

GOOD BYE STONE MOUNTAIN AIRPORT...
And Thank You from the Bottom Of My Heart
by
Tim Schnabel

Excerpts published in *The Atlanta Constitution*, July 25, 1996

The ending of an era took place this summer just outside the gates of Stone Mountain Park. A death transformed the greater Atlanta area, local aviation and my life forever. Stone Mountain Britt Memorial Airport, one of the last small public airstrips in the Atlanta area, permanently closed its doors. For the short term the property was leased to ACOG for parking during the Olympics. Now the tract of 100+ acres is for sale.

As a private pilot who values simplicity and loves breaking the bonds of earth from a "country" airport, I was grieving since hearing rumors of a permanent closure late last winter. To have witnessed the slow dismantling of the airport during the final months of operation was not unlike caring for a beloved one diagnosed with a terminal illness. While they are still with you, you sure notice their growing frailty and vulnerability, feeling helpless.

On a personal level I have lost a most special home away from home. Some folks go to Lake Lanier or a Braves' game to escape or rejuvenate. Others find refuge in the picturesque mountains of North Georgia. My respite was 10 minutes from my doorstep in Lilburn to a place some pilots referred to as a "third world airport." While that was often said as gentle ribbing, I always took pride in the character of the place. Although unsophisticated, it was quaint, friendly, uncomplicated and tucked neatly on the east side of the mountain. It was a piece of heaven at my doorstep!

From a historical or demographical perspective, the closing represents a loss attributed to "progress." Most regulars at the airport agreed the disappearance of the small strip was merely a matter of time. Some in the neighborhood had wanted it gone long ago. The Olympics sure brought the curtain down prematurely.

It was only two weeks prior to ACOG taking over the strip that those in charge began to talk of a permanent closure. It had been painful not knowing. Folks can handle the truth, even when it is the worst news. Although we hoped for the best, all evidence indicated something life-threatening - aircraft owners relocating, flight instructors inquiring elsewhere for employment, fewer pilots renting planes and mostly, the spirit of the old place had vanished. Laughter and the usual relaxed atmosphere were replaced with blank stares and tension. When a notice was posted announcing all equipment, including landing lights and the clock behind the counter would be auctioned...well, that's pretty final!

Just a hefty javelin throw from the northern end of the runway now sits in regal splendor the newly completed Olympic Tennis Center. Although grand in stature, there is little accommodation for cars. So the airport suddenly became quite attractive for the parking of those four-wheeled machines without wings. I think it almost sacrilegious that a Ford, Chevy, Honda or BMW sat on a spot where once reclined a J-3 Cub, Cessna 172 or an old war bird. Ah, but this scene is but a mere representation of what has been happening to Atlanta the past 15 years - growth...at all cost!

The short 3.7 miles from my door to the tail of the Cessna I rented afforded me the luxury to be spontaneous in terms of scheduling my flying time. If the weather looked good and I could escape for an hour, I just called to make sure a plane was available. After hanging up the phone, I, and sometimes my dog, Bucky, our curious Yorkshire Terrier, were there in a jiffy. He either hung out with the folks inside the FBO or napped on the grass near the windsock. When my wife, Nancy joined me, we occasionally made it a family affair by including our four-legged son. Bucky was generally asleep on the back seat within 15 minutes after departure.

Part of the simplicity for me was not having to talk to a control tower. Clear chatter on a universal frequency was all that was required. The very short north/south runway was to some, challenging. On weekends it was not uncommon to see a stranger on final approach suddenly decide to "go around" and attempt the landing once or twice more. It was not like touching down at one of the larger Atlanta airports with 3 to 5 times the usable runway. No, you definitely needed some skill and on windy days, even moxie to settle in at Stone Mountain. Oh, but the adventure of it all!

For me the quaintness of Stone Mountain Airport captured the qualities of that small grass strip in the middle of a North Carolina farm from which I learned to fly some 28 years ago. Upon arriving at the field you were warmly greeted by your "extended family." After a leisurely cup of coffee and pre-flighting your plane, you easily took off, flew from point A to point B, or slipped through the skies nearby. The air was clean and clear. The aroma of pine trees, cut hay and even cow manure were only slightly tainted by gas fumes.

At a country airport you hardly ever waited to take off due to a string of planes in front of you, nor were there any jets from which to carefully distance yourself. Basically it was a collection of single engine aircraft flown by a motley crew comprised of some pretty interesting characters.

One of the gifts I will miss most is that beautiful, majestic piece of dome shaped, exposed granite, 825' high called Stone Mountain. On a clear, cold winter day I could see where home was from some 50 miles away. In summer it was Stone Mountain which first appeared through the haze. Like my logbook, headset and heavy heart, I wish I could take that overgrown stone with me!

Now I am required to find a new home from which to leap into the sky and that will necessitate driving further. I have picked Gwinnett County airport in Lawrenceville. While it is friendly, it is sure busier - even has jets - and I will drive 40 minutes to get there, not 10. Last year I moved my psychotherapy practice from another suburb 30 miles away to my home. I refused to remain a prisoner of the beltline "parking lot syndrome" or better know as the sit and suck fumes show. However, once more our devouring metropolitan dinosaur is roaring at me, "Gotchya!" Part of the cost will be consuming more time driving to and from the new airport than I will generally spend flying once I am there!

On the evening of the last official day of operation, we all came together for a picnic at our special place. For me that Friday gathering was an opportunity to be with others in community for one last time. In a strange way it was a viewing of what remained. Virtually all of the 100 planes that had been parked along the runway or hangered were gone. Scanning the empty field was a lonely and painful sight.

One of the old-timers rolled onto the runway to make his final departure as we dined on hamburgers and hot dogs. Before heading to his new home he performed two ceremonious fly-by's, first from the north and then from the south. On his second pass he zoomed 20' above the field and, approaching the end of the runway, streaked towards the heavens never to return. I felt such emotion watching his silent prayer. I don't do well with good byes.

The next day two bright yellow X's were painted on the runway signifying the airport was officially closed. At dusk I took Bucky and silently walked the barren runway. In seven years it was the first time he had the pleasure of being there without a leash. It was ironic that he was experiencing such unbounded freedom and I was feeling restricted, imprisoned even.

At the south end of the runway one of the longtime regulars had built his own hanger with a small flagpole attached. On the previous afternoon I noticed the American flag, along with a banner from his military squadron gently waving in the breeze. That Saturday evening I was struck by the lone Stars and Stripes at half-mast, and tears streamed down my face. This is not an easy loss for me.

Tim Schnabel is a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist in clinical and organizational practice living in Lilburn, GA. He has adjusted to flying out of the fifth busiest airport in Georgia. However, he mostly enjoys flying to small, "country" airports.