



Aerospace and Spaces of Air

...Your vision is not limited by what your eye can see, but by what your mind can imagine
– Astronaut Ellison Onizuka, Konawaena High School, Hawaii, 1980

My locality has a rich history of aerospace that dates back to World War 2 and the early days of rocket science with the arrival of Wernher Von Braun. At roughly this same time, construction of a large aircraft plant took place in Birmingham adjacent to the municipal airport. This facility – indicative of the scale of wartime capacity throughout the United States – encompassed about one-and-half million square feet of hangar space along with administrative and support buildings to include barracks and officers' quarters. This operation provided much opportunity as a source for technical employment and the state's aerospace community; and it is the subject for this story of my spirit.

Aircraft have long intrigued me. Growing up on or around military airbases, I had the experience of seeing air shows and sitting in the cockpit of military aircraft. Such experiences, coupled with classis movies and plastic models, were the backdrop for which I imagined myself at the stick or for which models or miniatures engaged in a dogfight. Without the aid of video games or computer enhancements, my mind concocted images that may have more than pushed the envelope of aerial combat; or more likely, ended my flight with a crash-and-burn. These early experiences and images fostered a lifelong interest of the aircraft, the designers and developers, and the crews that flew them both in Hollywood and in real life.

In one of the most memorable of air shows, a P-51 mustang made a low-altitude flyover. With its Merlin engine in full volume, this chromed beauty dazzled me with a reflection of what was formidable in its time – perhaps the best in its class. With this reflection in mind, I may be able to draw a parallel with the large facility at the Birmingham Airport that became Hayes International.





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At some time after construction of the facility (post-war), Hayes International established its headquarters in Birmingham along with a network of offices throughout the U.S. Services of the company included aircraft maintenance, engineering research, design and construction of aerospace products and services for missile and space programs.

If a picture is any indication of the companies' success, the aerial photograph of the Birmingham facility (around 1966) could suggest a time of prosperity considering the volume of aircraft. To the reader as well as myself, such volume could be attributable to several factors not the least of which is that the U.S. had a relatively larger inventory; but



employment figures and the diversity of Hayes would further substantiate a time of prosperity. In 1966, Hayes employed thousands of people that designed and maintained aircraft and aerospace products – *it was formidable in its time.*

A similar aerial photograph around 1980 paints a different picture. The earlier volume of aircraft has been sharply reduced to coincide with a much smaller and limited organization. Other factors, as described previously, could have influenced the volume; but notwithstanding these factors, the picture is something far less that some fifteen years prior. In 1980, Hayes employed far fewer people that performed fewer services for few aircraft – *it was now something less.*



My encounter with this operation occurred on more than one occasion or circumstance: first was a study of third-party aircraft maintenance operations in 1991 in some an education program ; then a brief viewing on the infrequent flights through the Birmingham Airport in the late 1990's; and finally, my employment with Pemco Aeroplex – the subsequent occupant to Hayes – for a recent, but brief period.

An initial impression of arrival at Pemco (inside the security fence) was the sheer size of the facility. I know I already described the size of Hayes, but I could not get over ten adjoined hangars with a combined footprint of roughly 25 football fields – let alone the possibility that most of this space was once occupied by aircraft!

Setting-out on daily excursions to the outposts of this territory, I was able to move beyond initiate impressions and concentrate on other things of importance. During the same time however, my mind concocted images of the *days of Hayes* largely aided by assorted furnishings and décor from the period, and a marketing brochure obtained from one of the longstanding employees. Yes, with some fallback to my younger years, the mind could concoct P-51's (or some similar aged aircraft) present in a “full-house” along with the once-employed thousands – each and all using “spaces of air” to make “aerospace”.



Turning through the brochure – which was more like an annual report without the financials – the content *dazzled me with a reflection of something that was formidable in its time – the best in its class perhaps.* And the commute from the parking lot to the office would never be the same; no, I would fallback to images like that shown below of these thousands whose walk undoubtedly with a higher step than those in the years to follow. To explain all the reasons for this higher step are beyond the purpose of my story; but if the comments of some of the longstanding were accurate, the place had changed for the worse...as I understood and observed in time.



The brochure and some of the longstanding were the means by which I understood and observed; these sources described an organization (and culture) that in few ways compared to the present. Some of the pictures could be matched to the buildings and property features, but aside from these few obvious landmarks and some other similarities of the trained eye, the general impression of the past was much more positive and promising – the organization had a vision.



Maybe in some respect a vision is overrated – at least if it stops short with words only; but if words are the expression of action and results, then a vision is something of substance or worth. If the vision goes to the core of the being or spirit, then substance and worth are realized with dividends. What I understood was that the Hayes’ vision had substance and worth – that put a higher step in your walk and much more! Described as a “diversified aerospace contractor”, the Hayes’ vision included a range of programs and supplier-



alliances that included NASA among other participants in aerospace research and development. Shown in the photograph to the right, engineers and technical staff ply their skills in the design and development of first article support equipment for the Saturn space craft launch. Such services (and functions of the organization) had dissipated through the years along with vision of Hayes.



My excursions to the other outposts included a growing awareness of the dire condition of the facilities at Pemco. Longstanding roof leaks and drain backups had contributed to a variety of damages extending to entire shops and mezzanines; and whatever the reasons for such neglect, the prevailing impression was that the facilities were in desperate need of attention. As some of the mechanics commented, an umbrella was standard equipment on rainy days...inside the hangar!

If the facilities could talk (as my mind concocted images), the walls might speak of the Hayes’ vision...and of substance and worth that, like the facilities, had once been vibrant and well maintained. Could a convenient parallel be drawn between the condition of the facilities and the vision? I believe so.



As a parallel, the facilities (or walls) offer the implied messages of something that *was formidable in its time* but has wasted away because of neglect – because of shortsightedness or lack of attention and vision. I believe that the walls *speak volumes*: volumes of aircraft and other hardware that once filled its hangars; volumes of design and engineering that once filled its offices and mezzanines; and volumes of employees that accomplished their daily commute with a higher step. Beyond the volumes however, the walls speak of a fading vision – as evidenced by the condition of the walls themselves – but also of the passing volumes illustrated in the prior photograph. If the people perish without a vision then so too does the walls that surround them.

As I complete this story of my spirit, Pemco has-sold off its commercial division and will rely seemingly on defense contracting. Minor improvements have been made to the massive facility but much remains categorically dormant with only memories of the volumes. Under a new name, “Alabama Aircraft Industries, Inc.”, the organization will proceed with or without a vision...and Hayes International remains as history and as a story of my spirit. .



“Hayes International”, Brochure, 1960’s

Informal discussion with longstanding employees at Pemco Aeroplex, 2004-2005

“Pemco Announces Sale of its Commercial Division”, Media at www.pemcoaviationgroup.com, September 19, 2007