Flying to new heights



FOR THE JOURNAL

Oconee County Airport is the only regional airport in the nation that holds an international sky diving training program for active military members.

Local airport has only national skydiving program

BY JESSICA SIBLEY
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SENECA — It's quite the feat for a small regional airport to gain international accolades, but that's exactly what the Oconee County Regional Airport is doing.

Oconee Regional is carving out a niche as the only regional airport in the nation to hold a specific type of skydiving training for military members.

The Royal Laotian Airborne Association is an international program that active military members can participate in.

"It focuses around skydiving and different forms of jumping," said Jack Watkins, member of the Flying Tigers Sky Diving program and employee at the airport. "There are various program parts of this all over the world, but we are the only one that has it here in the States."

The program at Oconee highlights the "static line" jump, where jumpers step out of the plane attached to a line that automatically pulls the parachute within seconds of free falling.

"We have had people come from all over the nation to do this with us," he added. "It's mostly for fun, but when you complete the various training sessions in different areas, you get a certain pair of wings that you can wear on military uniforms. It's a cool thing to collect and some people even like to trade them. It's a big deal for a lot of the guys that do it. The feedback has been great."

Watkins added that the program happens at Oconee Regional about three or four times a year.

"We've had about 150 people do it since we started it about four years ago," he said. "It all started when the South Carolina State Guard called us and asked if we'd be interested in becoming qualified to hold a training program like this. We agreed and started working toward a solid plan. We haven't looked back since.

"We're extremely proud to be the only airport that holds what was before an international option only."

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