25 counties have also grown in size and experienced economic stability as a result of the development of Robins AFB and its supporting collateral businesses and industries which have burgeoned since 1941.

In 1993 and again in 1995, Robins and the WR-ALC were closely scrutinized by members of the Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) Commission. On both occasions the BRAC commissioners agreed that this installation was so vital to the nation's defense that it should remain open and functioning as one of America's primary Air Logistics Centers. Finally, on 12 May 1995 , all of the hard work put forth by the members of Team Robins Plus paid off. The Team reached the pinnacle of its profession when Center and Base personnel received the Commander-in-Chief's Installation Excellence Award from Secretary of the Air Force Widnall during formal ceremonies in Washington .

Robins AFB, Georgia, like all U.S. military installations, was deeply affected by the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001. Security measures so restricted access to the Base that for the first few days long lines of traffic stretched for miles and many members of the workforce were not able to even get to their job sites. However, as they have done since the Base opened in 1941 the military and civilian leadership and personnel adapted and overcame. Like the rest of the nation they soon took up their role in the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) surging repair materials and spares and pushing forward sustainment and support operations for U.S. forces going in harm's way.

Between 7 October 2001 and 18 March 2002, they performed remarkable service for Allied forces during Operation *Enduring Freedom*, the liberation of Afghanistan. They exceeded expectations even through a change of command when on 11 January 2002 Major General (later Lieutenant General) Donald Wetekam took over for Major General Dennis Haines. This performance continued during Operation *Iraqi Freedom* from 19 March to 1 May 2003 as Allied forces destroyed the evil regime of the dictator Saddam Hussein and freed the people of Iraq.

Since that time Afghan and Iraqi rebuilding efforts have also been supported by the men and women of Robins AFB. Even after the capture of Hussein on 14 December 2003, underground resistance has continued in both nations. However, the U.S. has remained determined to complete its nation-building effort. To this end, Robins has continued to play a vital role in this noble cause.

To better achieve this wartime sustainment process, AFMC leadership decided to reorganize the entire Command along more military lines. In an effort to "Blue" the Command, the Air Logistic Centers were divided into new unit organizations that changed directorates into wings, divisions into groups and branches into squadrons. Led by the current WR-ALC Commander Major General Michael Collings, the Center made these changes beginning in the second half of 2004 and culminating in early 2005. Indeed, this Center led the way in the reorganization converting its units first and obtaining its new lineage/honors, heraldry and unit histories first. Reaching back into the illustrious history of the Air Force the Center reactivated World War II and Cold War wings to designate the new units.

Today, the WR-ALC has four Wings—the 78th Air Base Wing (78ABW), 330th Aircraft Sustainment Wing (330ASW), 402 Maintenance Wing (402MXW) and 542nd Combat Sustainment Wing (542CSW). Even as the reorganization went into effect, the Base survived another round of Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC). In May 2005, Robins AFB did not appear on the closure list. Even though there will be changes with personnel at Robins AFB sustaining some new weapons systems and equipment and the make up of the units may be different, the men and women at Robins AFB will always fulfill their mission—"to keep them flying."

These positive trends continue to develop while the mission of Robins AFB and the WR-ALC continues to be, "Keep 'Em Flying." To this end, the present day

members of Team Robins Plus carry on the tradition of confronting and overcoming hard jobs just as their predecessors have done over the past 61 years. This history is a recollection of some, hopefully most, of the significant events, names, and achievements of not only the leaders, but all the people who have labored at Robins AFB. From its origins as a dairy farm pastureland 64 years ago to its status as a major defense industrial plant, Robins AFB, Georgia, remains one of the nation's greatest defense assets.

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