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## Port Charlotte teen finds freedom in flying

### Tom McMahon, 17, would rather fly a plane than drive a car

By PAMELA STAIK STAFF WRITER

PORT CHARLOTTE — Most teenagers can't wait for the day they gain the freedom to legally back out of their family's driveway without adult supervision.

But for 17-year-old Tom McMahon, having a driver's license isn't that exciting. But then again, he also received his pilot license on Aug. 16, allowing him to fly a two-seat, single-engine Cessna.

"The two don't really compare," laughed the Port Charlotte High School junior. "I mean, if I have to drive, I'll do it, but I don't really like driving that much. I'd rather fly a plane. I think most people would, actually."

And while he never dreamed of becoming a pilot during his childhood, McMahon's fascination with aviation was kicked into high gear at age 12, when his family moved from New Hampshire to Charlotte Harbor.

On one of the six-person family's first outings in the community, mother Therese, 51, said the group headed over to the Florida International Airshow at the Charlotte County Airport.

While she said her son became "hooked" on flying as soon as he saw the planes soaring above his head, McMahon can only remember the 12 people in uniforms who told him about the Charlotte County branch of the U.S. Air Force Auxiliary Civil Air Patrol Composite Squadron's cadets program.

"I started going to meetings and just joined right up," he said. "Five years later, I'm a cadet captain and commander of the squadron. It's truly been a great organization to be a part of, and without it I wouldn't be a pilot today."

Through CAP, McMahon has been able to travel across the nation, where cadets work together on developing their knowledge of aviation while building their leadership, problem-solving and physical endurance abilities.

This summer alone, he had the opportunity to travel to Maxwell Air Force Base in Alabama for officer training and to Oshkosh, Wisc., to help out at one of the largest air shows in the world.

"I've had some amazing experiences this summer," McMahon said.

Of course, he expects these experience to continue through the rest of the year — and his life.

At Port Charlotte High, McMahon participates in the Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps. He also takes dual enrollment classes in the aviation program at the Charlotte Technical Center, as well as online classes with Florida Virtual School.

As far as college is concerned, McMahon is planning to major in aeronautical engineering with the hope of attending the U.S. Air Force Academy. However, he has a backup choice of Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, where he would participate in the Air Force ROTC.

But regardless of how he gets there, McMahon hopes to enter the Air Force, just like his oldest sister, Veronica, 24.

Only one of the McMahon children wasn't bit with the military bug — sister Michelle, 23, who is a bartender in South Beach. Brother Jack, 19, will be leaving for Marine Corps boot camp this month.

But as far as McMahon is concerned, life is best when gliding through the air.

"When you're flying, you have to know basically everything about what you are doing, where you are going to do it, and how you are going to do it all the time," he said. "But even though there's a lot of responsibility in flying, you get a lot of freedom out of it. And that freedom is what I love best."

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**SUN PHOTO BY MOLLY DEMPSEY, mdempsey@sun-herald.com** Tom McMahon stands under the wing of the plane he learned to fly in the Civil Air Patrol. The Port Charlotte High School junior has been flying for three years.