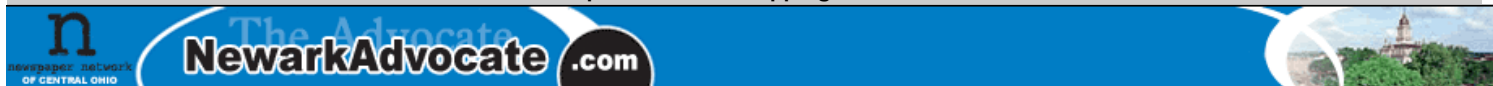


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Bicentennial: Horton's efforts saved Newark Air Force Base

By TIFFANY EDWARDS
Advocate Reporter

HEATH -- Persistence, study and a can-do attitude have defined Wally Horton's life.

And Horton, 90, who helped found and later save the former Newark Air Force Base, has helped define Licking County.

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In 2005, Horton received a national community leadership award from the Association of Defense Communities for his successful effort to privatize the Newark Air Force Base, which was slated to close in 1996. It was the first privatization-in-place effort attempted by the Pentagon.

His efforts also were recognized in 1996, when he received the Exceptional Civilian Service Award, the

highest award given to a civilian by the U.S. Air Force.

"You met the challenge with aggressiveness and creativity, viewing it as an opportunity, not a crisis," Secretary of the Air Force Sheila Widnall wrote in a 1996 congratulatory letter to Horton.

Rick Platt, executive director of the Heath-Newark-Licking County Port Authority, which now owns the property, credits Horton with saving the base. He said, "Wally was four people in one," possessing the charisma, managerial skills and knowledge needed to rally local leaders and convince military officials privatization could be achieved.

"He is the expert in the field about the equipment over there, its use and how important it was," said former Heath mayor Dan Dupps. "Nobody had the complete picture how important it was except for Wally."

Horton said saving the base he helped bring to Heath was an uphill battle.

"You wouldn't believe the gyrations we went through in that period of time," he said. "Everybody wanted a piece of something if they could get it for nothing."

The Pentagon announced in 1993 it intended to close the Newark Air Force Base. For a while, the government considered using the facility for other agencies or to house the homeless through the Department of Housing and Urban Development. Businesses wanted the government contracts but intended to complete production at other facilities.

Horton and the reuse committee eventually convinced businesses to locate at the former base, but some community members were afraid they soon would leave.

"They're going to come in here for a year and then take it to the West Coast -- that was the fear of most people," Horton said.

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Eric George, The Advocate

Wally Horton, 90, was a founder of the Newark Air Force Base and helped move it to privatization once it was threatened with closure.

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That fear never materialized. The reuse committee persuaded the government that private contractors could continue the work at the base for comparable cost. Contractors, such as Rockwell, decided they would bid on local jobs.

More than 1,100 jobs of the approximately 1,500 that had existed on the base were preserved, Horton said.

In 2006, the Heath-Newark-Licking County Port Authority paid off its \$11 million mortgage to the Air Force. Today, the former base -- now called the Central Ohio Aerospace and Technology Center -- houses companies such as Boeing, BAE Systems and Bionetics. More than 900 employees work there with a combined payroll of \$55 million. Platt said studies have shown the aerospace and technology center has a \$200 million economic impact locally.

"(Horton's) efforts have impacted thousands of families in Licking County," Platt said. "Without Wally, it's quite likely that the Newark Air Force Base today would instead be a pile of rubble and weeds."

INSPIRED BY HIS BROTHER

Horton was born Feb. 17, 1917, in Mills, Neb., near the South Dakota border. One of five children of Elizabeth and Herbert Horton, he grew up poor but developed an early interest in electronics and radios. There often wasn't money to buy radio components, so he designed them on paper, he said. Most of his knowledge came from books and the guidance of his older brother, Ivan, who loved electronics.

"When (Ivan) was in grade school, they were having him go to the high school and explain radio not only to the students but to the teachers," Horton said.

However, when Wally wanted to follow in his footsteps, Ivan handed him a book, promising to give him parts only if he could properly explain what he had read. After two tries, Horton got the parts, but he didn't assemble them correctly.

"He gave me that same book," Horton said with a laugh. "I was put out with him. Later I came to understand. I learned how to study."

Horton never completed college, but he took correspondence courses and other classes through such institutions as MIT and George Washington. For a couple of years, he worked for the Civilian Conservation Corps, clearing timber and building roads during the Dust Bowl.

"I'm not much of a college man," he said. "In my day you could do more things without college if you could prove you could do it."

DEVELOPING NEWARK AIR FORCE BASE

He got his start at Wright Field, where he became a civilian field engineer in 1942. One of his first projects was to identify problems with Identification Friend or Foe equipment, which used codes and radar to identify planes. During World War II, German forces often confronted Allied forces under the cloak of night above English soil.

"The German fighters were physically the same size as our fighters," Horton said. "The IFF were failing in flight, and British were shooting down our own planes because they couldn't tell the difference."

After six months, Horton found a solution inspired, he said, by his knowledge of radios. He wrote up a proposal for modification and soon IFF equipment was recalled. Horton was put in charge of modifications and repairs to 25,000 American-made and 5,000 British-made units.

Because most men with electronics backgrounds had been drafted, he enlisted women to make the repairs. Without sufficient time to train them, Horton set up a factory-style line and instructed them on one specific part of the process.

At the request of his superiors, he also started a similar operation in Chicago.

In the late 1950s, Horton was part of a team that approached Congress and Air Force brass about starting a metrology and inertial guidance system repair depot.

"(The House) turned me down," Horton said. "They said it didn't have enough justification."

Like he did as a child, he went back to his studies. He formed a committee, tightened his argument and went to the Senate.

The formation of the Newark Air Force Base was approved.

Horton and his wife, Clara Jane, moved to Heath from Dayton in 1962. He acted as technical director, the top civilian post, at Newark Air Force Base from 1962 to 1971. He continued to serve as a consultant from 1973 to 1980, and in 1995 he became executive director of the Central Ohio Aerospace and Technology Center. From 2000 to 2002 he served on the board of directors, and he attends board meetings to this day.

Horton's continued involvement is a wonderful opportunity, Platt said.

Not only "sharp as a tack," he's "living history."

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