

AEDC Memories

by James C. Uselton



I had the privilege of observing and being a part of a broad spectrum of AEDC's history starting with being a first-year boy scout on Jackson Street when President Harry Truman went by in a motorcade parade to dedicate AEDC in June 1951 through today as a member of the board of directors of ATA.

I first worked at AEDC in the summer of 1958 as a University of Tennessee (UT) co-op student in PWT plant operations. I had seven work quarters at AEDC and graduated with my Bachelor of Science degree in mechanical engineering from UT in June 1962.

I enjoyed working in the Propulsion Wind Tunnel plant operations and gained valuable experience. But I have told many people that the most valuable aspect of my co-op experience was that I learned plant operations. However it wasn't my primary interest. I learned that my real interest was in the main mission of AEDC, the research and development testing. Thus I was overjoyed when I was offered the opportunity to become a first-level project engineer in the von Kármán Gas Dynamics Facility (VKF).

We had a tremendous test load and there was significant pressure to train young project engineers like me to be ready for their own tests as quickly as they were able to handle the responsibility. I was assigned the first test project of my own in 10 months. I guess today

looking back maybe I should have been more humble and a bit apprehensive, but then I was just totally overjoyed. It felt so good to be contributing to our country's aerospace work, and I must admit I felt so important and valuable. It was a powerful adrenaline rush. I loved the responsibility. I have looked back many times and realized how fortunate I was to start my career in such a way.

I had to grow fast. Soon having four or five projects of my own in different phases was a norm. I had to learn both on the technical side and the management side. Going through the project cycle so often and so many times, grows one in a hurry. I have been fortunate in my career to hold many significant management positions. I credit my early years as a project engineer in VKF to AEDC for providing the foundation of management experiences that enabled me to perform in management later in my career.

As a young project engineer, I had to learn to manage a multi-disciplined team of people, plan and schedule and execute that plan against a budget and be held accountable. Problems occur and you have to resolve them. Conflicts occur and you have to manage them. It was just a great and enjoyable way to start a career.

Also, to have the opportunity to attend the University of Tennessee Space Institute on a part-time basis and continue my education was a tremendous boost. I was able to gain my Master of Science degree and take many more advanced courses before obtaining management positions that changed my

education path. It proved invaluable to my career. What a way to start! I have always been grateful.

I learned so much from the people I worked with and for at AEDC. I had the privilege of working with many excellent performers in our company, in the Air Force and in the civil service workforce. We have had an excellent legacy of outstanding commanders and key Air Force leaders throughout the history of AEDC. Many of the civil service leaders are heroes at AEDC and made major contributions. I am not capable of doing justice to giving a dialogue of all those excellent contributors and will leave that to others.

I would like to give a bit of inside history on one of Sverdrup & Parcel's (S&P) early heroes at AEDC – Bob Williams, Arnold Research Organization's (ARO) first general manager at AEDC. Bob was an engineer manager for S&P in St. Louis. He was a well thought of young executive in the relatively small S&P at the time.

S&P was the engineer designer of AEDC and much of the early construction was coming to a close and operations were on the horizon. The Air Force approached Maj. Gen. Leif Sverdrup, Chairman and CEO of S&P, about forming an operations company to perform a management and operations contract at AEDC. General Sverdrup called the board of the relatively small privately held corporation together to discuss the opportunity.

A key aspect of the decision revolved around the factor that if S&P accepted the management and operations contract it would be precluded from performing further

engineering design contracts that would continue to arise at AEDC because of a conflict of interest. Engineering design work across a broad spectrum of disciplines was "the work" of S&P at the time so it was a serious question.

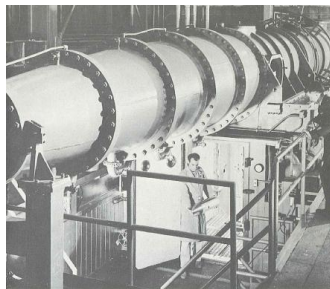
General Sverdrup asked the board to think on it overnight and present their views the next morning. Several board members including Bob were in a car pool and on the way home they discussed the opportunity at AEDC. They decided that it was not in the best interest of S&P to accept the opportunity for the management and operations contract at AEDC.

The senior members of the group suggested Bob contact the other members not present in the car and tell them of their conclusion and get their agreement. Bob was gently pushed in the role of spokesman for the group by the senior members since they did not want the responsibility of pushing the position with General Sverdrup the next morning. When General Sverdrup called the meeting to order, Bob stood up and indicated that all the board

members, except the general, had discussed the opportunity at length and had done a thorough analysis of the pros and cons of accepting the opportunity. Bob gave an excellent rationale for graciously declining the opportunity and sat down.

General Sverdrup paused for a significant period of time. The general told Bob that he and the group had done an excellent job of the analysis. Bob, who told me this story years later, said that he was sitting there feeling so

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The von Kármán Gas Dynamics Facility Tunnel C photo from the 1963 High Mach

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proud and glad that he had accepted the daunting role of spokesperson for the group.

Then General Sverdrup said that even though he respected their position, that not only was S&P going to accept the Air Force's offer of the management and operations contract, but Bob was going to Tullahoma to be in charge of the contract.

In my opinion, not only did this turn out to be a great decision for S&P, but also for AEDC. For S&P, it launched the company into an entirely different market in which, some 30 years later in the 1980s, the company would establish itself as a market leader.

For AEDC, Bob set a standard that ARO would hire the best and brightest for AEDC in this new venture. He believed strongly that AEDC was the premier place to have an aerospace career and that AEDC's mission demanded that we assemble the best workforce of its kind in the world.

I remember vividly years later as a young engineer at AEDC observing Bob as he walked around the facilities at AEDC. He not only knew most everyone by name but also their families – often inquiring about this or that child or spouse. He lived the "outstanding work force requirement," embraced it and established it as a standard that still exists today.

Later Bob and I became good friends. He enjoyed following my career and he was very proud that an AEDC guy became president of the Sverdrup Corporation.

He enjoyed saying that years ago he came from St Louis to Tullahoma and now we had sent a Tullahoma guy to St Louis. Not only was it my privilege and joy to be associated with AEDC my entire career continuing today, but it was my good fortune.