



WALLACE STATE

Community College

by Niamh Bailes

The Flight Technology program at Wallace State Community College has long had a reputation for producing some of the best trained helicopter pilots in the South. The Director, Bert Mackentepe, said the program is so well regarded that FAA professionals entrust the instructors with teaching their own children.

“One FAA inspector, who had been assigned to inspect our program quality, the records and the aircraft, actually sent his son here for training,” said Mackentepe. “That speaks volumes about the quality of the course. Birmingham FAA inspectors repeatedly recommend us to people who have inquired about training. We have really thrived on word of mouth

advertising.”

The course, taught at Folsom Field airport in Cullman, Alabama - identifier 3A1- has turned out 15 to 25 helicopter pilots a year since 1992.

Dave White, a highly experienced pilot who has been with the program since its inception, had a trial by fire flying for the U.S. military in Vietnam and has amassed over 30,000 flight hours. Most helicopter schools employ their own course graduates temporarily in a continual rotation of instructors with low flight hours. Wallace State Flight School is different.

“We have committed career instructors who have thousands of hours of experience each,” said Mackentepe. “There are a lot of good pilots out there at different

flight schools, but too many of them are just no good at teaching. Dave and Jimmy can explain things so a student can understand. They can adapt to the various levels of ability as needed from the complete novice to someone who has their own flight habits already in place.”

White was a local celebrity for several years, known as Commander Dave, giving weather and traffic reports for Huntsville television news and radio stations. He trained to be an instructor at Robinson Helicopter factory school, and got his R22 and R44 special training to instruct students in their own helicopters.

Jimmy Adams is one of the few true civilian-trained flight instructors. He is a graduate of the Wallace State program,



but that doesn't mean he is inexperienced. He graduated the Helicopter training program under the guidance of Dave White in 1996 and then trained as an instructor. By now, he has almost 5,000 helicopter flight hours under his belt. "I was the director of an ambulance service in southern Tennessee in the mid 1980's

when EMS helicopters were first introduced," said Adams. "Then I was exposed to helicopters all the time. From time to time I went on PR helicopter flights with Air Evac Lifeteam, as a treat. I decided then, I need to learn to fly this thing. I looked up schools in the South East and realized one of the best

was in my own backyard, Wallace State Flight School." Adams worked as a crop duster and corporate pilot, amassing hours until he decided to return to Wallace and take up teaching, which still gives him joy after 12 years.

Students take the controls the day they enroll in the program under the watchful eye and the duplicate cyclic controls of the instructors.

"The first hour of flight training is unique," said Adams. "Most of the students have never been in helicopter. It is a real treat to watch and to be in on. They calm down after a while and after 20 hours they are ready to solo. I still get the biggest kick out of that. They are all a little nervous to begin with but then their good training kicks in and the nerves go away. Their expressions when they land solo still tickle me to death; I never get tired of that. This is something they couldn't envision ever being able to do and here they are doing it after as little as 20 hours of flight time."

On cross country flights Adams likes to take students past their boundaries of familiarity into southern Tennessee and south of Birmingham. "That's my favorite thing to do with the students. They know this area of Alabama pretty well, but I like to get them out of their element. It is good to see how they respond when they don't have any familiar visual landmarks."

Adams has a spotless flight record having had neither an accident nor an incident during his flight career. "I think the way I was trained at Wallace from beginning to end has a lot to do with that. They are stringent about maintenance and practices."

Students have the opportunity to acquire FAA certification to get their private pilot's license, instrument rating and commercial pilot certificates. They can earn an AAS degree. The course is fully accredited by the FAA and is approved by the Alabama State Department of Education for flight instruction under the U.S. Veterans' Administration Program.

Students are trained in a Hughes 269C model helicopter at the minute and the College has plans in place to buy a Schweizer 300 C instrument trainer.

"These are well known training heli-

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copters,” said Adams. “They are good models: well designed, durable and reliable. When pilots train in these helicopters and then move on to a bigger one in their jobs, it isn’t a big change, they are comfortable.”

The Schweizer 300 C will enable the instructors to better simulate low visibility weather conditions. At the minute, the instructors use foggles and other vision blockers to prevent students from seeing outside the cockpit. The glasses do allow students to see and read the instruments inside. The Schweizer 300 instrument trainer has all the additional instrument equipment that students will need to fly in IFR conditions.

“Once a pilot gets their private and commercial rating, they need to have an instrument rating in order to get a job,” said Adams. “All of the insurance companies are requiring that now. When you don’t have a visual reference point, you have to bring the student’s focus into the cockpit. Once you look out

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when you’re in the middle of thick clouds, you don’t know up from down. You can get disoriented real fast.”

It turns out the Technological assets are not just in the helicopter at Wallace. “The ground school is pretty high tech,” said Adams. “We have projectors, computers, flight training software, DVD’s and a helicopter simulator set up so students can come in any time they want and use the equipment to sharpen their knowledge. That openness is unique.”

Adams said his focus is always on how well the student is learning. “We try to go above and beyond to make the course user-friendly from the time students walk through the door till the time

they graduate,” he said.

Graduates of the program have fanned out across the country working in many diverse industries: working in EMS operations, police helicopters, air taxi-services, crop dusting and in the petroleum industry, servicing oil rigs in the Gulf of Mexico.

“There is such a shortage, the industry is begging for pilots,” said Adams. “The military are holding onto their pilots these days, and that is traditionally where 90 percent of trained pilots came from. No matter what the application, there is a shortage of pilots and graduates are needed to fill that void. We hope to help fill that void by growing this program.”