

# Parachutes And Planes Keep Air Busy

## They Come From Afar To Train

They come from across the nation and around the world — eager, ambitious, sports parachutists to train with one of the top men in the field, Gene Thacker, owner and operator of Raeford Aviation.

Thacker's sports parachute school has paralleled and contributed to the growth of Raeford's airport. Coming here in 1969, Thacker remembers that the airport consisted of a poorly maintained grass runway and a single hangar.

After securing a lease from the city, Thacker says one of his first problems was finding a gasoline supplier.

"No one was interested because there were only three or four planes here then," he said.

Repair to the runway came next. "The city used its trucks and we got a few trucks and started hauling dirt," he said. "We reseeded the strip and fertilized it, trying to get it where a stranger could fly in. Local pilots could learn where the ruts and bumps were but a stranger could bang his airplane up pretty bad."

Thacker bought land, and built a home near the airport. His jump school and flight instruction facility grew from two planes to a total now of seven. A restaurant, office building and bunk house were constructed near the runway, on land purchased by Thacker. He says he has about \$60,000 invested here and estimates the value of his operation at \$100,000.

The target area for his sky diving students was located several hundred feet from the runway, behind his office building.

His Raeford school is unique, Thacker says, because it is the only drop zone in the United States that has a competitive training program for advanced students.

Last year, Thacker said that five women sports parachutists trained here to compete in the national trials. Four of them were selected for the U.S. team in world championship titles.

Thacker knows about world titles. A member of the famed Golden Knights for seven years, he earned the gold medal at the world meet in 1967 and coached the olympic team in 1966. He was team captain in the world competition in 1967 and in '64, he headed a US delegation to Hungary.

Thacker is on the board of directors for the U.S. Parachute Association and is director for the Southeast Conference, and chairman of the competition committee which is involved in the selection for national teams.

Sports parachuting has grown rapidly within the United States in the last few years. Skydiving was rarely seen in this country until about 1958, Thacker explained, but now there is hardly a major city without a sports parachute club. The United States and France are the two strongest Western nations in world competition, which is dominated by the Eastern European nations, where sports parachuting has been popular for many years.

For the average jumper, Thacker estimates that the cost of sports parachuting as a hobby ranks somewhere along the cost of golf. The initial training costs about \$250 and equipment costs about the same, he said. After that, an average day's jumping will be about \$25 or less, he estimated.

Competition jumping is something else again. Here equipment can cost several thousand dollars, Thacker said. Jumpers usually train in Raeford six to eight weeks before a meet. About five sports parachutists have moved to Raeford, relocating their families here and finding jobs.

Jumping begins about seven in the morning and continues until noon. The sky divers resume about four from 4 - 8 p.m., avoiding the hottest part of the day. They average about eight to ten jumps a day.

A monument located at the entrance of the airport to Paul Keith Thacker, killed practicing for a national meet, is a somber reminder that tragedy can occur.

But the safety record at Raeford has been excellent, Thacker says. With more than 10,000 jumps, the most serious accidents have been sprained or broken ankles, Thacker says. "And we've flown more than 6,000 hours and have never dinged an airplane," he said.

Thacker discounts talk of trouble at the airport as "gossip" and denies that parachuting near the runway poses any extra hazard to aircraft.

"Just using common horse sense with everybody being briefed is all you need," he says. "Everytime I jump, I fill out a notice to airman. All we need is communication."

Thacker observed that parachutes have the right of way over powered aircraft, but said there should not be a conflict anyway, because of the difference in altitude when jumpers have to drift across the runway

because of the wind direction.

Thacker said he has two other jump operations: one in Virginia located on a municipal airport at which there are commercial flights landing. There have been no conflicts there he said.

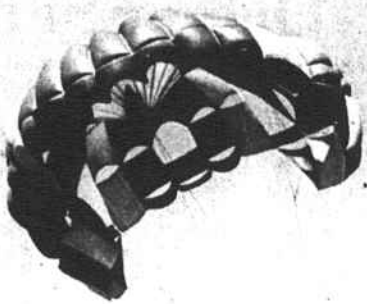
His other operation is in South Carolina, on a private airstrip.

Since January, Thacker has resumed flight instruction at his school here, with two instructor pilots giving lessons.

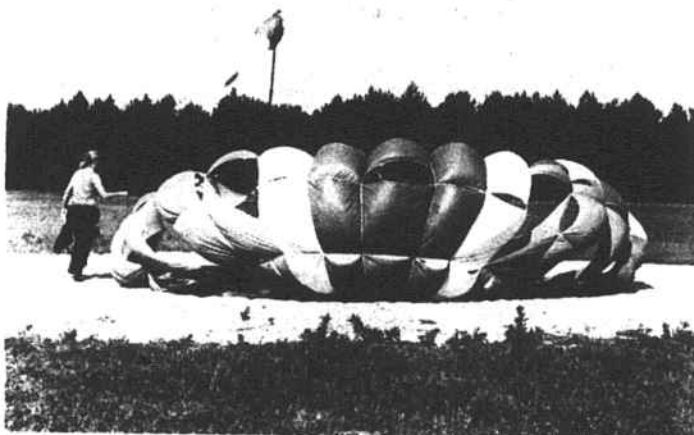
Right now, jumpers are training intensively under Thacker's practiced eye, for competition later this summer to pick the United States team.



LOADING UP....Skydivers get ready to board the jump plane for another drop.



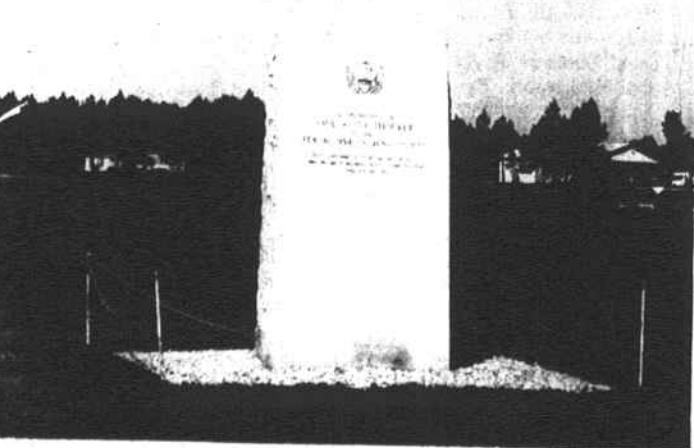
COMING IN...Mike Steele of California heads for a landing.



ON TARGET...Steele is enveloped by his canopy.



NEW HANGAR...built by Gene Thacker on land which the city needs to complete requirements for a federal grant.



REMINDER...of the danger that attends skydiving is the memorial to Thacker's son, Paul, killed while practicing for national competition.

## Lease Means Hope For Rose

"I'm bitter," Paul Rose said, drinking coffee at a table in his office at Raeford airport. "It has been very difficult."

Rose was discussing what he sees as a two year battle to obtain a lease from the city for his flight instruction school. A pilot for 30 years, Rose retired after 23 years in the military to open the school in June 1973.

Since then he says he was harassed by city officials and once was asked by Raeford's mayor to leave.

"Last fall, before I got my lease, but when it looked like the council would approve it, I was called to a meeting at city hall," Rose said. "When I got there, there was Mr. Gaddy, Mr. Thacker and Mr. McNeill. "Mr. McNeill says, 'Mr. Rose, we don't want you out there.'"

"At that time, I was on a month to month basis and could have been forced out at any time. They said they wanted me to leave because I didn't have a legal lease with the city. So that's when I got a lawyer to get a legal lease."

"But I'm sure they don't treat other new businesses that move to Raeford like this. And that's what my place is -- a new business."

(Mayor John K. McNeill said he had never made such a statement to Rose.

"I'm sure it would have been more tactful," he said.)

Conflicts have lessened since his lease was approved, Rose said.

"Things are better than they have been."

"But the only reason I'm here is I had the support from some people who believe in properly run city government. If it hadn't been for honest citizens who saw wrongs being done, they would have run me out of here."

Rose Aviation opened here in 1973, the owner said, beginning with one Cessna aircraft which Rose said he leased for a five - week period from Raeford Aviation before purchasing the plane.

Since then, his school has grown to nine aircraft and three full time employees. A large maintenance hangar has recently been completed



Paul Rose...flight instructor and owner of Rose Aviation.

on the property Rose leases from the city. Rose estimates his investment at \$100,000 -- "all on city owned property."

Approximately 50 - 60 students a month are taking flight instruction, Rose said.

In his two years of operation here, he has trained 38 persons who have obtained private pilot's licenses; five commercial pilots; three instructor pilots and 12 multi-engine pilots.

Rose says his safety record is good: more than 3,000 hours of dual instruction in the past two years with no serious injuries, despite one accident by a student pilot. According to Rose, the crash by David Hayney into a backyard on East Prospect Street last June was attributed to pilot error.

Raeford's airport is getting busier, Rose says.

"Monthly, it grows, as far as transient aircraft is concerned," he said. He estimated that two or three transient aircraft a day land at the strip.

Rose Aviation will soon be approved for VA training benefits, Rose said, and he expects his school to double.

"That should double traffic also," he said.

Rose said the field was next in line for a toll - free weather advisory line also. Like many others concerned with the airport, Rose sees many of the troubles there as growing pains.

"The city need to become more knowledgeable in the operation of a municipal airport," he said.

Tiedowns on the ramp are one area in which Rose recommends change.

"I have nine aircraft in the dirt and sand, yet I am a lessee from the city. I think leases should be on equal terms. He (Thacker) has six of the 12 slots on the ramp tied up."

"I think neither of us should have slots on the ramp. It should be for transients and for others in town who have planes."

Safety is another area of concern. Parachutists jumping near the runway add an extra responsibility for the pilots, Rose said, but local pilots are aware of the jumpers.

"For local people, the jump operation is no problem. My people are trained to stay away from the jumpers, and that includes the jump planes too," Rose said. "But it is different with transients who fly in here. If they call, we tell them if jumping is in progress."

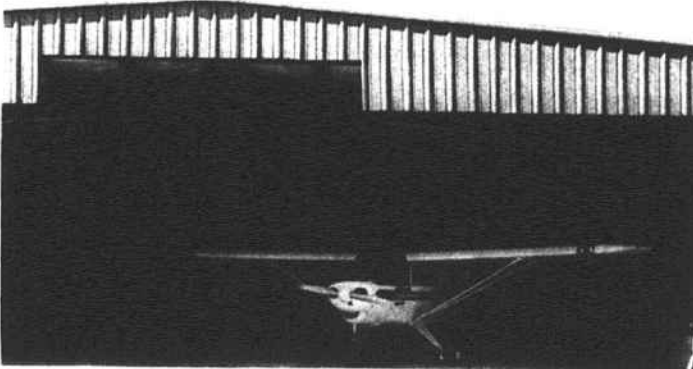
One solution would be to petition FAA for a legal change in the traffic pattern to require a right - turn approach that would position aircraft away from the jump zone, Rose said.

Another solution would be to have the drop zone moved farther from the runway, he said.

Rose said he sees the appointment of John Gaddy as airport manager as "a step in the right direction."

"I believe in the operation of a municipal airport for the general flying public," he said. "I want to see the airport develop to justify the investment of the federal government and some of the people who donated like Burlington, Knit-Away, Bank of Raeford and others."

"I'd like to add," Rose said, "that the airport committee and city council are doing everything they can to get the situation straightened out."



FOR MAINTENANCE... Rose has recently added a large maintenance hangar on his leased area at the airport.

## Boom At Airport Brings Problems Too

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directed by the city council to assume management. There is general agreement that this will be helpful.

As airport committee chairman, Rackley is looking ahead to development of airport.

The first goal of the committee was to get the leases re-drawn, Rackley said. After some months, Rose's lease was approved and Rackley was confident that Thacker's new lease, moving him from his position in the center of the airport, with control of the leased building, would also be approved.

However, Thacker recently notified the city that he was renewing his option on his original lease.

"The city wasn't as far along on Thacker's lease as they thought," Moses said.

Most airport committee members

see relocation of Thacker to the side of the airstrip to be vital to the development of the airport. One of the issues in the stalled negotiations is the removal of the old Cameron - Poole hangar, on which Thacker is said to be insistent.

Tie-downs and hangars are other recommendations of the committee. Recently, the city council approved rental of \$10 a month for tie - downs on the paved apron. Of the 10 slots available, two are leased by Thacker, two are set aside for transient aircraft and the remaining six are for rent to local aircraft owners.

Five slots had been rented the day following approval by the city council meeting. It is estimated that 20 T-hangars could also be rented.

The committee has also recommended that the city complete the land purchase needed for the FAA grant.

The land, owned now by Thacker, was appraised by Gerald Wright at \$19,000 for the 22.84 acres, in three tracts, that is needed. According to tax stamps recorded on the deeds, the purchase price for 52.7 acres at the airport was \$57,000. 32,000 in stamps was placed on 2.95 acres sold to the city in 1972.

Thacker recently built a hangar on one of the tracts, telling airport committee members that he was tired of waiting for city officials to tell him where he could build.

### Daily Operation

Gaddy sees a problem of day to day management at the airport.

For example, Gaddy was notified last week that several runway lights were burned out. As airport manager, he would have to replace them.

The city has not been faced with maintenance at the airport before.

"When Gene was there, he had his people cut grass; I never had to take anyone away from the city crews to do it. He did the maintenance on the runways. He did quite a bit for the people that they didn't realize."

"If they don't want anyone out there to be in charge, then we've got to hire someone to do it."

Gaddy sees record keeping as one of the most immediate needs.

"The city needs to know who come in out there, if they're properly insured, record the number of the plane in case that's needed." The airport committee has since recommended that plane owners register their aircraft with the city.

Expansion is already in the wind. Rose expects his flight instruction to get VA approval soon and says that will double the traffic at the airport. Preliminary work has begun on a project for which federal funds are being sought to add a paved taxiway lighted taxiway, expand the present paved apron, acquire the additional land needed along the runway and include a directional radio beacon. Total cost of the project is set at \$141,000.

The mood these days is optimistic: Following the last airport committee meeting, McLeod said, "I'm more encouraged about the way things are going."

Cameron summed it up: "Everyone has argued and fussed but all of us are proud of the airport. For a small town, it is one of the best and most active strips in North Carolina."

"Basically our problems are growing pains. Even though we have problems, it's good because it means we're growing."

"We've got something really moving and going."

Story & Photos

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