

Soaring the skies

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BY DAWN BAUMGARTNER
VAUGHAN

dvaughan@heraldsun.com; 419-6563

"The exhilaration of flying is too keen, the pleasure too great, for it to be neglected as a sport." -- Orville Wright

"More than anything else the sensation is one of perfect peace mingled with an excitement that strains every nerve to the utmost, if you can conceive of such a combination." -- Wilbur Wright



OXFORD -- How do you describe what it is to fly? If you ask pilots what it is about the great blue yonder, they'll usually talk about the feeling of freedom thousands of feet in the air. What they all have in common is a passion that ignited with their first

flight.

Empire Aviation at Henderson-Oxford Airport in Oxford offers those "Discovery" flights to students, as well as all the hours that come after when they go on to earn their private pilot license, instrument rating and beyond.

On a recent sunny summer morning, freshly retired Raleigh police officer Matt McKee brought a Piper Geronimo aloft over the Henderson-Oxford Airport. McKee was 13 when his dad, who was in the Air Force, told the young McKee that he'd pay half of what it cost to get a pilot's license if kid McKee got a job. He did, and McKee soloed at age 16 and earned his license at 17. Then he went into the Marines and then law enforcement, and finances and marriage came before flying for fun. So he went 25 years without donning a headset and yelling "clear."

Now McKee, only 50 years old and ready for a second career, is back at the instrument panel. He wants to teach others to fly and is also building a Sonex airplane in his garage. Right now he is taking classes again to earn his commercial and multi-engine license. His certified flight instructor in Oxford is Paul Hesse, a former science teacher at Northern High School who now runs the flight school at Henderson-Oxford Airport.

Hesse said flying isn't for everybody -- some get motion sickness, or are scared, or it just doesn't float their boat, he said. But for others, it's like nothing else.

"Flying opens your world up," said Dusty Wall, a Durham city firefighter who began taking flying lessons in February. He took ground school first and has about 30 hours of flight time logged now. Flying planes is something he's always wanted

to do. A friend took him up for a ride and it hooked him.

The feeling of taking off, he said is "adrenaline, freedom, then calm. It's very relaxing."

Wall said first-timers should put their fears aside and give it a try, and they'll develop confidence through knowledge. It costs between \$5,000 and \$8,000 over time to earn a pilot's license.

Hesse said many of his flying students are Duke University students, and mostly men. They take a Discovery Flight out of curiosity and keep going. Hesse uses a Cessna 152 and Cessna 172 for the lessons. The first flight costs \$86 for a half-hour lesson with basic maneuvers. Among his students are a mother and son flying team. Vickie Barbee of Durham homeschools her son Kevin, who took lessons as they focused on a career curriculum. Kevin soloed at 16 and is now 17 and a licensed private pilot. Vickie Barbee will soon be one, too.

"I was riding in the backseat when they were flying, and wanted to try it," she said. "It's addictive. There's a great community of people who fly and it's the most fun I've ever had." Flying is the ultimate feeling of freedom, Barbee added.

Up in the Piper, McKee flew over the Kerr Lake Dam in Vance County on a day with visibility of 20 miles.

For McKee, "It's fun to first get airborne and watch the earth move away." It's also the challenge of getting a good landing, he said.

"It's neat just to get a different perspective and view of the earth, to see things people who don't fly don't get to see," McKee said. "It seems like you're the only one up there."

LEARN TO FLY

Empire Aviation offers lessons at Henderson-Oxford Airport in Oxford.

An introductory flight is \$86. During the half-hour "Discovery Flight," you'll learn basic maneuvers with a certified flight instructor in a Cessna.

It takes a minimum of 40 flight hours to earn a private pilot's license, plus ground school.

For more information, visit www.empire-aviation.com.