

Local man was a pilot for the late evangelist

By Mike Wilder / Times-News

May 22

For more than three years in the 1970s, few people spent more time with Jerry Falwell than Tom Coble.

Coble was Falwell's pilot from early 1976 to mid-1979. He flew him to speak at events all over the country.

Coble, of Burlington, started taking flying lessons when he was 15. He soloed for the first time at 16 and got his private pilot's license when he was 17.

He earned his instrument, commercial and multi-engine ratings while he was a student at Liberty Baptist College, which became Liberty University. He graduated from the school in 1976 with a bachelor's degree in church history.

"I started flying for Jerry the last semester of my senior year," Coble said. Coble at first flew Falwell around the country in a Douglas DC-3. Later, he used a corporate jet. Eventually, Coble said, he flew Falwell to every state in the country except Hawaii. He also flew him to Canada and Haiti.

In addition to flying, he'd spend some time working in the counseling center at events where Falwell spoke.

Coble said he got close to Falwell while working for him.

"He's a lot of fun to be around," he said, describing his former boss in the present tense a few days before his funeral. "Jerry is a big prankster (and) practical joker." That was even true, Coble said, at public events.

"Everybody would be on the platform and he'd drop a stink bomb," he said. When he was flying the jet, Coble said, Falwell would call from the back of the plane with a request.

"He'd say, 'Hey guys, give me a barrel roll,'" Coble said. Coble also recalled Falwell's favorite diet soda.



Tom and Debby Coble pose for a photo with the Rev. Jerry Falwell during a 2005 visit to Liberty University in Lynchburg, Va. Tom was Falwell's pilot from 1976 to mid-1979. Submitted photo

“He was always on a diet kick, trying to lose weight,” Coble said. “He loved Frescas.”

COBLE FONDLY recalled the time Falwell reached into his pocket and gave him a few hundred dollars in cash. There had been a pay freeze for the ministry’s employees, and Coble and his wife, Debby, were struggling financially.

“I will never forget that,” he said. “He knew I was having a hard time.”

While still working as Falwell’s pilot, Coble started his first company, Coble Cranes & Equipment. He grew up around construction and had taken MBA courses offered at Lynchburg College.

“I felt that business could be a ministry,” he said.

Coble left his job as a pilot to pursue business full time.

He credits Falwell with laying the groundwork for how he’s tried to carry that out: “He was a tremendous influence on my life.”

Coble is now CEO of Coble Trench Safety, which has headquarters in Greensboro and locations in five other cities in the Southeast.

The company provides underground equipment and training for construction and industrial clients.

Tom and Debby Coble are members of Harvest Baptist Church. They got married when both were at Liberty. They started a scholarship program to help students from North Carolina, mainly Alamance County, attend the school.

In 1998, Coble received the Eagle Award, which is given each year by the Liberty University Alumni Association to graduates of the school.

Coble stayed in touch with Falwell. He and his wife last saw him in October 2006 at Liberty’s homecoming.

In 1995, Falwell visited the Cobles’ home when he came to Burlington.

Debby Coble said one of her most prized possessions is a photo taken of Falwell with her grandson, Ryan, when he was a baby.