

Kids' careers take wing at aviation camp

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Rashad Shelton climbed into the Cessna 172-F and started to sit in the cockpit, but the flight instructor stopped him. He was holding two phone books. He wanted his student to sit on a makeshift booster seat.

"It's a good thing I did," Rashad said later, "because I couldn't have seen over the control panels, and we would have crashed."



RICH ADDICKS/AJC

ACE (Aviation Career Education) Camp member Rashad Shelton, 14, Atlanta, is congratulated by a camp staffer after his flight.

Rashad, a 14-year-old ninth-grader at Chapel Hill High School in Douglasville, has never operated a car, much less an airplane. He'll have to wait to drive until he's old enough for a learner's permit, but this week, he got the chance to fly. He was one of 60 teenagers at one of the coolest summer camps around.

Started by the Organization of Black Airline Pilots, ACE camps (for Aviation Career Education) are staged around the country to encourage African Americans to consider pursuing jobs in aviation. According to the U.S. Census, barely 2,000 of the nation's 124,825 commercial pilots are black.

"We just want young people to know they can do this," said Delta Captain William Davis, who oversees the Atlanta camp.

As if the students needed any motivation, a recent alumnus came to the sessions this week wearing his Air Force Academy uniform. Cadet 3rd Class Christopher Allen of Riverdale first flew at an ACE camp here four summers ago. Two others have gone on to the Air Force Academy and one to the Naval Academy.

The Atlanta camp, which is sponsored by Delta Airlines, takes students on behind-the-scenes tours of Delta's operations at Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport. They also explore the FAA control center in Peachtree Center and watch fighter jets scream in and out of Dobbins Air Force Base. Then they take a day trip to the National Museum of the U.S Air Force in Dayton, Ohio.

But the highlight of the week for many students came on Thursday morning at Fulton County Airport when they were allowed to take the controls of a small plane for the first time.

Several of them gathered on the tarmac as instructor Richard Grey conducted an orientation session on their aircraft.

He pointed to the back side of a wing. "Now what's this part called?"

No one answered.

"Are you just sightseeing out here? Now what is this part called?"

"The flapper?" a brave voice ventured.

"No. That's the flap. A flapper is one of those women from the '20s, like Betty Boop."

A shy young woman from the 21st century listened intently. Delana Williams-Smith, a ninth-grader at Woodward Academy, later confided that she wanted to be a Delta pilot. If she succeeds, she would become one of the few and the proud — only 1 in 890 commercial pilots in the United States is a black woman, the Census reports.

Orientation done, it was finally time to fly.

No one was looking forward to it more than Rashad Shelton, better known to fellow students by his call sign, Calvin. He looked every inch the aspiring pilot, wearing a flight jacket he'd bought at an Army-Navy store and decked out with colorful patches and shiny medals. To him, this wasn't just summer camp; it was the start of something big.

"I want to fly," he explained, "but I really want to own a major airline."

Rashad — sorry, *Calvin* — learned about ACE camp on the Internet. For his application, he wrote an essay about the Tuskegee Airmen, the pioneer black pilots of World War II who had first stirred his interest in flying when he heard about them while his mother was attending Tuskegee University in Alabama.

He follows them into the wild blue yonder in a video game he likes to play called Lethal Skies II. "I've never been shot down," he said.

Back on earth, Calvin scaled the cockpit and took his seat atop the telephone books. He put on a headset and listened as his instructor, Paul Volle, pointed out the controls.

After the tutorial, Volle shouted, "Prop clear!" and fired up the plane.

They taxied out to Runway 8 and started going over a pre-flight checklist: brakes, throttle, oil pressure, magneto, suction gauge, flaps, seat belts ...

Once everything had been checked, Volle revved the engine to 1600 rpm and started down the runway. Calvin, ever the cool customer, suppressed a smile.

At 9:11 a.m., they took wing, banking over the muddy Chattahoochee River as the Atlanta skyline and then Kennesaw Mountain appeared on the hazy summer horizon.

"Nice day, isn't it?" the instructor's voice crackled over the headphones.

"Yes, sir!" his student replied crisply.

Somewhere over south Cobb County, Volle asked Calvin if he was ready to take the controls.

Well, *yeah*. He promptly executed a slow turn to the right and then to the left, keeping the nose up so the plane didn't lose altitude.

"That's pretty smooth," Volle said. "You must have learned something on the flight simulator."

Calvin nodded confidently. He has practiced many hours for this moment on a simulator program on his home computer. He wants to rig up a mock cockpit for more advanced training. If he keeps

it up until he's 16, he might be a good candidate for the next camp in the program, known as Flight Line, where a select number of alumni get the chance to fly solo.

After some more turns, the instructor assumed the controls again and swooped over Six Flags Over Georgia for the final approach into the airport.

Once they landed, Volle presented his student with a log book, penciling in credit for his first half-hour of flight time toward a pilot's license. "Great job!" he wrote in the space for comments.

Then camp director Mark Alexander approached with something in his hand: a pair of silver wings. He searched for an empty spot on Calvin's lapel and pinned them on.

"That," the young aviator said, "was way better than a video game."

More information about ACE camps can be found online at the Organization of Black Airline Pilots Web site: www.obap.org.