

People & Places

Alston Martin Stevens

He only wanted to fly.

By Judith R. Lear

With shoulders slumped by the weight of his nearly 80 years, Alston Martin Stevens of Colonial Heights, VA stood behind the podium before an auditorium filled with aviators. Initially hesitant, his speech grew swift and strong as he spoke of his first love: flying. His recollections permitted the audience a glimpse into his lifelong allegiance with aviation; the secret to his success.

The Stevens' alumnus was impressive, and was partially attributed to Mr. Steven's belief. "I have never met a person, who didn't at least think about learning to fly. At South Norfolk Airport, we made it affordable for everyone because we kept our rates low. When the weather stopped us from flying, we supplemented our income with aircraft maintenance and banner towing."

As he concluded his speech to a standing ovation, the unassuming gentleman accepted his nomination into the Virginia Aviation Hall of Fame, shoulder to shoulder between two NASA scientists.

"Steve" as he's known to many, began his aviation pursuit in 1946 at age sixteen. Just one year later he fudged his age, enlisting in the Navy in hopes of an aviation career. He was selected to serve as a flight engineer/aircraft mechanic until his retirement in 1970 as an E-8.

After retirement, Steve was free to do what he had been born to do: fly airplanes. He found a location in Chesapeake, Virginia, where he began a successful flight school. The fleet included 17 trainers all owned and operated by Steve and his wife of 45 years, Mable Ragas.

The couple had five sons, all accomplished aviators. The middle son, Joe, at age five was stricken with spinal meningitis, leaving the boy void of hearing. But through Steve's perseverance, Joe successfully achieved his private pilot's license. The team's steadfast example set the pace for the other boys and Steve often counseled them. "There will be hurdles in life but you can overcome them and be whatever you want."

At the airport, the aviation patriarch welcomed his customers into the South Norfolk family. In good humor monikers, were assigned to many. Steve, still known as the Buzzard, often "buzzed out" if someone wasn't performing to his high standards. He was often heard bellowing to his sons, "If the customer's prop stops turning and you don't have the fuel nozzle in your hand, you're late!"

Although female pilots were not common during the seventies and early eighties, Jan was the exception. During a flight as a passenger, her aircraft experienced a mechanical problem on final. The instructor aborted the landing, while tuning into the Unicom where Steve monitored the base.

Steve diagnosed the problem from the ground; the landing gear hydraulic system was depleted and the mechanism was unable to extend. "Are there any liquids on board?" Steve queried.

The instructor checked with his passengers and was taken aback to learn that Jan had carried a cocktail mix on board! The pilot asked if the mixture would work to which Steve

countered, “It’s liquid, ain’t it? Use it!”

Emptying the flask provided enough fluid to hydrate the gear. Once the plane’s wheels hit the runway, they locked into place with all four passengers aboard, uninjured.

Most of the memories of the FBO are fondly recalled, but not all. In mid-summer 1974, son Tom perched atop a tractor with a bush hog in tow, spotted an obstacle on the runway and hopped down to remove it. Clad in the uniform of the day—bell bottom jeans—Tom stepped dangerously close to the tractor’s rotating drive shaft.

As in most emergencies, instantly it was over. The 13 year-old boy’s screams could be heard from the flight school office. Steve’s military aviation training and quick actions saved his son’s leg. The ambulance responded quickly and a semi-conscious Tom was loaded aboard, with dad ever vigilant by his side.

Flying occasionally introduces risks. When asked how he remained in control during such events, Steve’s conviction was clear. “In an emergency, you must quickly diagnose the problem but while doing so, there are three things to remember: fly the airplane, fly the airplane, fly the airplane. If you save the plane you save yourself.”

Steve reminisced about managing his sons and the business. “Times were different then. We were a family; the flight instructors and the customers, we all looked out for each other. I know of no other setting where a doctor can become best buddies with a house painter. We all have one thing in common, our love of aviation.”

In 1985, the airport was sold and Home Depot now sits where the once active runway stood.

In 1999, his beloved Mable finally resigned her commission as the family sentinel and Steve found himself alone. After an extended period of mourning, Steve resumed the family business he had started so many years ago.

Stop by Steve’s hanger at Hampton Roads Executive Airport. You’ll be warmly welcomed in the South Norfolk spirit by the man who only wanted to fly.

Side Bar:

As a currently licensed IA, Steve has maintained his hangar at HREA for the last 10 years, acting as an aircraft mechanic consultant and along with son Tom, is the go-to man at the airport, selling hard to find used airport parts all over the country. Projects past and ongoing include personally owned aircraft refurbishing, most recently a 1946 Champ.

- The eldest son, Guy, held Commercial and Instrument ratings and flew Traffic Control for Bob Sinclair of WNIS Radio. Guy is now retired from the family business.
- Tom, formally with USAir and Piedmont is currently a CFI MEI and IA, VP and co-owner of Lear Stevens Aviation Services, Inc., and Curtis Eads Flight School in Chesapeake, VA.
- Joe is currently employed with the Jacksonville Naval Air Depot as an aircraft sheet metal mechanic, and is one of 75 worldwide deaf private licensed pilots.
- Ray holds ratings as a Commercial, Multi Engine and Instrument pilot, and is a licensed IA and co-owner and operator of Aerial Services in Chesapeake, VA.
- And finally youngest son, Jim, an ATP rated airline captain with 717 and 737 Type Ratings for Air Tran flying out of Atlanta, GA.