

EDIMGIAFAD

by Master Sgt. Chuck Roberts
photos by Master Sgt. Efrain Gonzalez

Black-eyed peas, fried chicken and banana pudding join the spread of traditional Southern fare offered at Owens Boarding House. The \$6.50 all-you-can-eat deal includes a bottomless glass of sweet iced tea.

If you can manage room for seconds, you may have to nudge the person beside you to pass the bowl of macaroni and cheese or turnips from the end of the long tables where folks sit family-reunion style. And chances are pretty good that at least one person in the food chain will be from Robins Air Force Base, Ga.

Each day around lunchtime,

hungry Airmen and civilian employees make the short journey across the highway and railroad tracks separating the base from the city of Warner Robins.

But according to part-time cook Dennis Graham, the two entities are inseparable.

“That is Warner Robins right there,” Mr. Graham said, pointing toward Robins in describing the relationship between city and base. When he isn’t manning a kitchen, as he’s done for 37 years, he’s a backhoe operator who said Air Force homes are about

80 percent of the business where he plies his trade.

Joe Balshai, who manages the boarding house, agreed about the harmony that has become a mainstay. “If you’re closed for a holiday, we’re closed. On your payday, business is booming.” Accordingly, the effect of the terrorist attacks came as no surprise. “It was kind of like a small ghost town here,” he said of the chairs that remained empty because of the reduced comings and goings of base people as a result of increased force protection measures at base gates. If the base were to close, War-

ner Robins would in turn become a ghost town, he added.

Historic harmony

History and economic data back up their assessment of the intertwined relationship. In 1941, what is now Warner Robins was a sleepy little whistle-stop known as Wellston, located just south of Macon in the central part of the state.

According to John Shoemaker, president of the Macon Chamber of Commerce, future-minded local citizens at that time realized the potential impact of an air base in middle Georgia. They

purchased land in Wellston and gave it to the Air Force.

By the time Georgia Air Depot, as the base was originally known, was ready to open its gates in 1943, World War II was in progress and base officials decided to adhere to the policy of limiting parades and celebrations, especially during the early days of the war when the outcome was in doubt.

However, proud local citizens were so enthusiastic about a dedication ceremony that an exception to policy was made, perhaps, in light of the fact that Wellston had changed its name the year prior to Warner Robins in honor

of the depot’s namesake, Brig. Gen. Augustine Warner Robins, generally recognized as the father of modern Air Force logistics, according to historian Dr. William Head.

Those founding fathers proved to be sage prognosticators. The base has become the state’s largest single employer with about 13,500 civilians on the federal payroll. Its economic impact on Georgia is estimated at \$4.1 billion.

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Perhaps then it’s no surprise that it’s only a matter of time before new

From biplane to modern jet fighter, visitors at the Aviation Museum adjacent to Robins can view 93 aircraft and hundreds of exhibits at the Air Force’s second largest museum. More than 700,000 people visit the museum each year, which also serves as a link with the community. The museum is open daily and admission is free.

arrivals to the base hear the term “EDIMGIAFAD” or rather “Every Day in Middle Georgia is Air Force Appreciation Day.”

“I think that just says it all,” said Bob Turpin, a retired senior master sergeant who settled in Warner Robins where he now stays busy as a volunteer tour guide at the Museum of Aviation



Martha Lockhart, an administrative assistant for STARBASE Robins helps Dillion Price, a fifth-grade student from Jeffersonville Elementary School, prepare his rocket for launch. The program, coordinated through the nearby Aviation Museum, was created in 1989 by base and area teachers to respond to the needs of youth through hands-on curriculum focusing on science, math, technology, personal development and drug demand reduction. The program has graduated more than 6,500 students from its academics.



where more than 700,000 visitors view its 93 aircraft and hundreds of exhibits each year. "I've never been in a community where the relationship is so good," he said.

In his letter posted on the chamber of commerce Web site welcoming new arrivals to the city, Mayor Donald

Walker quickly points out that Warner Robins is "proud to be the home of Robins Air Force Base," and boasts that EDIMGLAFAD is a way of life in this city of about 50,000.

Warner Robins doesn't possess a charming downtown with quaint historic architecture as found in other Southern communities. Instead, busy Watson Boulevard divides the city in half as it runs from Interstate 75 to the base. Strip malls, eating establishments and a host of other businesses line the roadway.

Southern hospitality

But just a few blocks away in every direction are peaceful neighborhoods housed in pine and dogwood trees, and vibrant azalea bushes. And just like the more elegant historical sites such as Augusta or Savannah, you'll find plenty of warm Southern hospitality.

It took Staff Sgt. Chris Rhonemus awhile to adjust to the warmth and friendliness of the local population. But now, he said, "I love it here. It's the best base I've ever been to."

Sergeant Rhonemus said his family enjoys the employment opportunities, affordable housing, schools with attentive teachers, the hot weather and a location that offers great nearby trips to Atlanta, Savannah, the mountains and the Florida panhandle beaches.

Master Sgt. Ben Simmons said he enjoys the acceptance from the local community expressed routinely through military discounts, or citizens always at the ready to help an Airman in need. "No one ever turns their back on the military," said the Humbolt,



Tenn., native assigned to the 116th Logistics Readiness Squadron. "It's a great place for me — a great neighborhood and location."

Sergeant Simmons is a member of the 116th Air Control Wing that was the first to combine active duty and Guard forces into a single unit [See "Two Cultures, One Force," April 2004]. In doing so, the 116th dealt with issues surrounding the merging of two different cultures. But there's no culture clash between base and community.

"You really don't get that 'they're military and they're civilian' attitude. Even off base it's blended," he said. "This local area is probably the most supportive community for its base that

I've ever seen in 14 years of active duty."

That's what Mr. Shoemaker loves to hear. As the chamber of commerce president and a local businessman, he said the community wants Airmen's experiences to be "unbelievable." The base is an invaluable source of employment, he said, but an Air Force presence also is a source of pride that enriches the local community.

But it wasn't diversity that Tech. Sgt. Pat Burke was seeking when he and his wife, Pam, arrived three years ago. The contracting specialist had spent an entire career hoping for an assignment to Robins where he could find the cultural sameness of his hometown of Signal Mountain, Tenn.

Heaping helpings of fried chicken and macaroni and cheese are standard fare at Owens Boarding House where Airmen and civilians from Robins make their way each day for lunch in Warner Robins, Ga. The boarding house and restaurant has been a mainstay throughout the years in Warner Robins, formerly a whistle-stop town before the arrival of the military installation more than 60 years ago.

There may be no place like home, but Warner Robins is pretty close. To be exact, he said, it's "220 miles to my mama's driveway." And it strikes close to home whenever he hears the familiar Southern accent of folks downtown, or experiences a dose of Southern hospitality from the local community.

"I love it. I wouldn't be anywhere else." ☺

Robins at a glance

Mission: Robins Air Force Base is home to the Warner Robins Air Logistics Center, the 78th Air Base Wing, the 116th Air Control Wing, the 19th Air Refueling Group, the 5th Combat Communications Group and Headquarters, Air Force Reserve Command.

Location: Located in the heart of Georgia, Robins is approximately 200 miles from the Atlantic Ocean and the Gulf of Mexico, and about 100 miles south of Atlanta. Getaway destinations include Athens, Savannah and the Georgia mountain range to include portions of the Appalachian Trail.

Getting around: I-75 and I-16 are the major entrances providing convenient connections anywhere else in the state.

Ground transportation is provided by one bus line and one rail line, while air service is easily accessible at the Lewis B. Wilson Airport, four miles north of Warner Robins.

Population: Warner Robins is Georgia's eighth largest city with a population of more than 50,000. The base has 6,452 active duty, 12,391 federal civilian employees, 5,568 contractors and 856 non-appropriated funds employees, as well as 11,572 family members.

History: Robins traces its history to June 14, 1941, when Macon civic leaders — with the help of U.S. Representative Carl Vinson — influenced the military to construct a depot in Wellston, which changed its name a year later to Warner Robins in honor of Brig. Gen. Augustine Warner Robins, considered the father of modern Air Force logistics.

Climate: A moderate climate produces an average winter temperature of 50 degrees, while the summer average is 82.4 degrees. The last killing freeze is usually about mid-March, and the first freeze of autumn takes place around mid-November. Average annual rainfall measures about 44.86 inches. Warner Robins is 365 feet above sea level.

Cost of living: Housing costs are moderate. A variety of housing options make Warner Robins an affordable place to live. You can find long-term homes or simply make a good, short-term investment in the real estate market. Condominiums, townhouses and apartment complexes are readily available for renters.

Education: All schools are fully accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. Warner Robins is served by the Houston County School District, a separate entity with

seven elected members on the board of education and an appointed superintendent. The school district runs 19 elementary, seven middle and five high schools. Additionally, there are several private schools in the area. Warner Robins is home to the Warner Robins campuses of Georgia Military College and Macon State College, as well as Macon State College's and Georgia College and State University's Robins Residence Centers and Middle Georgia Technical College. Minutes away in Macon are Mercer University, Wesleyan College and the main campus of Macon State College.

Recreation: Middle Georgia enjoys a year-round climate conducive to a variety of activities such as boating, deep-sea fishing, white water rafting, hiking, canoeing, kayaking, horseback riding and golfing.

For more info about Robins

www.robins.af.mil, www.warner-robins.org, www.warnerrobins.org and www.afcrossroads.com