

Fifty years of flight: a conversation with Mike Connell

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At 16, Can Fly Plane, Can't Drive Car

By Donna Jones

INDEPENDENCE — Sunday was a "big day" in the life of young Michael "Mike" Connell of Independence—on his 16th birthday he soloed an airplane for the first time at the Independence Municipal airport.

Mike, the son of Mr. and Mrs. James Connell, is the first person in the history of the local airport to obtain a student pilot license at age 16, the minimum age as required by federal regulations.

He made the flight in a plane belonging to J and J Flying Service, operated and owned by the elder Connell and John Tibbets of Marion.

Ground School

Having taken flight instructions for the last month from his father, manager of the Independence airport, he also just completed a ten-week course in aviation ground school through the adult edu-

cation program sponsored by the Independence Community high school. There again his father was the teacher.

The student pilot license will enable Mike to do all the flying needed in order to qualify for his private pilot's license which he could obtain with necessary qualifications at the minimum age of 17.

Ironically, young Connell can now fly an airplane alone at 16 but cannot drive a car alone, as he will not qualify for a driver's license until the end of the current school year when he has completed driver's education training.

The Independence municipal airport is now making a comeback after partially recovering from damages on July 3, 1971, when a severe wind and rainstorm caused more than \$100,000 damage to the airport, destroying 14 airplanes and the six hangars there. One of the hangars was owned by the city and also

was used for maintenance and repair of planes.

The new Municipal airport had been dedicated during the summer of 1966 with additional improvements and equipment added since that time.

New Hangar

Last year a 40 by 96-foot combination hangar maintenance building was constructed with money raised by the Indee Aviation Boosters, Inc., a non-profit group. The city is leasing land at the airport for the building to the group at \$1 per year for a 20-year period.

Presently 12 airplanes are based at the airport with flying interest in the area on the upswing, according to airport officials.

There are ten persons from the Independence area now taking flight instructions, Connell said. The students include one woman, Rita Norton, who is the physical therapist at People's Memorial hospital here.



Michael Connell of Independence
... He Soloed at Age 16 ...



COURTESY PHOTO

Mike Connell (left) and Jim Connell with the "2nd Generation" plaque at the Iowa Aviation Museum.

Iowa Aviation Museum honors Iowa's "2nd Generation" of aviation promoters

Jim and Mike Connell receive distinguished award

By JOHN KLOTZBACH
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INDEPENDENCE — Jim Connell has been a part of aviation since 1954 when he joined the Army and became an aircraft mechanic. After the Army he worked for PanAm at night, while continuing his education during the day. In 1968, after a short stint at the Colwell Airport, he became the first Fixed Base Operator (FBO) of the Independence Municipal Airport.

While airplanes pretty much still fly the same (i.e. stick and rudder), he has seen quite few changes in technology.

"Avionics is the biggest change,"

said Connell. "Pilots can navigate, with pinpoint accuracy, with a push of a button on a GPS."

Connell has overseen many changes at the Independence Airport during his tenure as FBO. Through support of aviation fuel taxes, the airport now has a 5,500 ft. run way, a parallel taxiway, and GPS guided approaches.

"It's the finest airport in northeast Iowa," he said.

Even in semi-retirement, he continues his passion and works at the airport doing fabrication and restoration.

Because of his life-long passion, Connell was recently honored at the Iowa Aviation Museum in Greenfield.

Opening in May 1990, the Iowa Aviation Museum, was formed to preserve, display and educate the public on Iowa's aviation heritage. The collection includes many vintage aircraft and other historical memorabilia ranging from balloons of the 1800s to Iowa's contribution to space exploration. The museum was dedicated to the original Aviation Pioneers, whose hard work, tireless hours and sometimes dangerous efforts created the Iowa general aviation industry of airports, aerial transportation, instruction and agriculture applications.

As the museum approaches its silver

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Local newspaper clipping of Mike Connell (left) and his father, Jim Connell (right) accepting award '2nd Generation' of Aviation Promoters

Fifty years of flight: a conversation with Mike Connell



Lon Haenel, publisher

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DECORAH, Iowa -- Long before powered flight, men and women gazed upward. They longed to do the impossible: fly.

Mike Connell, 66, was honored today by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) for his dedication and career of flying that spans 50 years. Connell earned his first pilot certificate when he was only 16 years old.

At the Decorah Airport, the FAA presented Connell with the Master Pilot Award. An open house followed where friends, families, and other pilots recognized Connell and helped him celebrate.

Connell holds private and commercial pilot certificates, with instrument and multi-engine ratings. "I teach the art of flying," Connell said. He provides lessons and instruction to others thanks to his multiple certified flight instructor designations. He teaches others looking to earn their private and/or commercial certificates and their instrument and/or multi-engine ratings.

The Master Pilot's expertise does not end with flying. He is also dual-rated. "I'm able to fly and fix," Connell said. He is certified by the FAA as an Airframe & Powerplant mechanic and has his Annual Inspection designation, too.

Connell has a lifetime of experience. He was six years old when he first flew with his father, Jim Connell. Flying is in the family and Mike caught the bug. "My dad was building time to earn his pilot's certificate," Connell said. "I remember flying from Marion to Marshalltown and back."

He modestly explained that he was only 16 years old when he first soloed an aircraft. "I flew my first solo in the morning," Connell said. "After I finished, I got a ride to school since I didn't have my drivers license yet." The 'first solo' is a right of passage for new student pilots. "My logbook showed 6.9 hours when I soloed," Connell continued. Student pilots gain experience and learn the skills that will eventually earn them a private pilot certificate. For Connell, that first ride at a young age was a big day.

Today Connell, and his wife, Ava, own Connell Flying Service. The 30 year-old business is a so-called fixed based operation, or FBO. The business provides flight lessons, sells airplane fuel, and provides aircraft maintenance. "Over the years, we've taught over 200 students," Connell said. He explained he stays very busy providing other aircraft owners with inspections, repairs, and maintenance. "I love flying and help others to love it, too," Connell said.

His accomplishments are being passed down to a new generation of pilots. Just like himself, Connell has soloed ten other students on their 16th birthday plus his son Chad Connell, as well. "I train to proficiency," Connell said. "After all these years, I still get a knot in my stomach watching a student solo the first time." He said he is always on the airport grounds watching carefully. "When I stop getting that knot in my stomach, I know it's my time to quit."

Mike Connell was recognized with another award, along with his father, Jim Connell. The Iowa Aviation Museum in 2014 recognized Mike and Jim with the '2nd Generation Award.' They were selected by a group of peers. The pair exemplifies how exactly a family of aviators promote the vocation of flight.

Connell is excited about the Decorah Airport, which is owned by the City of Decorah. "We live in a great city," Connell said. "And every great airport starts with a great city."

As a Fixed Base Operator at the airport, he glows talking about the city and the five-member airport commission. "We are responsible with our airport budget," Connell explained. "We try to save where we can, and buy equipment with the savings." The airport commission, Connell said, is responsible for budgeting, oversight, and project management. "They are so easy to work with," Connell added.

The future looks bright for the Decorah Airport, Connell said. The city is planning to rebuild a new shop and terminal, with solar energy generation. "Our airport is such a great asset to the area," Connell said.

Flying is all about feel, whether you're 16 or 116. "You must cultivate a feel for the airplane," said Connell. "There is so much technology in today's modern cockpit," he said. From GPS to autopilot to digital instruments and engine gauges, technology dominates the flight panel. "When I started," he said, "everything was (analog) gauges." He warned that new pilots must first learn the feel and tendencies of the airplane. "Sometimes, we forget the actual feel of flying the airplane," Connell said.

Connell Flying Service is currently training six student pilots. He said he tells new students that the people are what make aviation so great. "People are great and we have a great group of pilots here. Everybody helps everybody else," Connell said.

Mike Connell encourages anyone with a flying curiosity to check it out. He gives simple advice after 50 years of flying, "The hardest part about learning to fly is just getting to the airport."

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