

Flight academy trains cadets to be pilots and more

By Maj. Steven Solomon

Photos by Lt. Col. Roxann Richards, Nebraska Wing



Cadet 2nd Lt. Jonathan Sollender of the Colorado Wing goes over the Cessna 172 aircraft's preflight checklist.

Ever wonder what goes on at one of CAP's powered flight academies? At Nebraska's Camp Ashland, about 30 miles southwest of Omaha, a typical day starts with breakfast at 6:30 a.m. and an ensuing ride over to Fremont Municipal Airport.

"We try to be flying by 0800," said activity director Col. Dave Plum, who is also commander of the Nebraska Wing. "Students fly once a day for about an hour, have lunch, finish up their sorties and then we head back to Camp Ashland, usually arriving around 1500 or so. Then the cadets have free time for laundry, naps, calls home, etc., until dinner at 1800, and then

they have ground school from 1830 until 2100. Lights are out at 2130, and we start all over the next day."

The application process for attending one of CAP's five powered flight academies is based on what's called an objective slotting score, which takes into account the cadet's age, number of years as a member, level of achievement and attendance at any of the more than 30 other National Cadet Special Activities offered every summer. Cadets are also required to have graduated from an encampment by the time the application is submitted.

If it all works out, the cadet becomes one of the lucky ones invited to Camp Ashland, marking its 11th year this summer. Three students are assigned to each

airplane, all Cessna 172s. This year Camp Ashland will host 21 cadets, who will be arriving from Arizona, California, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Iowa, Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, Tennessee, Virginia and Wyoming.

“Going to the academy has helped me by teaching me I have to think and plan ahead while multitasking during a flight. This training also helped me do this in everyday life,” said Cadet Chief Master Sgt. Alexander Cases-Weaver of the New Mexico Wing, who attended Camp Ashland in 2009. “Getting the chance to solo was the most rewarding aspect of the academy, because I could not have afforded to do that on my own.”

“The most rewarding aspect of the academy for me was the increased confidence I gained after soloing,” said Senior Member Kira Swerdfeger of the California Wing, who held the rank of cadet major when she attended the academy in 2009. “It was wonderful to meet like-minded people in CAP who love aviation and encouraged me in my journey to achieve a lifelong goal — learning to fly.”

But it’s not all about learning to be a pilot.

“We sprinkle in visits to Offutt Air Force Base, getting rides in Black Hawk helicopters and KC-135s when we can,” Plum explained. “We also take them to the Strategic Air and Space Museum and Mahoney State Park for swimming.”

The academy staff tends to vary from year to year, depending on vacations. This year a dozen staff members will be on hand, coming from the Arizona, Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska and South Dakota wings.

“We have top-notch, highly skilled instructors. Over the years we have had Federal Aviation Administration safety inspectors, both active and retired; FAA-designated pilot examiners; instructors who spend the rest of the year teaching at major university flight programs; and freelance instructors,” Plum said.

“The tactical officers are CAP members who love to help and see the

program fly. They do everything — drive vans, take pictures, cook and just about anything else you can think of.”

The powered flight academy curriculum’s first 10 hours — probably the most difficult part of the flight instruction and required for soloing — cover how to taxi and take off (basic flight maneuvers), how to control the aircraft’s flight traffic pattern and how to land and park. Several hours of FAA classroom ground instruction are offered as well.

“After the academy I came home and found a local flight school to continue my training, and about a year later I passed my FAA private pilot check ride while flying out of a very busy airport located in very busy airspace. In addition, my attendance at the academy prepared me to be a competitive candidate for the Spaatz Association Aerospace Leadership Scholarship, which I won in 2010,” Swerdfeger said.

What is her advice to cadets who are thinking of applying?

“I will always remember what the academy director and flight instructor, then-Lt. Col. David Plum, said to me before I soloed: ‘Relax. Just do what you’re supposed to do.’” ▲



Capt. Andrew McCaddin, a certified flight instructor from the Nebraska Wing, teaches preflight inspection of the empennage to Cadet Senior Master Sgt. Tyler Toman of the Wyoming Wing, Cadet Maj. Gaynair Perry of the Florida Wing and now Cadet 2nd Lt. Caleb Adkins of the Missouri Wing.