The Franklin Times

www.thefranklintimes.com • Click on Breaking News for the latest reports

148 Years, No. 5 | Serving Franklin County Since 1870 | Thursday, February 1, 2018 | 75¢

A missing man: Gone but not forgotten!



Bandit Flight Team from Raleigh performed a missing man formation flyover

Friends, family keep local aviation leader's spirit and legacy alive

By CAREY JOHNSON
Times Staff Writer

LOUISBURG — Stephen Merritt died in December from injuries sustained in a plane crash.

This past Saturday, though, friends and family said his spirit lives on through funny stories, good deeds and now, a legacy — an aviation scholarship set up in his name.



Stephen Merritt

Merritt, the county's airport director, was a flight instructor and joined the North Carolina Wing of the Civil Air Patrol in 2004.

He was considered an architect of the Wing's glider program — one of Civil Air Patrol's most active.

As such, he was a strong champion of getting anyone into aviation, particularly young people and women.

Maj Frank Donahue, commander of the Franklin County Composite Squadron, said Merritt worked to make sure that finances were never an obstacle to young people who wanted to get into aviation and friends said he did so, often at his own expense.

During a celebration of Merritt's life, the Civil Air Patrol unveiled the Stephen Ward Merritt Memorial Scholarship, with a goal of making it an annual thing.

Civil Air Patrol Cadet Elizabeth Helbig was the scholarship's first recipient.

"It seemed so fitting ... to put together a scholarship program so that dream [of aviation] could continue ... hopefully, on an ongoing basis," Donahue said.

See MERRITT Page 4A



A LEGACY LIVES ON. The family of Stephen Merritt presents the first Stephen Ward Merritt Memorial Scholarship to Cadet Elizabeth Helbig, left, with Merritt's wife, Jane, holding the ceremonial check. From left to right are Merritt's family, Brittany Merritt, daughter-in-law; W. Holmes Merritt, son; Gene Merritt, brother; Sarah Merritt Ryan, daughter, and Bill Ryan, son-in-law. (*Times* photos by Carey Johnson)



BLUE SKIES AND TAILWINDS. Sarah Merritt Ryan did this charcoal drawing of her father, Stephen Merritt, saying she felt compelled to draw it as an expression of how much she loved her father and it was a way to pay tribute to him. It was on display at the celebration of Merritt's life at Triangle North Executive Airport on Saturday. (*Times* photos by Carey Johnson)

Merritt

Continued from Page 1A

"The hope is that we would be able to have an annual scholarship in his name, which I think would be so fitting given his passion for aviation.

"... He never wanted finances to be a barrier to anyone," Donahue said. "He was such a proponent of women in aviation and that's such a big part of what we're doing here."

The scholarship presentation essentially capped off the celebration, but the Saturday morning event served as an opportunity for people to share stories about Merritt and remind many of his impact to aviation and the county's Triangle North Executive Airport.

The event featured a presentation of colors by the Civil Air Patrol, and members of Triangle Skydiving, including its president, Greg Upper, parachuted into the venue, marking the sky in smoke and toting in an American flag and Navy flag — noting Merritt's military service.

And, members of the Raleigh-based Bandit Flight Team out of Charlotte performed a fly-over, as well as the missing man formation — a military tradition, Donahue said, symbolizing "that we must continue our lives but we can never replace those who are lost."

"Wow," said Holmes Merritt, Stephen's son. "Dad would have thought that was one of the coolest thing's he'd seen in his life," he said of the demonstrations.

"... Working here in Franklin County meant a lot to him.

"It makes everyone feel really happy that he got to affect so many people's lives, so many people got to see his unique and special character, in a lot of ways.

"The last month, I've had a lot of time to think," Merritt said. "I've had every emotion imaginable, and some that I thought were unimaginable.

"At the end of the day, there is a strong feeling of peace."

Stephen Merritt was a strong member of the aviation and humanities community, too, friends and family said.

Charles Stites with Able Flight, which offers people with disabilities (including wounded vets) flight and aviation career training, said Merritt was on-board with the effort before he could finish fully asking for his help.

He flew humanitarian missions as part of Bahamas Habitat with Merritt, also. Stites recalled one story when the two flew into Haiti to provide help after an earthquake and the notoriously calm Merritt had gotten into a shouting match with a bureaucrat who was apparently holding up their effort.



Sticker on a glider speaks volumes

Cooler heads, and a $20 fee payment, prevailed, but Stites said he remembers Merritt telling him that he'd never go back there again.

But, then he did. The next day, and the next day and the next day, to offer help.

"We all lost a good friend, but these memories are so rich, so rewarding and they'll last forever," Stites said.

Wendy Kelly recalled all the hoops that Merritt and good friend Michael Plante had to jump through as part of a humanitarian effort to rescue feral cats from Guantanamo Bay.

The trip, Kelly, recalled, required an unprecedented amount of Navy paperwork to clear.

It also required for Merritt, who was not a cat person, plenty of calm to transport a small plane full of 25 cats back to the states.

"The scene of this rescue was something else," Kelly said.

Merritt always seemed to have a can-do attitude, said Craig Winkelman, a lieutenant with the Civil Air Patrol.

He recalled having his plane at Triangle North, after having brought it up from the airport in Sanford, and having to work on it one evening on the field.

Merritt informed Winkelman that he had cleared space in a hangar so Winkelman could work free from the elements.

"That was the kind of guy Steve was," Winkelman said. "It was just always, everything could happen and he just made it happen."

Airport Commission Chair John Allers said Merritt spent plenty of time at the airport making things happen.

"... Just look around you," Allers said to those who gathered at the airport. "Many of these hangars you see around you are due to Steve.

"The number of planes you see out here are due to Steve," Allers said. "We are literally out of ramp space and out of hangar space because Steve has had the network, the knowledge and the ability to bring all these people here as he ... created the environment here that makes people want to come here and have their planes here, fly here and have a good time.

"He has done wonders for us."

Longtime friend Michael Plante, who got the flying bug from Merritt and flew plenty of Bahamas Habitat flights with him, remembers the return on a flight together very vividly.

"We were flying, it was late at night, the air was calm, it was just a beautiful evening," Plante recalled. "I felt reflective. You know, when I look back at the course of our friendship, the things we've done and the places we've been, I told Steve: 'I just wanted you to know how much you've enriched my life and made it better in very many ways.

'I want you to know that I love you.'

"Steve paused. Then he looked over his glasses," Plante said. "He said, Michael, you're very important to me.

"Steve, I just want you to know that you're very important to me and to all of us."