

COME FLY WITH ME

FLIGHT SCHOOL OPEN TO AVIATION ENTHUSIASTS

BY STEPHEN DOW

LAST WINTER, a regional survey conducted by Sheridan resident J.T. Grainger revealed several needs at the Sheridan County Airport.

"I did a survey with about 100 people, and I learned that access to flight training was a huge issue," said Grainger, the sole proprietor of Sheridan Pilots 307 LLC. "The cost was an issue. The availability of flight instructors was an issue. So I wanted to do something about that."

In the early summer of 2020, Grainger launched Sheridan Pilots 307, a flight school intended to improve access to aviation at a lower cost, compared to training in areas like Denver or Salt Lake City.

"Our whole pitch is that we meet the needs identified in that survey," Grainger said. "We provide affordable access to training for aviation enthusiasts of all ages and mentorship for those who want to pursue a passion for flying."

Each novice's journey begins with a discovery flight in a Cessna 172. From there, students can log more than 40 hours of time through weekly classes, ground school classes for learning terminology and equipment, in-air practice and a flight more than 25 miles from the airport. A medical review by a doctor verifies eyesight and body condition appropriate for flying.

As a backup when weather conditions prevent flying, instructors can take students to train in the Sheridan Pilot's Association simulators in Sheridan County Airport's main terminal. Students can log up to two-and-a-half hours toward their private license. If a future pilot wants to pursue instrument training, they can log up to 20 hours practicing flying by navigational instruments only with no visual references.

After passing a written test with the Federal Aviation Administration and taking a "check ride" with a dedicated pilot examiner, the student takes home a pilot's license. From there, the sky is the limit, Grainger said.



Instructor Bryan Belus, left, and student Benjamin Rogers do a radio check before taxiing onto the runway at the Sheridan County Airport Wednesday, Dec. 9, 2020.

"Despite COVID-19's drastic impact on commercial aviation, the airlines will still need another generation of pilots in the near future," Grainger said. "You could fly cargo, aerial fire-fight, spray for agriculture or even be a general aviation pilot. There are just so many ways to use these skills, and we try to provide our students with the solid foundation they need."

Seven instructors are listed on insurance for the plane used for classes. Instructors hold a private pilot's license, commercial flight instructor certification and instrument ratings with several thousand hours of experience.

At a rental rate of \$95 for the plane and \$50 for instructors, one hour of instruction in Sheridan is slightly less expensive than many other areas, Grainger said.

Whether because of the low price or the quality instruction, the flight school has thrived in its first year despite the COVID-19 pandemic, Grainger said. He plans to expand his operations next year by developing an aviation curriculum for local high school students.

"A lot of people think 2020 was a bad year, and it was in many ways, however, for us, it was a very prosperous year," Grainger said. "There are a lot of people wanting to do something different in their life and wanting to still travel while avoiding commercial airline traffic. Flight training is a great way for us to fill that niche. Also there is a common stigma that aviation is expensive and only a few can afford it. We are trying to change that and improve access so everyone can enjoy the privileges aviation offers."

John Stopka, Sheridan County Airport manager, agreed.

"The idea is to get younger people involved in aviation and flight school and flight training is one of the best ways to do that," Stopka said. "It's a great way to bring people out to the airport and familiarize them with what is going on here." ■



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