



These Eagles Do **SOAR**

Take a Ride on a Sailplane High Above Frederick

“Oh, my gosh! My ride was so phenomenal—so amazing! Flying up near the clouds and with the peaceful green landscape so far below, it was such a wonderfully freeing experience. I just loved it!”

That’s Donna Fortney, a psychotherapist and Northern Virginia TV personality, enthusing about her maiden sailplane flight some 5,000 feet above the City of Spires. Now, 30 minutes post touchdown, she’s still giddy—and sharing the love.

BY Matthew Robb
PHOTOGRAPHY by Mike Collins

Fortney isn't alone. This quiet sport of gossamer wings and whispery flight stirs in people something close to an epiphany. And the revelry isn't reserved only for newbies.

For veteran pilot Preston Burch, the "magic" hasn't waned one iota since his inaugural flight more than a dozen years ago. Today, the former program manager of the Hubble Space Telescope says, "It's the closest feeling you can have of being a bird in flight. It's absolutely amazing."

"First-timers are really turned on by it," says Dan Morris, one of the ace flight instructors of the Mid-Atlantic Soaring Association (M-ASA). "Once we hook them, they just have to do it again. Our club is here to help make it happen—to help them live their dream."

Care to sail the friendly skies yourself? Come along with *Frederick Magazine* and see if your future is soaring.

M-ASA: SEEKING NEW MEMBERS

It surprises many to learn that Maryland offers first-rate soaring, but the telltales are all around us. Crane your neck skyward most any weekend, March through November, and you'll spy M-ASA's spindly gliders circling like so many eagles. The club, founded in 1952, counts many licensed commercial, military and recreational pilots (active and retired) among its members, but the majority are everyday people with an extraordinary passion for motorless flight. The club's ranks are more than 95 percent male, but Burch—a M-ASA board member—says leadership wants to grow the club and adding women is a priority.

Members typically fly out of two hubs: Frederick Municipal Airport and Karlindo Airport in

TOP, RIGHT: Following obediently at the end of the 200-foot-long tow rope, a glider lifts off from Frederick Municipal Airport's Runway 30. **RIGHT:** Bill Whelan helps to turn a glider around as it's prepared for another flight.



Fairfield, Pa. (M-ASA snapped up the Pennsylvania site at a bankruptcy auction in 1976.) Notably, Karlindo practically abuts Site "R," also known as "The Underground Pentagon," which raises sensitive security issues in our post-9/11 environment. In addition, Camp David is located just eight miles to the south. When President Barack Obama is there, the mandatory no-fly zone around the presidential retreat is extended from three to 10 nautical miles in radius. It speaks of enormous goodwill that the Secret Service and Northeast Air Defense Sector allow M-ASA to fly when and where other aviators cannot.

BLUE ON GREEN

It's high noon on a recent summer day when I and *Frederick Magazine* photographer (and licensed pilot) Mike Collins converge on M-ASA's

hangar on the northern lip of Frederick Airport. Right off, I—a white-knuckled flier—notice two items of interest. Big, puffy clouds are skittering across a sky of cornflower blue. And they're moving fast. Yes, it's very breezy today. Windy enough, in fact, to rattle the hangar's metal doors. My stomach tightens.

We rendezvous with Morris. After giving us the \$5 VIP tour of M-ASA's facility, he casually announces, "It's going to be a bit bumpy today—a little turbulent." The wind is gusting near 15 mph. On such a "bumpy" day, a hot-air balloon pilot wouldn't even think of lifting off. For gliders, it's an invitation to good times.

On a 1-to-10 scale, Morris rates today's soaring conditions as a middlin' "four." He'd prefer tighter cloud formation, lots of vertical buildup and

strong, lift-giving “thermals.” I joke that I’d prefer zero turbulence and a nice, trusty parachute strapped to my back—while watching “Jeopardy!” at home. Parachutes, I learn, are an insurance policy that about one-half of M-ASA’s pilots opt to wear. That is, except when they’re flying in competition where cheek-by-jowl, corkscrew formations inside tight thermals are commonplace, making parachutes a must.

Back at the hangar, things move quickly. We roll the featherweight Grob Twin Astir (882 pounds empty) across a grassy field and onto the end of runway three-zero. I clamber into the cockpit’s front seat and strap into a four-point harness. As tow pilot

Dee Torgerson—a leather-tough ex-Montanan whose life reads like a Michener novel—fires up her 260-horsepower Piper Pawnee (think crop dusters), the ground crew seals our canopy, hooks a 200-foot tether to the glider’s streamlined nose, and suddenly we’re rolling down asphalt PDQ.

As we lift off the ground, the flight under tow is just as Morris advertised: bumpy. Not “Six Flags Over Frederick” bumpy, but gentle heaving and pitching, as Torgerson hauls us up, up, up into the wild blue. At 2,500 feet, Morris pulls a yellow knob and the rope releases. Torgerson banks to the left. Morris veers to the right. Instantly, our airspeed slows, the ride steadies and suddenly ... we are soaring, baby.



LEFT: Dee Torgerson sits in the cockpit of the Piper Pawnee tow plane, waiting for the signal to launch another glider. **BELOW, LEFT:** She pulls a glider southbound over Frederick. Downtown and Carroll Creek are at lower left.

My forward seat provides the proverbial bird’s-eye view: blue above, green below, a sensory extravaganza at every turn. In slow motion, Frederick County’s 667 square miles unfold as a picturesque

travelogue of forested mountains, checkered fields, rustic barns, glinting lakes, fabled spires and three centuries of architecture. Donna Fortney got it right: amazing. And yet, while the view above Frederick will capture your heart, Burch says it’s the Fairfield locale that really dazzles the eye. “On my first flight from Fairfield, my jaw was on my chest,” he recalls. “It is just one of the most gorgeous areas you could hope to see from the air.”

We soar. We admire. We chat. Not a few first-time riders, Morris notes, are nervous and expect the “glider to float like a leaf—at the mercy of wherever the wind wants to take us.” Silly rookies, I laugh.

Morris as a teen, I learn, grew up around aircraft. Thirty years later, he has taught the miracle of flight to “hundreds” of people, logged more than 2,000 hours in gliders, and is widely regarded as having “The Right Stuff.” I like that in my pilots.

Many glider enthusiasts talk of the left-brain, intellectual appeal of soaring, or what Burch calls “basic airmanship—stick-and-rudder skills.” But Morris also notes the right-brain appeal. “As soon as I climb into the cockpit, I totally leave the stresses of the work world behind me,” he says.

Soaring is all about freedom, but M-ASA members must observe a few commonsense rules. No aerobatic “stunts” in club planes means no snap rolls, no inverted loops, no “graveyard” spirals to test the moxie of nail-biting newbies. Nighttime





Banking in a thermal—a column of rising air—to gain lift, a glider climbs above Frederick Municipal Airport. Glider pilots seek out scattered, puffy clouds like these because they usually indicate rising air. A piece of yarn is taped to the canopy, telling the pilot how efficiently he's flying through the air.

RIGHT: Glider pilot and flight instructor Dan Morris soars above Frederick County. **BELOW, RIGHT:** Frederick Municipal Airport is seen from a banking glider; cloud shadows dot the ground.

flying is also verboten, as sailplanes typically lack navigational lights. Ditto for flying in stormy conditions. Don't do it.

Suitable "unscheduled" landing areas abound. "Maryland is perhaps the best place I've ever seen in terms of landing on farm fields," Morris says. "We can land in anything from grass to a plowed farm field to 2–3 feet of crop. In a sailplane, we are always prepared for a landing without an engine. This is very safe."

MORE THAN LEISURELY CRUISING

Much to my bemusement, Morris steers us toward the only dark cloud in the sky. Ahead, I see danger and foreboding. Morris sees lift and promise. Perhaps it is a Rorschach inkblot test, I think.

A plume of rising warm air buffets the sailplane, and we rise with it. In a minute or two, our altimeter reads 3,000, then 4,000 feet. A thermal or three later, we're cruising at more than 5,000 feet—a mile high. "Many times we will be circling with hawks or eagles, as they are a good indicator of lift," Morris observes.

He pauses and then adds, "Outside of burning fuel for a short tow, this is a totally green hobby. Basically, we're powered by solar energy and can be up for hours and hours and hours."

Our glider's graceful lines and nearly 60-foot wingspan convey the feel of aerial ballet. To me, it seems exceedingly nimble and fast (maximum air speed: 135 mph), but Morris likens it to a family sedan versus the true high-performance Porsches of soaring.



Much like the world of sailing, a big part of the international soaring community participates in races. Depending on conditions, a typical competition may send pilots along a vast triangle from Frederick to Winchester, Va., to Carlisle, Pa., and back, using predetermined GPS waypoints. "On a good soaring day, that's an easy ride," Morris observes.

After touchdown, M-ASA member Bill Whelan notes, "Some of our people routinely fly 8–10 hours nonstop, which may be 300 miles or more. After a weather front moves through the area, you'll see our pilots running long missions along the mountain ridges just west of Frederick. They're often flying at glider 'red line' and only a couple of hundred feet off the crest of the ridge."

Membership in M-ASA works out to about \$400 annually, which includes flight instruction. About the only additional fees are for towing (\$25–\$35) and glider rental (\$35 per hour). Be advised that M-ASA also offers \$99 introductory flights that get you airborne for about 30 minutes.

And so, our bottom line is simple: Add soaring to the "bucket list" of things you absolutely, positively must do before you slumber in the ever after. One flight and you might just discover a new passion. More than flying, soaring is a celebration—of being totally and utterly free. ✧

To reach M-ASA, call 301-788-6612 or go to www.midatlanticsoaring.org.

