

Health-care exec finds therapy in jet

By Tom Barry
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Regions of CEOs hit the fairways to relax. Others go on hunting or fishing trips, while still others tool around town in a snappy little sports car or head to the beach home.

What Parker H. "Pete" Petit does is strap himself in his L-39C Albatross jet — a former trainer/light attack aircraft from the old Soviet Union fleet — and head deep into the wild blue yonder.

When his peers are having a hot dog at the turn, Petit might be doing loops and rolls at 10,000 feet, in an aircraft

High-flying: Pete Petit and his son, Bill, co-own the Soviet-era jet once used as a trainer and attack aircraft.



BYRON E. SMAL

that can do 550 mph and cruise at more than 30,000 feet.

"Flying's my therapy," said the CEO and chairman of Marietta-based **Matria Healthcare Inc.** "It's the thing I do to break out of my business cycle. I like to get up there and do some acrobatics and just enjoy myself."

Board meetings seem far away when one is a couple of miles up executing a favorite maneuver, which in Petit's case is the Cuban 8. Imagine a series of loops and half-rolls when viewed from the side.

"You can't fly a plane like this and not be thinking about flying the airplane," said Petit, a Roswell resident who flies out of Cobb County Airport-McCollum Field. "You can't do it, and you don't do

The plane facts

AIRCRAFT: L-39C Albatross

YEAR: 1982

MANUFACTURER: Czech aerospace company Aero Vodochody

TOP SPEED: 565 mph at 30,000 feet

RANGE: 750 miles

CRUISING ALTITUDE: 30,000 feet to a maximum of 36,000

it. It keeps you very busy mentally, and physically you have to coordinate what you're doing.

"Flying's a process of continually correcting mistakes," he said. "There's always something in a plane that's a little bit off that has to be fixed. It's a challenge, and you get instant feedback on your performance."

On-the-ground feedback can come quickly, too.

"People have told me I'm crazy," said the 67-year-old Petit. "But I've been flying for over 40 years, and I love it."

So does his son, Bill Petit, a pilot and flight instructor in the Air Force Reserve at Dobbins Air Reserve Base who co-owns the two-seat jet with his dad. Occasionally, they go punch a hole in the sky together.

"Sometimes he gives his dad instructions," said the senior Petit. "Sometimes I like it, and sometimes I don't."

Bill Petit was the one who got his father interested in the aircraft. The younger Petit owned a former Polish jet fighter similar to the L-39C when he

lived in Nashville in the 1990s.

Built in 1982 by the Czech aerospace company Aero Vodochody, the \$3 million jet was used as a trainer for Soviet and, later, Russian pilots. Like a good number of former Eastern Bloc aircraft, it eventually passed into private hands in the United States. The Petits bought it for \$290,000 from its previous owner in Louisville, Ky.

The year was 2000, and they've been having a blast with it ever since.

"Those old Soviet weapons of war are now our hot rods, so to speak," said Bill Petit, 40. "They're really pretty easy to acquire. You can even buy a MiG-29, which would be like owning one of our F-15s. Obviously, the planes have been demilitarized, with modifications made to comply with regulations here."

The younger Petit, who owns Tactical Flight Services, a Marietta firm that does flight testing for the military, often takes the plane on business trips.

"I've even used it for a couple of military contracts we've executed," he said. "My father uses it for stress relief."

Amazingly, the Petits' L-39C still has its military color scheme and Russian markings: dark green/light green camouflage with a light-blue underbelly. Plus, there's that red Russian star still on the tail.

"Nobody has ever tried to shoot us down or arrest us so, so far so good," Pete Petit said with a laugh. "We used to do landings at Dobbins, until 9/11."

Petit also has a CJ1 Citation jet (sometimes his wife, Janet, accompanies him in that one), and has thought about trading up on the L-39C.