



Buffalo Air-Park today is a bustling \$250,000 enterprise covering 95 acres. In addition to its maintenance base and flying school it houses 60 aircraft and the local National Guard. At left is Tony Riccio, who started the airport in 1938 with \$250 and faith in the future.

Buffalo Air-Park

Private flying on the wane? Tony Riccio has other ideas.

By ERNIE STADVEC

FROM \$250 to \$250,000 in 12 years—that's the Buffalo Air-Park and Tony Riccio story.

Let's put ourselves in a private airplane on a cross-country trip, approaching Buffalo, N. Y. Until now, Buffalo Air-Park has been just a spot on our chart. Since our flight plan calls for a refueling stop at this airport, we near the field with curiosity. Circling the field once to get the wind direction, we are impressed by the neat layout and the lengthy hard-surface runway crossed by a hard packed north-south strip.

After landing we taxi down the blacktop ramp and are met by line boys who guide us to the gas pump and start cleaning our windshield before we are out of the plane. This service surprises us, but more is to come. We are directed to the trim Administration building where we find the operations office, an inviting restaurant and clean restrooms. The restaurant, offering anything from a cup of coffee to a full dinner, is a welcome sight to hungry flyers like us.

While we are enjoying sandwiches and coffee, a friendly

fellow introduces himself as Tony Riccio, owner and manager of the field, and inquires as to whether we require transportation into town or hotel reservations. As we are only passing through, we decline. But we're curious about this busy operation, since we are familiar with all the rumors that the private airport is fast joining the disappearing American Indian. We ask a few questions.

It doesn't take much to get the story from Tony, a former Republic P-47 test pilot with all ratings and 22 years of aviation experience. He tells it proudly as he starts from the beginning in 1938 when all he had was a dream, a 40 hp *Cub* and \$250 for a down payment on 20 acres of land. Today that dream has been parlayed into a bustling \$250,000 airport, covering 95 acres, that grossed \$100,000 last year. It includes a maintenance base, a flying school operating 16 airplanes, and employs 17 people. It is home base for another 60 private, business and club ships, plus a special hangar for use by the National Guard.

How did he do it? Ask Tony and he'll stop a moment, then say: "I guess you could say

it was in the planning. That's the most important, but you have to follow through with all you have and stay with it."

What does he mean by planning? The location of the field is an example. Tony chose this particular site for his airport only after enlisting the aid of the local CAA and the New York State Bureau of Aviation personnel and after investigating all other possible locations.

The effectiveness of the planning that went into the selection of the present site is evidenced by the long, flat, unobstructed approaches, the excellent drainage and location on a main highway only three and one-half miles from the Buffalo city line.

Bit by bit the story unfolds. As more airplanes were added, a new hangar appeared and finally the weary old 40 hp Cub was retired. With the war, came a training contract, and the little airport busily turned out flight instructors for the Air Force. In 1943, Tony accepted a position with Republic Aviation testing P-47's. Upon arrival at Farmingdale, L. I., he received word that his hangar and shop back in Buffalo had been destroyed by fire, along with every trainer he had on the field. The school did not close, and Tony proudly adds that at no time has Buffalo Air-Park closed its doors since it opened for business.

Postwar Spurt

After the war, Tony returned to Buffalo and prepared for the brave "New World" when every family would want to fly. Postwar business came, but in the form of government-subsidized G.I. Training, at the peak of which 250 students were enrolled. Although this was fine at

the time, Tony decided early in the program that it would not be a permanent condition, so he planned again.

He improved maintenance facilities to the point where his completely equipped shop employs five mechanics, three helpers, a Designated Aircraft Maintenance Inspector and is capable of handling complete major overhauls. He went after the substantial business of the private pilot and businessman by offering facilities and service suited to their needs. It's no accident that the National Guard, Civil Air Patrol, Sheriff's patrol and several flying clubs base their airplanes here. These organizations want facilities and service away from the heavy traffic of a large municipal airport. They get them at Buffalo Air-Park.

It was the summer of 1949 when the G.I. program slowed considerably, airports were closing by the score with many becoming only week-end operations. During this crucial time, Buffalo Air-Park began construction of a new concrete block and metal 220' by 140', \$80,000 hangar. Even before the building was completed, this new addition attracted private aircraft owners.

Since that time hundreds of airports around the nation have closed, along with every school in the Niagara Frontier area except Buffalo Air-Park. While it was being generally conceded that private flying was not in a healthy state, Tony planned again. He figured that a hard-surfaced, lighted runway would attract even more transient private and company aircraft. Last summer 2,400 feet of the northeast-southwest runway was black-topped and lights of Tony's own design were installed. Most of the airport improvements have been Tony's own inno-

vations. However, for the hangar and runway construction he gives much of the credit to Edward Jaworski, a former Air Force instructor and ATC pilot.

And Next?

What is Tony planning for the future? He smiles at that question, then explains that his building program has levelled off for the present. He is now concentrating on charter and light freight for immediate results. This phase of his operation is doing well, with several local corporations and businessmen as steady customers.

Another market Tony is investigating is the lease charter program being used successfully in various places across the country. Under this plan he will supply the airplane, pilot and service on a yearly lease basis to the corporation that wants the flexibility and economy of its own airline schedule, without the large capital investment required. Tony is enthusiastic about the future of charter, lease and business flying, and is aggressively going after it, but he will always have a soft spot in his heart for private flying.

After lunch we go on a brief inspection tour around the field with Tony. He points out the physical plant, recent improvements and future possible expansion. As he talks we visualize the field growing each year—and the most amazing part is that this is, and always has been, a private venture. No municipal, state or government funds ever went into Buffalo Air-Park.

Finally it is time to head home. Reluctantly we climb aboard our serviced and waiting airplane. Tony, with a wave and a smile, calls out, "And, you might add, you've just gotta love it." END