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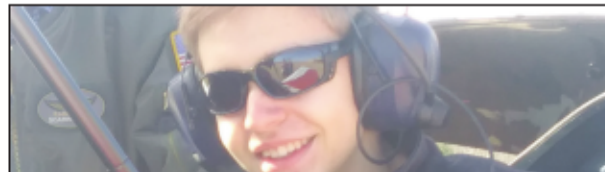
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If you have recently saw a green (really green) plane flying low around the county, then you’ve witnessed part of Dale Swenson’s dream.

A dream becomes reality

RHS senior Dale Swenson earns single engine pilot’s license as his goals and wings continue to grow

By Rhonda Mitchell

Lots of young boys have dreams of becoming a pilot. Sounds of woosh, swoosh and zoom are a favorite sound of a kid imitating flying a plane. But this once young child with such a dream is now a young man who has made his dream into a reality.

If you have recently saw a green (really green) plane flying low around the county, then you’ve witnessed part of Dale Swenson’s dream.

The News Leader first did a story on 14-year-old Dale Swenson from Decaturville in 2016. At that time he was flying gliders. He started out with his instructor, Terry Barnes, learning how to fly gliders. He flew several hours with three different instructors in Eagleville. The determined young man kept going through training, practicing and getting the required hours to be ready to solo.

Now most of you know that a glider has no motor. For most people that would be a drawback, but not for Dale. If you take a minute to talk with him, he will take you through a complete science lesson about the forces of nature. Not only is he a pilot, he also has to be a meteorologist, scientist and even a fortune teller.

“A glider uses the same forces that birds use in the environment,” explained Dale. “Usually going along with rising columns of air marked by small fluffy clouds.”

“I call him the cloud whisperer,” acknowledged his very supportive mother, Laura Swenson.

“I’m looking for a large, dense, dark-bottomed cloud with a fluffy top,” continued Dale. “Cumulus clouds or CU’s is the nickname pilots give them. Then we try to get as much altitude as we can and go to the base of the cloud. We can’t go in the cloud, because we have no instruments.”

Once riding on the air current, there is a feeling of being carefree and adventurous. The pilot literally has the world in his hands with blue skies all around.

“What makes it so challenging is that you have to make decisions and make them quickly,” Dale explains. “The biggest challenge of a glider pilot is to



Dale Swenson’s original glider instructor, Terry Barnes, cuts the back out of Swenson’s shirt as tradition requires with pilots after their first time flying a solo engine plane alone. The reason for that is to leave room for the pilot’s wings to grow. Barnes did the pleasure by using his 93-year-old dad’s knife to cut the shirt. The plane that Dale had been training in belonged to the 93-year-old pilot who had flown the same plane to Alaska.

master the art of looking at something and making a quick decision. What makes this difficult is in competitions and air races where you try to go across country and gain as much area as possible. You circle and keep note of a wisp, which can either be dying out or forming and you have to pay close attention to see what you’re doing.”

The glider is constantly circling the columns of air, going up with the column and circling inside. That’s the part that some people can’t handle-circling and more circling. Motion sickness can quickly come into the situation. “The best cure for air sickness is to look out and focus on something and don’t look inside the cockpit,” related the glider pilot. “We’ve even had a military helicopter pilot get sick.”

Once the glider gets to the top of the cloud, the speed is increased as the heated ground air rises causing the column, and when the air reaches a certain altitude, the hot air condenses and becomes a cloud.

Then it starts to vary in strength from weak to strong, even very strong. The strength of the cloud in a thunderstorm could even rip the plane apart. “That’s why you don’t fly in a thunderstorm and I am constantly watching the weather. Weather watching is the most important part of the skill, sometimes watching it days in advance. The best time to fly a glider is just after a cold front comes through. That’s what makes this so challenging,” related the now 18-year-old pilot. “The

longest flight I’ve had was 5 ½ hours from 2,000 feet to more than 6000 feet from Eagleville to Columbia.”

Dale took on this long flight with the chairman of the scholarship committee at the young age of 15. His flight companion was only in his early 20’s, but very few people have managed to get a flight that long using one of the Eagleville club planes.

“The higher you are the more distance you can cover and the more you have to pay close attention to which clouds are dying out or building,” stated Dale. “You want to be able to get back to the airport for sure! It’s rewarding, but also frustrating. If it’s not rising air, it’s sinking air.”

When the tow plane takes a glider up, there is a

possibility that the clouds and conditions are not right and they may have to come back in and land if the pilot doesn’t find an updraft.

“It’s all a mental thing,” declared Dale. “I don’t accept defeat. Just keep looking for a little bump of rising air. When you find that bump, it gives you a boost of adrenalin.”

According to Dale’s grandmother, Kathy Brueske, that bump only gives the pilot a boost of adrenalin, not the passenger!

“If you see nothing but blue skies, take a chance, but be smart, or go back. Some pilots can’t get back to the airport and have to land in a field. If that happens, a tow pilot has to land and take off again with the glider or the glider can be taken apart

and put on a trailer. A two-seater glider that you train in weighs less than a thousand pounds,” he continued.

When Dale began gliding, he was not old enough to solo, but on Nov. 12, 2016, he had solo gliding under his belt. By Nov. 11, 2017, Dale now proudly had his private glider license certificate. Since he had to be 16 years old to acquire that license, he had to wait a whole year. That time was spent getting a whole lot of extra knowledge and practice gliding around the area.

“I could solo anytime in any glider and I participated in all of the club events, such as races. I would just fly and build up hours.”

According to his mother, Dale likes “roller coasting” flying and has flown at least 10 hours with him in the glider. She has been dubbed “super mom,” because she flies frequently with her son.

“When I was pregnant with Dale, I thought I would have someone to ride roller coasters with,” Laura Mae said with a proud smile. “I like roller coaster flying and if I look up, I can tell which one is Dale, because he is flipping and turning!”

“I’m just making my turns tighter than most people,” countered Dale. “I find that more fun.”

You might think that would be enough for a young man, but not so. He has more goals in mind.

“After I got private in gliders, I wanted to go further. I knew it had to be on a scholarship. The gold standard is a private pilot certificate. I only had a glider then and I wanted to go for single engine.”

“After he finished his glider schooling on a scholarship, I wondered how to pay for his habit,” his mom pointed out. “I knew he wanted to do it and I spent my time looking for scholarships. But most of the scholarships, he wasn’t eligible because he already had a license. We were on the search.”

Fate was with the Swensons. A call to Dale’s original glider instructor, Terry Barnes, opened a big door. Barnes, his father, brother and their families, live at Kitty Hawk Estates in Florida. The name should tell you something! Every

See “A dream” on A11

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A dream becomes reality

FROM PAGE A11



Dale Swenson has come a long way from playing with paper airplanes. He is flying high in the sky and chasing his dreams and well on his way to even more success. Dreams do not come easy and this dream is not only hard work, but expensive. Dale is living proof, if there's a will, there's a way!

one in the estates has a hangar! Dale's dream was soon to become a reality. Barnes decided that he would present Dale the very first ever, Terry Barnes Flight Scholarship. In February 2019, Dale started from scratch and a whirlwind of accomplishments began. In three days he got his solo requirement match met, but he didn't get to solo at that time. When Riverside High School's spring break rolled around in March of 2019, Dale was on his way back to Florida. The Barnes family had basically adopted him and the journey was on. After an initial time spent getting to know everyone, the area and the plane, training continued with plenty of take offs and landings at different airports. By the third day of spring break, his instructor asked if he knew what day it was. It was solo day with a large peanut gallery cheering him on. The excitement was evident as Dale began his first time on a solo engine plane. The first two landings were a little bumpy, but as they say, the third time was the charm and smooth as silk. There is a tradition with pilots that the first time on a solo engine plane, they cut the shirt back out. The reason for that is to leave room for the pilot's wings to grow. Barnes did the pleasure by using his 93-year-old dad's knife to cut the shirt. The plane that Dale had been training in belonged to the 93-year-old pilot who had flown the same plane to Alaska. "That was incredibly exciting, but also scary. I only had one week to get all the requirements," Dale admitted with a big smile. "It was a good feeling making that landing in that airplane. Almost 15 kids and grandkids had soloed in that plane and now I'm part of that history. History is cool. That plane is a machine with history." Dale's mother, grandmother and Bob Dillon made it from Tennessee just in time to see Barnes hand Dale the keys to the plane and telling him to enjoy a flight. Needless to say the celebration continued long after the flight. "I just got lucky," admits Dale. "I managed to do stuff in a week that took people years to accomplish. I went from a very small two-seater 1946 airplane to a 1960's Cessna 172, four-seater. It had a lot more instruments and was a lot heavier. I had to learn a lot of things and had to get a lot of landings at different airports, lots of flights and cross country hours. I landed at airports with air traffic controls and was not used to it, but did it. I had to get 10 night time landings and crammed them in. The days went from 8 a.m. to 1 a.m."

"It's cool to have this much authority, throttle in

your hand. Freedom is an understatement. I just had fun and admired the scenery. It's more relaxing than flying gliders. Being able to come back in one piece. Now, that's rewarding. I have always been interested in airplanes, but never saw myself actually being at the controls. I saw myself designing planes, but everything just worked out."

All of his instructors have told Dale that he was a "natural" but when the examiner gets in the plane, they determine your fate. Even before the actual flight, Dale had to memorize a "big" book of information. That part of the exam was tested prior to the flight in a corner of the airport and he did well. The morning of the test flight part of the exam in Florida, the plane's wings were covered in ice. In Florida? Bad sign? Nope! Things were still in Dale's favor. His instructors knew he was capable, but it was whether the examiner knew that or not. The take-off was smooth and the landing was smooth. As they were walking back into the airport, the examiner announced to all of his family and friends, "I think we have a new private pilot!"

"That was the greatest feeling and greatest achievement," concluded the new single engine pilot. "I couldn't believe I had managed to pull that off in such a short time. Everyone was impressed."

On April 7, two weeks after getting his license, he was attending an EAA meeting in Paris, Tenn., Chapter 734. Ritual was performed and he was anointed with aviation oil in a big celebration. Of course, Dale's mind was now seeking out a new goal. During the many conversations at the celebration, it was mentioned that a pilot had passed and his plane was still in one of the hangars. When the hangar doors were opened, there sat an unusual looking green plane. "It looked like an old Wright Brothers airplane," Dale described. "I was fascinated by it. It was cool."

With the help of his mother, grandmother and an investment by Bob Dillon, Dale became the pilot of the "Green Hornet" in July. It has one little engine, basically a flying lawn mower (thus the green color relates to green grass).

Bob and Dale overhauled the engine and after a couple of months, the 400 pound plane was in the hands of the new pilot and ready to be flown home.

"It was easy to get the hang of and easy to fly. It had such a smooth landing and I was sold! We got ready to fly it home (to the Beech River Regional Airport) from Paris and Mom flew with me. It's an experimental plane from a kit. It's not fast and the en-

gine is famously unreliable. I had to make safe decisions on the flight path and that's when the glider training seeps in."

People around Decatur County have probably seen Dale in his green Hornet plane. It is very recognizable and very loud.

"Decatur County has spectacular terrain and I like flying around Parsons because of the old airstrip. I like flying over football games, over the town of Parsons and Decaturville and I like a captive audience, because they can't run away!"

"I consider myself good at what I do. I will continue to use the plane to get hours and will attend MTSU next fall and fly in the aerospace pro pilot, professional pilot courses. That will carry me from private to the airline transport pilot rating, which is the highest you can get. I also want to get instructor rating to help pay for school and be able to teach others. I want to spend the rest of my life flying in some form, designing them maybe, but preferably inside them. I want to see the world and get mom and granny airfare discounts!"

Dale has come a long way from playing with paper airplanes. He is flying high in the sky and chasing his dreams and well on his way to even more success. Dreams do not come easy and this dream is not only hard work, but expensive. Dale is living proof, if there's a will, there's a way!

Next time you see a little loud, green plane flying over, just give Dale a wave as he soars on to follow his dreams!

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