

The Altimeter of Character

In the air with the 557th Flying Training Squad

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Photographed
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C1C Spenser Bell is serious about airplanes. As cadet commander of the Flying Team at the Academy's 557th Flying Training Squad, he relishes the opportunity to pack up his books, cruise down to the airfield and power up his Cessna 150. Bell is confident that heading out for missions over the Rocky Mountains as a cadet will some day land him in the cockpit of an A-10 Thunderbolt. And he's not alone. For any cadet looking to some day end up in a cockpit, training at the Academy is a strong first step.

The 557th is home to the Academy's Powered Flight Program, where over 600 cadets come to train each year. Every day, they receive personal instruction from officers who are rated pilots. As everyone at the airfield will tell you, no simulator can match

the sensation of taking a real aircraft into the sky, and no collegiate program in the nation can match the level of military experience represented here at USAFA.

Subdivided into three main categories, the 557th runs the Powered Flight Program, which teaches cadets from scratch how to pilot an aircraft; the Cadet Flying Team, which competes each year at collegiate nationals; and the coveted Test-Pilot Program, which is the only undergraduate course of its kind in the nation.

Lt. Col. Paul Szostak, '90, runs the 557th with the grace of a well-oiled athletic program. "What we're doing here," he explains, "is developing officers of character by helping the Academy reach its professional development goals. Everything we



do is about building their leadership. For instance, the 98th FTS teaches cadets to jump out of airplanes. That takes tremendous courage, faith and confidence. It's the same with us: we culminate in solo-flight after only nine rides, which is a fairly aggressive timeline. We try to build up our students' confidence and abilities so they're ready to take on that solo-flight objective."

Szostak explains that one of the main course objectives at the 557th is to teach Air Force heritage. "That's why we have military officers leading these sorties instead of contractors or civilians. These are officers who have been in the field doing the mission. They've flown in active duty and combat situations, which puts them in the unique position of being able to relate their real-life experiences to their teachings."

As a cadet in flight training, chances are good that the Air Force officer sitting next to you has landed a heavy lifter in 50 knot cross winds, or flown fighters in the Middle East, or been shot at by enemy ground fire.

The squadron is busy during the semester, flying 40-50 sorties per day. In the main

conference room, pilots busy themselves with pre-flight briefings, going over navigation plans with the cadets who are on the flight roster. Captain Ginny Walker, '02, is flight commander for the course. "The whole point of this program," she describes, "is to teach cadets what it's like to fly on active duty. What we really try to do is prepare these students for pilot training with a solid foundation. For the students who are not slated for pilot training, we provide the opportunity for them to develop as officers. You learn a lot about yourself when you're up in the air."

For those who prefer solid ground under their feet, being up in the air means more than just using charts and instruments. Mastering one's fears, remaining calm, being prepared and staying focused are just a few of the character traits it takes to handle an airplane; these are the foundations of a well rounded officer, whether on the ground or in the sky.

"When I was at the Academy," Walker continues, "I didn't have the opportunity to fly a plane before I had to make the choice on going into pilot training. This pro-

gram gives students the chance to make an informed decision on whether or not pilot training is right for them, and I'm happy to be able to help with that choice."

"One of our greatest advantages," Szostak confesses, "is that we can take cadets who already know they're not going on to pilot training after the Academy. We can take students who are going on to contracting or logistics or maintenance and say, 'come down and fly with our squadron.' It affords them the opportunity to fly with an operational squadron. They understand what it's like being a part of a training sortie; they can interact with other airplanes and air traffic control, which enables them to see the big picture."

Being able to see the big picture is a critical skill among our nation's new generation of officers. Gone are the days of specialization. Today's leaders must know how to operate under any condition at any location across the globe. As technology continues to advance, officers will take on new roles throughout the course of their careers; having a narrow spectrum of skills





Captain Ginny Walker runs a pre-flight briefing with her student.

is no longer an option. Perhaps the best example of officers taking on an array of roles in a single day rests with the supplemental flight instructors who serve as the backbone of the 557th.

Szostak is quick to point out that the whole program depends heavily on the attached pilots who are teaching classes on the campus. “These are the professors who are teaching physics and Chinese, the AOC’s over-seeing cadets, the athletic instructors overseeing sports. The success of this program depends on them coming down to help out. The 557th only has 16 people. There’s no way we could fly 40 sorties per day every day to teach these cadets. Our arrangement gives the cadets a chance to see their AOC’s and professors in action. They get to see what it means to

be a rated officer flying in the Air Force.”

Like Lt. Col. Szostak, Capt. Walker is a firm believer in preparing cadets for success after the Academy. “My favorite thing about this program,” she says with a reflective smile, “is being able to take someone who’s never sat at the controls of an airplane and teach him everything he needs to know in order to solo in just three short weeks. Helping someone build the confidence required to take a plane into the air and land safely is really amazing.”

With its burgeoning popularity, Szostak has high hopes for the future of the program. Growth is on the horizon, and the 557th is gearing up to becoming one of the nation’s top flight training programs. “In 2013,” the commander foresees, “we’re going to be buying 25 of our own airplanes.

The Flying Team receives its new Presidential paint-scheme.



Right now we’re leasing 20. So in the years to come, the squadron will grow and we’ll be able to train 700 cadets per year. Eventually, we’ll have up to 50 attached pilots coming down to help out. Compared to my 16, that 50 is a huge multiplier.”

With such a large number of cadets to draw from, the 557th is able to recruit plenty of talent for the Academy’s Flying Team. C1C Spenser Bell explains, “There’s a tryout process which takes about eight months. Once you make it on the team, you get checked out as a mission pilot for the T-51. Normally we only take six cadets per year, making a total of 18 cadet pilots. Anyone who makes the team must first have a pilot’s license ... so we’re already pilots when we come here. This program simply refines us for military flying.”

“Believe it or not,” Szostak says, “there are about 50 other schools in the country with flying teams. For competition we do spot landings, navigation events and message drops. Then on the ground we have knowledge tests which count pretty heavily in the scoring process. We’ve been the winners of our region for 23 years straight. At the national level we tend to finish in the top ten.”

Bell says that the 557th has had a big impact on him since he came to the Academy. “The program is huge for leadership and character development. Flying is great, and that’s what we’re going to do in the Air Force; but as the Flying Team Commander, I have to lead 18 of my peers. I trust every person on this team implicitly. If I couldn’t do that, we wouldn’t be able to operate as a unit. Eventually we’ll begin instructing our own members. We’ve been relatively competitive at a collegiate level. We typically land between 5th and 2nd at Nationals. Obviously we want to improve that record.”

Szostak is excited to have a successful flying team in his squadron. He speaks highly of the cadets and always makes an effort to ensure they get the best possible experience out of the program. He is also equally passionate about the Academy’s Test-Pilot Program, a two-part class that takes place in both the classroom and at the airfield. “It’s the only undergraduate test program in the nation,” he explains. “Students participate in theoretical classroom exercises on the Academy campus. Twenty five seniors per semester will come

down to the airfield for the research and data collecting segment of the course. During their laboratory sessions, they visit the 557th, where they fly with Air Force officers to collect data while in the air.”

From practicing in cross winds to analyzing air frame integrity, cadets at the 557th are learning an entire spectrum of aviation skills, all of which will prove essential in their careers as officers. Of the myriad of character building disciplines here at the Academy, the lessons learned from the flying training squadron will be long-lasting. What pilot could ever forget the first time he/she flew solo? What officer could ever forget the first time he was responsible for the lives of his crew? Building the courage and skill it takes to pilot an airplane is a tremendous educational milestone. As the program continues to grow, so too will its sphere of influence.

Cadet Bell left us with one last piece of advice before stepping out on the tarmac to pre-flight his aircraft. “Every program at the Academy has a purpose,” he describes, “and they’re all very worthwhile. Get into something you’re passionate about and it will take you far.” ✓



Cadet Spencer Bell (left) and Brian Johnston, of the Flying Team, run through their pre-flight checklist before taking off.

Cadets in the Powered Flight program receive one-on-one instruction from rated Air Force pilots.

