




EAGLE VISTAS GETS AG PILOTS  
READY TO SPRAY

BY TI WINDISCH





**THERE ARE CERTAIN THINGS** people just need to survive. Air to breathe and water to drink are important ones, and many EAA members would argue the ability to fly their aircraft of choice qualifies as well. Food is pretty high on the list, too, which is part of the reason Randy and Beverly Berry started Eagle Vistas, a “boot camp” to supply farmers with the skilled ag pilots they need to keep on growing.

 **Check out the digital edition** of *EAA Sport Aviation* for a video about Eagle Vistas.



#### THE NEED FOR PROPER TRAINING

**E**agle Vistas has been around for more than a decade at this point, with most of those years spent in Fort Pierce and Sebring before the business settled in Arcadia, Florida. Randy, EAA 677384, said Eagle Vistas' current home is just right.

While the where of Eagle Vistas has changed in years past, the why remains the same. Randy's time as chief pilot for Southeastern Aerial Crop Service included encounters with pilots in the agricultural flying industry that convinced him many of their skills were simply not up to par.

"I was astounded at the people that came to me looking for work, that had even sprayed for a year or two maybe, that had been other places, and did not have the stick and rudder skills and techniques that are necessary for this business," he said.

Beverly, EAA 1014721, said Randy's experience hiring pilots for Southeastern Aerial Crop Service, which is also an Air Tractor dealer, led the couple to decide that better training was a necessity for entry-level ag pilots.

"He was just amazed at how unprepared the candidates were coming to him," Beverly said. "He had a background for instructing. He had done ag instructing under other schools in the past, and he said, 'I think I can do a better job.' And so we wrote a syllabus and started a school."

What sets their school apart from others, most of all, is having a standard to train ag pilot hopefuls to. Every student who goes through Eagle Vistas is guaranteed to hit bench marks in ability and knowledge devised by Randy.

"Randy has written a standardization for ag pilot training, much like a private pilot can go to [the] FAA and go down the list of standards, and commercial pilots the same thing," Beverly said. "There is no minimum standards for ag pilots currently. There is nothing with FAA, there is nothing with our national association, no minimum standards. It's kind of like the Wild West out there."

As a third-generation pilot who grew up learning from his father and grandfather in airplanes like a Beech Staggerwing and a Stinson Reliant, Randy believes the fundamentals of tailwheel flying are the first steps to training a successful ag pilot.

"I want to instill that stick and rudder – basic things – at the boot camp, where I teach them to march, to field-dress a rifle, all the necessities," Randy said. "Then when they get their first deployment, their first job, that operator now does not have to mess with all that. He can bring them right into his own operation, the way he wants. That's my goal. And safety is always first, paramount."



*The two place Pawnee prepares for another sortie*

#### TEACHING THE TRADE

Any good flight school will put safety first and foremost, but Randy said it is especially important to ensure that Eagle Vistas is both a safe environment for learners and that it produces ag pilots who fly safely. After all, aerial application is not for the faint of heart.

Randy said the difference between crop dusting and recreational flying is akin to driving a go-kart at 50 mph compared to driving a semitrailer at the same speed. While in reality there's no difference in how fast each vehicle is going, being up high and being able to see much farther from the driver's seat in the semitrailer means it's a lot calmer than zipping by just above the ground in a go-kart. Similarly, flying mere feet above trees or crops in an ag airplane at 150 mph feels a whole lot faster than cruising at 5,000 feet, even if the speed is the same.

Teaching a pilot to be able to navigate safely at high speeds and low altitudes is Randy and company's job at Eagle Vistas. Some pilots, however, come to the school with little to no pilot training whatsoever. Clearly, 150 mph right above the treetops is not a suitable first lesson.



The mighty Ag Cat roars above the Florida orange groves.

Instead, no-time pilots can work with a partner school, Right Rudder Aviation. Andy Chan, EAA 1225205, of Right Rudder explained the synergistic relationship between the two flight schools.

“When Eagle Vistas gets somebody who’s kind of zero-time and wants to become an ag pilot, they need to get started somehow,” Andy said. “Those customers can then come to us and do from zero-time to 250 hours, [and get their] commercial certificate almost exclusively in tailwheel, except for the small part required for the commercial certificate to be in complex. Besides that, 100 percent in tailwheel.”

Andy said trainees at Right Rudder begin with a Piper Cub on a grass strip, with either a headwind or no wind, before learning more about how to best handle the airplane in different conditions.

“Being able to safely build up your envelope as a pilot to what the airplane can do is very, very important,” he said. “In my opinion, a lot of pilots who come to us, the airplane can way outperform the pilot, and the pilot is the limiting factor. And what we concentrate on is bringing your envelope as a pilot to match that of the airplane, and understand what it is, and fly safely within those envelopes.”

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– Randy Berry

Mitchell Krzysztan, EAA 1271930, is one of those zero-time pilots who started at Right Rudder and then progressed to learn ag flying afterward. He said it took about nine weeks to progress through both schools’ programs, and that prepared pilots get started quickly at Eagle Vistas.

“They get you right into it,” Mitchell said. “They get you in the field and make sure that you’re doing everything safely before they put you in the planes for solo training – to do loaded takeoffs in increments, and then jettison dumps, before letting you actually go and do any spraying solo.”



Chief instructor and crop dusting extraordinaire, Randy Miller.



The front office of the two place Pawnee.



As opposed to the many pilots who come through Eagle Vistas to work for a commercial operation, Mitchell said he wanted to become proficient to take care of his family's farm back home in Canada. There were no local ag pilots close enough to handle dusting the fields, so Mitchell decided to take care of them himself.

"I think there's a need for it, and I like aviation, so I just want to work that into my farm program and eventually offer service to others," he said.

Randy said Mitchell was able to work through both schools pretty quickly because he had the drive to do so.

"The man's flying six and seven hours a day when the weather's good," Randy said. "He's driven. He has a need, once again. This man, I think he has like 18,000 acres in Canada, and he can't get anybody to come do it, so necessity is the mother of invention."

Eagle Vistas also gets student ag pilots who are interested in taking care of other people's crops, as opposed to their own. Jerick Wells is one of them, and he said he chose Eagle Vistas based on the school's reputation.

"I had a few friends that came down here and went through the ag program," Jerick said. "I talked to them, and they said that it was by far the best that they've seen, so that's what brought me down here."

Jerick came to Eagle Vistas fairly prepared, as he had 200 hours of flight time already, many of them in tail-wheel airplanes. In addition to learning a lot about ag flying, Jerick said he had fun taking part in Randy's boot camp.

"You come down here, and you're flying four to six hours a day," he said. "They get you through, and they teach you right, and they teach you safe, and that's pretty much what it's about."

Randy said in some ways, it's easier for him and his instructors to teach students who have little or no time, especially if they flew mostly tricycle-gear airplanes. While it takes longer for the student to learn the basics at Right Rudder, they don't come in with what Randy calls "lazy feet" from only flying nosewheel airplanes like some pilots do.

"The feet work, understanding the physics ... it takes a lot," Randy said.



*This Cub serves as the first step for aspiring crop dusters.*

#### ORDER OF OPERATIONS

Flying the Grumman Ag Cat especially takes a lot. Even students who come prepared from Right Rudder don't start off in the big beast.

Eagle Vistas Chief Pilot Randy Miller said students start out in a two-seat Piper Pawnee, so they can fly with an instructor.

"The student will typically ride up front," he said. "The instructor sits in the back, and the spray system has been removed from the two-place Pawnee. It kind of makes this school unique. To the best of my knowledge, there aren't very many two-place Pawnees, especially for instruction purposes."

From there, students move to a single-seat Pawnee, before returning to the two-seater to learn GPS flying. Then it's time to move to the Ag Cat. Randy Berry said he waits to introduce the more modern technology and emphasizes being able to fly well without the GPS first to avoid students not looking outside of the cockpit enough.

"In my course, I do not introduce the GPS until they have first learned the stick and rudder techniques and

***"We support them all along the way. I get calls from operators for our students, for jobs, throughout the year. And I'll call them, and as many as I can, to get those jobs. We're becoming recognized for the quality of our students. They know that a student from Eagle Vistas is prepared to enter this field."***

—Beverly Berry

learned how to count tree rows," Randy Berry said. "I want them looking outside. The trees are outside, and that's where you need to look."

After going through weeks of flying at Eagle Vistas, Mitchell said he could confirm that the instructors stress the importance of keeping a watchful eye on what's around the airplane during low flight.

"They make you survey the field, so you're looking for any kind of hazards, people in the field, power lines to look out for," he said. "Widow-makers, they'll call them. Something that you might not be expecting to see, little guy wires, stuff like that."



Instructors and students of Eagle Vistas and Right Rudder Inc. pose in front of the crop dusting fleet.

#### MORE THAN A CLASSROOM

Eagle Vistas is an ideal school for those who are looking to become professional ag pilots, even beyond the detailed curriculum. The network of past students who have gone on to work in the industry is expansive, and it makes finding a career easier for newer students following in the footsteps of those who came before.

“If you’re looking for a job, they have connections out there, in the industry,” Andy said. “And even the students who are here right now, they co-mingle and talk with each other. It’s a great environment that Eagle Vistas has set up.”

Beverly said when students make it through Eagle Vistas, it’s like fledglings being released from the nest, although she and Randy Berry are there to help even after the training is complete.

“We support them all along the way,” Beverly said. “I get calls from operators for our students, for jobs, throughout the year. And I’ll call them, and as many as I can, to get those jobs. We’re becoming recognized for the quality of our students. They know that a student from Eagle Vistas is prepared to enter this field.”

Randy Miller has flown as an air tactical group supervisor over wildfires and as a tanker pilot dropping the retardant on those fires, but he said he still likes his job training ag pilots the most.

“I love my job,” he said. “It’s the best ever. I’ve flown a cargo jet for a year and a half, I flew fire, which is equally as rewarding, but this is by far the best. I love it.”

As much as the students get out of attending Eagle Vistas, Beverly said having second-generation students sent to the school ensures that she and Randy Berry get a lot from the job, too.

“We absolutely feel like we’re making a difference because of the success of our students,” Beverly said. “When we get operators that send us their sons to train with us, they have said to us, ‘While I am an ag pilot, I don’t want to miss anything. I don’t want to leave anything out.’”

Randy Berry said the pride and admiration he feels watching his former pupils go into the world and find successful careers makes it all worthwhile.

“I’m making a difference,” he said. “I ain’t never gonna get rich, but I might be able to make a difference in every one of those young lives.” *EAA*

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