

Shannon Chamber discuss Shannon Airport's future as a world cargo hub

Guests at last Friday's Shannon & District Chamber of Commerce business luncheon were in for a rare treat when they were introduced to the originator of the concept of metamorphosing Shannon Airport into an engine of growth for industry and commerce in the midwest region and a pioneer in world aviation

In addition to honouring American air cargo journalist Richard Malkin, a number of freight industry specialists spoke positively about the airport's future before the chairman designate of the board of the proposed Shannon Airport Authority, Pat Shanahan, gave his vision of the future with the assurance that he is "not concerned about the viability of Shannon Airport".

In his opening address, Paddy Purcell, the outgoing president of Shannon Chamber, said that his organisation had lobbied hard over the last two years for the independence of the airport. "As an entrepreneur, I could never see any radical growth here by not having our own airport authority where we could call our own shots."

"I believe that the establishment of this Airport Authority is a beginning

only. I think a vision that is attainable is to establish Shannon Airport as a low cost airport for European routes," said Mr Purcell.

President of the professional members section of the Irish Institute of Freight Forwarders, Colm Walsh, spoke of the potential Shannon has as a cargo hub for the whole island of Ireland. Mr Walsh, a native of Newmarket-on-Fergus now living in Dublin once worked in Shannon with Lep Transport.

He noted that Shannon was actually one of the first air cargo hubs in the world during the 1950's when Seaboard & Western were the only trans-Atlantic airline with daily flights from New York to Shannon. Cargo was broken down in Co. Clare and flown on to three separate routes in the UK and Europe.

According to Mr

Walsh, "there is an understandable emphasis on the development of passenger traffic at Shannon Airport. Although it was never sexy enough to make the headlines, the fact remains that air cargo will continue to be a very important plank in future Shannon strategy."

He recalled the famous debate in the Dáil at the time legislation was being passed to create Shannon Airport in 1947. At that time Fine Gael leader James Dillon commented that if Shannon depended on passenger traffic only, "we will have nothing at Rineanna but rabbits". Mr Dillon went on to say that the only chance of saving Rineanna was to make it the most efficient merchandise distribution centre in Europe, in other words he was referring to air freight.

According to Colm Walsh a slogan for Shan-



Destiny brought together Brendan O'Regan, Richard Malkin and Sean McCool back in 1957. On Friday they were reunited when Shannon Chamber of Commerce honoured Mr Malkin.

non could be 'Freight is the Future'. He claimed that a number of companies are actively seeking to have Shannon used as a hub for cargo from the Far East. "Should these opportunities come about, they will open an extremely impor-

tant channel for Irish plans for import and export".

He claimed that Shannon, as a cargo hub, has national as well as regional importance. He claimed that since 9/11 there has been a shift in aviation trends with many compa-

nies deciding to shift cargo from the bellies of passenger aircraft to freight. Passenger growth is now lagging behind freight and this results in freighters accounting for an increasing share of airlift capacity.

Mr Walsh concluded

by saying that, "cargo, and the professionals involved with it, has much to contribute in establishing Shannon as a world cargo hub... and we are looking forward to doing so."

Richard Malkin's story in his own words

These days the name Richard Malkin is not widely known in the Shannon area, surprisingly. According to Kevin Thompstone, as a distinguished air cargo journalist and managing editor of 'Air Transportation', Mr Malkin played a crucial role in spreading the Shannon story around the world during the early years.

However Richard Malkin himself, told a fascinating story of the modest part he played in transforming Shannon from an airport threatened by the introduction of long range aircraft in the 1950s, and '60s, into a regional hub for industry and commerce.

Mr Malkin was here at the invitation of the Shannon Chamber to be honoured for his contribution to the Shannon story. A modest man of mature years, let him tell his story in his own words:

"I make my living from

using words. But I have no words appropriate enough to show my appreciation for what has happened here today. Let me open by saying how delighted I am to be in Ireland. This is the land where, over many years, I encountered open armed welcome and hospitality; where I discovered warm receptivity for exciting ideas.

Turning back the pages of the calendar to nearly half a century ago. This was when the first seeds were planted for what was to become the Shannon Industrial Estate. Someone once said that destiny has more resources than the most imaginative composer of fiction. Taking into account my own encounters with destiny would certainly change the course of my endeavours, I wholly subscribe to that bit of wisdom.

It was in 1957 that I boarded a Seaboard

freighter destined for Frankfurt. We dropped into Shannon for refuelling minutes ahead of a dense fog which grounded us for 48 hours. faced with a lot of unproductive hours, I spent many hours in the company of Seaboard's young cargo manager, Sean McCool, in serious discussion about the economic present and future of Ireland and her role in the fast developing world of air commerce.

At one point I posed a blunt question, "what will be the fate of Shannon when the Boeing 707 jet transports overfly Shannon on their way to the continent?"

He challenged me by asking if I had any ideas on the issue. Well, I did have the germ of an idea. I had recently been in Panama and witnessed how unfinished products were flown down from the States and finished by local workers in a Foreign Trade Zone and

re-exported to Central and South America, all without duty or tax entanglements.

Shannon was the western-most airport in Europe, strategically adjacent to sea, air and inter-global possibilities. With the spur of long term tax advantages and other practical considerations attractive to corporate managements, it appeared to me that a decent case could be made for the right kind of planners to develop a customised industrial centre – a magnet for inboard and outboard business traffic.

What I had in mind was the luring of US and European producers of air oriented commodities. By this I meant raw materials and finished and unfinished products that could be economically airlifted in and out of Shannon. Such traffic would naturally stimulate business travel and various types of service and, overarching these po-

tentialities, was the urgent goal of labour employment.

Actually, I was talking off the top of my head. Still the young man from Seaboard was excited, so he suggested that I confer with a certain Mr Brendan O'Regan who lived in Ennis. I was not particularly anxious to drive to Ennis in the fog, but the young man was persistent, he overcame my objections and lost no time in speeding to Ennis where I was introduced to Mr O'Regan and got deeply involved in a discussion about the Shannon concept, as I saw it.

Suffice to say that Mr O'Regan took the ball and ran with it, doing a much better job than I ever dreamed.

Certainly the creation of the Shannon Industrial Estate was an outstanding example of how a small nation, with its creative juices at high tide, carved out for itself a significant place in

the scheme of international air commerce. The economic impact of what was happening at the estate spread far beyond Shannon's borders.

Where are we today?

From that time to this we have found ourselves immersed in an ocean of change and change, as the old saying goes, is an ever whirling wheel. The clear truth of that aphorism underlies the challenge facing Shannon today as it does all other facilities.

If I am to leave a message with Shannon it is that in this techno age virtually nothing is wrought in concrete. There must be a constant awareness that change is always in the air and it demands a readiness, a competence and wisdom to deal with its dynamics and certainties.

A proud tradition of

excellence is not enough. For the present day interpretation of excellence is vulnerable to tomorrow to sudden shock and new standards. Indeed the exacting marketplace is a clamorous and persistent tyrant, but also a rewarding one, in its quest for uniform excellence.

Shannon is an important regional presence in transAtlantic air trade. When I took my first close look at Shannon it was as a natural crossroads for North Atlantic air shipping. Indeed it remains so. But it is my considered opinion that it must be ceaselessly promoted as such.

Shannon has a great story to tell, Shannon might be more than a regional facility. In this increasingly globalised world surely Shannon has a vital role to play!"