

FLYING

Civil Air Patrol: Not Just for Kids

By Jay Hopkins / Published: Jan 05, 2003

Are the \$100 hamburgers getting old? Have you visited every airport restaurant within 100 miles so many times that the staff greets you by name and has your favorite meal ready? Did you already give all your friends rides, so that you are now reduced to approaching people on the street, like the press gangs of early naval warfare, hoping to find someone to go flying with you? Since most people don't have the unlimited resources necessary to go hop in an airplane whenever they want to, maintaining currency and proficiency can be a problem. Even if you do have unlimited cash, boring holes in the sky can get old pretty fast. Because of this, many pilots end up flying just a few times a year. In the meantime, the flying skills they worked so hard to develop get pretty rusty. This in turn leads to days when less active pilots don't feel safe to fly because of conditions like a gusty crosswind, which means flying skills deteriorate even further. It sure would be nice to have a way to stay current while doing some interesting flying.

What if I told you there was a way to fly regularly at a reduced cost or even for free? How about if your expenses could be tax deductible and you would be helping your country and your fellow pilots at the same time? Sound too good to be true? Absolutely not! The Civil Air Patrol offers all this and more. Most pilots are familiar with the cadet program the CAP runs for young people. However, many pilots may not be aware that the CAP also has senior squadrons that often have an aircraft assigned to them and offer numerous opportunities to maintain currency and even increase your skills as a pilot. In fact, the CAP operates the largest fleet of single-engine aircraft in the world, with 546 aircraft owned by the CAP, and hundreds of other aircraft owned by members and available for use by the CAP.

The CAP actually got started at the beginning of World War II patrolling our eastern seaboard for enemy submarines. The CAP was credited with locating 173 submarines. CAP aircraft attacked 57 of those submarines, hitting 10 and sinking two, all using small general aviation aircraft. A German commander testified to the effectiveness of the CAP Coastal Patrol when he confirmed that coastal U-boat operations were ended because of "those damned little red and yellow airplanes." While CAP aircraft no longer hunt for submarines, there are actually a number of exciting missions CAP members fly:

Counterdrug Missions

For over 15 years, the CAP has supported the U.S. Air Force, the U.S. Customs Service, the Drug Enforcement Administration and the U.S. Forest Service in the fight to stem the flow of drugs into and within our country. CAP members provide aerial reconnaissance, airborne communication support and airlift of law enforcement personnel. Our local squadron, located in Payson, Arizona, usually flies several missions each month along the U. S. border searching for suspicious activity. There is a humanitarian aspect to these missions as the aircrew also direct aid to illegal immigrants who may be dying in the desert.

Disaster Relief and Humanitarian Services

At the request of the governor of New York, on September 12th CAP provided the first direct aerial perspective of the World Trade Center disaster site. The high-resolution photos the aircrew provided were of immediate value to rescue and security personnel at Ground Zero. Over 21 CAP Wings were involved in transportation missions related to the attack on the World Trade Center. Within hours of the terrorist attacks, CAP flew thousands of pints of blood, critical medical supplies and equipment to aid the rescue efforts. The Civil Air Patrol was also active following the explosion of Mount Saint Helens in 1980, the San Francisco earthquake of 1991, and many other disasters that have affected our country in the last 60 years.

Air Force Support

Want an exciting flight? How about testing the intercept capabilities of an F-16? This is another of the missions CAP units, including our local squadron, support. CAP pilots fly typical illegal drug smuggling and terrorist profiles to provide training for Air Force F-16 pilots. CAP pilots also aid the Air Force by providing light transport, communications support and by conducting low-altitude route surveys.

Search and Rescue

Probably the most well known of the CAP missions, the CAP now flies more than 85 percent of all federal inland search and rescue missions requested by the Air Force Rescue Coordination Center at Langley Air Force Base in Virginia. The CAP also supports the Joint Rescue Coordination Centers in Alaska, Hawaii and Puerto Rico. Between 50 and 100 civilian and military personnel are saved each year through the efforts of CAP members.

What can you expect if you join the CAP? The dues are around \$50 per year, depending on the squadron. If you already own a pair of gray slacks and black shoes, all you will need to complete your "uniform" is a polo shirt available from the CAP bookstore. You will attend a basic class on the CAP and complete a couple of online courses on flight operations and emergency incident management. Then you will get checked out in the local CAP aircraft, usually a well equipped Cessna 172 or 182 with additional radio gear. Gliders are available in some locations. There is no charge for the instructor, and your CAP checkout can often be used as a biennial flight review and/or Instrument Competency Check if you ask the instructor in advance.

In order to keep the airplanes active between missions, keep the pilots current and help pay for airplane maintenance, each active pilot is expected to fly his unit's aircraft at least one hour a month if possible. It's a tough job, but somebody has to do it. The C-182 assigned to my squadron is available for \$40 per hour plus fuel. Just try getting a recent model C-182 in good condition for that price! To be able to fly search and rescue missions, you first learn how to be a scanner-the crewmember who sits in the back seat and looks for downed aircraft. After that you will serve as a mission pilot trainee until you have completed the minimum training requirements under the supervision of a qualified mission pilot and passed a check ride showing you are competent to be a mission pilot. After qualifying to fly search and rescue missions, you can also become a counterdrug mission pilot after you have been a CAP member for two years and pass the additional background screening and training required by the federal government.

There is a constant emphasis on training and safety in the CAP. In addition to annual certification check rides, classes and flight training clinics are offered on topics such as mountain flying and crew resource

management. At each squadron meeting, usually once or twice a month, there will be a discussion on a different safety topic. Realistic search and rescue training exercises are held regularly to ensure everyone is ready for the real thing.

Any flying on official CAP business, such as on an actual search mission, is paid for by the government. Many official training exercises and flying clinics are also government funded. It is also possible to work on advanced ratings using CAP aircraft and instructors. Like all CAP members, CAP instructors are volunteers who never charge for their time. If you use your own airplane for CAP business, you are reimbursed for your expenses at a predetermined rate. Because the CAP is a non-profit organization, members may claim various expenses as charitable contributions, including membership dues, expenses for uniforms and training materials, personal expenses while participating in CAP activities and mileage on personal vehicles.

There are many opportunities within the CAP, depending on your own interests. People who are not pilots as well as pilots who have had their wings clipped by medical problems also fill many significant roles in the CAP, such as serving as mission commanders for both air and ground searches. I think that the CAP offers one of the best opportunities for general aviation pilots and others who want to be more involved in aviation, fly more often, learn new skills and help others.

As this article was going to press, General John P. Jumper, USAF Chief of Staff, notified CAP staff that in anticipation of a greater role for the Civil Air Patrol in homeland security, he is transferring the CAP Air Force Auxiliary from the Directorate of Operations and Training to the Directorate of Homeland Security. He is also promoting the CAP National Commander from Brigadier General to Major General. The new Air Force Director of Homeland Security is the former CAP National Commander. Now, more than ever, will be a particularly exciting time to fly with the Civil Air Patrol.