

# Clarksdale-Coahoma County Airport



By Rusty Hampton

In last week's letter to the company, Neel-Schaffer President Hibbett Neel wrote:

"The customer wants us to always look for better ways to do what we do. The customer, naturally, wants us to use our education and experience to find the best solutions, while also being creative and innovative when possible."

For a prime example of Neel-Schaffer putting this philosophy into practice, check out the project underway in Clarksdale, Mississippi, where Neel-Schaffer has combined with an innovative Air Force Reserve training program to help bring a Delta airport into the 21st century.

"It's kind of a word that's used too much, but really this has been a godsend for a small, rural airport," said David Huggins, Chairman of the Clarksdale-Coahoma County Airport Board, in explaining the program's impact.

The Clarksdale-Coahoma County Airport was built in 1938 as a U.S. Army training base. And now it's being upgraded – 75 years later.

Neel-Schaffer is providing design and construction services for the project, which includes a new flight office building, hanger and taxiway. The Air Force Reserve Innovative Readiness Training program is providing the labor – free of charge. For Clarksdale, that means a \$1.5 million construction project will cost about \$850,000.

"Neel-Schaffer has been invaluable," said Huggins. "We couldn't do this without the expert engineering of Neel-Schaffer. And we just could not be more impressed with the professionalism of the Air Force people who came here and performed this work."



From head to toe, it's been high-quality work from great people."

The only drawback is that the construction, which started in March, wasn't quite finished in the program's allotted window of time. The good news, said Huggins, is that the airport and Coahoma County are working with the Air Force IRT to develop a five-year Capital Improvements Program and that the work is scheduled to be finished next March – along with another project for another hanger, lighting and taxiway upgrades.

Tom Henderson, P.E., is the project manager for Neel-Schaffer. He said the Air Force had some 40 to 50 reserves from around the country working on the project at any time, in two-week shifts.

"They're learning how to build buildings and use the equipment," said Henderson. "We designed

the project and we're providing construction management services, including the coordination of purchasing and delivery of the materials on-site and the testing on-site.

"It was a challenge," added Henderson. "It's allowed us to appreciate the contractor's role in a project because we served, in a way, as the prime contractor. Coordinating delivery of material gives us insight into what a contractor does."

In videos produced by the Air Force, several officers praised the program.



"The best thing they learn is the hands-on training they get," said Lt. Colonel Brady Johnson.

Added 1st Lt. Bartholemew Erwin of Indiana: "Some of the benefits are the training is training we can't receive at home station. There's a lot of equipment they have out here we don't have. There's a lot of other training we can't get."

Huggins said Clarksdale has struggled for years to get enough funding for these upgrades.

"The bigger airports get the majority of the funds," he said.

With help from the Delta Regional Authority, Clarksdale hooked up with the Air Force and is now receiving grant money from several other organizations, including the FAA and the Mississippi Department of Transportation.

"That's what the IRT has allowed us to do," Huggins said. "With their help we've done more this summer and will do more next summer than the previous 13 years combined, by quite a margin. And Neel-Schaffer has been involved with this from the beginning. About 15 years ago, Neel-Schaffer did the first drawings of what our vision was for the future, but it's taken this long to get the funding. The IRT stepping in allows the funding to go that much further."

And improving the airport, Huggins said, should be beneficial to the bottom line for Clarksdale, Coahoma County and the Delta.

"It's hard for me to give you a figure on what this means for economic development," Huggins said. "But there's no doubt it's very important when you're trying to draw industry to your community."

Executives who make decisions usually fly into areas aboard private jets.

"The first impression is when they land at the airport," said Huggins. "As good as we try to make it, it can't be that positive when they deplane and walk into a 1938 building. ... There's no doubt that will drastically improve that first impression."