

Two local aviators receive FAA's

highest honor

*The award is considered
the highest civilian
aviation achievement*

BY JOSH JONES

SENTINEL NEWS STAFF

MOUNT VERNON — In a special ceremony at the recent Midwest LSA Expo in Mount Vernon, Steve Willis of Woodlawn and Orlando Ham of Opdyke were presented with the Wright Brothers Master Pilot Award.

According to a Mount Vernon Outland Airport news release, the

Wright Brothers Master Pilot Award is issued to pilots who have safely flown over 50 years from the date of their first solo. It is the highest civilian aviation achievement.

FAA Springfield Flight Standards Office Safety Programs Manager Nick Loftus was at the expo to present the awards. Along with the awards, Loftus presented both Willis and Ham with a master compilation containing copies of all official FAA records in both aviators' official files in Oklahoma City. In a room packed full of pilots, Loftus mentioned various highlights from the files including test scores and specific aircraft endorsements.

Willis, a USAF Academy

graduate, served in the Air Force after achieving the rank of Lt. Colonel. He flew F-4 "Phantoms," F-16 "Fighting Falcons," and T-38 "Talons" — later becoming an Instructor Pilot in the F-16, F-4 and T-38. He integrated himself into local aviation after retirement, flying corporate and instructing at Mount Vernon Outland Airport and Salem Leckrone Field. When combining his USAF and local flight instruction services, Willis has helped thousands of flight students over his aviation career. Willis is also an MVTHS Distinguished Alumnus and Illinois Aviation Hall of Fame Member, the release states.

"I am very honored, I have enjoyed a long career in aviation so it is nice to get recognized for that," Willis said.

Mount Vernon Outland Airport Director Chris Collins spoke highly of both award recipients as he commented on Willis' contributions to aviation.

"I think he has trained hundreds of people here in Mount Vernon and a little time in Salem, so a large percentage of us that had been certificated since 1997, Steve had a hand in helping," Collins said. "It is just wonderful to have that level of expertise sitting next to you in the cockpit."

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Ham is the owner/operator of Hams Aerial Spraying. He began his aviation career in 1963 working for Mt. Vernon Aviation Company, the Fixed Base Operator/Cessna Dealership at Mount Vernon Municipal Airport. He soloed various models of aircraft prior to becoming an officially licensed pilot, something rarely done these days.

While working for Mt. Vernon Aviation Company, Ham flew nearly all Cessna piston powered models. He has logged flight time in Piper, Luscomb, Stinson, Maule, North American (T6), Boeing (Stearman), and even owned/operated a "Twin Beech 18." In 1966, he started

Hams Aerial Spraying and has been heavily involved since its inception. The sounds and sights of his yellow "Ag-Cat" in the Jefferson County skies over the decades is so ingrained in local minds that any time one sees a yellow agricultural aircraft it is automatically assumed — "that must be Orlando Ham!" the release states.

Collins said that he has known Ham for most of his life and fondly recalled seeing him fly in his youth.

"The noisy yellow bi-plane flying over in the spring and summer and everyone knew it was Orlando," Collins said. "I got to know him more when I came to the airport and have been working with him throughout my career. ... Now he has a hangar next to me and the family has a 172 Skyhawk that is next to my hangar."

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Submitted Photo

FAA'S HIGHEST HONOR — During the recent Midwest LSA Expo at Mount Vernon Outland Airport, two local aviators were honored with the Wright Brothers Master Pilot Award, including Orlando Ham, CENTER, of Opdyke. The Wright Brothers Master Pilot Award is issued to pilots who have safely flown over 50 years from the date of their first solo. Pictured, FROM LEFT, are Sheri Campbell, daughter; Orlando Ham; and Todd Ham, son.



Submitted Photo

WRIGHT BROTHERS MASTER PILOT AWARD — During the recent Midwest LSA Expo at Mount Vernon Outland Airport, two local aviators were honored with the Wright Brothers Master Pilot Award, including Steve Willis of Woodlawn. It is the highest civilian aviation achievement. Pictured, FROM LEFT, are FAA Springfield Flight Standards Office Safety Programs Manager Nick Loftus; Kathy Willis, wife; and Steve Willis.

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