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FLYING HIGH: TUPELO AVIATION GEARS UP, PAGE 10

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# SKY'S THE LIMIT

*Tupelo Aviation Unlimited is the fixed-based operator at the airport*

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TUPELO – An airport is often judged by its commercial air service, but it's not the only gauge of the overall operations.

The Tupelo Regional Airport, for example, has had its fair share of issues with commercial service the past few years.

The newest service, Contour Airlines, seems to have resolved that problem in its first few months of service.

An integral part of any airport's operation is the fixed-based operator, or FBO. An FBO is much like a service station for aircraft, providing a multitude of services including fueling, defueling, cleaning, catering, de-icing, towing, hangar space, etc.

According to desertjet.com, "The history behind the term fixed-based operator is interesting in itself. Toward the end of World War I in 1918, civil aviation was virtually unregulated and mostly made up of 'barnstormers' or transient pilots operating military surplus aircraft. Flying from city to city and landing in farmer's fields, pilots set up temporary camps where they would offer airplane rides and flight lessons. With pressure from the Air Commerce Act of 1926 that resulted in licensing of pilots, aircraft maintenance requirements, and training standards, the pilots and mechanics making a living on the road started to develop permanent businesses, which were quickly termed fixed-base operators."

▶ TURN TO FLIGHT, 14

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Shelton Tutor prepares to get a Learjet ready for takeoff at Tupelo Regional Airport.

# FLIGHT: Tupelo Aviation serves variety of clients from small engines to jets

FROM 10



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Shelton Tutor prepares to remove a Learjet. On the right, he removes a Learjet from a hanger to get ready for takeoff at Tupelo Regional Airport. Tupelo Aviation serves a variety of planes.

Tupelo Aviation Unlimited is the FBO at Tupelo Regional, having formed after the airport's buyout of two former privately owned businesses, Southernaire and Tupelo Aero.

Airline Maintenance Service, or AMS, of Nashville manages TAU, a deal struck in 2012 with the airport. The entities split the profits of the operations, with 60 percent going to the airport and the rest to AMS.

"We took what was a small, barely profitable operation and turned it into a thriving, successful FBO," said Erik Larson, AMS' business development director. "For example, we've doubled fuel sales in the four years we've been here".

The principle players behind AMS have been in business together for about a decade. All with aviation experience, they formed AMS. Corey Gillard, the president and owner of the company, is not only a pilot like Larson, but a mechanic, too.

"We've both got the aviation bug, for better or worse," Larson said with a laugh.

AMS is based in Nashville, but its management team saw Tupelo as an opportunity for growth.

"Tupelo is a unique area, and it has a pro-business environment, both in city government and the airport board, and we were able to come in and make some changes in customer service and man-

agement style to help with the profitability of the FBO and to give the service our clients ex-

**We see small planes, large planes and everything in between.**

**ERIK LARSON**

pect," Larson said.

TAU now employs about a dozen full- and part-time employees, having doubled its workforce since 2012.

Tupelo Regional Airport's recent struggles with commercial air ser-

vice aren't a big issue with the FBO because its business depends on general aviation. Clients are mostly private, recreational pilots who require services no matter what airline might be flying in and out of the airport.

The FBO does sell fuel to the airlines, but it's a small portion of its budget. The fuel is sold at the lowest margin possible, so "whether there's commercial aviation or not, it has little material impact on the FBO," Larson said.

And he said the airport

is an under-appreciated asset.

"Our clients are all the major manufacturers and businesses in the area, plus the businesses they deal with," Larsson said. "The airport and the FBO are extremely important, helping to facilitate business to the area, Lee County in particular. ... I think the airport is often overlooked for the commerce it helps generate. Many companies wouldn't be here unless there was an airport. We know this because they tell us all the time."

Tupelo Aviation serves a variety of clients. It's not uncommon to see small single-engine planes next to multi-million-dollar corporate jets. Large charter air-

craft also fly into Tupelo, carrying college sports teams.

"We see small planes, large planes and everything in between," Larson said.

TAU also recently signed a military fuel contract, specifically with the Army Aviation Support Facility located on airport property. The AASF is home to several Apache helicopters, which are used by the National Guard.

"We've been able to significantly increase our fuel sales to the military, which is our single largest customer," Larson said. "We're proud to serve them, and I think they've really been a big help to the FBO and the airport in general."