

Up front

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UNC students, faculty take to the skies



Line Serviceman Matt Sullivan scans the sky above the airfield for approaching air traffic

DTH/David Minton

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Features Editor

The ear-filling roar of the airplane's engine halts our conversation. The propellers become blurs of motion. James turns the wheels of the plane onto the paved runway. Gaining momentum on that one-way road to the air, he lifts the plane into the sky, leaving the ground disappearing below.

James smiles — the smile of someone who has flown many times — but who never quite loses the thrill of a good take-off.

There is a little of the Wright brothers in many of us — a secret desire to take to the controls of an airplane, taxi it down an airstrip somewhere and nose it up into the sky for a ride.

Some people who love to fly make it their profession and become pilots. But many of Chapel Hill's avid aviators are already busy — as faculty members or full-time students at the University.

Horace Williams Airport, a University owned and operated airport, has about 50 small airplanes filling its hangars. About seven of those are owned by University professors. Ten of them are leased by the Chapel Hill Flying Club, a 150-member organization that includes about 50 students in its membership.

"I'd go out of my way to fly," says Gary Gambrell, a graduate business major. Gambrell often packs some fishing gear, calls up some friends and heads off in a plane to the Outer Banks for a one-day trip.

"It's beautiful at the Outer Banks," he says. "There is really nothing there where the airstrip is except the ocean. The airstrip is the only piece of civilization."

Gambrell used to watch the planes take off and land at his hometown airport. Three years ago, Gambrell stopped watching the planes and started flying them. Now he is an officer of the Chapel Hill Flying Club, a non-profit club that rents planes and instructs would-be pilots.

"I remember the first solo flight I took — it was a real calming sensation," he says. "Everything has to be done right up there. When I got out of the plane, my feet hit the ground, my knees buckled and I fell to the ground. It was great."

James Brown, a senior geography major, fell in love with planes at age five. His father brought home a model airplane for his son to put together. During his childhood, Brown put together about 300 model planes. At age 15, real airplanes became his hobby.

To receive the first pilot certification, a private pilot's license, Brown was required to spend 40 hours of dual and solo instruction in the air. He also had ground school instruction to complete the course.

Flying lessons cost about \$10 to \$12 an hour. This fee does not include aircraft rentals, which can cost up to \$30, depending on the type of planes used. Student pilots must also purchase textbooks and flight manuals.

"It's an expensive hobby," Brown says. "If you can get over the initial hump of money, then it is really worth it."

Brown has been flying about seven years. He considers planes safer than cars and prefers an airplane as his means of getting from one place to another.

"Small airplanes are very safe, you just have to pay a lot of attention," he says. "You can't just park it anywhere. I'm always looking for a possible place to land. You need an ace in the hole."

Dawn Hurst started flying two years ago. Hurst calls her family a "flying family" because both her 18-year-old sister and her father also fly.

"My dad was really happy when my sister and I learned to fly," Hurst says. "It's really a unique hobby. It would be neat to fly to my class reunion."

Hurst took ground school lessons one winter during high school, then completed the training the next spring. After receiving her pilot's license, she now flies to many North Carolina towns.

"You feel so free up there," she says. "When you're a passenger, you can relax. But when you're the pilot, you have to always be checking out everything around you."

Spotting landmarks below her was the trickiest part of learning to fly, Hurst says. When she learned the distinguishing features of the land below, she knew it was worth all of the hours spent in the air.

Brian Gallagher says he would fly in a heartbeat. Gallagher, 25, took up flying while he was away from school. He has returned to school to study speech, but he still finds time to fly on the weekends and some weekdays.

"I'm trying to balance classes and flying," he says. "It is really important that pilots keep current in flying. You can't just fly once a month. That's what gives general aviation pilots a bad name."

Gallagher has taken airplane trips

to Pittsburgh, Atlanta and Washington, D.C. Like Gambrell, he enjoys the Outer Banks and Ocracoke Island. The peacefulness on a North Carolina island with only an airstrip and an ocean is hard to top anywhere else, he says.

After teaching college students all week, some professors get away from the campus by winging away from the Chapel Hill area.

Peter Calingaert, a professor in the computer science department, started flying in 1953. He uses his hobby to take him to professional lectures and meetings and on personal trips.

"I flew to my college reunion in Philadelphia this summer," Calingaert says. "I also flew to Newfoundland in July with family and friends. So, I have a variety of uses for the plane."

He rents an airplane from the Chapel Hill Flying Club, of which he is a member. He once owned two planes but has now decided that renting a plane is more economical for his uses.

"The economics of plane ownership are such that it's a big price to even get the plane at all," he says. "Then you have the upkeep and fuel and such."

Russell Christman, who teaches in the department of environmental science, uses his plane to take him to a program that he teaches in Hickory on Fridays.

"I wouldn't call my flying a hobby

because all the travel in my plane is for work purposes," Christman says. He flies to professional society meetings, seminars and other events related to his profession.

He has traveled by plane at least once to all of the states in the United States. Just during the month of August, he flew to Tampa, Denver, Savannah, Kansas City and Orlando. Even though the trips have been related to his profession, Christman loves the opportunity to fly.

"I fly because I love it," he says. "It's a great sense of adventure. It brings my soul a little higher."

Christman's next long flight will be next summer when he and a friend fly to Europe. His friend, a former University professor who is now at Kansas State University, also shares the plane with him.

"We have common interests and we use the plane much more than average," he says. "There is no way I could own a plane without a partner to share costs."

Whatever motivates flying enthusiasts to wing it into the sky, all of them find pleasure in their hobby.

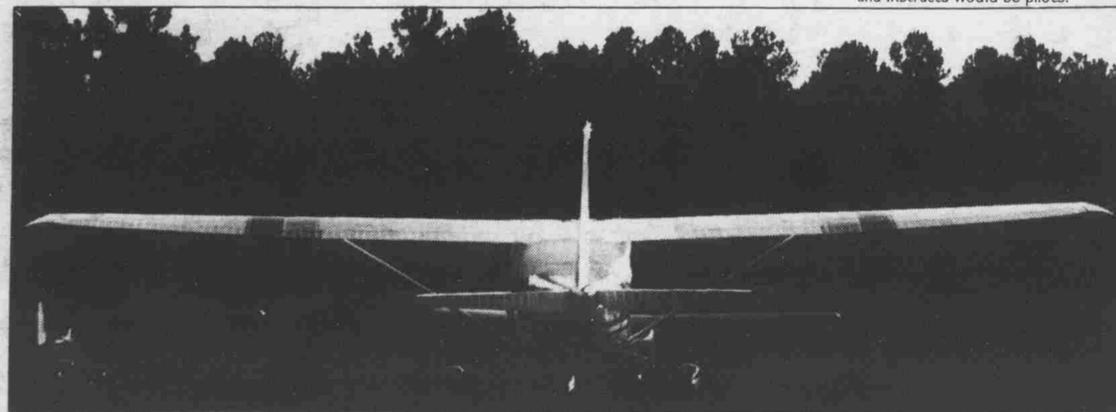
"I just love it. I wouldn't trade it for anything," Brown says. "There is something new about the process every time you take off."

In a world of cold, commercial flights filled with hundreds of strangers who simply share the same destination, a journey in a four-seater with friends or family on board is, well, almost cozy.



James Brown inspects the plane's cargo compartment

DTH/David Minton



This airplane is down for the night at Horace Williams airport in Chapel Hill

Tar Heel file photo



James Brown examines the aircraft's nosegear during a pre-flight inspection

DTH/David Minton