Cleared For Takeoff: Link’s New Tower–Based ATC Academy

Tower training is a rarity for new recruits to air traffic control. But that is planned at the Link ATC Academy, which will fast-track students through the rigorous program and into a job in just 10 months, writes Rick Adams.

For half a century, the smallish town of Denison (population 24,103), 75 miles north of Dallas on the Red River border between Texas and Oklahoma, has been little more than a footnote in the AAA travel guide. For this was the birthplace of General Dwight D. “Ike” Eisenhower, hero of the Normandy invasion and the Allied WWII victory in Europe, and 34th president of the United States during the 1950s economic boom.

Then in mid-January this year, Denison celebrated its second hometown hero – Chesley “Sully” Sullenberger, the pilot in command who saved his entire crew and passengers of US Airways 1549 with the remarkable water landing in the Hudson River.

Sullenberger’s passion for flying was stimulated as a young teenager in the 1960s, watching US Air Force F-102 Delta Daggers at Denison’s Perrin AFB. During that era the 4780th Air Defense Training Wing boasted the largest fleet of Convair F-102 interceptor aircraft anywhere.

In fact, Perrin Field was the first Army Air Field basic flying training school to become operational after the attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941.

Chuck Stone, a pilot instructor trainee at Perrin during the Korean War, fondly recalled the Link “Blue Box” trainers there: “Whenever there was a trainer open and time permitted, I was sitting in that box recalling and honing my instrument flying procedures. The sound of the dots and dashes from flying the beam would ring in my ears as I fell asleep at night.”

Now, Perrin – rechristened the North Texas Regional airport (GYI) - is showing signs of once again becoming a vibrant airfield, thanks to the 9,000-foot concrete runway that the Air Force ceded to Grayson County. Just as Judge Jake Loy lobbied Washington to build the original Perrin, West Point graduate County Judge Drue Byrum is leading the effort to redevelop the airport to attract business to the largely rural region. MD Helicopters, for example, has been contemplating relocating there from Arizona. Indeed, there are even suggestions that Denison could someday become the site of a third major airport in the Dallas/Fort Worth Metroplex as the northern suburbs continue to sprawl. (Ironic, considering that the USAF closed Perrin in 1971, in part, because it was considered too close to the busy air routes feeding the then-new DFW International airport.)

The latest part of the Denison resurgence is a pioneering air traffic control (ATC) training program initiated by L-3 Communications’ Link Simulation & Training, the progeny of the Blue Box inventors, whose headquarters is just south of DFW in Arlington, Texas.

The Link ATC Academy promises to graduate FAA-qualified controllers in only 10 months, compared with the traditional route of a two-year or four-year college plus the FAA Academy 16-week program in Oklahoma City. The Link program should help fast-track students into an FAA job and on the path to the median US $177,240 annual salary.

Cost of the 10 months in Denison is $41,000 per student.

As you would expect, the Link ATC Academy incorporates training in a high-fidelity simulator, the same Adacel MaxSim tower simulators used at the FAA Academy and several of the 31 schools in the Collegiate Training Initiative (CTI). A June 2008 FAA report indicates that
It took 60% fewer days for developmental controllers to complete ground control training at the Miami tower, and at Chicago O’Hare, 42% fewer days as a result of simulator training.

What is unique at Denison is on-the-job (OJT) training in an operational ATC tower. Only two CTI schools, Middle Georgia College and Community College of Beaver County (Pennsylvania), offer in-tower practice.

“Tower training was added to our program to produce a more qualified controller and a better candidate for employment with the FAA,” explains Carl Wilson, director, advanced education and training solutions, for Link. “The normal CTI facilities only produce controller trainees. This puts the onus of training responsibility on FAA facilities, which are least able to allocate adequate manning to accomplish the training because of the controller shortage.”

**Strike**

The shortage stems from the air traffic controller strike nearly three decades ago in 1981 when President Ronald Reagan fired 10,000 controllers. With mandatory retirement from the high-stress role set at age 56, the FAA is hiring new controllers at a high tempo – 5,000 over the past three years, 2,000 more expected in fiscal 2009, and 17,000 across the next 10 years. (The total controller workforce is currently about 15,000.)

More than 20 new classes have been added to the FAA Academy to accommodate growing enrollment. As many as 50% arrive from degree-granting colleges, an additional 33% from the military. The remainder gets in via a relatively new off-the-street (OTS) recruitment in which candidates go directly to Oklahoma City after passing various tests and interviews.

Upon graduation from Oklahoma City, new FAA “developmental air traffic control specialists” begin OJT on route or terminal training at their assigned locations. Generally, it takes new controllers two to four years to complete all requirements to become certified professional controllers (CPC).

Link personnel actually operate the ATC tower at Denison, which re-opened last June. After the initial four months of full-time academic and simulator instruction, students begin daily climbing the 115 steps to the top of the tower for six months of hands-on training in “pushing tin.”

Is there sufficient traffic at a general aviation airport to keep students busy? Scott James, curriculum/courseware manager for the Link ATC Academy, says it has been soliciting area flight schools and the Joint Reserve Base (JRB) in Fort Worth to make use of the Denison runway and “drum up the traffic count.” The JRB is home to P-16s, F/A-18s, and C-130s. Marine Corps V-22 tilt-rotors have touched down at Denison, as well as Army helicopters transiting to Fort Hood in central Texas.

North Texas Regional airport was also host to two stages of the 2008 United States National Aerobatic Championships with thousands of take-offs and landings.

The launch class for Link started in late January, and once in full gear it expects to accommodate up to 120 students a year at Denison. Wilson says they are investigating other potential Category 1 towers around the country. A “classic example” is Madera, California; the city inherited Castle AFB (at one time a major site for Link B-52 simulators), and hopes to leverage its runways into concrete business development.