

FREEMAN FIELD, 1947 to 1950

THE G I BILL TRAINING PROGRAM

Aircraft used by Trans-Air, Inc. on the G I Bill flight training program.

Aeronca Chief 11AC		NC-3205E
Aeronca Champ	7AC	NC-2227E
Aeronca Champ	7AC	NC-83300
Aeronca Champ	7AC	NC-1149E
Aeronca Champ	7AC	NC-1929E
Aeronca Champ	7AC	NC-81764
Aeronca Champ	7AC	NC-4508E
Fairchild PT-19		NC-50666
Vultee BT-13A		NC-54730
Cessna 140		NC-89396
Cessna UC-78 (T-50)		NC-64338

Other aircraft flown during this same time frame but not as part of the G-I Bill program.

Vultee BT-13A		NC-61569
Erocoupe		NC-2480H
Aeronca Sedan		NC-1062H

Instructors on the G I Bill program at Trans-Air, Inc.

E. K. Beck	89043-41
R.S. Mosley	CI 353405
J. N. Holmes	CI 234224
D.E. Abel	CI271698

When I started flying at Freeman Field in August of 1947, it was in top shape. It had just been turned over to the city of Seymour on a 99-year lease. It was the second largest field in Indiana, Bear Field in Ft. Wayne being the largest. At the time, Weir Cook (Indianapolis International) was much smaller than Freeman Field.

Freeman had 22,000 feet of runways, 4 runways of 5580 feet each in length and 150 feet wide. In addition to the concrete runways, there were 6 grass strips to be used for takeoffs and landings. 5 of the grass strips were 1300 ft. long and one was 2500 ft. long. This gave Freeman Field a total of 31,000 ft. of usable runways for the G I Bill students. Today (1990), we are down to 9800 ft. The last 40 years has saw 21,200 ft. of runway disappear from Freeman Field.

The ramp was an endless expanse of concrete, around 6,000 ft. long and 600 ft. wide, with hundreds of tiedown locations still in place. A large tetrahedron 12 ft. tall was located by the junctions of runways 9-27 and 13-31 and was visible several miles from the airport. A large compass rose was located on the ramp near where the west T hangers are located today. The former control tower used by the military was still standing and was located in the area where the beacon light is today. At that time the beacon light was still located where it had been at the old Seymour airport, near the entrance gate by the present police pistol range. During the war years and a few years after, the old radio range system of navigation was in effect, and the beacon remained where it was, since it marked the airway.

There were 5 large hangers on the ramp of which none are left today, and the large maintenance hanger (now the Big Blue Warehouse), which has been highly modified. Of course at the time, there were many military buildings left on the field, including the field house, the theatre, hospital units, fire station, WAC's barracks, link trainer buildings, quartermaster units, etc. Some of these buildings still stand and are in use today.

One strange thing I remember about the field at this time was that the runways lights did not operate. When I took my night flight training requirements, flare pots were set up on the ramp in front of the hangers, making a lighted runway (9-27) for us to practice our takeoffs and landings. While none of the Champs we were using had electrical systems, two of them had wiring for the navigation lights in place and we hooked up a battery, which was put in the aircraft against the firewall between the rudder pedals. We really earned our night takeoff and landings.

Trans-Air, Inc. the FBO and operator of the G I Bill flight school was located in the 1st hanger to the east, where now the Rhoades' blue hanger is located. The hangars were in excellent condition and were heated in the winter. The large doors could be opened and closed by one person. Maintenance facilities were located in the rooms on the east side of the hanger, and at first, the offices and classrooms were located on the north side of the hanger, but later were changed to the rooms on the west side of the hanger and a restaurant was put in the rooms on the north side.

The restaurant was operated by a certain J.D. Timbers, and was one of the better short order restaurants in the Seymour area. During the G.I. Bill days, it was a very popular hangout for the pilots and their friends. The restaurant had a long lunch counter, several booths, and the ever-present pinball machines to put the nickels in. If I remember correctly, there was a jukebox on the east wall. Much "hanger flying" was done in here on rainy days and/or snowy days. With over 70 students on the GI Bill, there were lots and lots of experiences to hash over. You would learn a lot in these sessions – some good, some bad.

Ed Beck and his wife Dottie managed Trans-Air Inc. Ed had been a Navel Aviator (Lt. Commander) in WWII, operating from carriers in the South Pacific combat zone. Ed was also the chief flight instructor for Trans-Air. I might mention at this time that Trans-Air, Inc. was a locally formed corporation, with some of the stockholders being Ed Beck, Fulton Meyers, Dewey Abel, Jim Holmes and others in Seymour.

The other instructors at this time were Dewey Abel (a local boy) who flew transport aircraft in WWII (and later, Korea), Robert Mosley, who had been a Non-com pilot in WWII and flew transports over the Hump into China, and Jim Holmes, a former instructor-pilot in the Army Air Forces, and a P-40 pilot.

With both former Army and Navy instructors for training, The GI Bill students at Freeman received the best instruction available and learned both the Army and Navy techniques. You could tell by watching a student practicing landings who his instructor was, since some would be making short field "carrier" landings in the grass strips by the runways.

Speaking of the grass strips, all students were restricted to the grass for landings while practicing. They were allowed to take off on the concrete, but all landings were to be on the grass. All the aircraft in use were taildraggers and the grass is much more forgiving in landing errors and – to the FBO's benefit – saved wear and tear on the tires. Some of the students got a shock when they were allowed to use the concrete. They thought they knew how to land until they hit the concrete. Landing grass and concrete is different as day and night in a taildragger.

As I listed earlier, there were 11 aircraft in use by the students at Trans-Air. Some of the aircraft were owned by the people learning to fly and were leased to Trans-Air, but the majority were owned by Trans-Air. There was also an Erocoupe that could be rented once you had received your private ticket, but it was not on the GI Bill.

Evenings and weekends were very busy at Freeman Field. Most of the aircraft were in the air, either in the practice area around Cortland, or all around the field practicing takeoffs and landings. It was nothing to have 6 or 7 planes in the pattern at once, and all students. And to think this was all taking place with no radios, no control tower, no Unicom, no near misses and no accidents. In those days, everyone was taught to fly with their eyes and not their ears. Seems as though we did all right without the "modern" safe traffic controls. With the exception of some prop tips damaged, and some wind damage to planes on the ramp, only one aircraft was damaged due to pilot error. He ran out of gas on a cross country and landed in a small field and took out a chicken coop stopping.

As I mentioned earlier, all students who had received their private ticket and were on the commercial course received night training on the "flare pot" runway. According to my logbook, I flew over two hours of night time on and off this runway, which is a heck of a lot of takeoff and landings, since we weren't allowed out of the traffic pattern.

Since all of our cross-country work was without the benefit of radio, we mostly flew by dead reckoning, following a line drawn on a sectional. And of course we had "IFR" flights (I Follow Railroads). Dead reckoning and pilotage were really enjoyable, since we got to use the countryside to find our way around. We always had our heads "outside" the cockpit, unlike today's pilots who must always watch their

instruments to find their way around. We were also not distracted by the constant radio "chatter" in our ears, as is the case today. Of course, aviation has "grown up" since the 1940s and 50s, and in most cases for the better.

Some time during this period we had another FBO operate on the field. Two brothers, Ray and Tony Taguam opened up a little maintenance facility on the west side of the ramp, and operated for a short period. They were located in the little white building north of the Freeman Field Maintenance facility building. Ray was a government aircraft inspector at the then active Bakalar Air Base, and was also a civil aircraft inspector. They did aircraft inspections and also had an Aeronca Champ for rent. They did not stay too long and moved out sometime during the Korean conflict.

The GI Bill training finally drew to a close in the early 1950s, and the flying activity really died down. Trans-Air, Inc. was down to one person, Jim Holmes, who was the FBO manager, the instructor, mechanic and inspector. There were a couple of planes for rent, but most of the local flying was done by members of the Seymour Flying Club with their aircraft, a Cessna 140, Aeronca Champ and a J-3 Cub.

I also might mention that during this time frame, Trans-Air was also the dealership for Crosley automobiles. They also had auto maintenance facilities set up in the hanger. If I recall right, they sold several autos during this time.

Of course, there are many, many more stories to be told about this time frame at Freeman, and maybe someday I can relate some of them.

By Al Seibert
(Written in 1990)