

MEMBER PROFILE – Ralph Neal

I started life in North Central Pennsylvania and was taken to Western New York State at 18 months of age. My father was just trying to keep his family of 7 fed and warm, which he did. We lived 5 miles from the nearest town, about a half of a block from Lake Erie.

There was a grass strip between where we lived and the nearest town and the school bus would pass by it twice a day. Being a typical boy, I thought airplanes were pretty neat. Having destroyed my share of balsa gliders and rubber band powered airplanes, the opportunity to ride in a J-3 came up. We taxied to the end of the runway, the pilot took one look at me and my green complexion and taxied back to the hangar.....! I was relieved!!

The next opportunity was about three years later at the same grass strip in an Ercoupe. We flew one circuit in the pattern, then the pilot let me out, he didn't have any sick sacks on board.

After high school, I graduated from DeVry Tech in Chicago, IL. Riding to and from on an American Airlines Vicount was my next airplane experience. No sick sacks were needed! After DeVry I spent four years in the Navy. My last duty assignment was at N.A.S. Glynco near Brunswick, GA, which is now the Brunswick Airport. The Navy trained radar intercept operators there. They rode in the back seat of the F4 Phantoms. We maintained about 40 airborne radar systems.

After the Navy, Cape Canaveral was next. I was there during the Apollo Program. Guilford Mooring and I were there at the same time, but with four or five tracking stations in the area, we never met. My flight training started while living in Florida. When the Apollo Program ended, Bristol TN was my next stop. An electronic business venture with a Navy buddy paid the bills while I continued my flight training.

By this time, I realized that flying for a living was where I was headed. Upon receiving all of the ratings available at the Bristol, IN Airport, I moved to Greensboro, NC where the Beechcraft dealer had a full flight school. After getting my flight instructor ratings, the dealer hired me to flight instruct. Then I moved into the charter department and from there I began my first corporate flying job. In 1985 Standard Commercial Tobacco Company offered me a flying job. The move to Wilson was made. I met Vickie at the Hardee's hangar where she worked in the early 90's and about 10 years later we were married. I inherited all of her animals too, the cat, dog and the squirrels.

Twenty years in Wilson and looking forward to the future. Ralph Neal