

McCall flying club gets a place to land

Historic airport hangar was donated by owner

BY DREW DODSON

The Star-News

Levi Johnson is relieved the future of the MYL High Flying Club and its youth pilot program are now secure thanks to the donation of an historic hangar at the McCall Municipal Airport.

Johnson serves as president of the flying club, which also runs the McCall Youth Learning Aviation Fund, a non-profit aimed at helping local high school students earn a pilot's license.

"We now know for generations to come that we have secured the hangar and the airplanes," said Johnson, 38. "Now we just need donations and funds to help these students."

Jeff Carter owned the former Johnson Flying Service hangar, or the red hangar seen from Idaho 55 near Deinhard Lane, for 10 years before deciding to donate it to the flying club.

"It just made sense," said Carter, 59, who splits time between McCall and Los Banos, California, where he works part-time as a dentist while taking care of his parents.

"Yeah, I could have made money on it, but this was better and it helped out the flying club. There's more to life than money."

See **HANGAR**, Page 2



Photo by Chelsea Tuttle/For The Star-News

Lance Nichols, a member of the Myl High Flying Club, cleans the windshield on a plane in front of the new home of the club, which was donated by the hangar's owner.

Hangar

(Continued from Page 1)

Carter's passion for historic buildings and aviation led him to buy the hangar for personal use, but then his personal life pulled him away from aviation and back to California.

In 2019, Carter worked with the McCall Historic Preservation Commission to list the hangar on the National Register of Historic Places, which is managed by the National Park Service.

"It's an icon of McCall and anybody else that would buy something like that usually tears it down," Carter said of donating the hangar. "It was kind of one of my little treasures in life."

The flying club rented the hangar since being established in 2016, but feared the club's 27 members and three airplanes could be left with no place to go if the hangar were to be sold.

"We didn't want to one day be out on the tarmac looking for another hangar," Johnson said. "Without a hangar to store and protect your airplane from the elements in McCall, you basically don't have an airplane."

The 4,819 square foot hangar can "comfortably" fit four airplanes, giving the club room to add another plane and up to nine more members, he said.

Having a permanent hangar solidifies the future of the club and the youth program, which former Council High School Student Lance Nichols credited for propelling his aviation career.

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Nichols earned his pilot's license through the flying fund at age 17 before going on to attend the U.S. Air Force Academy in Colorado, where he is currently enrolled as a junior.

"Honestly, there's no other way I could have ever earned my license (so young) without the opportunity that the fund gave me, because planes aren't cheap," said Nichols, now 21.

"My ultimate goal is to serve as a fighter pilot in the Air Force," he said.

In a class of about 1,180 students at the academy, only about 35 students went in with a pilot's license, Nichols said.

"It was really fun for all of us to be involved in Lance's dreams and see him take them to fruition," Johnson said of Nichols.

"It's just that it's a dream that's hard to accomplish," he said. "I'd say seven or eight years old is when I started dreaming about it."

A Dream Realized

For Johnson, he was only able to realize his dream of flying about five years ago when the flying club was formed.

By pooling the resources of local pilots, the club lowers the financial barrier to aviation and provides an avenue into aviation for aspiring pilots of all ages, Johnson said.

Meanwhile, the youth fund accepts donations and secures grants to help local youths afford certifications, training and other expenses

tied to obtaining a pilot's license.

The club currently takes on one student per year, but hopes to continue expanding.

"We haven't been able to provide a full ride (financially), but we hope to eventually," Johnson said.

Anyone interested in donating to the McCall Youth Learning Aviation Fund should contact Johnson at 208-315-0859.

The hangar was built in 1932 by local bush pilot Almer Bennett, who used it as the base for Bennett Air Transport service, a backcountry mail service.

In the 1940s, Johnson Flying Service of Missoula, Montana, moved into the hangar and operated out of it until about 1980.

The company's operations included backcountry mapping, fighting wildfires, scenic tours, supply delivery, pesticide application and cooperative Forest Service missions.

The hangar was renovated in the 1990s to add insulation, but most of the original building remains intact, including timbers and the doors on the western side of the building.

An office in the hangar is currently leased to McCall Mountain Canyon Flying, a backcountry pilot instruction program. The office area includes restrooms, a classroom and a lobby.

The name of the MYL High Flying Club uses the Federal Aviation Administration's designation for the McCall airport which is MYL.

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