

Operation Skyhook



A little friendly competition

BY JULIE K. BOATMAN

Each arrival into Grider Field in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, is greeted with a slap on the back and a “Hey, how’re you doing?” whether old friend or new. But most of these pilots know each other from toeing the hold-short line in their annual fly-in competition at Operation Skyhook, which is evident from the injections of bravado into every well-met welcome.

“You’re going down this year, Bronze Eagle!”

“What? Are you talking to me, Red-tail? I think you’re in for a beating.”

“Not if we have anything to say about it—the Thunderbirds have been practicing all year. I don’t know what flying nonsense y’all have been up to!”

Operation Skyhook is under way.

Every year, over Memorial Day weekend, members of the Black Pilots of America descend upon this central-Arkansas airport for their family reunion—a long weekend of flying contests, educational seminars, and social events that cement the group.

Late May in Arkansas can be more summer than most people want to deal with—daytime temps stretch into the high 90s, with the humidity keeping pace. But the enthusiasm shows no signs of flagging as the teams coalesce into a parade of spirit. The California-based chapter, the Redtails, may win style points for best team plumage, with its alternating black and khaki flight suits, but every chapter, it seems, has a theme, a palette of team colors, and a winning attitude.

The first Skyhook

The seeds of friendly competition were planted almost 40 years ago, when Horace Noble, a Chicago-based pilot, founded the Chicago Area Pilots Association in 1968. And CAPA officials attended the first Negro Airmen International (NAI) convention in Pine Bluff in 1969, and joined the NAI. The Bronze Eagles, a group of Houston-area pilots, and CAPA started Skyhook as an outlet for the “friendly rivalry” that had cropped up between pilots in each group—a contest of skills with which to challenge each other. Since neither club wanted to give the other home-field advantage, Yazoo City, Mississippi, was selected to host the first competitive fly-in, over Memorial Day weekend in 1971. NAI member Rufus Hunt bestowed the name “Operation Skyhook” upon the event that year.



Ken Johnson, president of the Arkansas Thunderbirds chapter of the Black Pilots of America, greets a recent arrival to Grider Field (above).

In 1972, NAI President Ed Gibbs asked to sponsor Skyhook, and it became an NAI event. For a while, Skyhook moved around: In 1973, it was held in Wichita; in 1974, Houston; and in 1975, Tuskegee, Alabama, where it remained until 1995. In 1997, a group of pilots from NAI reorganized under the name "Black Pilots of America," and Ken Johnson, a member of that group, invited the BPA (now the sponsor of the event) to hold Skyhook at Pine Bluff. Since then, the event has been there each year, and continues to take place over the Memorial Day weekend.

Pine Bluff made a natural choice for both the continuation of Skyhook, and as a hometown to the BPA. The town and airport have been extremely welcoming and supportive of Operation Skyhook and the association—red carpets roll out and keys to the city have been handed over (literally). The Arkansas State Aeronautics Commission has thrown in financial support for Skyhook's educational programs—even the current Arkansas governor, Mike Huckabee (an avid general aviation enthusiast), has given the event his blessing.

Across the country, BPA has about 700 members gathered into 17 chapters. And the association is part of IBAC, the International Black Aerospace Council, a top-level group comprised of several membership organizations serving various branches of aviation and aerospace. Along with BPA, NAI and OBAP (Organization of Black Airline Pilots), among other associations, also are signatories to IBAC, and each carries on a tradition of service and education that started with a legendary assembly of aviators from Tuskegee.

The Tuskegee legacy

Roughly 1,000 black pilots, navigators, and bombardiers trained at Tuskegee in segregated units from 1940 to 1946. Although 66 airmen were killed in action, and 32 were taken prisoner, their units downed 260 enemy aircraft and did not lose a single bomber in their escort to enemy fire during more than 200 combat missions. In total, 850 medals were awarded to the cadre of pilots now known as the Tuskegee Airmen.

BPA has a history of honoring its Tuskegee legacy, and for good reason. Airmen from those World War II



The BPA builds on the traditions of the Tuskegee Airmen (left). Camaraderie—such as flying to Skyhook together—is vital to BPA members (below).



units have paid it forward by serving as mentors and inspiration for the ensuing generations of black pilots, and pilots from all racial and cultural backgrounds.

This year at Skyhook, the St. Louis chapter, formerly known as the Gateway Eagles (in honor of the city's famous arch), renamed itself to celebrate Lewis Lynch, a Tuskegee Airman. The new Lewis Lynch chapter joins six other BPA chapters that honor members of the Tuskegee group. You might think, well, that's nice, a fitting tribute to pioneering aviators long past—but actually, Lewis Lynch is alive and well, and an active member of the chapter. And several BPA chapters honor their living legends this way, rather than simply memorializing them after they're gone. This link between present and past helps the chapters educate young people—and respect their heritage—by introducing them to the aviators who paved the way.

Skyhook today

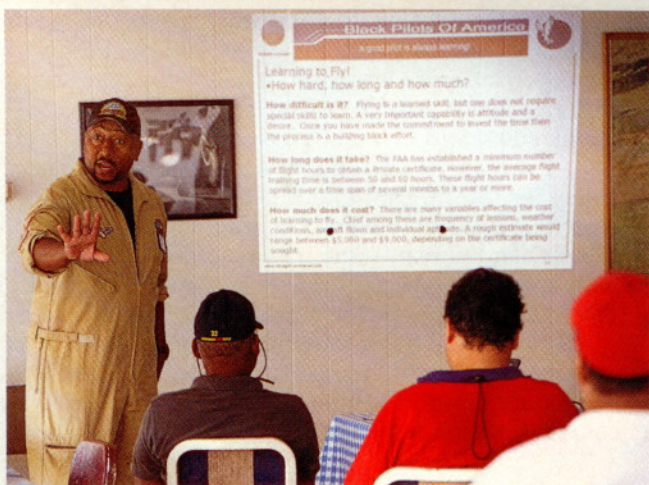
But what's education without some fun, some purpose for learning? Pilots naturally want to demonstrate their hard-

won skills. Skyhook provides just such an outlet, with a roster of activities common to fly-ins of all stripes: flour-bomb drops, balloon-burst passes, pylon races, spot landings, and formation flying. But at most events, the competition begins with the takeoff on the first bomb drop, and ends with the squeak of the tires on the last spot landing. Not so here. Points are tallied with each contest, and close watch is kept, because an entire trophy shop's worth of hardware is going to be given out at Skyhook's awards banquet on Saturday night.

With 105 attendees registered, and 40 airplanes on the ramp, there is a healthy field for such competition. Call signs follow chapter names: "Redtail" belongs to the California contingent, "Motown" to the Detroit-based Cargill chapter, and "Wrangler" to the Bronze Eagles of Texas. With a marker, pilots write their call signs on every flour bomb—even while knowing those words will soon be obliterated in a cloud of powder.

Members of the Bronze Eagles, like many chapters, held a formal practice session the weekend before the fly-in, which befits their position as returning

Flight instructor Rayvon Williams (far left, standing) leads one of several educational sessions at Skyhook each year.



team champions. However, practice by the newly christened Lewis Lynch chapter paid off, with that team taking top honors overall. Points assessed on each pilot for his or her performance in each event are totaled to come up with an overall "Top Gun," or best pilot, and then an overall "Top Team," or highest-scoring chapter. The Top Gun this year? Wrangler 67, Marvin Smith, of the Bronze Eagles, with nearly 350 points gathered by winning the single-engine retract pylon race, placing second in the flour bomb drop, and showing a respectable fifth-place in the balloon burst.

In addition to the competition, educational seminars focus the group's attention on specific topics, including the pursuit of additional ratings, how to inspire and mentor new pilots, and how to make a proficiency plan. Rayvon Williams, a flight instructor from the Redtail chapter, put on a Friday-morning seminar for a group of early risers, in which he outlined the

steps toward getting a private pilot certificate—and what other options exist for further training and development beyond that first signoff.

The BPA pilots also give an extensive number of rides to local children, church groups, and others from the Pine Bluff community who come out to the airport and express interest in learning to fly. Tipped off by the formation flyovers of the city, a collection of eager spectators gathers to watch the Skyhook activities each time the show comes to town.

After the fly-in

The BPA chapters are active ones, with plenty of year-round events to keep members engaged—from fly-outs to local youth education programs. Most chapters make school visits each year to talk with students about opportunities in aviation, and how to start flying or pursue an aviation career.

And sometimes the chapter takes along a special guest to drive the point home, as did the members of the

Summer Flight Academy

With a committed cadre of experienced instructors, each year the Summer Flight Academy doesn't just give young people a taste of flight—they get practically the whole buffet. During the two-week program, participants in the SFA receive 40 hours of ground school and 10 hours of flight time toward their private pilot certificate—some even get a chance to solo, if qualified. Although some students come to the academy with flight hours under their belts, many do not. At a cost of \$1,900 per child, the SFA represents a special opportunity for motivated students, ages 15 to 19, to sink their teeth into aviation.

Many people and companies come together to make SFA possible. Texas Southern University, which hosts the academy, donates use of campus apartments, meals for the students, vans for transportation, and classrooms—as well as several members of their staff to ease the process. Aircraft are provided at reasonable rates, and other companies contribute charts, textbooks, and student materials.

The Houston-based Bronze Eagles are involved heavily in the program, but other chapters help out. In fact, many chapters raise funds to send their local kids to the academy. This year, SFA took place from July 15 through 29, with 16 students attending. Out of that number, 10 passed the private pilot written exam—and four soloed for the first time.

—JKB

Roscoe Draper chapter in Philadelphia last December, when they brought Roscoe "Coach" Draper to a talk given at the Young Scholars Charter School—the class had just finished a curriculum on the Tuskegee Airmen, so meeting one in the flesh was an awe-inspiring moment. Coach Draper, one of the first black men selected to instruct at Tuskegee, flew into last year's Skyhook, bringing a young pilot he was mentoring along with him—still true to his nickname at 87.

BPA events also feature current prominent African-Americans in aero-

space and aviation careers, such as Patti Grace Smith, associate administrator for commercial space transportation for the FAA, who spoke at Operation Skyhook 2005, and Lt. Gen. Russell Davis—a career Air National Guard pilot and the first African-American to ascend to the position of chief of the National Guard Bureau—who was the keynote speaker at Skyhook 2006.

The BPA also supports the Summer Flight Academy at Texas Southern University. The program for teens is a joint educational effort to develop and encourage young people with the ap-

titude and passion for aviation (see the "Summer Flight Academy" sidebar, page 123).

A family affair

Perhaps the most touching moment at the event, however, took place at the start of the organization's business meeting late on Friday afternoon. Palmer Sullins, president of the BPA, stood up and called the meeting to order with a thank you to his fellow pilots. Sullins, a professional seaplane pilot and sales engineer for a chemical company in southern Louisiana, and his wife were displaced for seven months when Hurricane Katrina blew through their hometown in August 2005. "BPA members came to each

XM WX SATELLITE WEATHER

PILOTS WON'T FLY WITHOUT IT.

"I don't mind flying through bumpy weather alone, but with my wife and kids in the plane, it's a different story. While IFR and returning from Disneyworld, we flew into heavy rain and moderate turbulence. After that rough ride, we decided we weren't going out again until we had weather information in the cockpit. Now I won't take them anywhere without XM WX. It's my insurance policy for peace of mind."

Tavis White, DVM Pilot

Weather to the Power of X™.

Pilots across the country have embraced XM WX Satellite Weather. Many just won't fly without its reliable, redundant and continuous datalink. And with real-time conditions like radar, winds aloft, lightning and the largest number of compatible devices on the market, it's easy to see why. Flying with XM WX means flying with confidence.

www.XMWXweather.com or call 321-751-9202

Hardware and required monthly subscriptions sold separately. Subscriptions for in-vehicle use only. Offer ends 12/31/06. All fees and weather data subject to change. XM WX weather data coverage and individual product availability only for business equipment. Reception of the XM signal may vary depending on location. Subscriptions subject to Customer Agreement included with the XM Weather Kit and available at xmads.com. Available only in the 48 contiguous United States. XM WX is a trademark of XM Satellite Radio Inc. © 2006 XM Satellite Radio Inc. All rights reserved. 11/2006 0450




Bennie Clay, a.k.a. *Redtail 2*, holds up a flour bomb in anticipation of the contest to come.

other's aid in the wake of Katrina," said Sullins, who touched upon the donations of food, clothing, and shelter made to the pilots of the devastated New Orleans Golden Eagles chapter from BPA members across the country. When it comes to "the boots on the ground" (Sullins' term for the pilots who make consistent effort to promote aviation), the BPA has a legion. **ACPA**

E-mail the author at julie.boatman@aopa.org.

Like members of the Black Pilots of America, you too can introduce others to general aviation. Be an AOPA Project Pilot Mentor. Visit the Web site (www.AOPAProjectPilot.org).



i Links to additional information about Operation Skyhook and the Black Pilots of America may be found on AOPA Online (www.aopa.org/pilot/links.shtml).