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A self-funded lab in the engineering school brings in up to \$2M a year.

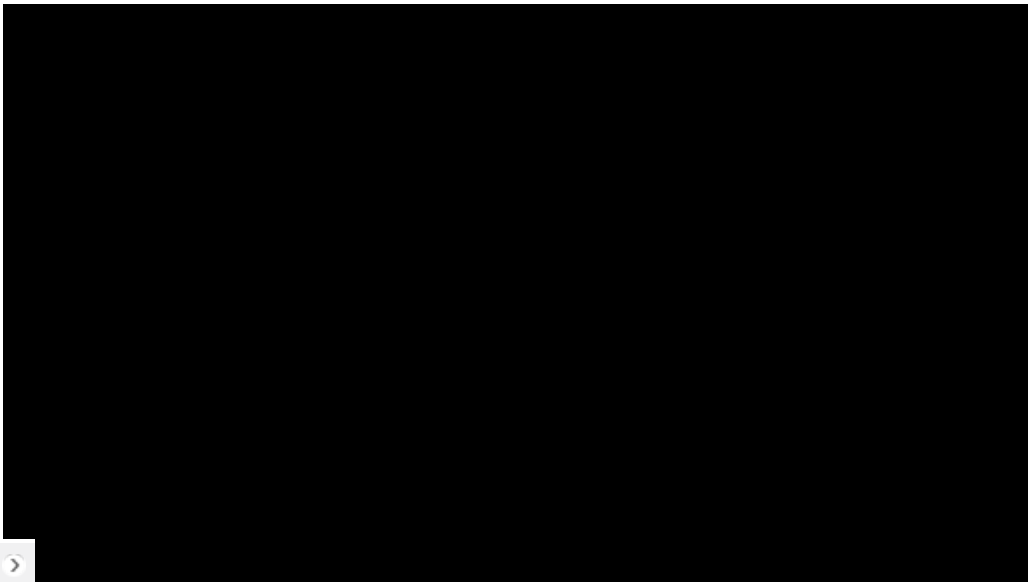
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Written by
SH O'LEARY
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IOWA CITY, IA. — Tom Schnell had shed his pilot's helmet and flight suit in favor of street clothes, for the time being.

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He watched as a group of Rockwell Collins employees huddled around the cockpit of his small jet — a Cold War-era, East European fighter trainer with a Herky logo on its nose — parked outside the hangar.

It was midafternoon Wednesday at the Iowa City Municipal Airport, and Schnell's test flight had been postponed since morning while the crew sorted through a technical hang-up. The researchers unspooled extension cables from the hangar and plugged their laptops into a rack of testing instruments mounted in the jet's back seat.

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University of Iowa professor Thomas "Mach" Schnell flies an Aero Vodochody L-29 Delfin over Iowa on Wednesday, Feb. 13, 2013. The experimental jet is used by the University of Iowa Operator Performance Laboratory and has been used by Rockwell Collins for the last few years. Contributed photo by Thomas Schnell



Tom Schnell, an associate professor at the University of Iowa, helps prepare an Aero L-29 Delfin for flight at the Iowa City airport. The jet, part of the university's Operator Performance Laboratory, has been used by companies to test equipment for the last few years. / David Scrivner/Iowa City Press-Citizen

Meanwhile, in Cedar Rapids, systems lab workers at Rockwell Collins' headquarters were waiting to monitor Schnell's flight, if and when he got off the ground.

The pilot apologized, saying he had to duck out for a while.

"I have to teach a class," said Schnell, whose engineering students soon would be awaiting him at the University of Iowa.

Flying by the seat of his G-suit pants on days like this is nothing new for Schnell, a Swiss-born research pilot and associate professor in industrial engineering at the university.

Schnell often puts in 70 hours a week at the airport, weekends included, and this rigorous week of flight tests was shaping up to be no exception.

"If it were easy, it wouldn't be worth doing," Schnell said of the hours of tinkering that day, on top of the months of preparation before the flight — one of several he was to make to test sophisticated GPS and telemetry electronics in development at Rockwell Collins.

Schnell, 46, is the founder and director of the university's Operator Performance Laboratory, where he oversees a team of about a dozen researchers and a small, U of I-owned fleet of aircraft and ground vehicles.

The laboratory is a self-funded branch of the U of I's College of Engineering, bringing in \$1 million to \$2 million a year, largely through military and industry contracts, with Rockwell Collins serving as its primary partner.

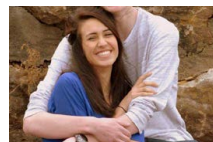
The laboratory, housed in two hangars at the airport, has the feel of the military bases to which much of the lab's work is tailored.



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On this day, beneath an oversized American flag dangling from the rafters, sat one of the lab's two Aero L-29 Delfin jets, along with a camouflaged MI-2 twin-turbine military helicopter. Another small plane, a 1978 Beech Bonanza, was parked in the hangar next door.

Outside, near the blue-and-gold L-29 being readied for flight, was a sand-colored Humvee containing a mobile communications lab.

Nick Anderson, a research engineer for the lab, was providing technical support for the Rockwell crew Wednesday, in addition to helping install a cutting-edge instrument panel — also built by Rockwell — in the helicopter.

"I'll meet people and they say, 'What do you do?' And I say I work with those jets out at the airport," said Anderson, 21. "They say, 'I've seen those. Those are university jets? I didn't know we had that.' That's the response of 95 percent of people."

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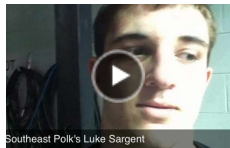
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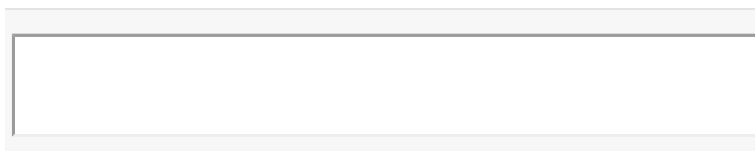
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