

■ Jim Ikerman will be guest speaker for today's meeting of the American Legion Post No. 31. The group meets at 6:30 p.m. at the Senior Citizen Building in Leighton.
CALENDAR/2D

ALSO INSIDE

- TELEVISION & ANN LANDERS/2D
- COMICS/3D
- JAY'S PLACE/4D

Flying high

Young Shoals entrepreneur knows true meaning of slogan, 'Just Do It'

By Sherhonda Allen
Feature Writer

When he was 5, John Odem sat in his dad's lap and prepared to land an airplane that was traveling 140 miles an hour from a descent of 5,000 feet.

It was his first landing. From that moment on, John said he and his dad landed airplanes together "too many times to count."

John is a perfect example of what "just do it" really means. Before his 10th birthday, John not only mastered landing airplanes, he had started learning how to fly helicopters, was expert at hang gliding, barefoot water skiing and, at age 9, had taken up the banjo.

By 13, he had won the Tennessee Valley Talent Search contest, played on the Roy Acuff stage in Opryland and appeared on stage with Minnie Pearl. He even developed a one-man show of banjo music and jokes called "Hot Stuff" that appeared on local television and radio.

He shrugs and smiles when asked if there's anything he can't do - a modest gesture that's typical of this polite 19-year-old.

Quiet-spoken but with a direct look and open friendliness to people he meets, John earned his coveted helicopter pilot's license last year when he was 18.

He said his FAA examiner told him he was the youngest commercial helicopter pilot in the United States.

"That felt good. Real good," John said. "I've always wanted to be a pilot."

As president of Shoals Creek Aviation, he also might be one of the youngest people in the Shoals in charge of running a company. In addition, he is "almost a junior" political science major at the University of North Alabama.

Airplanes and helicopters always have been in his life, he said. Political science is just another thing in his life that shares a common denominator with flying and music - they are interests he shares with his father, Florence lawyer Dennis Odem.

"He's more like my best friend than my dad," John said. "We don't fight. We just ... talk about everything. My dad and mom are like that. I've never heard them fight."

Odem said he and his wife, Carolyn, have

always been "exceptionally close" to John. He said John is a son who frequently tells his parents that he loves them. He said that as parents, they "have truly been blessed." He said they, too, consider John their best and closest friend.

"In his early years, we spent a lot of time with John emphasizing trust, honor and respect," he said. "These are the things that are truly important in life."

"Many times I have told John, 'Son, no person on earth will ever love you more than your mother so always honor and respect her,'" he said.

Dennis Odem began teaching John about helicopters after John mastered landing airplanes. By age 14, John had flown dozens of hours as co-pilot.

"With dual controls, I was permitted to hover, take off and land without Dad ever having to touch the controls," John said.

He said his dad always was calm and never fussed or got excited. Father and son flew together almost daily.

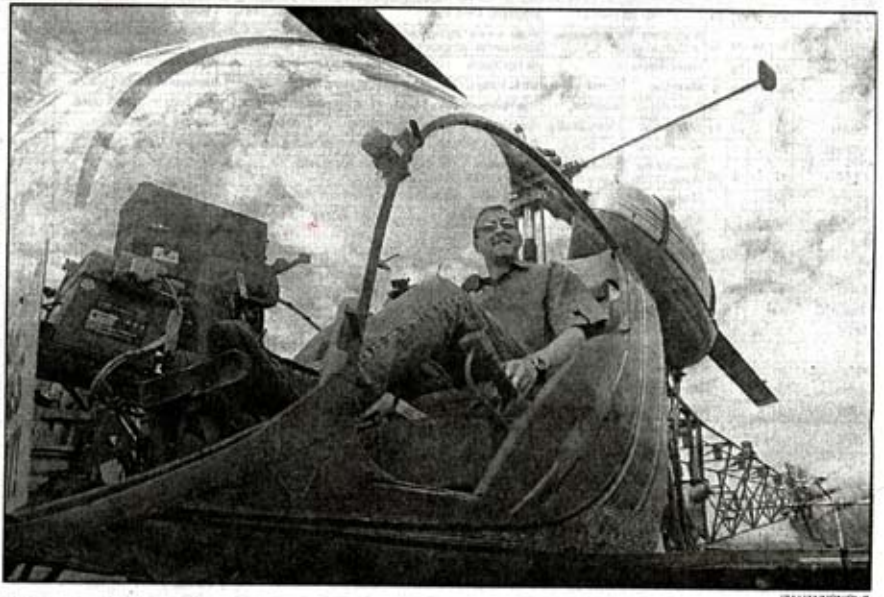
When he was 15, Dennis Odem told John he was ready to solo the helicopter. John said when he heard the words, he felt a lump in his throat because he knew "solo" means "all by yourself."

They began that day by flying together, as usual, with John landing the aircraft. John said his dad then stepped out of the helicopter, wished him luck and told him not to be late for breakfast. John said he watched his dad calmly walk away and leave him alone at the controls.

"I was back on the ground in 55 minutes sharp grinning from ear to ear," he said. "That was the best breakfast I've ever eaten."

The next year John began formal training to earn his license.

One of his instructors was Richard Downs, a pilot with the Tennessee Valley Authority. Downs



Today, at age 19, John Odem is a licensed commercial helicopter pilot and is president of his own business, Shoals Creek Aviation.

said he first met John when the young pilot was 9 or 10 years old.

"I was teaching Dennis to fly," Downs recalled. "My wife was an EMT with the rescue squad ... and John just picked right up on that and held a conversation. He's the sharpest and most sensible individual I know."

It was about that time that John met William Foster and heard for the first time the Foster Family String Band. Foster's music inspired John to take up the banjo.

"We opened for Jerry Clower and John and his family had come to hear Jerry perform," Foster said. "Maybe a week later, John and his dad came by the office here ... so I played for him."

Foster is an instructor and dean of UNA's English department. His family's band has gained wide recognition with their music and is a favorite attraction at festivals and concerts.

Foster said he is honored to know John was inspired by his music. The two men are a generation apart, but have become firm friends.

"We play together ... at rotating sessions at each other's houses," Foster said.

Dennis Odem has learned to play the bass fiddle and with his usual collector's enthusiasm, has a collection of bass fiddles in his home.

John hasn't acquired his father's love of collecting, though he proudly shows off his dad's gleaming bass fiddles, aircraft photos and a



By age 10, John Odem had learned to land airplanes and had started learning how to operate a helicopter under the tutelage of his father, Dennis.

mint-condition Vietnam-era Army jeep.

"It has less than 1,000 miles," John tells visitors.

"Most were destroyed because they were (built) so narrow - they're considered too dangerous."

Law school is John's next venture, he said. Applications have been mailed to "about a dozen schools" but John said he really would like to attend law school in Tuscaloosa.

Law would be one more thing father and son would have in common.



Learning to play the banjo earned 10-year-old John Odem a meeting with the late Minnie Pearl.