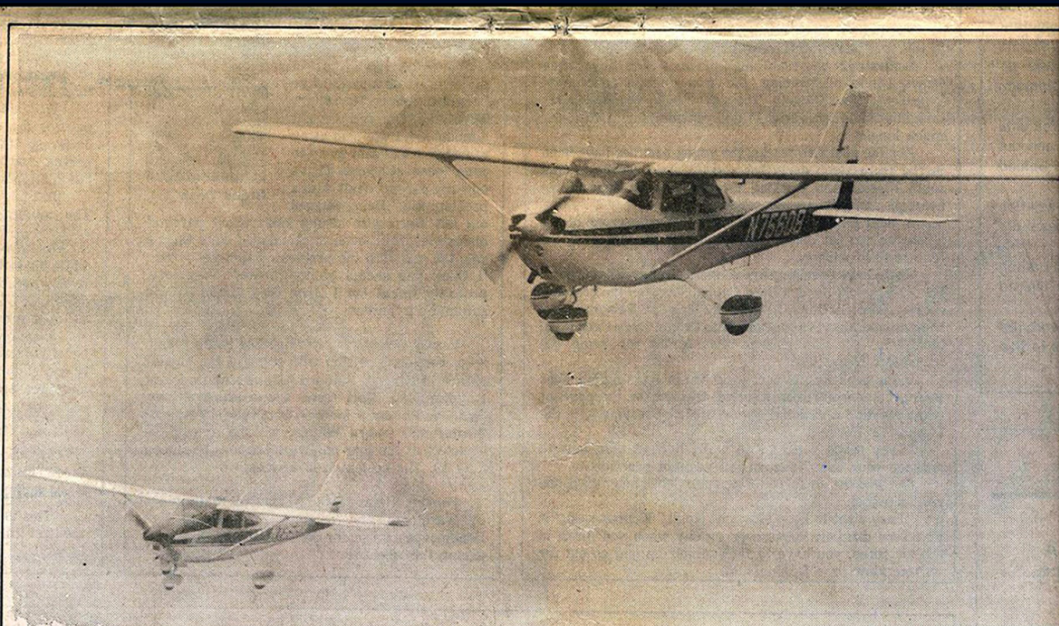






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Some breakfast clubbers make their way back home to Columbia via the airwaves

Staff photos by ANDY LAVALLE

Breakfast Club

Elite, but loosely knit, group of pilots holds ritual every other Sunday morning

By Kay Gordon
Staff writer

Sunday breakfast is a ritual and only minutes away for an elite, but loosely knit, group of pilots who hop in their airplanes and fly to meetings of The Breakfast Club every other Sunday morning.

The Breakfast Club, begun in the late 1930s, has no by-laws, no rules and no membership pre-requisites.

All you need to do is show up, and, once you attend, you're a lifetime member. No pilot's license necessary. Automatic membership is granted to children and grandparents alike.

Nobody is really sure how many members there are, but the estimate reaches about 100,000.

There are some female pilots and other women attend, too.

A few wives, like Azalea Leonhardt, flies to almost every meeting with her husband, John.

The Leonhardts, who have been members for 16 years, "have a ball," Mrs. Leonhardt said. "We go to Florida, Williamsburg, to eat in Savannah. Last winter, we flew to Florida every Saturday for one month for lunch and then flew home. . . . The nicest thing is the

places you get to go, and you enjoy meeting the people."

The couple, who own an office supply shop in Columbia, take such side trips on their own or with flying buddies, like Jack Hilton and Buddy Bennett. They, and at least 10 others park their single-engine planes in a group under the hangars at Owens Field.

Hilton, who owns The Shade Shop in Columbia, and Bennett, who owns a heating and air-conditioning business in Columbia, cruised in yesterday from Owens Field and Eagle Aviation, after picking up passengers. Both have been "real active" in The Breakfast Club for about 12 years.

Bennett, who flies "all over the place" — from the Bahamas to Wisconsin and Canada — usually flies his plane alone, though he also flies in formation with pilot buddies.

However, he does have one constant companion his daughter gave him 12 years ago — a stuffed Snoopy dog, replete with leather flying jacket, white scarf and goggles.

"I normally fly 90 percent of the

(See Pilots 6-A)



Gerald Ballard gets fixins for Frank Clemmons

Pilots

(Continued from 1-A)

time with Snoopy," he said. "All my friends have their own airplanes."

Bennett is high on the Breakfast Club.

"We go to different towns and to airports where we're invited," Bennett said. "We're booked up to the first of the year."

It's up to the president, who currently is Gerald "Crazy Boy" Ballard of Augusta, Ga., to coordinate meeting sites and programs. Members volunteer their own airstrips or arrange for meeting places at local airports in their hometowns.

Yesterday, Ballard, a salvage business operator who owns four planes, flew in from Augusta in 15 minutes.

He bought his first airplane in 1966 and joined the Breakfast Club because he "didn't have any place to go on Sundays. We go all over, even to Paris. You meet a lot of nice people."

In Batesburg, Ballard joined about 30 single-engine planes and 100 people who converged at David Oswalt's home in Batesburg for a country breakfast of scrambled eggs, sausage, ham, grits, biscuits, juice and coffee.

Oswalt, vice president of The Breakfast Club; his father, J.E.; and brother, Jeff, have thrown a breakfast bash annually for five years.

This year, helping the Oswalt family were neighbors Bill and Anna Barrier and members of the Experimental Aircraft Association, Chapter 242, who cooked and served the meal.

Many members of the EAA, like vice-president Jack Hilton, also belong to the Breakfast Club.

Hal Thomas, president of the local chapter, explained that the Breakfast Club is a statewide organization, while the Columbia branch, Chapter 242, is an arm of the EAA, a national group.

The Breakfast Club meetings unofficially begin with food at 10 a.m., followed by an informal business meeting and traditionally end an hour later, when everybody pitches in to clean up, boards their planes and flies home. During the meeting, prizes are awarded for such milestones as the farthest distance flown to attend the

meeting, the worst landing and the best landing.

Jean Skidmore and Lee Hilton, both of Charlotte, yesterday won a brass heart-shaped, encribed memento and a belt, respectively, for the farthest distance.

Members hail from all walks of life, from all over the state, and even from nearby states.

Yesterday, pilots flew in from such towns as Holly Hill, Saluda, Charleston, Augusta and Charlotte.

Some, from the Lexington, Batesburg and Columbia areas, drove. And a couple, like James Sizemore Jr., 68, and his friend, Allan Harman, wheeled in on their motorcycles.

Sizemore, who retired last year from the Augusta Chronicle and Augusta Herald newspaper, attended the second Breakfast Club meeting held in 1939 and has been coming ever since. He's been riding motorcycles since he was 13 and flying airplanes since 1938.

The desire to fly began when he was a child growing up in the country.

"I heard a noise (in the sky) and said, 'Mama, what's that?'" he said. "It's something that hit me hard and heavy — just like motorcycles."

Another longtimer is John Nance, 72, of Columbia, who attended the very first Breakfast Club meeting in Orangeburg in 1938.

Nance, who flies a Mooney four-seater, his fourth plane, took flying up as a hobby before World War II, then flew fighter planes and instructed all during the war until 1945.

His friend Coy Derrick, 66, of Lexington, the Breakfast Club's historian, joined the group in 1944.

Derrick said the club began with a "bunch of guys interested in flying single-engine airplanes and decided to meet. There are no by-laws or charter. Everybody who comes, pays for breakfast."

Except for a couple of years during World War II, when gasoline was limited, the Breakfast Club has met religiously bi-monthly for 47 years.

Derrick, who served as president of the club in the 1960s, flies a 1939 J-4 Cub antique plane.

For all the fellowship and camaraderie, there is a serious side to the meetings.

"We hope we promote safety in flying," Derrick said. "With all the flying, we've only had one fatal accident and that was in 1940."

In two weeks, Ballard will play host in Augusta to The Breakfast Club. The agenda for the rest of the year includes meetings at Newberry, Orangeburg, Summerville, Walterboro, Sumter and Laurens. But members aren't limited to meeting in South Carolina. Pilots also are planning trips to Jekyll Island, Ga., Washington, D.C., and Osh Kosh, Wis.

Meeting places are published monthly in the Experimental Aircraft Association's bulletin and every three months in the South Carolina Aeronautics Commission's publication.

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