Going Airborne

With the Flying Club

Started by World War II veterans, Tech's pilot program helps students, faculty, staff and alumni take to the skies

By Van Jensen

In the 62-year history of the Yellow Jacket Flying Club, there has never been a single accident. It's a remarkable feat, given the thousands of flights club members have made in that time.

It seems an important fact to remind oneself when readying for a flight in one of the club's four Cessna 172 planes and trying to ignore the gusts of wind whipping through the Fulton County Airport.

Club president Ryan Rodd, a seventh-year civil engineering and computer science major, carefully took a passenger through the list of safety precautions on the 1979 aircraft before strapping in and taxiing to the runway.

With surprising ease, the four-seat plane sped up and hopped into the air, bobbing slightly in the cross wind as the horizon fell below.

That exact moment — of the plane breaking contact with the ground and surging into the sky — is what most club members say hooked them on flying. They often hear of the club through a friend or see its posters around campus and decide to give it a shot. When they take off that first time, more often than not a lifelong love is forged.

Tina Heil, ME 96, had that experience as a sophomore at Tech. A lab partner mentioned the club during class, and that afternoon she was flying over Atlanta. "I signed up for the club at the next meeting," she said. "I had no idea it was actually possible for me to earn my license as a college student. I thought it was a rich person's activity."

PHOTOS: GARY MEEK

A Yellow Jacket Flying Club member takes off from Fulton County Airport on a windy Saturday in October.

The club is open to Tech students, faculty, staff, alumni and their immediate family members. Members pay for their flight time to cover fuel costs and a fee for lessons, but members said it's by far the cheapest and easiest way to learn how to fly.

For Heil, it took only four months to earn her private license and a year to earn an instrument rating.

"I enjoyed it so much that I wanted to become an instructor, and I earned my commercial and flight instructor certificates in 1996," she said. "I've been a flight instructor in the club since."

The club first formed in 1946, when Tech received a surplus plane from the military. Many of the Institute's students had flown in World War II, and in the club's first year nearly 50 members signed up to fly for fun on Saturday afternoons out of Candler Field, which has since grown into Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport.

During that time the flying club also has grown and now boasts well more than 100 active members. They're a true cross section of the Yellow Jacket community, young and not so young, female and male.

On a recent Saturday when a couple of dozen members gathered at the airport, they only took a break from the skies to catch the end of Tech's football game against Clemson.

As soon as the game ended in a Yellow Jackets victory, they headed right back for the planes.

As Rodd guided the plane east toward the city and over the Tech campus, he looked over for a moment from the multitude of knobs, levers and dials and smiled wide. "Do you like roller coasters?" he asked his passenger.

This is the appeal of flying, the pilots say, the

"It's the freedom aspect, and that's what Americans love. You're literally in control of your own destiny when you're flying a plane."

Club members take their passengers through preflight inspections of one of the group's Cessna 172 aircraft before taking off to give them an aerial tour of Atlanta.

freedom of movement, the absolute control and heart-thumping movements.

"It's the freedom aspect, and that's what Americans love. You're literally in control of your destiny when you're flying a plane," said Jud Ready, MatE 94, MS MetE 97, PhD MatE 00, the club's faculty adviser.

He cited the Leonardo da Vinci quotation: "For once you have tasted flight you will walk the earth with your eyes turned skywards, for there you have been and there you will long to return."

Ready joined the club while a graduate student. And though he'd never been in a small plane before, he took to it in "about 12 seconds." Before long he had his license and would fly to break from the stresses of school and work.

"It was such a great way to literally clear my head," he said. "I didn't think about anything but flying that plane and making sure I didn't crash it."

Having a pilot's license also has been of romantic benefit, Ready said. When his wife, Jamie, was working in Carrollton, he one day flew out with flowers. Another time he took her on a weekend trip for her birthday, and he'd arranged with all the air traffic controllers along the way to wish her a happy birthday.

"She liked that a lot," he said.

Ed Hotchkiss, Cls 78, had worked in the civilian air patrol and joined the club with another Tech alum

in 2003. Hotchkiss said it's the challenge of flying that keeps him coming back.

"It's essentially applied physics," he said. "You've got to be a weather forecaster on your own, because you want to make sure you don't get caught in something turbulent. What's fun for me is all the club members. We've got students involved and alumni. It's great fun interacting with all of them."

Club members can take the planes on cross-country trips, and Rodd recently returned from a fall break excursion to Florida. The club also leads many members into flying as a profession. Ready said members have gone on to fly in the military and for all major airlines. Others have started their own aviation companies.

In addition to learning to fly, club members learn about plane maintenance and work to raise funds to replace engines or procure new aircraft. The club also has had alumni donate planes.

The club uses more fuel than any other person or organization at Fulton County Airport — that includes Falcons owner Arthur Blank — and so the planes go through a lot of wear and tear.

That's another factoid one tries to push out of mind circling over downtown Atlanta and heading back for a landing. Within sight of the airport, Rodd warned his passenger, "When you slow down, that's when it gets bumpy."

A few jolts aside, the plane coasted in for an easy landing. Rodd isn't sure whether he'll fly commercially once he graduates or if he'll just keep flying for fun. But the point is obvious: He's going to keep flying.

It's a point Hotchkiss drove home as he reflected on another good day at the airport. "We love flying."