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Sunday, April 18, 2010

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# Annual Blue Ridge Kite Festival lets enthusiasts and kids alike fly their colors

By Duncan Adams | The Roanoke Times



JEANNA DUERSCHERL The Roanoke Times

A giant penguin kite flies above Green Hill Park in Roanoke County during Saturday's kite festival.



Photos by JEANNA DUERSCHERL The Roanoke Times

Walter Borden of Danville said he has been flying kites since childhood. The kite he brought Saturday is 16 feet wide and 10 feet long with three tails.



Photos by JEANNA DUERSCHERL The Roanoke Times

Walter Borden of Danville said he has been flying kites since childhood. The kite he brought Saturday is 16 feet wide and 10 feet

A minivan caravan idled Saturday morning waiting to make the turn onto Duiguids Lane.

Nearby, flying colors already dotted the bright blue sky. Kites whipped, fluttered, danced and dipped.

Army veteran Dustin Bowles, home in Roanoke after two tours of duty in Iraq, first met his 2-year-old son just a few months ago. He and Tyrique flew a kite together -- a first for each.

And then Tyrique circled his father in small arcs of glee. Tyrique's mother, Keisha Bowles, grinned.

One estimate suggested that the crowd peaked at about 12,000 people. They filled a wide-open field at Roanoke County's Green Hill Park near Salem during the 12th Annual Blue Ridge Kite Festival.

There was wind aplenty. The National Weather Service in Blacksburg said that wind gusts Saturday afternoon reached about 35 mph.

Some participants celebrated the blustery conditions. Others, especially newbies, found the gusts challenging. Kite lines sometimes tangled. Kites occasionally dived earthward with the speed of a peregrine falcon.

In Iraq, Bowles was a tank crewman. On Saturday, he said it was very good to be home.

Meanwhile, the RAF was out in force. (Not the chaps from the Battle of Britain.)

The Richmond Air Force was founded in 1986 by a group of kite fliers who had been congregating in Henrico County. Membership grew and club enterprises multiplied -- ranging from hosting and participating in competitions to traveling to stage demonstrations such as the one Saturday.

Other kite clubs, including Wings Over Washington, helped out.

WOW members Paul Dugard and Paul LaMasters each

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long with three tails.

deftly flew a maneuverable Revolution Kite. The kites, each with four lines attached, danced and spun.

LaMasters, 54, is a kite-flying fanatic with a gift of gab.

"I've been doing it 10 hours a week since 1993," he said.

But LaMasters said he got started back in the late 1970s.

Some men walk dogs. Not LaMasters.

"I used kite flying to get dates in college," he said.

He liked Saturday's steady wind and gusty conditions.

"Today, you could fly a manhole cover," LaMasters said. "Today, every kid's kite flies."

And that was certainly true for the dragonfly kite flown by Nathanael Moses, 4.

More accurately, his father, David, flew the kite and Nathanael occasionally gripped the spool. Mother Karen took a turn. Her flight did not fare well; the dragonfly crossed another kite's line and then bit the dust.

"I've never had experience with these kinds of kites before," Karen Moses said. "But that's all right. It's all about the fun."

Fun. Family. Free. Flying.

That was the foursome cited by Chuck Kroll and Terry Murray to describe the appeal of the annual kite festival.

Murray is with the RAF. Kroll, along with Stephanie Garst, co-led the kite festival committee for the Salem-Roanoke County Chamber of Commerce.

The chamber hosts the event, which relies on corporate sponsors, the RAF, vendor fees, volunteers and more to get off the ground.

Les Johnson of Roanoke County ventured away from the madding crowd to fly a kite while his daughter, Leslie, volunteered at the event with Girl Scouts Troop 423.

Based on the line remaining on his spool, Johnson estimated his kite was about 400 feet off the ground. He said his small aircraft narrowly escaped a kite-eating tree.

"The winds are doing funny things. The kite dropped into a tree and caught on a branch," he said.

But after a quick sprint with the line through the parking lot, Johnson freed the 15-year-old kite.

Historians say that kites came to be about 2,900 or 3,000 years ago in China and Indonesia. Early uses varied, historians say, and included fishing, communicating with deities and even some military applications.

There was no aerial bombing Saturday.

And why were RAF members willing to travel to Roanoke County and spend a whole day there for the festival?

"We love kite flying and we love spreading the joy," Murray said.



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