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McAir Aviation - The Adventure Begins Here! By Jeff Price

Flight training with a kick! That's the promise of McAir Aviation at Jefferson County Airport.

Just load up their website (www.mcairaviation.com) if you want to get a taste of the 50,000 watts of energy this flight school brings to your life. The opening flash sequence explodes onto your screen with a rock-and-roll soundtrack, promising an adventure that begins at McAir. The guitar riff is so strong you'll feel the air blowing out the subwoofer attached to your computer's speakers. In fact, if you're just looking to get charged up in the morning, load this website up everyday!

And if you're looking to get charged up about your aviation career, the folks at McAir Aviation want to make it happen.

As flight schools across the nation reel from the effects of 9/11 and the economic downturn, McAir, located at Jefferson County Airport, has experienced a steroid-induced growth spurt over the past couple of years.

In just two years, their student base has nearly tripled and the school added at least 20 new aircraft, including brand new factory Cessna 172s-11 in all-plus a factory-new Cessna Turbo 206 and Cessna 182. Additionally, McAir has a Piper Seneca for twin-engine training, and this summer the company will expand their multiengine training. All aircraft are fully IFR equipped with GPS, moving map, multifunction displays showing terrain and two-axis autopilot with altitude preselect. They're also fuel injected, with redundant vacuum pumps.

Gary Hulme, McAir co-owner, said they haven't cancelled a flight in a year in a half; due to maintenance. "It used to be, when we first started with all those old N models, we had a list every night of about 15 people we'd have to call and cancel for the next day because the planes were down for maintenance," he said.

With the new aircraft maintained primarily, by Windsong Aviation, located right next door to McAir, Hulme says maintenance is no longer an issue.

"Windsong is impeccable for maintenance," he said. "They take such good care of us and our owners. Enough can't be said about them."

Interestingly enough, Windsong also provides flight training, which begs the question about how two competing flight schools, one also a maintenance shop, get along so well. Hulme explains that the two businesses get along just fine primarily because they serve slightly different niches.

"We're probably 60 to 75 percent career-oriented pilots," says Hulme, who notes that nearly 60 percent of his total students are going through the aviation program at the Metropolitan State College of Denver. The remaining 35 to 40 percent is a slightly older clientele, mostly high-tech business workers with more expendable income.

McAir Aviation is a Cessna Pilot Center with the addition of two and four-year fully accredited degrees through Utah Valley State College. Financial aid is also available through KeyBank. In 2002, McAir was ranked #3 in the country for financial aid for flight schools.

Looking at the smallish ramp at McAir is deceiving; however, the company just leased an additional 20 tie-down spaces from the airport for its growing fleet.

In fact, in the last two years the student base more than tripled, from 93 customers in the entire database to over 380 students today who are actively flying. There have been 800 come through in the last two years.



So how did all this growth and expansion happen so quickly, especially when the rest of the aviation industry is suffering from layoffs, furloughs and bankruptcies? It started over two years ago when Hulme and John Wiltfang, co-owner, decided to get into the flight-training business.

Wiltfang is the administrative mastermind, handling items such as payroll, taxes and aircraft management. However, his background isn't exactly what you'd expect for a guy running the fastest growing flight school in Denver.

"I had a music store for about 12 years, and I just wanted to do something different," explains Wiltfang, who says that the "big box" stores and the Internet continued to cut into his profit margins. Wiltfang liquidated his music business and along with Hulme took over operations at McAir in February of 2001. He just recently started flying.

McAir also offers computerized flight testing (among other tests for computer professionals) and has its own in-house flight medical exams, provided by Dr.

Donald Coleman, whose offices are located within McAir's walls.

While the flight school may be doing well, what about the future of its students in this uncertain industry? Wiltfang believes that by the time many of their students are ready to enter the industry, things will have improved.

"I think about 10 to 12 years ago, the airlines were in the same mess they are in today, and they said, "The airlines will never be the same," he said. "Of course, it built itself back up; there's always going to be a need for air travel. I don't think students are getting too scared off."

Wiltfang sees a lot of opportunity two or three years from now, once the airlines get their financial situations straightened out. Hulme echoes those comments.

"One of the things a senior flight instructor said a few years ago is, 'You have to be prepared for opportunity.' The opportunities will still come; a lot of it is up to the individual to be prepared," he said. "If you don't take the steps to be prepared, you won't be there when the opportunity arises."

Hulme also feels that air travel isn't going to decrease over the long term. "It's going to continue to grow; they just need to reorganize their finances," he said.

While nearly every flight school boasts about the quality of their instruction, McAir takes it very seriously.

"All of our instructors are employees," said Hulme. "The last one we hired was selected out of 148 applications. We interviewed from Portland, Florida, Maine and Arizona; people flew in to interview for the job. They're top-notch instructors."

The fact that every flight instructor has their name placarded in their own office areas is a testament to the seriousness with which McAir takes their instruction. McAir's reputation in the industry precedes them, said Liz Williams, one of McAir's instructors.

I heard a lot of really good feedback from instructors," she said "McAir has just a really great reputation. The atmosphere is safe and professional, but it's not too busy. Everybody's very friendly, willing to talk and open."

Williams also enjoys the creativity she's been allowed at McAir.

"They're very open to new ideas. Another flight instructor and I started a monthly safety seminar; they're open to anything like that, which might improve our pilot skills and knowledge," says Williams, who one day would like to own her own school.

Jefferson County Airport is locally known as a challenging place to fly due to its variable winds, but Hulme believes this is actually a benefit to learning to fly there.

"I learned up in Wyoming in the middle of nowhere," he said. "The place where I learned has the least amount of wind in the country and there's no traffic. So, I was scared to go to Casper. To be able to come here and learn in a towered airport, without delays, and get some wind experience, is tremendous."

Hulme notes that they tailor their training for wind and other variables.

"You can go on a cross-country, and if the terminal area forecast isn't exactly what it said it was going to be, you can be confident you know what you're doing," he said.

Since the only training many pilots will receive is the initial 40 to 60 hours it takes to get a private pilot certificate, Hulme feels you should be exposed to as many different elements as possible.

As for 9/11, Hulme explained that the business was growing slowly before the terrorist attacks, and that they had no negative impacts.

"We just kind of rationalized it as a big snowstorm, and didn't really worry about it," he said. "We grew more after 9/11 than prior to 9/11."

Hulme notes that it's been interesting watching other businesses talk about the negative impacts of 9/11 with flight school closures, while McAir has experienced such tremendous growth. Part of the explanation may come from the business experience both Hulme and Wiltfang bring to the school.

Originally wanting to be an airline pilot, 22 years ago, Hulme was turned away due to perfect vision requirements at the time. He went into the family business up in Wyoming, and because of that, understands basic management principles.

Through some proactive moves, McAir also managed to dodge the insurance rate increases experienced by so many flight schools after 9/11.

"We didn't have any insurance rate increases," says Hulme. "We actually got picked up by one of the premier insurance carriers in the country."

Hiring outside companies to conduct safety audits not only got McAir nationally recognized for their safety programs, but also helped keep their insurance rates low.

McAir also has taken proactive steps when it comes to security. "We have what's called positive control of the aircraft at all times," explains Hulme. "We know exactly where the plane is and where the keys are, at all times. We escort people onto the ramp; everybody is pretty diligent and watchful about the airport environment."

Aircraft sales have also been going well, with three aircraft recently sold. While McAir does the actual selling of the aircraft, all the paperwork goes through Windsong-another example of the two competitors working together. However, Hulme notes that they haven't completely

escaped the economic downturn. "The rental market has dropped off in the last year and a half," he said. "The folks that use to come out and rent 182s and go do things, that's slowed, with the economy.

The availability of financial aid is among the 10 reasons McAir lists (a list that Hulme says has been pirated and plagiarized heavily by some other flight schools) on their website for why a person should fly out of McAir.

When many of us learned to fly years ago, financial aid consisted of how far you could max out a Visa or MasterCard. Now, KeyBank offers low interest loans with no prepayment penalty and deferred payments until after training is completed. Up to \$80,000 could be available with a 20-year pay off option. The career loans are similar to loans for IT schools or other technical training.

While a lot of McAir's students are in the aviation program at Metro State, the agreement with Utah Valley State College provides options for working adults to take classes online and do their flight training out of McAir.

As McAir moves toward the future, they see nothing but more opportunity.
"We've just been real fortunate," says Hulme. "We've got a great group of people here who really love what they're doing. We know that when people come out here to take flying lessons, they want to escape. We try to provide them a safe learning environment to do that."

For more information call
(303) 466-8730, and be sure to visit
www.mcairaviation.com.

