

# Iowa's forgotten history of flight and a man named Hunsaker



Kyle Munson, kmunson@dmreg.com 8:08 a.m. CDT July 15, 2016



(Photo: Kyle Munson/The Register)

GREENFIELD, Ia. — I stand at the dead end of a gravel road, in the shadow of a parked A-7 Corsair II attack jet, as Greg Schildberg strafes me with tales on his favorite topic: everything that flies.

How often had I driven by the [Iowa Aviation Museum](#), situated on the dead-end gravel just north of Greenfield at the municipal airport, south of the original [Freedom Rock](#) and Interstate Highway 80?

Dozens of times, at least?

Here I was, finally, introduced to yet another curious Iowa character. Schildberg, 62, is one of those guys who feels duty-bound to preserve what otherwise might fade away as forgotten Iowa lore.

No offense to "Birthplace of aviation" Ohio or "First in flight" North Carolina. But it turns out that Iowa soars higher in flight history than at first you might assume. And we figure heavily — "heavily" might not be the best word — in the history of dirigibles, or those "lighter-than-air" ships that, a century ago, enjoyed a brief, shining moment as the anticipated future of air travel.

For the one or two history nerds among you still reading, I should explain that this municipal airport and museum stand on what had been Schildberg's grandparents' farmland. The family's devotion to flying is why aviation history took root in this small town. Schildberg's late father, John, dropped out of high school during World War II so he could enroll at Iowa State University and fulfill the minimum requirement of one year of college to volunteer as an Army Air Corps pilot.

But when he reached Germany, the Army finally discovered that John was too young. He was relegated to chauffeuring a chaplain around the theater of battle.

Schildberg now runs his own construction company and auto service center and farms, as well as chairs the board of the nonprofit museum.

In short, he's a geologist with his head in the clouds.



Creston native Jerome Hunsaker arguably was one of the most important Americans, let alone Iowans, in the realm of flight in the 20th century. (Photo: Special

Schildberg got hooked on aircraft at 13, when his father gave him a 1929 Gipsy Moth airplane for his birthday. John amassed a collection of 17 aircraft by the time he died in 1981.

The son followed in his flight path and, 27 years ago, helped open this museum. Its Iowa Aviation Hall of Fame has since inducted 65 members. One of the newest additions, an Iowan to be inducted posthumously Aug. 27, is Creston native Jerome Hunsaker.

Hunsaker, Schildberg said, arguably rates as the most significant Iowan in aviation — even compared to, say, Amelia Earhart, the famed first woman to fly across the Atlantic Ocean, who graduated high

to The Register)

school in Des Moines.

## 'Lighter Than Air' lands in Greenfield

Before telling you more about Hunsaker, I should explain that, last year, Schildberg met David Wendell at the world's largest air show, [AirVenture](#) in Oshkosh, Wis.

Wendell, 48, is an amateur historian and fellow aviation nut from the other side of the state, in Marion. He was in Wisconsin selling lithographs. He and Schildberg talked.

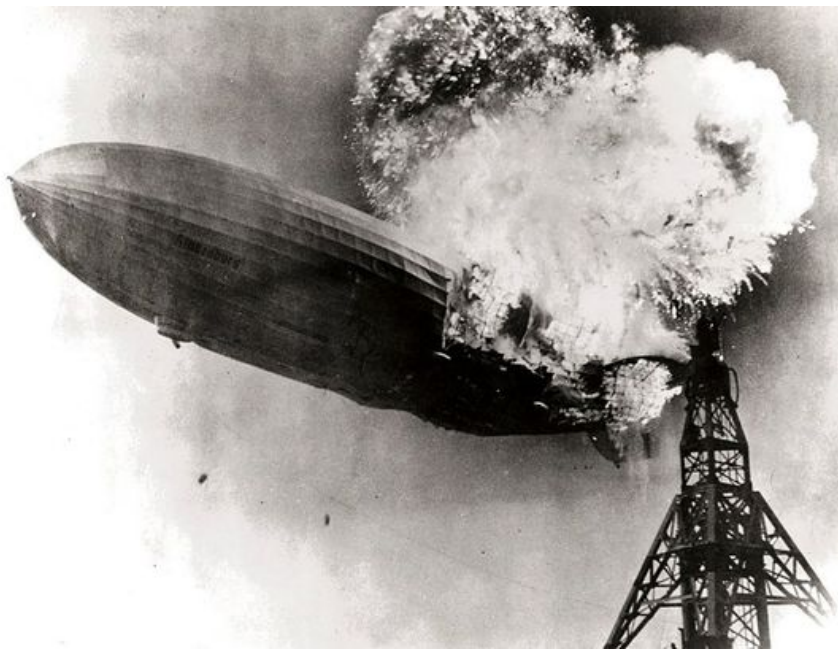
Their mutual admiration for Hunsaker led Wendell to assemble a new "Lighter Than Air" exhibit for the Greenfield museum. He mounted more than 150 images and captions on foam board that now line the middle of the museum hangar, surrounded by 14 old aircraft.



Historian David Wendell of Marion, Ia., holds a model of the U.S.S. Macon, the largest American airship ever built, at the entrance to an exhibit he has curated at the Iowa Aviation Museum in Greenfield honoring lighter than air flight in Iowa and around the world. (Photo: Special to The Register)

"Hunsaker believed that lighter than air was the future of aviation," Wendell said, "and until more powerful engines were developed, he was right."

If anybody knows anything about airships, it tends to be the tragedy that still occasionally flashes on one of the video screens in our newsroom in the form of a Des Moines Register front page published May 7, 1937: "HINDENBURG EXPLODES; 34 DIE."



The location of the Hindenburg airship's infamous crash on May 6, 1937, was the Navy base in Lakehurst, N.J. (Photo: Gannett File Photo)

That's the dirigible image seared into people's brains, thanks in part to the pervasiveness of early Led Zeppelin album covers.

"Hundreds of horrified spectators saw the zeppelin burst into flames and fall to earth at the Lakehurst, N.J., airport," reads the news story.

Others might instead picture the Goodyear blimp hovering above a Super Bowl.

It all began in America in 1793, with the first domestic flight by a balloon in Philadelphia. President George Washington was among the witnesses.

Germany's Count Ferdinand Von Zeppelin, inspired by simple balloons he saw floating above the battlefield as an observer during our Civil War, was inspired to build the first rigid airships in the 1890s. The first specimen took flight in 1900.



Charles Hamilton on Aug. 27, 1906, flew an airship from the fairgrounds to the Iowa State Capitol and hovered within 50 feet of the golden dome to the delight of 5,000 spectators. (Photo: Special to The Register)

Even the Iowa State Fair became part of the dirigible craze, in the early 20th century, when Charles Hamilton on Aug. 27, 1906, flew an airship from the fairgrounds to the Iowa State Capitol and hovered within 50 feet of the dome, to the delight of 5,000 onlookers.

During World War I, the Army Balloon School was based in Omaha.

Hunsaker, meanwhile, was a gifted structural engineer born in 1886 in Creston who graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy in 1912, then earned his engineering master's from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where he also became the first chairman of aeronautical engineering.

He oversaw construction of the first aircraft to fly across the Atlantic Ocean (nine years before Charles Lindbergh). He was the first person to procure aircraft for the U.S. military. He commissioned the Navy's first aircraft carrier. He built the largest airships (875 feet long) ever constructed in the nation. (Alas, both of them crashed into the ocean.) He wrote the English translations for the work of Gustave

Eiffel, the French civil engineer and architect for whom the Eiffel Tower is named.

He was vice president of the Goodyear Zeppelin Co. He ran the NACA (National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics), retiring in 1958, just as it transformed into NASA (the National Aeronautics and Space Administration).

Wind tunnels, radio communication between aircraft, teletype machines at airports, Area 51: Hunsaker seemingly influenced most of the flight culture of the early 20th century.

He died in 1984.

Hunsaker will be inducted Aug. 27 with a dinner and ceremony, followed by dancing in the museum hangar.

"I've never run across anybody like him," Schildberg said of Hunsaker.

I doubt I would have run across him at all, had I not finally turned down this dead-end gravel road.

It's summer in Iowa. Go find your own little detour that you've been putting off for years.

*Kyle Munson can be reached at 515-284-8124 or [kmunson@dmreg.com](mailto:kmunson@dmreg.com). See more of his columns and video at [DesMoinesRegister.com/KyleMunson](http://DesMoinesRegister.com/KyleMunson). Connect with him on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#) (@KyleMunson), and on Snapchat (@kylemunsoniowa).*