

PEOPLE /

Ramone Hemphill

Role models inspire more role models

BY JAMIE BECKETT

AS RAMONE HEMPHILL reflects on his early life, he speaks of his appreciation for the role models who helped set him on a path to success. Counted among those who influenced him profoundly is a cousin who flew for the U.S. Navy, now an active airline pilot. "He was a real inspiration," said Hemphill, a 38-year-old systems engineer for a major aerospace company.

Another contributor to Hemphill's can-do mindset was a Junior ROTC instructor, Sgt. Maj. Willie Owens. "That's the first person who pops up in my mind as a big influence from outside the house," Hemphill said. "He was just a great teacher."

Based in Melbourne, Florida, Hemphill is a private pilot with an instrument rating and a complex endorsement who has become a flattering reflection of those who helped mold him. He is the founder of The 99th Squadron, a 501(c)(3) tax exempt non-profit outfit designed to introduce young students, and particularly students of color, to the broad expanse of career opportunities that can be found in aviation.

Hemphill runs the operation nearly single-handedly, with enthusiastic and capable support from his wife, Shannon. Like the organization their outfit takes its name from, The 99th Squadron is on a mission.

"That's the first of four squadrons that were part of the 332nd," said Hemphill. A unit that is more commonly



known today by the almost mythic title, the Tuskegee Airmen.

Each fall The 99th Squadron begins a new five-week curriculum by delving into a series of aviation-related topics on successive Saturdays. Each student is assigned homework. On Wednesdays the group reconvenes to review the homework and fill in any blanks that might come to light.

The classwork provides an opportunity to scratch the surface of every subject

a pilot applicant would need to be familiar with. With students ranging from the sixth to twelfth grade, the choice to present a more superficial level of material is intentional. The goal isn't so much to create professional pilots as it is to make it clear that aviation presents myriad desirable positions to those students who choose to set their sights on aerospace in some form.

Hemphill didn't start out to be a pilot. "Most of my career has been spent in

STEVE MARTINE

avionics. In flight control. I love that kind of stuff." Yet, his first real attraction to aviation came through a Boy Scout Explorers Club that introduced him to the idea of working in air traffic control. "That's what started me thinking in that [aviation's] direction."

It is Hemphill's hope that he can provide similar insight and initiative to the students he works with through The 99th Squadron.

Toward the end of the five-week program, Hemphill begins scheduling introductory flights with the students. Often, they are accompanied by a parent, a sibling, or a combination of family members who are as excited about the possibilities as their young students are.

In 2021 the program will begin on Saturday, September 11, in the main building at Valkaria Airport just south of Melbourne. It will conclude with a commencement ceremony on October 30.

The program is specifically and deliberately targeted at students from minority populations, as Hemphill says, "in an effort to address the disparity in representation in the industry." This is an especially important goal because even though his own family was very supportive of his aspirations, he recalls the personal struggles presented by the type of self-limiting thoughts teenagers often hold. Those doubts and misunderstandings very well might derail an otherwise stellar career if not for the availability of external support and encouragement.

The Hemphill family covers the costs to continue a program in which they see real value. Local pilots are supportive and helpful, as well. But the full cost of operating The 99th Squadron falls on the shoulders of Ramone, Shannon, and the generosity of benefactors who find them in person or seek them out through the organization's website. ■ jamie.beckett@aopa.org
▶ the99th.org

Going long

These pilots are living their dream



SHINJI MAEDA circumnavigated the Earth in 43 days in a 1963 Beechcraft V-tail Bonanza he named *Lucy*. Weather—including sand-blasting from a Sahara Desert storm, fog in Russia, and brief but harrowing icing conditions—was a factor along the route. The around-the-world flight was a culmination of the messages of hope that Maeda, who is blind in one eye from a motorcycle accident, uses to inspire others. Maeda founded the nonprofit Aero Zypangu Project (Air Japan) in 2015, which encourages others to follow their own dreams. ▶ aopa.org/pilot/Maeda



BRITISH PILOT Travis Ludlow, 18, secured a Guinness World Record as the youngest to fly solo around the world after he landed a Continental CD-155 Jet A-powered Cessna 172 at Teuge International Airport in the Netherlands (see "Pilots," p. 112).
▶ aopa.org/pilot/Ludlow



BEN TEMPLETON, 18, launched a 100-airport, 8,300-mile journey in a Piper J-3 Cub on June 1, the same day most of his classmates walked across the stage to collect their high school diplomas. He flies radio control aircraft for fun, soloed on his sixteenth birthday, and earned a pilot certificate at age 17. After completing the 60-day journey, Templeton said he plans to pursue aviation management at Middle Georgia State University. ▶ aopa.org/pilot/Templeton



YOUNG PILOTS USA founder and 16-year-old student pilot Luc Zipkin embarked on a Connecticut-to-California round-trip flight in a 1946 Piper J-3 Cub on June 8 to raise awareness for AOPA Foundation flight training scholarships and two charities. He was accompanied by his father and CFI Eric Zipkin, who flew the family's Cessna 180 Skywagon as a chase aircraft during the 5,000-mile journey, keeping an eye on the vintage Cub with no electrical system and adhering to Part 61 solo endorsement regulations. ▶ aopa.org/pilot/Zipkin