

Mt. Vernon native earns commercial pilot license

Certification will supplement job with U.S. border patrol

BY JODI KEEN

SENTINEL NEWS STAFF

MT. VERNON — "Come Fly With Me" can now legitimately be Mt. Vernon native Ben Ancona's cell phone ringtone.

An agent with the U.S. Border Patrol, Ancona returned home last week to earn certification as a commercial pilot. Ancona said his desire to obtain his commercial pilot certification came from within his current job.

"To fly with the border patrol, you have to be able to fly a com-

plex aircraft utilizing three different systems," he said. "There was no plane like that around [Arizona] and for insurance reasons, a lot of the flight instruction in Arizona can't afford it. So my dad was able to track down the airplane that I needed in Centralia, and I came home and got my certification here."

Under the evaluation of FAA examiner Leland Widick, Ancona received his Commercial Pilot Rating for Single Engine Land (SEL) Aircraft May 19 at the Mt. Vernon Outland Airport. Ancona had to pass comprehensive oral and practical examinations for certification. Jay Grafton was his local SRT Aviation certified flight instructor.

This is hardly Ancona's first foray into flying, however. His father,

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Submitted Photo

WINGS EARNED — Ben Ancona, CENTER, receives his commercial pilot certification May 19 at the Mt. Vernon Outland Airport. Assisting in his certification were FAA examiner Leland Widick, LEFT, and SRT Aviation certified flight instructor Jay Grafton.

Pilot:

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Mike, said Ben Ancona's interest in flying is rooted in family tradition.

"We're kind of a flying family," Mike Ancona said. "I started flying at a really young age and got my pilot's license when I was 21, and all of us have been flying. So it's kind of been a family issue." Ancona is the chairman of the Mt. Vernon Airport Authority.

Ben Ancona secured his private pilot's license in 2003, which required at least 50 hours of flight time and cross-country trips. In September 2009 he earned his instrument rating, a more difficult rating to get because "it allows you to fly a plane when conditions are below visual flight rules," he said.

With his new certification, Ben said he looks forward to the possibility of being on a different side of the border patrol.

"If we have groups on the ground, we call the air support guys, and they fly in helicopters and tell us where to go," he said. "[The certification] will allow me to be an air interdiction agent. I hope to be giving my support from the air instead of being on the ground."

A 1994 graduate of Mt. Vernon Township High School, Ben Ancona graduated from Southern Illinois University at Carbondale in 1999 with a degree in physical education. He served Mt. Vernon as a city police officer for 3 1/2 years before joining the border patrol.

Ben Ancona said flying will only add to the enjoyment he already gets out of his job.

"I have a lot of fun [at the border patrol]," he said, "especially since I get to ride a horse all day. I get to go to work, saddle up my horse and ride off into the desert."

Ben Ancona is the son of Mike and Ardi Ancona. He and his fiancée Melissa Bruce plan to marry in Mt. Vernon in September.

jkeen@morningsentinel.com