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Flying through the air *with the greatest of peace*

BY NANCY LUSE
PHOTOGRAPHY BY BILL GREEN

Once you've skipped among the clouds, soared with hawks at your side and listened to nothing but the whistling wind, you're ready to go back up and do it again.

"The first flight proves you can actually keep a plane up without an engine and the second flight gets you hooked," said Richard Horigan of Fairfield, Pa., who has been flying since 1969 and is one of some 125 members of the Mid-Atlantic Soaring Association. Based at the Frederick Municipal Airport and an airstrip in Fairfield, the club has been around for close to 60 years and has pilots ranging from teenagers to those in the stratosphere of senior citizenship.

Gene Wilburn of Frederick, a founding member of the club, is 83 and like many of the pilots, points to a childhood fascination with flight as the reason for their hobby today.

"I did a little bit of power flying," Wilburn said, but being in a sailplane is where he's the happiest. It's the same for Michael Vance of Virginia, who also tried hang gliding along with flying planes with engines.

"I was sold on one flight. It's truly addictive," Vance said. "Soaring is one of the purest forms of flying. You have to rely on your own skills and knowledge and not technology. You also become a very keen weather person," since sailplanes depend on rising air currents to stay aloft. In addition to the thermals, there are also lifts that come off mountain ridges.

When Wilburn started in the sport, the planes were made of steel tubes and fabric, he said. Now, most are fiberglass, with a single-passenger craft weighing between 400 and 500 pounds. Sailplanes use the same control sur-

For information, visit:
www.midatlanticsoaring.org





Pilot Wayne Elseth soars over a maze of roadways south of Frederick.

*“It’s so peaceful
and at the same
time it’s a blast.”*

— James Joao, 11, sailplane student

faces as conventional planes for flight direction — a control stick for the moveable sections of the wing and tail, and a foot pedal for the rudder. The glider is towed aloft by a powered plane, the two connected by a strong rope.

“The sail pilot decides when to release,” said Vance, although the tow plane pilot can also release in an emergency. The average release altitude is 2,500 feet, he said and typical flights can last anywhere from 10 minutes to 10 hours.

Unless it’s a cross-country flight or part of a competition, when it comes time to land, pilots ideally want it to be back at the place where they took off.

“You may have to land in somebody’s field,” Vance said. “And you learn to land safely. You only have one shot at landing; you can’t go back around” like with a powered plane.

Several of the pilots mentioned the miraculous landing last year of a jetliner in the Hudson River in New York

City, maneuvered by Chesley “Sully” Sullenberger, using the soaring techniques he had learned in the sport.

“Sully knew what he was doing,” Wilburn said. “You look at World War II, all the German pilots started out as glider pilots and it actually made them better pilots.”

EASY ON THE GREEN

Soaring enthusiasts like to point out that the sport is both environmentally-friendly as well as not being excessively hard on the green in your wallet.

“We tend to be conservation-oriented,” said Vance, a man who can get downright poetic as he talks about the appreciation he has for nature as he’s sailing through the skies. “We see birds all the time. We soar with them and they soar with us. I’ve flown with hawks and eagles, I’ve danced with the clouds.”

The small amount of gas needed by the tow plane is the extent of it, with

the sailplane essentially operating on solar power. Vance said a one-hour flight could cost between \$60 and \$80 for renting a plane and for the tow. For pilots to join Mid-Atlantic Soaring Association there's a \$600 initiation fee and yearly dues of \$420. "We want it to be as affordable as possible," he said.

The club owns nine planes, both single- and two-passenger models.

"When the club started, we didn't own anything," Wilburn said. "We operated in Martinsburg (W.Va.) at that time. We had just one tow pilot and by the time the weather got nice he went home to lunch."

Today, many members have their own planes. Cathy Williams, a nurse practitioner who calls herself a nomad because she "works three different jobs in three different places," has four planes. "Probably more than I should," she said with a touch of humor.

Williams flies in national glider competitions. "I love to compete, it makes the whole thing more fun ... I like to try going the distance. It puts on my best game, and it's fun even if I don't win," said Williams, of LaPorte, Pa.

She started flying at 16, before she even had her driver's license, and Wilburn was her first instructor. He continues to teach, part of the club's eight or so other instructors.

Williams is joined by other women in the club. "We have always had women in soaring," she said. Famed aviator Charles "Lindbergh's wife was a soaring pilot."

Williams is proud of the association's membership — "We have excellent pilots in our club and you can always learn something from them" — as well as how "we help each other."

In addition to supporting the sport, the club is also a social outlet for the members and it's common during the warmer months to have cookouts at the airfields where everyone gathers to grill burgers and talk flying or just about anything else.

The Frederick location has a bunkhouse for those living outside the area wanting to spend the weekend and, at Fairfield, some of the members



Steve Shelton, top, sits in the cockpit of his new Ventus B glider waiting for his turn to be towed into the skies over Frederick. The view, right, from the front seat of a two-seat glider over Frederick.

“The first flight proves you can actually keep a plane up without an engine and the second flight gets you hooked.”

— Richard Horigan of Fairfield, Pa., member of the Mid-Atlantic Soaring Association

set up campers. A couple of times a year members have what is called “a 10-day weekend” where they fly daily from one weekend to the next.

Lance Nuckolls, of Sugarloaf Estates, is an aviation safety inspector for the FAA and has been a pilot since 1976, coming to soaring in 1984. He’s the club’s chief tow pilot as well as an instructor and he can’t say enough about the social side of the organization.

“I try to fly out of both” airfields, he said, not only to stay familiar with each, but also to run into as many members as he can.

“My other passion is music,” Nuckolls said, and he and his wife belong to a band called the Unruly

Blues. “A lot of the club members come out to see us,” he said. “It’s great seeing them” out in the audience. There’s talk of maybe having the band play at one of the club barbecues.

THE CLUB’S FUTURE

Like all clubs, tomorrow depends on attracting new and younger members. James Joao, of Frederick, is a good example of making that happen.

When his father gave him a flight simulation game at age 9, the flying bug took a firm grip. At age 11, he was flying powered planes and now at 13 he can’t get enough of flying “Miss Daisy,” the name of the glider he uses with the club. He won’t be able to solo until he’s

14, he said, but in the meantime he’s learning all he can from Glen Collins. “He’s a super instructor,” James said, with every flight “I’m learning and trying something new.”

He said “it’s almost impossible to describe” the sport. “It’s so peaceful and at the same time it’s a blast.” He has been posting his soaring experiences on Facebook and “my friends are totally jealous.”

James said he sees an aviation career in his future, probably starting out in the military because “they have all the cool tools.”

But for now, few things can beat climbing into a glider and circling the skies with hawks and eagles. ■

Tow Pilot Spencer Wilson, a Midshipman at the United States Naval Academy, pulls a glider as it is released several thousand feet above Frederick.

