



AEROSPACE ENGINEERING AND MECHANICS

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Fifty Years of Aeronautical Engineering

University of Minnesota 1929-1979

50 Years of Aeronautical Engineering



*First class of seniors taking
flying lessons*



Akerman Hall

Just 2 years after Charles Lindbergh dramatized the future of aviation by flying solo across the Atlantic, the University of Minnesota established a Department of Aeronautical Engineering. Although its formal existence dates from 1929, the department had its initial start the year before when Dean Ora M. Leland of the College of Engineering invited John D. Akerman, chief engineer at the Minneapolis-based [Mohawk Aircraft Company](#), to give lectures on aircraft design in courses administered by the Department of Mechanical Engineering. Even before that, the University had sown the seeds for the Aeronautical Engineering Department by offering a few courses in aerodynamics taught by Charles Boehnlein in both daytime and evening classes.

With Professor Akerman as acting head of the department, Aeronautical Engineering began its official life in the fall of 1929 in the old Mechanical Engineering building. Professor Akerman and one other instructor taught all the aeronautical engineering courses. Professor Joseph A. Wise of the Civil Engineering Department gave courses in aircraft structures, and Professor Boehnlein taught three courses in aerodynamics. That was the extent of the department that was to grow to maturity in little more than a decade.

The University's commencement exercises in June 1930 included, for the first time, a class of aeronautical engineers. The degree awarded was Bachelor of Aeronautical Engineering, and that first class consisted of just six members: Joseph A. Bezek, Ivan R. Dawson, Lloyd F. Kernkamp, Karl O. Larson, Louis A. Rodert, and Clarence Wang.

Professor Akerman was head of the department from 1929, his first year as acting head. He recalled that during its first 5 years, his colleagues and he became expert scavengers. Funds were rather meager, but enrollment and curriculum were growing. The only solution was to beg or borrow equipment wherever possible.

Then, in 1935, another milestone event occurred. The department got its own quarters. When the athletic department abandoned its swimming pool, basketball floor, and shower rooms in the basement of the Armory in favor of more up-to-date facilities elsewhere on the campus, the Department of Aeronautical Engineering moved in and ingeniously adapted these rather odd surroundings for offices and laboratories.

Enrollment continued to grow and the department was bursting through cracks in the old Armory walls when the first efforts were made in 1941 to secure a new building. Although the state legislature that year turned a deaf ear to the needs of aeronautical engineers the next biennial legislature, meeting in 1943, appropriated \$1,175,000 for the construction of a Mechanical and Aeronautical Engineering building. Additional appropriations were made available by the next two legislatures, bringing the total amount up to \$2,169,000. The new building was dedicated in October 1950, and the first classes were held in it that fall.

The Department of Aeronautical Engineering had meanwhile added another important facility in 1946. In that first post-war year, the University acquired from the federal government, through the efforts of Professor Akerman and others, the properties known as Rosemount Research Center located at the former TNT plant south of the Twin Cities. Several technical and scientific departments of the University engaged in research activities at this center. The Aeronautical Engineering Department conducted extensive supersonic research in its laboratories and five wind tunnels at Rosemount. During the first year of occupancy of the Rosemount Center, the department had research contracts totaling \$400,000; 1954 saw this figure reach close to a million.

Today [1979, ed.], 50 years after its founding, the department under the leadership of Dr. P. R. Sethna and his staff have set a high standard of achievement for the 225 undergraduate students now enrolled in the department. A sense of pride and achievement is embodied by the more than 2,500 graduates who reflect considerable credit upon Minnesota's Aerospace Engineering and Mechanics Department through their accomplishments.

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