

Briefing



GORDON STUDER

COMPILED BY JULIE SUMMERS WALKER



FIRST LOOK

ON A MISSION

“Flights Above seeks to build a robust aviation community through something it calls Social Aviation. It focuses on connecting aviation enthusiasts online, but also in person at social events and gatherings across North America. The goal is for members to develop genuine relationships based on their shared passion of flight. Through Social Aviation, Flights Above will always strive to be a dynamic and uplifting network of pilots, mechanics, controllers, aircraft spotters, and whomever shares the same passion of flight—no matter their age, sex, or social background.”

FATPNW—Flights Above the Pacific Northwest

FATPSW—Flights Above the Pacific Southwest

FATMNW—Flights Above the Mountain Northwest

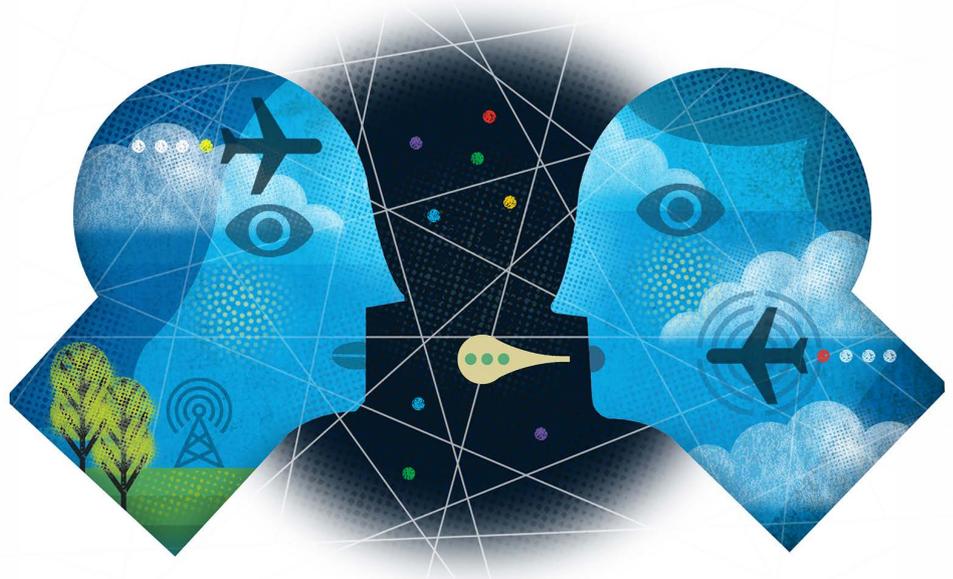
FATMSW—Flights Above the Mountain Southwest

FATNCS—Flights Above the North Central States

FATMCS—Flights Above the Middle Central States

FATASE—Flights Above the Atlantic Southeast

FATANE—Flights Above the Atlantic Northeast



People are talking

Friendships are forged in Flights Above

BY JIM MOORE

A COMPUTER SPECIALIST working for a college in Washington state saved up for flight lessons and earned a private pilot certificate in 2009, then an instrument rating in 2011. He joined a flying club that was all flying, very little talk. The pilots took turns flying airplanes, no sharing to speak of. The new pilot was frustrated by the lack of social connection and wanted to make flying an experience shared with others. By the time you read this, the Flights Above groups that grew out of Brice Van Baren’s 2012 Facebook post into a social aviation powerhouse will have more than 15,000 members.

They gather at airport diners. Organizers of local fly-ins make a space for their meetups. Got a flat tire? Weathered in? Chances are, someone—often more than one someone—will be happy to help. They post photos of obscure airports and scenic vistas,

BRICE VAN BAREN'S FAVORITES

1) Arlington Municipal Airport, Arlington, Washington (AWO) A busy GA airport that has it all; multiple runways, a restaurant, plenty of hangars, gliders, fuel, and always someone with an open hangar to socialize with.

2) Orcas Island Airport, Washington (ORS) Great for camping and an easy walk into town, Orcas is a popular choice for those who want to explore the San Juan Islands. On a sunny day, you’re bound to recognize aircraft you know there.

3) Copalis State Airport, Grays Harbor, Washington (S16) This is the perfect airport for an off-airport adventure. This gem is the only official beach runway in the lower 48, and offers a great location for fly-ins and events. FATPNW has had many fly-ins there.

4) Auburn Municipal Airport, Auburn, Washington (S50) Centrally located in western Washington, and where the FATPNW HQ is based, Auburn always has pilots willing to chat and socialize.

5) Felts Field, Spokane, Washington (SFF) With a water runway and two concrete runways and a turf runway, Felts Field is the perfect place to run into multiple types of pilots headed all directions. The diner there is perfect for food and socializing, as well.



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smiling kids perched on airplane tires, brilliant sunsets. They cook tasty food on grills at airports and grass strips. They soak in all that aviation offers and share the love.

Soon, they will be setting up chairs to watch each other land and judge those landings, all in good fun.

“What we do is we have fun,” Van Baren said, explaining Flights Above Beauty Landings, which will be introduced this year at events alongside spot landing contests and flour drops. “Flights Above is all about having fun.”

The creation of an airplane landing beauty pageant with prizes and food and judges who hold score cards over their heads is, in essence, a new implementation of the same core concept that created the online groups: Take the things that pilots do anyway and make them more fun by sharing the experience with an appreciative audience. Who among us, Van Baren wondered, has not sat and watched another pilot land and rendered a silent verdict on the airmanship and/or aesthetics of said landing?

The contest concept features another of the threads that run through each Flights Above group, gathering, and conversation: “Everybody can participate.”

That means the contest is just as open to the student pilot as the veteran airline captain. All are welcome.

The original group, Flights Above the Pacific Northwest (FATPNW, pronounced “fat pee, and double-u” with impish glee) began replicating in 2017, with volunteers stepping up in nine regions around the country to serve as group administrators. Van Baren takes pains to shower them with credit and resists any accusation he is a leader of a social aviation movement, although he has devoted countless hours to adding new layers to the concept. Premium memberships launched in 2016 cost \$99; with that comes access to discounts and deals from nearly 100 vendors on products

and services that can put a noticeable dent in the cost of flying. Participating vendors, in turn, get new customers they might otherwise have missed, and the organization covers the cost of organizing events and printing stickers and other swag with the group’s logo—a logo that has featured prominently in many a picture posted on social media, including one memorable logo shot taken from the cockpit of an inverted F/A-18 Hornet.

There has been enough left over to pay for scholarships, at first being offered to FATPNW members. These



Brice Van Baren

relatively modest awards cover a few lessons, or books, or a knowledge test, or ground school, although that could easily grow. Van Baren hopes to enlarge what he terms a “perfect circle of happiness” that includes members, vendors, and organizers. Applications are being accepted in the form of selfie videos in which the applicant explains what they can contribute to the aviation community, how they’ve benefited from being a FATPNW member, and why they’re a good candidate.

“My goal and my dream is to be able to offer this nationwide down the road,” said Van Baren, who had no idea it would come to this when he started.

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