

Sailplaning provides an uplifting experience

By WAYNE THOMPSON
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Inside the cockpit of a sailplane at 3,000 feet, the only sounds I could hear in the front seat were the wind whistling like a tea kettle through the vent in the clear canopy and the ride pilot's voice.

"Okay, put your hand on the stick and your feet on the pedals and follow along with what I'm doing," the pilot told me.

I felt the stick jiggle slightly to the left, the left foot pedal depress and the sailplane bank left. "A little left pedal and stick and you make a left turn!" I said.

"That's all it takes," the pilot said. "Pretty nice, huh?"

Before I could answer the glider began to gain altitude, rising in tiers like an elevator.

"We're in a thermal," the pilot explained. "I'll try to keep us in it for a while." Thermals, or rising columns of hot air caused by the uneven heating of the earth by the sun, are the sailplane jock's stock and trade. Unlike gliders, which can only lose altitude, sailplanes can climb; the thermals are how they can do it.

After twenty minutes of circling lazily in the thermal, the needle on the altimeter started to move counterclockwise.

"That's it for the thermal," the pilot said. "We're in sync now."

Then I figured it out. "That means we're out of the hot air and losing our lift," I said.

"That's right," said the pilot. "It's time for us to take it on in, so I'm going to cross back over (Interstate) 85 and set us up for the runway," he said. "When we're in the middle of our turn we should be somewhere around 400 feet."

The sun overhead cast the plane's silhouette over the cars below. The cars got larger and larger as the craft gently lowered. One woman with her hair in

rollers leaned over the steering wheel of her blue Monte Carlo and cast a puzzled glance up at the sky as the twin-seat Grob Twin II crossed the interstate banked to the left, and swung back over the road.

Seconds later, treetops passed under the white fiberglass belly of the sailplane. It drifted steadily downward toward a thin ribbon of black pavement, rising up a few feet only briefly before the rubber wheel hit the asphalt and the disc brakes whined after the pilot pulled the brake lever. Rolling to a swift stop, the sailplane's right wing eased to the ground and I pulled a lever opening the canopy and got out a little queasy but with a smile on my face.

"Wasn't it a lot of fun?" asked a man who walked up to me.

"I want to do it again," I said, handing \$30 to the man who jotted down the length of the flight on a clipboard.

A handshake later, I got into my car, pulled out of the parking lot and headed back home to Chapel Hill.

What happened to me was a scene that former UNC professor Bill Via loves to see happen every day above the farms, woods and trailers of Whitsett, N.C.

"I get my biggest thrill in taking someone for a ride that's never been in a plane," said Via, the owner of the two runways, a hangar, an operations building and a parking lot known as the Meadowlark Gliderport. "When they finally get in the machine and go ... they live this fantasy."

For Via, the chairman of the oral diagnosis department of the Dental School from 1969-78, his fantasy with sailplanes began years ago.

"I started flying power planes in 1939 and sail planes in '64," he said. "About 18 years ago my dream was to open up a gliderport before I turned 50.

"While I missed it by a few years," Via said with a grin, "this is the culmination of that plan."

And Via said he likes Whitsett, where he's been operating for the last 10 months — Thursday through Sunday from 10:30 to sunset. "The location here is ideal," he said. "We're in the center of population in North Carolina. And it's easy for people to find us."

Soaring appeals to a broad group of people, he said. "Some come in that have flown power planes for years and want to fly sailplanes," he said.

"There are millionaires, college students, dentists, lawyers and businessmen." But he added, "there are also some people who are only going to do it once in their lifetime."

Others will pay up to \$1,100 to solo in the Gliderport's sleek Grob Twin II. Via said the special challenge of soaring is worth the money. "This is the only real challenge in aviation," he said.

"It's the joy of knowing that you personally are in charge of that machine and your skill will decide whether you get a 20-minute flight or a two-hour one."

Even when a pilot makes a mistake, the sailplane gives him more options, Via said. "A sailplane is not going to burn up if it crashes like a power plane," he said. "And 98 percent of the fatalities are caused by fire."

The aerodynamics help, too. "We had one guy that crash-landed in a soybean field. When we got there the sailplane was floating on the tops of the soybeans, two feet off the ground."

"We're also doing everything we can to promote safety at the field," Via said. "The power lines are run underground, and even if a new pilot has 5,000 log hours, he'll take check flights with our instructors."

Aside from running students through the grist mill of turns and level flying in

their first lesson, the four part-time FAA-certified ride pilots teach the finer points of "pilotage" — that's sailplane talk for using buildings, water towers and other landmarks on the ground to tell where you are. Of special importance is Interstate 85. Gene Wheeler told one of his students during a lesson, "If you panic and get confused by the compass, look for 85," he advised. "If you remember that it runs north to south, west and east won't be too hard to find."

Students pay \$15 an hour to Wheeler and the other pilots for the instruction, from \$15 to 40 an hour for glider rental (the more sophisticated — model sailplanes cost more), and from \$10 for a tow to 1,000 feet or less to \$20 for 3,000 feet. Students can choose from one of ten sailplanes.

"I want to continue to develop this as a place where people can go and have the most conveniences so they can enjoy soaring," he said about the new operations building and pilot lounge.

"As we get more and more people out here and buying equipment, we'll have races here ... maybe even completing a 50-mile course against the clock," he said.

Meadowlark and the 30 other Soaring Centers of America may offer the chance to share with others the soaring experience, but there's a private side to hours of floating on a cushion of air.

"I have flown with hawks as high as 7,000 feet," said Via. "How beautiful they are in the sunset."

"You're up there and flying with them...it's the beauty of the earth."

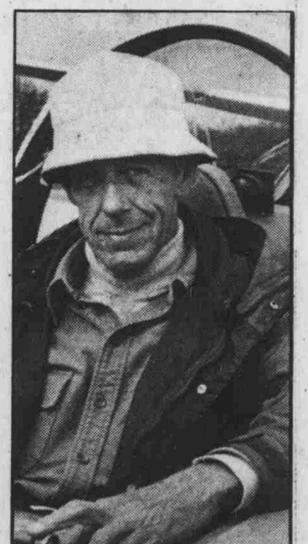
To get to Meadowlark Gliderport, take Interstate 85 to Exit 138 Gibsonville. From this exit, turn right and go straight until you reach US 70. After taking a left onto US 70, the gliderport will be one mile ahead on the left.



Sailplanes takes off from Bill Via's Meadowlark Gliderport, located near Whitsett.



The sailplanes are readied for their flights. Safety is an important consideration at Meadowlark.



Bill Via (above) has realized his dream of operating a gliderport.

Photos by
Zane A. Saunders

Left, the view from the cockpit is exhilarating and adds to the excitement of the experience.