

HUNTER H. HARRIS

**Airship pilot, barnstormer and
all-around amicable aviator**

By Jill Malcolm

At the Hangar Café at Easton Airport one hot summer afternoon, the AutoPILOT caught up with local flying legend Hunter H. Harris. With his flying antics in a 1942 Stearman memorialized on the café wall, this regular café customer has an eclectic flying history. Barnstormer and helicopter pilot, he seems to have done it all, but what he is perhaps best known for is flying blimps. “When I started flying airships, there were twice as many space shuttle pilots in this country than there were airship pilots; in fact we introduced some astronauts to airship flying,” said Harris.

Dressed in khaki shorts and a straw hat, Harris is a true son of Maryland’s Eastern Shore. Born and raised on the shores of Kent County on the Chesapeake Bay, he is laid-back, friendly and full of more stories than you could listen to in a week. At the café with Harris, stories of his flying escapades came one after the other, all told in his light-hearted humor.

With a flying career that spans nearly three decades, Harris has piloted airships around the country, flown corporate and charter aircraft and barnstormed up and down the shore. He is as comfortable flying in high-speed corporate jets as he is flying in low and slow airships.

The pilot certificate of Hunter H. Harris reads like an adventure novel: commercial pilot, single and multi-engine Land and Sea, instrument airplane, rotorcraft-helicopter, glider, and lighter-than-air-airship. He also holds an Airframe and Powerplant mechanic certificate and is a certified flight instructor in airplanes and airships.

And how exactly does one get into flying airships as a career? It was simple, says Harris: “I answered a want ad.”

Harris came to airship flying in the early 1980s when he read an ad in the local Easton paper for a “mechanic with aircraft



experience” in Bozman, Maryland. The small town south of Easton on the Bay Hundred peninsula of the Eastern Shore was the first home for Aerolift, Inc., a company that was building an experimental heavy-lift airship called the Cyclo-Crane. The idea was to build an airship that could serve in the Canadian logging industry, in the military and in construction.

Harris got the job with Aerolift and worked for five years helping to build and flight-test the experimental craft. He moved with the company to the coast of Oregon so they could house the entire project at an old naval airship hangar in Tillamook. According to Harris, the company flew the Cyclo-Crane nearly 18 hours before the project lost funding. But by then he was intrigued with lighter-than-air flight and found a job as a student airship pilot.

“I flew airships for Airship International, who were famous for many airships including the Seaworld, Budweiser, Gulf Oil and Met Life blimps,” says Harris. Harris was the first commercially licensed airship pilot in the United States that wasn’t trained by the Navy or Goodyear. He was inducted into the Society of Experimental Test Pilots in 1988, an exclusive association dominated by military pilots, for his work in airship certification flight-testing.

“Flying blimps for Airship International was a great way to see the country,” says Harris. Flying low and slow behind enormous windscreens, airship pilots have an omnipotent view of the Earth below. The long trips from venue to venue meant they had a lot of time to enjoy the view. “We used to call into airports saying we were 20 miles out and would be there in two hours.” That would give their crew adequate time to set up the mast and prepare for the landing, but that initial call often threw controllers for a loop. With a ground speed of about 35 knots, depending on the wind, airship flying was slow going but ideal for building flight time. In fact, nearly half of Harris’s logged time is in airships.

Harris still gets a kick out of taking fixed-wing pilots flying in airships. On takeoff, the pilot rotates the craft under full power and the blimp leaps off the ground. “I like to watch their eyes get wide when I reduce power for the prop pitch change then very slowly bring the power up to cruise settings,” says Harris. “They think we are going to stall, but in an airship you can’t stall.”

Harris has a reputation for putting the fun in flying. He once played a joke on an airship crew by getting members of the California Highway Patrol (CHiPs) to chase him “Hollywood-style” along a taxiway. “I was loading my car at the airport hotel, dressed in full uniform, when a whole string of about 20 CHiPs officers on motorcycles drove up and asked if I was flying that blimp,” says Harris. “I said yes, then thought, ‘Wouldn’t it be funny if ...?’” He talked the cops into playing a gag on the crew readying the airship across the airport.

He raced up to the blimp in his 5.0 Mustang with the ChiPs officers in hot pursuit. The crew, some of them still up on top of the bag, were flabbergasted when Harris jumped out of the car and yelled, "Get that thing in the air!"

Some of Harris's favorite memories of airship flying were when schoolchildren would form messages for the blimp, lying on the ground and spelling out "Hi!" with their bodies. His best tour was in 1994 with Pink Floyd during their World Tour when he flew the band's concert-promotion blimp around the country. During his airship career, he has flown over Super Bowls and World Series games and many major sporting events. But after years of traveling and living out of a suitcase, Harris longed to return home.

"While I was flying airships, I met a lot of bi-plane pilots who were giving rides and thought, 'Hey, I could get into that,'" said Harris. So in 1994, after the completion of the Pink Floyd Tour, he moved back home and started the Easton-based Aloft, Inc., offering rides in a Stearman bi-plane and doing aerial photography for local businesses. He stays current in airships by filling in with the crew of the Fuji blimp and other airships on an on-call basis.

Harris's hangar at Easton is a collection of his flying adventures. Two airplanes, a Piper J3 Cub and a Cessna Cardinal he uses for aerial photography, are flight-ready and spotlessly clean. On the wall, he has the four-bladed propeller from a prototype of the Cyclo-Crane, fabric from a Met Life blimp that crashed a few years ago, a bike and a golf cart (both modified with flight instruments) and a fishing boat on a trailer, something every Eastern Shore boy needs to have at the ready. The hangar is immaculate and extremely organized. He has built-in shelving and an upper loft to house all his flying memories

that include hundreds of photo albums, signed photographs and memorabilia. Most everything in the hangar has a story connected to it, and Harris is always willing to tell it.

So what's Harris's next adventure? If things go well, he may find himself flying a Waco in exotic destinations around the world. Though this trip is still in the planning stages, Harris believes that if it is meant to be, it will happen. After 9,000 hours of flying, he has taken away a very big lesson from his experiences that he hopes to pass on to new pilots.

"Learn from your elders," says Harris. And learn to fly without all the technology. It may be what gets you home.

Jill Malcolm is a freelance writer and private pilot living in Southern Maryland. She has hundreds of articles published in regional publications including Nor'easter Magazine, the Calvert Recorder, and Southern Maryland Magazine. She loves living, flying, and boating on the Chesapeake Bay with her family aboard the sailing sloop Rugby Queen. Send her an e-mail at Jill.Malcolm@comcast.net.





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