

# IL Aviation HOF announces 2022 inductees

*A Mount Vernon pilot  
and organization are  
among the inductees*

**BY JOSH JONES**

SENTINEL NEWS STAFF

**MOUNT VERNON** — A passion for aviation alone does not induct one into the Illinois Aviation Hall of Fame, as a drive to share that passion and better one's community is also a must.

According to a press release, the Illinois Aviation Hall of Fame is pleased to announce its 2022 inductees and Spirit of Flight Awardee. Inductees include Doug Kimmel, Donald Kirlin, the late John Charles Robinson and Lt. Col. Steve Willis, USAF Ret.

Willis is a flight instructor at Mount Vernon Outland Airport.

He served in the United States Air Force from 1969 through 1997, flying F-4 Phantoms and F-16 Falcons and then serving as an instructor pilot. Following his tours of duty, he returned home to the



Steve Willis

Mount Vernon area and became deeply involved with airport activities and flight instruction. Willis is president of EAA Chapter 1155 at Mount Vernon, where he currently leads the chapter in the restoration of a Pietenpol aircraft.

Willis said that it was his time in the Air Force that led to his love for aviation, as he gave his reaction to being inducted into the Illinois Aviation Hall of Fame.

Please see **Aviation**, Page 2A

## Aviation:

*Continued from Page 1A*

"I am obviously very honored to be recognized by the Illinois Aviation Hall of Fame," Willis said. "I have been involved in aviation for almost 50 years, and it is quite an honor to be recognized."

Willis has also participated in Rend Lake RC Club activities and Angel Flights. He participates in Experimental Aircraft Association (EAA) Young Eagles activities as both a pilot and event coordinator, and works with the EAA Chapter to assist with coordination at the AirVenture Cup Races and Midwest LSA Expo. Willis is also active in community programs, including the local Lions Club, Gideons, Meals on Wheels, and Central Christian Church. He also is very active in the local Honor Guard, providing military recognition to those who served in the Armed Forces and have passed on.

"I enjoy the people, I enjoy teaching and when people solo (flight), the instructor has almost as much pride and joy as the student who soloed it," Willis said.

This year's Spirit of Flight Award will be presented to EAA Chapter 1155 of Mount Vernon. Spirit of Flight Awardees are selected for their contributions to aviation in Illinois, with a particular emphasis on volunteerism and contributions to the community, the press release states.

Willis, who is also president of EAA Chapter 1155, said that he is very proud of their chapter.

"I am really proud of the fact that our EAA Chapter has done that," Willis said.

EAA Chapter 1155 was organized in 1996. The chapter's mission is to further aviation in Southern Illinois. EAA Chapter 1155 hosted the Annual Little Egypt Fly In and Veterans Reunion from 1999 to 2012. Chapter members assisted with the Balloons Over Mount Vernon event occurring over the same weekend at the Little Egypt Fly-In and Veterans Reunion. Balloons Over Mount Vernon occurred from 2013 to 2018.



Sentinel File Photo

**SPIRIT OF FLIGHT** — Richard Irvin, LEFT, and Phil Beal stand in front of an EAA Young Eagle Build and Fly eKade LT 40 remote control aircraft. EAA Chapter 1155 of Mount Vernon was recently announced as the winner of this year's Illinois Aviation Hall of Fame Spirit of Flight Award.

Beginning in 2013 and occurring every other year, EAA 1155 has provided ground support duties at the EAA Airventure Cup Race at Mount Vernon Outland Airport. EAA Young Eagle flights were conducted at all events mentioned above. The chapter continues to offer at least one Young Eagle rally each year. To date, EAA Chapter 1155 has safely flown over 3,500 Young Eagle missions.

Perhaps the biggest contribution of EAA Chapter 1155 is the group's work at the annual Midwest LSA Expo. EAA Chapter 1155 members conduct all manner of volunteerism at this national aviation event. Starting at set up and ending at teardown, the "Orange Shirt Crew" handles air traffic monitoring, aircraft marshaling, ramp safety patrols and water delivery. Midwest LSA Expo enters its 14th year in 2022.

Willis said that they are always looking for new EAA members.

"If they are interested in aviation, get ahold of us, because we are always looking for members," Willis said. "You don't have to



own an airplane, you don't have to be a pilot. We still welcome you if you have an enthusiasm for aviation."

People may call Mount Vernon Outland Airport at (618) 242-7016 for more information.

Doug Kimmel has served as airport director for the Veterans Airport of Southern Illinois

(formerly Williamson County Airport), located at Marion, since 1998. He has worked tirelessly to improve airline and air cargo

service in southern Illinois and has guided the airport through a major runway extension and the development of the airport's new modern terminal building. The airport's Essential Air Service provider, Cape Air, now provides service to both Nashville and St. Louis, the press release states.

"It is a wonderful honor for myself, but really also for my family and the airport authority here at the airport, both whom have supported me and all the work I have had the opportunity to be a part of over the past 24 years here," Kimmel said. "I know many of those who have been inducted in years past some have been mentors of mine that are a part of the Hall of Fame. So to be amongst those ranks and colleagues of mine is truly an honor."

Under Kimmel's direction, the airport has become a place to honor veterans. Founded in 2016, Veterans Honor Flight of Southern Illinois regularly organizes Honor Flights for veterans, taking groups of veterans to Washington, D.C. Kimmel has served on the board of Veterans Honor Flight of Southern Illinois since its inception. He helps organize the flights and the fundraising events. This is a volunteer activity on Kimmel's part.

In addition to Honor Flights, Kimmel worked with others to bring airshows to the airport. The airshows occurred from 2000-2004 and then again in 2006. This activity brought thousands of people out to the airport. Kimmel has also worked diligently to attract warbird tours to the airport. Since 2012, the



Doug Kimmel

Commemorative Air Force, EAA and others have displayed a variety of aircraft at KMWA, making the aircraft available to the public for tours and rides. Often, these events also had Young Eagles rides as well. For a lot of these events, Kimmel also worked closely with EAA Chapter 277.

Kimmel explained what he finds most gratifying about his work and service over the past 24 years.

"To be involved in so many different levels as a representative of the airport. I remember back in 2007, I was testifying before a House aviation subcommittee on airport funding and program elements that affect airports across the country. Then, the next day, I was back home giving an airport tour to first graders, and there is a lot of in-between as far the types of things I get to be involved with. It is just that level of involvement that I have always found rewarding that I have been blessed to be a part of."

Other inductees this year include Donald Kirlin, founder and owner of Air USA, a United States government contractor that provides an array of tactical aircraft services to the U.S. defense agencies, defense contractors and foreign governments. John C. Robinson (1903-1954) was an African American aviator who led the way for generations to follow. In 1931, Robinson and his colleague, Cornelius Coffey, became the first Black Americans to receive their Aircraft and Engine Certification from Curtiss-Wright Aeronautical College (CWAU).

Mount Vernon Airport Authority Director Chris Collins, who is assisting with this year's Illinois Aviation Hall of Fame, commented on the inductees.

"The Hall of Fame is not just about aviators; it is about aviators that do things in their community outside of aviation," Collins said. "It is what they are doing for their community in a service role."

The Illinois Aviation Hall of Fame will honor its inductees at its annual banquet, to be held on June 16 at the Holiday Inn Hotel and Conference Center in Champaign. Visit the Illinois Aviation Hall of Fame website at [ilavhalloffame.org](http://ilavhalloffame.org) for more details. 6-14-22  
[jjones@morningsentinel.com](mailto:jjones@morningsentinel.com)