

Firebaugh to be recognized for aviation accomplishments

Late Mt. Vernon Outland Airport Manager to be inducted into Illinois Aviation Hall of Fame

BY LAUREN P. DUNCAN

SENTINEL NEWS STAFF

MT. VERNON — A man who knew a few things about the aviation industry will be recognized post-mortem next month.

Max C. Firebaugh, former manager at Mt. Vernon Outland Airport, will be inducted into the Illinois Aviation Hall of Fame in May.

While Firebaugh's recognition

comes almost a year and a half after he passed away in December 2011, this isn't the first time the airport has applied for his induction. In 2007, Airport Manager Chris Collins said an application was submitted, but was withdrawn due to Firebaugh's humility. He asked that he not be considered.

"He didn't want to draw any kind of attention to himself," Collins

said.

But there's little question as to why Firebaugh has been chosen as an inductee this year.

A few of his qualifications to be recognized include the fact that he was experience in military combat, corporate aviation,



Max Firebaugh

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SAYING GOODBYE — Local residents and friends of Max Firebaugh gathered at the Mt. Vernon Outland Airport on Dec. 23, 2011 to see him off on his flight to Knoxville, Tenn. After Firebaugh suffered a stroke, local volunteers were quick to jump on board to have him flown to be closer to family in Tennessee. He passed away on Dec. 31, 2011. Firebaugh will be inducted into the Illinois Aviation Hall of Fame next month in recognition of his numerous efforts and successes involving aviation.



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HALL OF FAMER — Max Firebaugh, who was the Mt. Vernon Outland Airport manager from 1966 to 1989, will be inducted into the Illinois Aviation Hall of Fame in May. Firebaugh, who passed away in Dec. 2011, is pictured, LEFT, with Mt. Vernon Outland Airport Manager Chris Collins, CENTER, and the late R.D. White.

Firebaugh:

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airport management and fixed base ownership.

Firebaugh was the leader at Mt. Vernon Outland Airport when it experienced much of its growth, and his aviation experience wasn't just at the airport. Firebaugh had flown in World War II. He was a retired lieutenant colonel USAF Reserve, and was first unit commander of the Jefferson County Civil Air Patrol Squadron. He was a member of the Purple Heart Organization, and flew close to 69 B-26 combat missions over Europe in WWII.

Firebaugh organized ground schools for prospective pilots, and saw several former students go on to become airline or executive pilots. He was a ground service volunteer and assisted with more than 1,900 EAA Young Eagle rides.

A few of the awards he received over his lifetime include the Purple Heart and Air Medal with 13 oak cluster. He flew three missions during D-day.

Firebaugh was also known for being dedicated to the airport even after he retired from his position as manager.

"I think he was one of the few people in the community that experienced everything in aviation," Collins said.

Collins knew Firebaugh in both the professional sense and as a friend.

"Max is probably the reason I'm here," Collins said. "He encouraged me to turn in a resume for this job and instilled the confidence in my to try."

Up until Firebaugh became ill in late 2011, Collins said he continued to guide the airport leaders in advising them and assisting with projects. And he never missed an event.

"This was his home," Collins said. "He loved this facility."

Previous to his start at the airport, Firebaugh returned from World War II and received his degree at the University of Illinois in geology. He then went on to work for the Collins Brothers Oil Company in Mt. Vernon, whom he was the chief pilot for. Then, when Earl Outland left the airport in 1966, Firebaugh was the man chosen for the job.

In his time at the airport, one of the many successes Firebaugh was instrumental in was the completion of the

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'Dusting His Home Town'

By Edgar A. Guest

I have it from his mother: 'Tis the custom
with them all
When they've finished with their training
to fly home and pay a call.
Not as earth-bound fellows do it, not as
sailors home from sea,
But as pilots of the heavens in the cause of
liberty,
And before he leaves for battle and can put
his school books down
He must do that bit of solo known as dusting
off his town.

Now the trick that's known as "dusting" is the
swooping from the skies
Where his mother's sitting watching with the
address in her eyes.
He must rouse his home town people with that
terrifying roar
Of a bomber rushing downward, bringing
friends to every door
Where they stand aghast to see him, goggled,
capped and dressed in brown,
A lad they've known from boyhood back and
dusting off his town.

Those acquainted with the practice know the
final rite is paid:
Know the boy is off to danger when that
hazy tip is made,
With the morning he'll be flying to some battle
post afar
Where the skies with flack are troubled and the
lethal hazards are
So just pray the Lord to save him and his
pilot with glory crown,
And just wish him happy landings when he's
dusting off his town.
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A REMEMBERED RESIDENT

— "Dusting His Home Town," a poem written by Edgar A. Guest following a request by Max Firebaugh's mother in the 1940s, was printed in newspapers across the country. The poem came after Firebaugh stopped over Mt. Vernon in a cross country flight to swoop in close to downtown Mt. Vernon.

new airport terminal and campus relocation in 1977 that is still used today.

"Max was the guy in the chair when we went from a smaller municipal airport to a larger jet-service airport," Collins said.

A REMEMBERED RESIDENT

And Firebaugh's dedication to the community extended beyond the airport. Collins said Firebaugh was a familiar face throughout Mt. Vernon, as he could be found at the local AmVets and American Legion posts, and was involved in the Jefferson County Historical Society and served as an election judge each year. He was the former manager of the Jefferson County Chamber of Commerce and a volunteer for the Central Christian Church Food Pantry.

"Max loved Mt. Vernon, he just truly loved his community," Collins said.

His importance in the community still lives today, as Collins said in discussion with other residents who lived in the area around the time local men and women began leaving for World War II, a story of Firebaugh's departure is still circulated.

One such local story shared

his crew flew a B-26 at a low-level around downtown Mt. Vernon in the midst of a cross country fuel test during the spring of 1943. Although flying across the country, it has been said that Firebaugh wanted to say hello to his friends and family in Mt. Vernon. Some people have said they remember books falling off the shelf at the local library and windows rattled at the Rogers Building downtown.

"Firebaugh's mother was so inspired by the act, she wrote a letter to her favorite poet, Edgar Guest," information from the airport states. "The letter described the flight through Mt. Vernon by one of its own preparing to fight overseas. Mr. Guest crafted a poem 'Dusting off His Hometown' in tribute to Firebaugh's aerial antics over Mt. Vernon. The poem was published in syndicated newspapers as well as the Saturday Evening Post on July 27, 1943. Firebaugh spent the rest of his life fearful the Civil Aeronautics Administration, and later, the Federal Aviation Administration would render punishment."

But they never did.

Such stories of Firebaugh's experience in Mt. Vernon have been passed down since the 1940s, as an event that marked many area residents farewell to Firebaugh in 2011 proved how important he was in the area.

On Dec. 23, 2011, a week before Firebaugh's death, he was given a proper sendoff from the Mt. Vernon Outland Airport he cared about so much. A twin-engine airplane left the airport carrying Firebaugh, who had suffered a stroke in November 2011, as family in Knoxville, Tenn. had voiced a concern that they wanted him to be near family members. Although ground transportation would have been difficult, within five minutes of Collins sending out a request for a volunteer, he said Dr. Alan Froehling offered to fly Firebaugh in his Piper Navajo aircraft, and a number of other local volunteers helped in the flight.

Many of Firebaugh's friends, airport employees, airport board members and aviation enthusiasts showed up to say what they hoped to be a temporary "good-bye" to the adored man.

On May 16, Ron Mosier, maintenance supervisor at the airport who was a close friend of Firebaugh's, will be attending the Hall of Fame induction in recognition of Firebaugh.