

Pilot's career finding solid ground with flight school

From an early age Susan VanFleet was infatuated with taking to the air. With a whimsical smile she recalls the efforts of an imaginative little girl trying to harness the power of flight.

"I can remember the first time I jumped off the porch with an umbrella thinking I was going to fly." VanFleet says, "I couldn't have been more than five years old, but I remember landing in a heap, thinking his is not the way to go."

Following that first failed venture, VanFleet has found a more orthodox path to take in route to the freedom of flying. Over the past 30 years she has received her pilots license and taken extensive courses to obtain certificates in Commercial, Commercial Glider, Certified Instructor-Instruments and Multi-Engine flying, and as an Airline Transport Pilot.

With over 4,000 flight hours VanFleet has done everything from serving as a private pilot for the University of Georgia Athletic Department to being an instructor or Flight Safety International in Atlanta. There she trained students from all over the world on \$22 million simulators. But Sept. 11 sent a shock wave throughout the aviation world, including schools with an international clientele like Flight Safety. Falling victim to rampant layoffs within the industry, VanFleet found herself at a crossroads with a decision to make.

"Atlanta is inundated with pilots right now with Delta and all of these companies laying people off, and I'm not that fond of Atlanta or any big cities." VanFleet says. "The further away you get from it, the more beauty there is and the more chance there is for a pilot, so I went back to the basics. I've always wanted to star my own flight school and now I'm really excited about it. It's a dream come true."

The fruition of that dream is Abingdon Aviation at Virginia Highlands Airport. Serving as owner and operator, VanFleet aims to share the joys of flying with others by offering flight training as well as aerial photography, tours and motor glider rides. The majority of the flight training and group tours are done in a Cessna 172.

Whit the Cessna 172 being the most common airplane in the world for training, chances are that once a pilot's license is obtained from Abingdon Aviation, they can go to virtually any airport and rent the plane they trained in.

But while the Cessna carries the bulk of the workload at Abingdon Aviation, it is VanFleet's 1984-carbon fiber Tailfin Motor Glider that serves as her pride and joy. Constructed in Munich, Germany, the glider has a 56-foot wing span and can cruise at 115 miles-per-hour while consuming only 3.5 gallons of fuel an hour. Bt the fun really begins when the engine is cut off and Mother Nature takes control.

"You can take it up and shut it down, and as long as you've got thermals, rising air, or are in a ridge you can fly all day long," VanFleet says.

While the Tailfin Glider is VanFleet's pick for personal kicks, it is occasionally used in proficiency training for emergency procedures as well. It also serves as an initiation tool for students that will be piloting the Cessna through the majority of their training.

"My favorite thing is to start them in this their first lesson," VanFleet says of the glider. "They really learn the rudders. This is a glider with a 56-foot wing span, so they've got to use the rudder. In typical American planes they can almost put their feet on the floor and not worry about it. It's a little more sensitive (than the Cessna), but once they see the beauty of it they transition well."

In her travels across the nation, including the 3,000-mile cross-country Air Race Classic, VanFleet has seen all America has to offer from a bird's eye view. And that is precisely why she chose Southwest Virginia to set up shop for her flight school.

"This is the most beautiful country I've ever flown in," VanFleet says. "You can see it just roll, and it is just layer after layer of beauty. I almost feel sorry for these people learning here, because once they get out in the Midwest they will be disappointed. To me this is the most beautiful place in the world to learn to fly."

And while private flying is typically viewed as a hobby for the wealthy, VanFleet points to the career opportunities that are ample. After two hours a week over a 60-week period, you could find yourself well on the way to a career as a pilot.

"The amazing part is within three years we are going to have the greatest shortage of pilots that we've ever had," VanFleet says. "The baby boomers and the Vietnam people are all retiring. And the military is holding their people, they're not letting their pilots go. So a kid that starts right now and works on it, is going to hit that high peak of need for pilots in a few years."

And while the field of flying has taken an obvious decline over the past year, VanFleet is confident it will make a resurgence. She says Sept. 11 proved just how dependent America is on aviation.

"I believe in aviation," VanFleet says. "When the economy is down the business man stops flying, then his business goes down. But when the economy picks back up he has to fly. America has to fly. When it comes back I think it will be very, very strong because this nation has learned they can't do without aviation."

VanFleet admits that besides the natural beauty of the area, economics played a key role in her decision to choose Virginia Highlands Airport as the location to set up her school.

"Abingdon is absolutely dependent on this airport," VanFleet says. "The economic impact on the state from aviation is like \$13.9 billion, this is a big aviation state. And it's over \$1.5 million for Abingdon. The fact is not only is it a pleasurable, beautiful area to fly, but many businesses that we might consider small businesses are dependent on this airport to get supplies in and customers in." But if you read between the lines it's obvious why VanFleet has made a career of sailing the serene skies. It is not the pursuit of dollars, but the docile demeanor of flying evokes.

"When you're up there looking down on the world you don't see the problems, you see the beauty," VanFleet says. "And I think you get back on the ground and whatever problem you had, you try to solve it instead of being angry about it. Everyday you go to fly the slate gets cleaned again. And you look at things again and think, This world is worth working for."

