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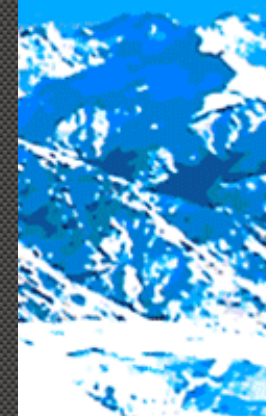
Sailplane Pilot Dick Butler
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Dick Butler's smooth southern accent and modest tone might lead you to believe he is the retiring sort. You would, however, be mistaken. A remarkably accomplished pilot and engineer, he has made extensive contributions to the field of aviation and his passion for sailplanes has led him all over the world as a top competitor in a sport that defines the word 'adventure.' "Like most aviation guys," Butler says, "I built model airplanes as a kid." But unlike most children, Butler grew up to become an innovator in nearly everything aviation. An Alabama native, Butler has degrees in aeronautical (Auburn University) and aerospace (University of Tennessee Space Institute) engineering. Working for decades with Sverdrup Technology, Inc., a leading company in aerospace and defense services, Butler retired as president in 1999. Admitting he is "very focused," Butler now puts all his energies into sailplanes. Sailplanes are graceful, motorless planes that soar quietly at altitudes into the tens of thousands of feet. Their wide wing span (90 feet) contrasts with the very narrow wing chord (2.5 feet), allowing the aircraft to make the most out of everyday wind pressure and weather conditions. Traveling long distances by riding 'thermals'-pockets of air created by rising heat from the earth-a sailplane pilot has to become a bit of a "micro-meteorologist," according to Butler. Always in love with these elegant planes, Butler did not even have a power plane license until fairly recently. "I just need it, now, to tow my sailplane," he explains. Soaring, as the sport of sailplane competition is called, is popular in America, but even more so in Europe, and Butler is a fixture on both the national and international circuits. In the 1970s and 1980s, Butler was the U.S. National Soaring Champion three times and represented the United States four times on international soaring teams. During the 1980s, he became so immersed in his job at Sverdrup that he gave up competitive flying altogether, but since retirement he's back full throttle. Returning to competitive flying in 2000, he has been U.S. champion twice and in 2006 joined the international team in Sweden. In his hangar in Tullahoma, Tennessee, Butler and a team of experts are busy building a high performance sailplane for the 2010 international competition in Hungary. His fellow devotees on the project include a German designer, Gerhard Wiabel, and Loek Boremans, a professor from the Netherlands. Butler works from morning until night every day, but swears, "Not seven days a week." If you do not find him in the hangar, he is likely pursuing another passion: biking. And yes, he does compete in bicycle racing as well, although he claims he rides mostly to "keep in shape for sailplane competitions." The international soaring event lasts 12 days and requires about



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six hours of intensely focused flying each day. Butler needs strength and stamina to compete at that level. When asked what lies ahead, he admits that Argentina is a current hotspot for sailplane enthusiasts and he is interested in trying out the sky over the Andes Mountains someday. That is where new records are being set, but that is not really what motivates him. "There are two kinds of pilots in soaring: the record setters and the competition guys." Butler is one of the latter. "I like to measure myself against other pilots." Honored to be invited into the Alabama Aviation Hall of Fame, Butler is especially gratified to be the first sailplane pilot inducted. According to Billy Singleton, chairman of the Hall of Fame, Butler's nominations came from all over the country and included "giants in the aviation industry." Singleton speaks of Butler with unabashed admiration, "Typically someone will be successful in one aspect of aviation, but Mr. Butler's achievements have been so widespread that it's just incredible....he's an internationally renowned designer, a world-class competitor and that doesn't even begin to cover his contributions to aerospace technology." Butler is looking forward to the Hall of Fame ceremony in October, but you can bet he will be back at the hangar working on his new sailplane as soon as decorum will allow. Trying to explain his love affair with soaring, Butler says simply, "If you really have a romance with aviation, sailplanes are the closest you can come to being a bird." For more information on the Alabama Aviation Hall of Fame, visit www.southernmuseumofflight.org/AAHOF.html. For more information on the Soaring Society of America, visit www.ssa.org

Written by Patricia Henritze