

Times-Republican

Flying high — Marshalltown native builds unique career in aviation



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO — From left to right, Vanguard Squadron pilots David Myers, Steve Thompson, Joe Brewster, and Mark Ketcham. The Vanguard Squadron is an aerobatics team that has been around since the early 1990s, and Ketcham, a Marshalltown native and MHS graduate, joined the South Dakota based team in 2013.

Mark Ketcham's passion for aviation was ignited right in his own backyard when he was still in elementary school watching his neighbor fly radio-

controlled airplanes. Now, he's an aerospace engineer, and he flies with the Vanguard Squadron entertaining the masses.

Ketcham was born and raised in Marshalltown, and his first introduction to the world of flying was at Kiwanis Park when he was still in kindergarten, where his neighbor's planes almost immediately intrigued him.

“That was my earliest memory of flying and just aviation in general,” Ketcham said. “I remember him always telling me that there was a squirrel, little, you know, a stuffed squirrel, stuffed animal, in this thing and he always told me that was what was flying it. Back then, I didn't know any different. I thought it was just cool.”

Shortly after kindergarten and Ketcham's initial introduction to aviation, he and his family moved into a home just south of the Marshalltown Municipal Airport, and from that location, he had the opportunity to watch planes fly in and out every day.

As Ketcham reached middle school, he started flying his own RC planes and even joined an RC club in Marshalltown. Unsurprisingly, his interest did not subside when he reached high school. At age 14, he started taking lessons at the Marshalltown Airport to learn how to fly on his own. A few days after he turned 16, he flew solo for the first time, and a year later at age 17, he was a licensed pilot.

After he graduated high school in 2003, Ketcham considered becoming a full-time pilot or even joining the United States Air Force, but with decent scores in math and science, his family convinced him that college was the best way to go. He attended Iowa State University to study aerospace engineering and graduated in 2008 before taking an engineering job in Southern California for a defense contractor.

Ketcham said his job in California combined his interests in the military, his degree and his interests in aircraft all into one.

“In Southern California, (I was working on) very large unmanned aircrafts, which are kind of like how I started all the way back when I was little,

flying RC airplanes. Now, they're just very large RC airplanes for defense contractors," Ketcham said.

He worked in Southern California for a while, but eventually, in 2013, he and his wife decided they wanted to start a family closer to Marshalltown, where they both grew up. He found a job in Sioux Falls working on stratospheric balloons.

As it happened, that was where Ketcham came across the Vanguard Squadron, an airshow team that has been around since the early 1990s. Over the years, several different teams of pilots have flown formation aerobatics with the Vanguard Squadron, and Ketcham is a member of the third or fourth generation of pilots now with the team.

The pilots for the four-plane airshow fly experimental airplanes called Van's RV-3s built in Sioux Falls in the late 80s and early 90s.

Ketcham flies in the number two position in the Vanguard Squadron, which means he flies the left wing of the leader, David Myers. Ketcham joined the squadron in 2013, but he didn't fly his first aerobatics show until 2016. Aerobatics differs greatly from everyday flying, so it took Ketcham a little bit of time to learn the new style.

"It's a totally different type of flying because we're not looking out for other traffic, we're not trying to navigate the airplane, and we're not trying to check our airspeed. We're not trying to do anything other than just maintain our position in reference to lead and whatever he does, whether it be a loop or barrel or whatever," Ketcham said.



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO — The Vanguard Squadron, which includes Marshalltown native Mark Ketcham, performs airshows all over the Midwest, and on Aug. 6, they will make a stop at Fly Iowa 2022 at the Iowa Falls Municipal Airport.

When learning to fly solo, Ketcham said multitasking is key to help with keeping track of various things like air speed and navigation, but everyday flying doesn't generally require split second decisions like tight formation aerobatics does.

“When we're doing the airshow, when we're flying a really tight formation, like say six to 10 feet apart — or six to eight feet apart is typical on a good weather day — when we're flying that close together, we're pretty much only looking at the lead plane,” he said. “We're not really looking at our instruments or anything inside the airplane. Whatever the lead does, we do and that's pretty much all you can do, is focus only on that thing, because everything happens very fast.”

The two types of flying have varying levels of concentration and skill required, but Ketcham said he enjoys both equally. He likes cross-country flying, but the challenge of aerobatics also strikes his fancy.

“Learning how to do aerobatics is a fun challenge and then learning how to do aerobatics really close to another airplane is yet another level of challenge on top of that,” Ketcham said. “I would say it's comparable to

shooting a basket. There gets to be a lot of muscle memory, and it just takes a lot of practice and a lot of focus when you're doing tight formation flying. There's really no capacity, mental capacity to think about anything else, so for a short period of time all you can think about is this and only this."

The Vanguard Squadron flies aerobatics shows all over the Midwest, and in addition to several upcoming shows in South Dakota and Minnesota, Ketcham and the rest of the squadron — Myers, Gary Middlebrooks and Joe Brewster — will be flying a show just down the road at the Iowa Falls Municipal Airport on Aug. 6 for Fly Iowa 2022.

Generally, Steve Thompson flies instead of Middlebrooks, but Thompson will be unable to attend the Iowa Falls event.

Ketcham has enjoyed more notable experiences throughout his time as a pilot than he can count, and he can't remember a single time in his life when he wasn't interested in flying or aviation as a whole. Even though he lives in South Dakota now, he still makes a point to fly out to Marshalltown about once a month to visit friends and family.

To learn more about the Vanguard Squadron, visit <http://vanguardsquadron.com/>.

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