



Naples Flying Club member Ron Woodliff, left, and Treasurer Rob Kolstedt pull a 1997 Cessna 172R from the club's hangar in preparation for a flight to Tampa on March 18 at the Naples Municipal Airport. The 36-member flying club has been in operation since 1955.

Up in the air

Naples Flying Club an exclusive group for aviation enthusiasts

by John Osborne • Photography by David Albers

In the 1986 blockbuster movie "Top Gun," Tom Cruise's "Maverick" character requests permission to "buzz the tower," to which he is told, "That's a negative, Ghost Rider, the pattern is full."

Long story short, Maverick buzzes the tower anyway, causing the startled air traffic controller to dump coffee all over the front of his immaculately pressed uniform shirt as he utters a few choice words not fit for print.

While that iconic scene might have taken place in "Fightertown, USA" at Naval Air Station Miramar, just north of San Diego, and "Goose," "Iceman," "Cougar" and the rest of the flight-suited gang might not be anywhere to be seen in the azure skies around these parts, it turns out that Naples has a long story of its own when it comes to the high-flying world of aviation.

In continuous operation since 1955, when President Dwight D. Eisenhower graced the Oval Office at 1600 Pennsylvania Ave. in Washington, D.C., and the Los Angeles Dodgers bested the New York Yankees four games to three in the World Series, the Naples Flying Club is at once an exclusive club and one that is centered on offering the joys of recreational flight to people of all ages and from all walks of life.

"We have the gamut, from retired and active people to retired and active airline pilots to strictly recreational pilots based here in Naples," said President Hans Muller, a retired pilot for Continental



Naples Flying Club President Hans Muller, left, and Vice President Bill Cecil.

Airlines. "All of our flying now is done for pleasure, whether it's local flying in the practice area or taking a trip up to Venice or Punta Gorda for breakfast."

As a nonprofit, the Naples Flying Club limits itself to 36 members, all of whom buy a share in the club and take to the skies over Southwest Florida in a 1997 Cessna 172R upgraded to 180hp and a 2001 Cessna 182T. Club Vice President Bill Cecil said the memberships are bought

and sold between current members and those who queue up on a waiting list.

"Right now we've got three or four people who want to get in the club and three or four people looking to get out of the club," said the nearly 81-year-old former Marine Corps pilot and club member since 1969 who flew – among other aircraft – transport planes in the 1950s to such far-flung locales as Okinawa and the Midway Islands. "We



Naples Flying Club Treasurer Rob Kolstedt, of Bonita Springs, left, and club vice president Bill Cecil, right, pull a 1997 Cessna 172R from the club's hanger at the Naples Municipal Airport.



Kolstedt prepares to take off on a flight to Tampa in one of the club's two Cessna airplanes at the Naples Municipal Airport.

have members, like me, in their 80s, to those in their 20s, so it's sort of a natural attrition."

As a self-described "old Kentucky hillbilly" who recalls charting flight paths with the help of a sextant, Cecil said constant technological advancements represent the never-ending trends in flight.

"Now anyone can go from A to B by pushing one number on an instrument, but back in the days you needed to use the stars to see where you were," he said.

"The Navy would send up weather balloons, which were helpful to judge the wind, but if you were off by just a little bit you could miss an entire island by hundreds of miles."

Cecil said the cost of flying has also trended upward consistently, outpacing inflation and limiting some to taking off a little less often than they might like.

"When I first started, it cost seven or eight bucks to rent a Cessna 172 for an hour, and now it's \$100 an hour," he said. "So it used to be something anyone could do whenever they wanted, and now it's something they do only when they really want to. So if there's any one trend in aviation,

it's definitely that it's becoming more expensive."

Still, whatever the cost, Muller said it's money well spent.

"I enjoy the challenge of keeping my skills sharp, and I never get tired of it," said the European native who soloed for the first time in 1957. "So even after I retired from the airline, I just wanted to continue flying for recreation and enjoyment."

Muller said he especially enjoys the sight of Southwest Florida from the air.

"There are no mountains, of course, but you get to see the beach and the ocean, and you get to see all the different landscapes, the development along the coast and how it's just sugar plantations inland," he said. "The contrast is pretty impressive."

Cecil agreed, noting that the Southwest Florida landscape has changed steadily and dramatically over time.

"When I first moved here following my medical discharge from the Marines, Naples and Collier County was about 1 percent of what it is now," he said. "Ninety-nine percent is all different. Everything has changed."

The one thing that hasn't changed, Cecil said, is his love of flying.

"Piloting an airplane kind of puts you into a different subset of the population," he said. "You're doing something that not everyone does. And if you can do it with skill, it puts you in another little spot of the population, so I really enjoy that aspect of it."

For his part, Naples Flying Club Secretary Al Russo, a four-year member, corporate pilot and aviation instructor, said flying is a skill aviators learn but never master.

"You're always learning, but you never arrive," said the retired

IBM executive from Frederick, Maryland. "Every day is something new, and it's as exciting to learn as it is to teach."

Plus, Russo said, when you're in the air, everything else just fades away.

"You really don't think about anything else," he said. "You're in the moment you need to be in, and you're focused, so it allows you to really escape and get away. I've always said that I don't understand why everyone doesn't fly."

The Naples Flying Club operates out of the Naples Municipal Airport. For more information visit naplesflyingclub.com.