

## Silver wings still soar

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Love of aviation unites diverse group of longtime pilots

At 91, Montgomery resident Herb Sloane is still flying, an activity he says is therapeutic as well as fun. He keeps his Piper Cherokee 140 at the Wetumpka Airport. It's a far cry from the B-17s he flew in World War II, but it keeps his head in the clouds, all the same. Sloane and some of his friends, who also keep their planes at the airport, meet regularly on Thursdays for lunch at the Smokehouse Barbecue in Millbrook where they swap flying stories and tell jokes. A picture of the pilots hangs on a wall of the restaurant. The men come from a variety of backgrounds and occupations. Their love of aviation keeps them together, Sloane said. "I'm only 91, so what the heck?" the retired Air Force colonel said. "I've been flying for 67 years. It's great to be able to keep doing it." Lifelong Prattville resident Charles "Hut" Hall flies a 1962 Cessna 150. He said that he and another member, Millbrook veterinarian Jim Williams, started the group about five years ago when Hall retired. Originally, the guys cooked lunch at one of the hangars, but eventually the group, now with 16 members, got too big.

"(Thursday) was Jim's day off," Hall said. "When the weather cools off we'll start flying to places like Pell City or Alex City for lunch. We've got a pretty unique group here."

Hall has owned his plane since 1982. A former employee of the Autauga County Board of Education, he said he used to take teachers up in his plane to encourage them to teach aviation in their classes.

"(Hall) can make that airplane do what it was never intended to do but he makes it do it anyway," Sloane said. "Too many people that learn to fly, it's the airplane flying them instead of them flying the airplane."

Wetumpka resident Dr. Joe Benson, known as "Doc" Benson, said he was an aviation ordnance man in the Navy and trained as an aerial gunner before the war was over. He got his pilot's license in 1960 and is a huge advocate of the Wetumpka Airport. Benson's sight is no longer good enough for him to fly, but he meets with his friends every week anyway.

"We've got six or seven colonels in the group, one major, one of the guys is 91 and another is 88. I'm 82," he said. "They all have airplanes, but I don't fly anymore because I'm blind."

Benson said that he and his father-in-law built the fixed base operation building at the airport and leased the airport until 1972. The city of Wetumpka now owns the airport. He also said that

adding jet fuel to the list of the airport's many amenities would really rejuvenate it and that there are 13 planes currently on the waiting list for a hangar.

James McCary, 88, is also a retired Air Force colonel and still flies as well.

"A high majority of us are retired military and flew for the Air Force," he said. "I'll fly as long as they'll let me."

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