

New airport manager hopes to rejuvenate flying here



Keeps Spirit Alive

Build your own plane, fly for the love of it, says new Blackstone Airport manager, L. G. Barnes, shown here with his handmade biplane, which he keeps next to his house at the airport. Barnes believes the youth of today have lost the connection with aviation his generation had.

Blackstone Airport is an uncrowded space—like one of those seldom visited wind-swept gas stations you see out west—and that’s the way L.G.Barnes, the field’s new manager, likes it. When he steps out of his house, he stands at the shore of the sky, his sky...and there, moored like a sailboat, waits his small bi-plane. Looks like a good day to fly, he says to himself...and he does!

“I love flying..I’d rather fly than anything in the world,” he says to anyone who wants to know what it’s like to have built your own plane and have put 35 years of flying experience on life’s odometer.

Barnes grew up in Blackstone, joined the navy as an aviation recruit, and ended up in Hopewell with a career in electronics. When offered the house at the airport, the payment for being its manager, he felt like a sailor come home to the sea.

Like his plane, there are two wings to this man. He’s a throwback to the days when aviators could pasture hop through the countryside seeding young minds with dreams. But he is also a compass pointing the way to the future. Do you think flying is too expensive, too complicated and far removed from the average man? Whatever the barrier that stands between the human spirit and its eternal urge to fly, it can be quickly forgotten by standing on this asphalt field with Barnes and listening.

“This is strictly a scratch built airplane made from raw tubing, wood, aluminum sheets, and fabric—no kit whatsoever,” he said, patting the glossy white side of his machine affectionately. He went on to point out the advantage of building your own plane. “First, it’s a heavily built airplane, stressed for 9 G’s, which is far more than you’ll find in a factory built plane...The double wings and bracing make it strong. You don’t

see this on commercial stuff.” The small plane with its single cockpit remind you of the sturdy planes you saw in the 1930’s.

“This is a close as you can get to real flying,” he continued, the bright sun flooding the airfield making him squint. “Planes with closed cabins with soundproofing and heat is flying...but not like this is flying!” Peering into the hole where he sits, you could see what he meant. He had scraped away all that government regulations and technology had added over the years and exposed the golden essence of flying.

“I can come out here and fly for 45 minutes and feel totally refreshed and renewed. You feel closer to God because you’re up there where you can see just how big and magnificent everything is.”

As Barnes talked, a group of army parachutists came floating down like pieces from a broken cloud, gently, silently. They had been practicing at the field and consequently closed the airport for the day.

The interruption changed the direction of Barnes’ thought. “I just wish there was enough going on so I could stay out here as a full-time manager.” As it is, Barnes runs a small TV repair shop in town. He leaves his town number by a phone at his airport house so pilots in need of gas can contact him.

“But general aviation aircraft don’t like to come in here because they don’t understand what’s going on or when the army had closed the field.” However, sharing the airport with the army is not what really bothers Barnes.

“Almost everyone that flies out here is my age. What’s going to happen in five or ten years?” Beyond the gas pumps a few hangars stand. Barnes nodded towards them. “I have five people that will rent hangers today if the town would add the hangars we need,” he said. Even Barnes has to take his plane to Petersburg where he has a hangar because he can’t leave his plane out in bad weather.

The equation was simple. Fewer and fewer aviators plus limited hangar space equals Barnes’ description of the airport: “It’s dead as a hammer out here.”

“You see, we come from an era when you could rent a cub for \$8 an hour. For the same airplane today, you’d spend \$40 an hour.” And the cost of a plane has also slipped out of reach. “To buy a plane comparable to this one, which cost me about \$9,000, would cost about \$60,000” What Barnes was getting at was that his biplane could bypass one of the major obstacles to flying. Money!

“Anybody who is good with tools and likes to do things right can do it,” he continued. And he knew how to get the mind in the proper position so it wouldn’t perceive the project as too difficult. “You must look at it as one little project after another. The more you do it, the easier it gets.”

Barnes said it took him 4,000 man ours and seven years to build his plane, which he completed in 1983. But that was part-time labor, he pointed out. The finished product, which still looks new except for some tape he put on the tail where the paint was chipping, weighs 800 pounds, flies 110 miles per hour and will travel 400 miles. It is called an Experimental Aircraft because it hasn’t been approved by the FAS for commercial sale.

“All that means is that you don’t have to buy all kinds of expensive electronic equipment, which adds thousands to the cost of the plane,” he said, but that doesn’t mean the plane’s not safe. “These things are not dangerous as long as you know how to fly it and pre-check it...and, of course, stay out of bad weather.”

Barnes is making the experience of flying attainable. And he has ideas. “I would like to get a J3 at the airport to use as a primary trainer and talk to the high school kids to promote aviation.” But one thing is crucial. “You’ve got to give people the experience!” Just talking about it is not enough.

Barnes’ thought again turned to his sky. “There’s still open spaces out there. You can fly for two hours and never see another airplane...”

What was Barnes really talking about? The feeling of accomplishment, of having passed some personal test, of being entirely on your own, of getting above earth bound problems...or of just being free.

Barnes said the experience was contagious.