

## **Persuading the Hearing to Listen** **By Mel Futrell**

### **WHATEVER MADE ME DO IT?**

As a hearing pilot and ground instructor, my introduction to deaf pilots came with one, and then two and then three, student pilots that joined my ground school class in summer of 2004. Due to their participation, my own awareness was heightened of the deaf population in aviation and I found myself ever more deeply involved with the associated issues and challenges. I began working with deaf pilot research and developments in my academic world of California State University Northridge (CSUN), as well as building awareness in my personal world. I did not, however, know a single, FAA-certificated deaf pilot.

My motivation for schlepping to the DPA fly-in on the opposite end of the country from my home in CA was sparked by this circumstance and another annual fly-in: Experimental Aircraft Association (EAA)'s Airventure. EAA Radio broadcasts on an AM news station to the entire Airventure grounds and surrounding regional area, and as well, is webcast the world over. I have been an on-air personality on EAA Radio for three years and involved with forums for five. Last year, I pieced together the best awareness program I could using these resources:

- I caught Matt Herrman online and managed to chat with him a bit about deaf pilots, the DPA and its efforts;
- On pre-recorded radio, I interviewed a hearing woman by the name of "Millie", whose flying club hosted a previous DPA fly-in;
- I dragged OSH tower operators into the studio to talk about deaf pilots and other NORDO approaches (they get a lot of vintage) into Airventure – the busiest *well*-controlled GA airport in the world for that week; and
- I went live, on-air with NACTA (National Air Traffic Controllers Association) officials and product manufacturers to discuss the potential for technology to open up opportunities.

Still, I knew no deaf pilots to interview and the hearing community's awareness (including my own) remained minimal.

### **BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU WISH FOR:**

I decided to register application for a [forum on Deaf & Hard-of-Hearing Pilots](#), and received acceptance in early 2005. My goal in all of this was and is to help introduce and educate a hearing aviation population about deaf pilots. So, as the event drew closer once again, I felt it *mandatory* to at least interview a few deaf pilots before presenting a population I myself had never met. As luck would have it, the DPA 12<sup>th</sup> Annual Fly-in was one month prior to Airventure. This provided me an invaluable opportunity not only to meet and get to everyone, but to have several DPA members become actively involved in the presentation. I even became a DPA member, myself!

With the anticipation of 3 or 4 deaf pilots introducing themselves to this hearing audience, I had made arrangements for EAA to provide a RID interpreter to be present to sign and voice as needed. Though only one deaf pilot was able to be a part of the presentation, Stephen Hopson, the interpreter was welcome to a surprising number of hearing-impaired people in the audience. There was a man with cochlear implants and a young Hard-of-hearing woman – both pilots, as well as several aging pilots gradually losing their hearing. There were a few non-pilot Deaf with an aviation curiosity and

hearing pilots with some personal or professional interest in the subject, there to round out the 35 attendees that stayed from beginning through the middle to the end.

New forums are generally given a time slot intended to gauge relative interest, and this was no exception. Counts of attendance are taken at several time-points throughout all presentations. At a time-slot of 5:30pm, during the air show itself, 35 people remaining throughout the forum is a wonderful turn-out!

With a few to-be-expected technical difficulties, I showed several short video clips of the DPA fly-in: landings and take-offs, & in-air footage as well as some brief signed introductions of deaf pilots and their comments for the camera. After a [Powerpoint](#) presentation of some more “educational” aspects, Stephen Hopson jumped up to entertain the audience with his stories as a deaf pilot. Following, there were several audience questions with topics such as details of Stephen’s story, options for ergonomically designed headsets for hearing-aid wearers, the potential of new technology and updates to the DPA website.



The audience paying attention at the forum.  
Photo Credit: Suzy Long



Stephen Hopson and Mel Futrell giving the presentation.  
Photo Credit: Suzy Long

#### **BASKING IN THE AFTERMATH:**

The follow-up to the forum was fabulous, too! I provided a sign-up sheet for anyone interested in e-mailed [informational PDF](#) files to aid the hearing pilot with a deaf pilot friend or student and almost a third of the audience signed up. Several gave me on-the-spot feedback about the forum, and many others continue to engage via email. Two have relayed to a deaf friend that it *is* indeed possible for them to fly. An older member vowed to make an appointment with his AMD after a 12-yr. flying retirement due to hearing loss. And several want to get involved in research, funding and/or awareness-raising in their community.

EAA’s [Airventure Today](#), a daily paper distributed to the event grounds and surrounding local community, did a great follow-up story in the weekend edition of the paper. Despite a few expected “not-quite-rights”, the article focused on the educational aspects of the forum and provided readers with tidbits of Stephen’s tales. Airventure Today circulates among tens of thousands of hands daily, and is also available on the web worldwide to millions of readers. This supplemented the on-air broadcasts on EAA Radio: rerunning last-year’s stories as well as talking with Stephen in a live discussion.

Throughout the upcoming year, I will be developing informational FAA Safety Seminars in the Southern CA region on Deaf, deaf & Hard-of-hearing pilots, in preparation for next year’s Airventure forum. I look forward to an enviable time-slot, a solid and polished

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presentation, ongoing promotional efforts with Airventure Today and many more deaf pilots coming to tell their story at the biggest airshow in the world!

Please email [mfutrell@aviatechconcepts.com](mailto:mfutrell@aviatechconcepts.com) for feedback, more information, or to be involved with upcoming presentations.