

A row of small, colorful propeller planes parked on a grassy field. The planes are in various colors, including red, white, and blue. The registration 'N43MT' is visible on the side of one of the planes. The background features a line of tall evergreen trees under a clear blue sky. The text 'Dream Big: The Thrill of Your Own Airport' is overlaid in a large, white, italicized font with a black outline.

***Dream Big:
The Thrill of
Your Own
Airport***

Dream Big: The Thrill of Your Own Airport

By Mike Jones

Cessna Pilots Magazine, originally published: September 2022

In this journal last winter, I wrote about the two Rovegno brothers who had just purchased the Lake Ridge Aero Park, just north of Raleigh-Durham International. Danny and Paul Rovegno are lively and loquacious as they greet arrivals and watch the traffic. They spend their summers mowing grass, planning fly-ins, smiling at their new brides and newer babies, selling fuel and filling t-hangars. It sounds like fun, but it also sounds like work. Which got me a-thinking. Other than two slightly-crazed brothers, what kind of person owns his own airport? Why do they do it? Do they make a lot of money? The answers, I found, were as diverse as the owners themselves.

Pace Field in Stuart, VA

For decades, Pace Field in south-central Virginia has sustained a cholesterol-loaded tradition of offering a hot breakfast to anybody who shows up on Sunday morning. I arrived in my bright red taildragger and found a neatly mowed rolling turf runway about 3,000 feet long, with a slight curve to the southwest like a giant green banana. There's a well-maintained hangar with a Cessna 120, a Champ and a couple other venerable flivvers. There's a small office, some classroom space, and in the back a surprisingly spacious "event room" filled with couches, tables and dozens of visiting pilots wolfing down some scrambled eggs.

I caught up with the owner, Kem Pace, as he washed dishes and laughed with his guests. Kem retired from the Virginia Department of Forestry after 41 years so he's seen his share of outdoor work. He's a handsome bear of an outdoorsman, with a ruddy complexion and a well-trimmed beard, sort of a Santa in civilian clothes. And yes, his name really is Kem. Put it in your spell-checker and get over it.



The flightline at the Pace airport can be a busy place on a sunny Sunday morning, when dozens of hungry pilots arrive to enjoy Kem Pace's long runway and engaging hospitality.

"Yeah, I don't know what mother was thinking when she picked that name," he said with a gentle smile.

Airports run in the Pace family. Kem's uncle had an airport after the Second World War while another uncle owned the Martinsville airport

(KMTV) seven miles away,

on the other side of the mountain. Kem's father started flying when he was 16 years old and opened his own airport in the 1980s.

"It was all rough. We had to move a lot of dirt," Kem recalls. "He had a little Cessna 140, flew it in and out of here. People started coming along, wanted to learn to fly, and he'd take them up."

To pay the bills, his dad flew an old Waco for crop-dusting. Kem ran a pilot ground school during the long winter evenings when it was too blustery to fly. In the spring, his dad would assemble a grab-bag of instructors for the air-work. "It would take us all winter to get through the ground school," he noted, "but they'd be ready for the spring. It worked out good."

Kem's dad worked at the airport every day, "from daylight to darkness, every day of the year," he recalls. "People just came on by, knowing he would be here, just to sit and talk."

Even today, it's all about the people. While I was at the airport, two gentlemen from the FAA rallied all the visitors into the hangar to present to Walter Penn a rare Master Pilot Award, honoring him for fifty years of accident-free flying. His entire family had joined him at the breakfast but had kept the award a secret; Penn thought everybody had come just for the pancakes.

"Flying has been part of my life since I was 12 years old," he told me. "Eventually I made it over to Martinsville. That's where Kem's uncle taught me how to fly. Kem's father and I have been friends forever."



Kem Pace, forester, pilot, airport owner and chef extraordinaire.

Penn was born and raised in Stuart, Virginia. Once he earned his license, he worked as a jump-pilot for a parachute maker in 1959. He then joined the Army and became a green beret. He practiced law for years before eventually transitioning to a teaching career. Through all those years he never stopped flying.

Returning to the kitchen, I asked Kem about the money and he said there isn't any.



The event room in the back of the Pace airfield hangar was filled with tables and hungry pilots like these. The whole event is funded through donations and the labor of volunteers who cook, clean and organize. It's a community thing.

“I do this for the love of it. We’re not making any money, not any at all,” he explained. “It’s a community thing. Some people drive here, some people will fly, some folks have retired from flying, but they all come in and talk to us.”

Kem’s dad passed away in 2004 and he inherited the airport. He expects his daughter will take over the field someday, and maybe his grandson after that.

“My daughter went up to Blue Ridge to get some training,” he said, with a sparkle in his eye. “She jumped out of an airplane last year, shocked us all. I think she’s getting into it.”

Gilliam-McConnell Airport, Carthage, NC

Octogenarian Roland Gilliam owns a small field in central North Carolina with a paved 2,500 foot runway, a parallel grass strip, a mis-matched collection of antique hangars, a wildly popular barbeque restaurant, a military museum, and an RV park.

“I was raised on the North Carolina ocean-front during WWII, right under the pattern for Oceana Naval Air Station,” Gilliam recalls. “I remember the troops marching, and Higgins boats landing in our front yard. Corsairs and Wildcats were strafing and tail-chasing right over my head,” Gilliam told me. He started flying in 1958 and bought his first airplane from his high school science teacher.



Gilliam-McConnell Airport in Carthage, NC. Notice the round hangar? The entire building spins and pivots on a massive center post, allowing eight or nine planes to share just one single door. Across from that hangar is the award-winning Pik-n-Pig restaurant. It burned a few weeks after this photo was taken and has been rebuilt; COVID slowed the re-building process but it should be re-opening by the time your read these words.

“I’ve been flying for 64 years,” he said. “I did some crop dusting, some air show work, and from then on it was flying for work and for pleasure.”

Gilliam had his own construction business as a teenager and attracted the attention of a big property development company in Virginia. By his early 20s, he and his employer were building 4,000 apartments a year. He went out on his own in 1975 and moved to Pinehurst, NC. Through it all, Gilliam kept flying. He was particularly fond of banner towing.

“I towed banners around NASCAR races, and ball games, some special events like weddings,” he said. “One day I pulled a banner 50 feet tall by 80 feet long. One time a guy shot at me. It was fun.”

For reasons even he can’t explain, Gilliam had always wanted to build an airport. In 1980 he bought a historic house in Carthage, NC and started buying land nearby.



Roland Gilliam and a P-47 replica on his airfield, next to the bronze plaque sent by a grateful French government after World War 1 to honor James McConnell, one of the first American fighter pilots and a hero of the Lafayette Escadrille.

“It was rough. I moved a lot of dirt for two years,” he recalled. “I filled a huge gully about 15 feet deep.” He had planned on just a

grass strip but paved the runway in 1994. For infrastructure, Gilliam looks for equipment retired from other airports. His biggest hangar is from Richmond, VA. The popular Pik-n-Pig barbeque restaurant is on the field, housed in the old

Carthage post office. The fuel tanks are from the Edenton Airport. The rotating beacon is his pride-and-joy, from Norton, Kansas.

“it’s one of the original 1,500 airway towers the government build from the 1920s when they started flying air mail. I paid \$200 for it, put it on a truck and dragged it here,” he said.

“Dream no small dreams, for they have no power to move the hearts of men.”

—Goethe

Gilliam renamed the airport for a local pilot and World War I hero, James McConnell.

McConnell was the son of a prosperous railroad family in Carthage. He was a bit of an adventurer, and when war broke out in 1914 McConnell sailed for France to contribute in any

way he could. Eventually, he was one of the seven Americans in the Lafayette Escadrille, the first Americans fighting in the war. He was killed in March 1917, just before the U.S. joined the war. In honor of his sacrifice, the French government sent a giant bronze plaque to the McConnell family which is now on display at the airport.

“I’m proud of my airport, it’s just morphed into what it is,” Gilliam said. “It doesn’t make any money, but it sure makes people happy. One sunny Sunday, we had 212 motorcycles and 48 airplanes.”

Williamsburg-Jamestown Airport, Williamsburg, VA

Larry Waltrip owns the oldest airport in Virginia that’s still being run by the people who built it. I tried several times to meet with Waltrip at his home-drome in Williamsburg, Virginia, but as luck and schedules would have it, we finally connected at Oshkosh. With a sixty-year career in aviation, it was his first time to the giant airshow. But he wanted to talk about his airport.

“I can’t believe I did it. I look back and it’s nothing like I thought it was going to be when I started, just a little grass strip,” he remembers. Today the

Larry Waltrip and I connected at Oshkosh this summer, after he had flown to the airshow for the first time in his 60+ years of flying. He built his airport in Williamsburg, VA and it’s now the oldest airport in the state still operated by the same family that built it.

airport features a 3,200-foot paved runway and a parallel taxiway. 70 planes are based on the field, eighteen new hangars are going up, 65 names are on the hangar waiting list and one of the best airport restaurants in the country



serves sandwiches in the terminal building. It wasn’t easy getting it done.

In 1962, right as Vietnam was getting hot, Waltrip was graduating from high school. To avoid being drafted, Waltrip joined the 192nd Civil Engineering Group of the Air National Guard in Richmond, VA, an organization with the unlikely moniker of “Prime Base Engineer Emergency Force” or PRIME BEEF. He went in as a cook but was quickly moved to civil engineering because he had been in construction and could drive bulldozers.

The National Guard has monthly meetings, but Waltrip “didn’t like all the driving back and forth to Richmond.” It dawned on him that flying might be feasible. Since his parents owned 200 acres of land by the James River and had all the construction equipment, he figured he’d “push out a little grass strip” and learn how to fly.

Even before he earned his pilot's license he ran into complications. Homeowners around the area were concerned about noise and safety; all the usual NIMBY complaints.

"We started at the County Board of Supervisors and ended up in the State Supreme Court. I won because they needed an airport in our area," he explained. "Once we won in the courts, the Governor said, we'll help you because we need an airport here." Using his family bulldozer, Waltrip moved a lot of dirt but the State helped pave the runway in 1970, prior to actually opening.

But it was tough making ends meet, so Waltrip worked double-hard. In addition to the construction business, he was the local Evinrude dealer, he opened a recycling business, and he garnered the local Cessna dealership in 1972, all of which helped finance the project. Waltrip married Jean Tailor in 1968, right in the middle of the fight at the Supreme Court, and for their entire married life she did the bookkeeping while Waltrip worked the ramp.



Charly's Restaurant is a jewel and the heart of the Williamsburg airport. The food is great, the bread is home-baked, and if the weather permits you can sit on the outside patio and watch the planes come and go. There's even a playground for the kids.

“Everything I do helps support the airport. I’m mighty proud of it and the people here,” he said. “I’ve had six astronauts base their planes at my airport! Movie stars, executives, politicians, everybody comes through here. Charley’s Restaurant won the best airport restaurant in the whole country. The playground gives the kids something to do; one of the best things I ever did!”

Waltrip is particularly pleased with the Williamsburg Aviation Scholarship program, which funds young people through their PPL rating. The program is supported through donations.

“This year we’re gonna graduate ten or twelve new students, I think we did seven last year,” he explained. “If somebody is really, truly interested in aviation we’re going to give them that chance to get their private [license]. A lot of kids don’t have the affordability, the financial end of things, to do it on their own. I think that’s plenty important, and we need to get the younger kids into flying. “

“People and pilots really appreciate our airport in Williamsburg. We give them personal attention, not like some airports where nobody knows anybody,” Waltrip concluded. “We encourage people to come to Williamsburg. We’ll take care of them.”

The Common Thread

As I listen to these stories, I hear three themes repeated. First, it’s going to be hard, much harder than it looks. If you don’t know how to drive a bulldozer you better be a quick study because you’re going to have to move a lot of dirt. Second, don’t expect to make a lot of money. Airports are not glamorous cash machines. It’s long days, tight budgets, countless community meetings, and again and again “moving a lot of dirt.” Lastly, it’s all about the people and giving back to the community. Help your airport build a community of supporters, and watch it thrive.

About the Author

Mike Jones is a 4,000 hour commercial-rated pilot who has more than 50 aircraft types in his logbook. His pride and joy is a Cessna T210, which has carried him to every corner of the U.S. and Canada for more than twenty years. He's always accessible at PilotMike2012@gmail.com.

