

Glider competition at Fairfield concludes today

By Michael Cooper-White For the Gettysburg Times

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MEETING — There was a short pilots’ meeting on the runway of the Mid-Atlantic Soaring Club prior to any gliders taking off on Friday. They talked about the weather conditions and what times the different classes of gliders would take off.

Like the giant passenger jets queued up at Chicago, Denver or Atlanta airports during a Friday afternoon rush, a bevy of gliders lined up awaiting takeoff on runway 15 at Fairfield’s Mid-Atlantic Soaring Association (M-ASA) airport several days this past week.

Final launches are expected early afternoon today as a competitive sailplane event hosted annually by M-ASA concludes. Winners will be announced at a closing ceremony when all aircraft have landed.

After a final check of the weather, aided by radioed reports from airborne “sniffer” aircraft, the competition director (CD) issues launch authorization. One by one, the gliders are connected by 200-foot ropes to the three single engine tow planes or “tugs”, which roar down the runway and pull the sleek-winged sailplanes into the sky.

Once airborne, the gliders circle near the airport until all aircraft are aloft and the CD issues a command to open the day's competition. Then they set out in search of building "cu's" (cumulous clouds) under which it's likely some upward lift will be found. A pilot circling in good lift can expect to be joined by others making up a "gaggle" in the same way soaring hawks and other birds fly in formation.

Pilots from up and down the east coast converged last weekend on the small field in the shadow of Liberty Mountain for the annual contest sponsored by the regional subdivision of the Soaring Society of America (SSA).

Some of the flyers in the competitive event are veterans of dozens of contests stretching back 40 years or more. A handful are widely recognized pilots who have won multiple soaring awards in national and international competitions. Erik Nelson of Winchester, Virginia, took 5th place in one of this year's national contests held in Florida.

Around the premises of his day job the low-key pilot is known as Dr. Nelson, a highly skilled radiologist. When he's at the Fairfield glider port or elsewhere flying his Ventus glider, his handle is 5E, the FAA-registered number affixed on the tail of his sleek fiberglass sailplane.

At least one airman competing this week is doing so for the first time. While Tom Jones of Columbia, Md. has flown gliders for over 20 years, the newly retired engineer now has time to stretch his flying skills to new levels. Indicating he has learned a lot from fellow pilots, Jones stated, "It's quite a feeling when you complete an assigned task."

A complex set of rules governs the flow of the flying competition and daily scores earned by pilots who receive a different assignment or "task" each day. While speed to complete a three- or four-legged course is a primary factor, pilots are also awarded extra points for landing at an airport rather than in a field if lift subsides and the glider must alight elsewhere than back at the M-ASA base.

Given recent days' relatively poor weather conditions, there were multiple such "land outs." Once safely down in a field, pilots call a retrieve number and a ground crew is dispatched to bring the gliders back to M-ASA in the long and narrow trailers that readily accommodate the lightweight craft once their wings and tail sections are removed.

Planning for and overseeing all aspects of the weeklong event is M-ASA's chief flight instructor, Cathy Williams, of Laporte. A soaring veteran with decades of experience, Williams' enthusiasm for the sport continues unabated.

Assisting Williams in overall contest organizing is Nirmal Mathrani of Rockville, Md. whose flying career began when he retired last year. Mathrani and others of us newer to the sport gain valuable experience riding along with highly experienced M-ASA pilots.

Williams and other instructors often forego their own flying in order to give priority to teaching student pilots. "I always want to see people fly," said Williams, who is glad a number of newer pilots accompany seasoned pilots to gain experience.

The competition director, who makes final calls on whether or not it's fit to fly and what tasks are assigned each day, is Marshall McClung of Salem, Va. Once a contest pilot himself at regional and national competitions, McClung has dedicated his efforts in recent years to overseeing the high stress environment created when a glider club hosts a competitive flying event.

While at times he still yearns to get back in the flying contests himself, McClung considers it an honor and privilege to serve with Williams and Chief Tow Pilot John Machamer at the hub of the M-ASA contest. "I had my turn," he declared, in reference to the actual flying, "and now contests continue giving me a seat at the table with some amazing pilots I've long admired."

Each day of the competition begins with a pilot's briefing led by Williams, McClung and other contest officials. On the daily agenda is a safety presentation, reminding all involved that while flying modern gliders is relatively risk-free, there is no room for error or oversights like missing a preflight checklist item.

At every daily dispatch huddle on the flight line, McClung offers his final mandate: "Keep your heads out of the cockpit (looking for other aircraft), be safe, and bring home a smile."

Those who fly gliders and the single engine planes that tow them skyward represent a broad spectrum of backgrounds, national origins and professions. Radio calls by those competing at the Fairfield competition are broadcast in a variety of accents.

The majority of flyers are "weekend pilots" who earn their living in other arenas or are retired from a variety of occupations. But current and former military and airline pilots accustomed to flying large passenger jet aircraft also squeeze themselves into the tiny glider and tow plane cockpits.

When he's not flying or instructing in the tow planes, where flights seldom wander far from Fairfield, area resident Machamer captains Boeing 787 "Dreamliners" across the Pacific to China for American Airlines. Also completing 787 qualification training is a veteran United Airlines captain, Mike Smith of Fairfield, another long-time M-ASA member and national glider competitor.

Most visiting pilots and their family members have spent the week in tents and campers on the airport premises. Receptions and group dinners are hosted by M-ASA members, and a midweek banquet was held at the Hickory Bridge restaurant in nearby Orrtanna.

Speaking at the banquet was long-time M-ASA member and flight instructor Richard Carlson of Germantown, Md. Carlson, who works for the U.S. Department of Energy, serves as chair of the national Soaring Safety Foundation (SSF).

Blind in one eye, Carlson recounted how as a teenager who aspired to fly, he was unable to pass the medical exam for engine-powered aircraft but was eligible to fly gliders.

Thousands of hours in 30 different types of gliders have been entered in Carlson’s logbook over the past 40 years, and he has mentored dozens of aspiring aviators. He was instrumental in SSF’s recent launch of a database by which pilots of all experience levels can share mistakes and dicey situations that others may avoid.

“We want to allow pilots to share their experiences before they become an accident statistic,” the nationally recognized glider expert stated.



BUCKLE UP — Michael Cooper-White, center, is a member of the grounds crew at the Mid- Atlantic Soaring Club. He is making sure Mike Higgins, left, and Nirmal Mathrani are all strapped in and ready for their glider flight on Friday.

As occurs whenever long-time friends are reunited, stories abound as pilots unwind and reminisce at day’s end. A favorite incident recalled by several occurred years ago when M-ASA’s current Airport Manager Bob Jackson landed out at an Amish-owned farm and was returned to the host field in a horse-drawn buggy.

M-ASA current president, Mike Higgins of Winchester, W.V. said of the 2018 Region 4 competition, “We’ve had challenging weather conditions, but these are expert pilots who make the most of it.” Paying tribute to his fellow M-ASA club members’ efforts in hosting the event, Higgins concluded, “The pilots seem quite pleased.”

The contest wraps up today, and observers are welcome at 154 Pecher Road, Fairfield. Visitors are requested to check in at the gazebo near the airport entrance to ensure their safety and receive an orientation briefing from glider club members. More information about soaring and club membership is available on M-ASA’s website: www.midatlanticsoaring.org.