



Jim Stamps, 83, at his home in Russellville, holds The Wright Brothers Master Pilot Award he received May 10 for his dedication and service to aviation safety. The honor is given to pilots who have 50 or more continuous years as a pilot without incident.

Jim Stamps of Russellville was honored for 50-plus years as a commercial pilot without incident, but, if it existed, he could have gotten an award for having the most famous passengers.

Stamps, who turned 83 last week, is low-key about his career, which includes serving as a pilot for politicians and celebrities such as Richard Nixon, then-Gov. Bill Clinton, Barry Goldwater, Vic Damone, Cameron Diaz and Mick Jagger.

That was just a side gig.

Stamps has just about done it all, from seaplanes to jumbo jets.

“It shocks people when they find out I’m type-rated in 50 different airplanes,” he said, laughing. Most pilots might have certificates to fly two or three types of planes, he said.

Stamps speaks in the present tense. He has been flying for 67 years — and counting. He retired as captain, No. 1 in seniority, after 37 years with Northwest Airlines and now is director of operations for Air America in Florida.

“I fly the Falcon 50 and the 900,” he said.

It all started when he was 15 and went to flight school at what was then Arkansas Polytechnic, now Arkansas Tech University.

“I wanted something that would go fast, and the airplane was about the fastest thing at that time. It still is, I guess,” he said. “I just loved aviation. Very few airplanes ever flew close to our house, but my mother said I would chase [a plane] as long as I could see it or hear it.”

He did not have his mother’s blessing to become a pilot.

“My mother didn’t really respect airplanes, and she was afraid of them, in fact,” Stamps said. “I had to sneak away to fly. My father knew most of the time.

“Arkansas Tech, when I was in high school, it had a government program that taught GIs from World War II,” he said. It was the Civilian Aeronautics Administration then. Stamps was given special permission to enroll in the college program. “I guess I was 15 at the time,” he said.

Stamps stayed in high school but went to the airport for certain classes.

“Arkansas Tech deserves a lot of credit. Had it not been for Arkansas Tech, I don’t know what I would have been doing. Arkansas Tech gave me the break I needed,” Stamps said.

He soloed at 16. By age 17, he had his private license; at 18, he had his commercial pilot’s license.

Stamps’ first job was as a crop duster in McGehee.

“I really wasn’t comfortable crop dusting, so I selected the Navy instead of the Army,” he said.

“I was lucky enough that I got to fly in the Navy, and I was there four years. I flew the same airplane for three years — the Mars. It was the biggest airplane in the Korean conflict — they didn’t call it a war. It was a four-engine seaplane; it had to stay in the water — no wheels on it at all. The only time it got up on land, they would tow it up for maintenance. It was huge.

“All the time I was in the Navy, at 4 o’clock in the afternoon, usually I could get off, and I would work for Transocean Airlines [in Oakland, California]. I was there flying a DC4 for them as co-pilot when I was 22.”

Stamps was rotated off active duty at the end of the war and lived in San Francisco, California. He was hired by an airline called South West Airlines in San Francisco, not the Southwest of today.

“After eight months, I became an instructor for the airlines, starting in the DC3,” he said. “I did that, check airman for the airline, for years. There were no simulators then.”

The airline changed names several times through mergers, until it became Northwest. He flew a DC3, Martin 404s and F27s, DC 9s and Boeing 727s, as well as a Boeing 767 before the merger.

At one point, reclusive billionaire Howard Hughes bought the airline, and it became Hughes Air.

“I met Howard Hughes a long time before I worked for him at Hughes Air,” Stamps said. “He was always in Levi’s and white tennis shoes. He was just a strange man, and that’s all I can say. He lived his life like no one else.”

In the 1970s, Stamps was recommended to fly for high-profile clients.

“I flew Nixon in California. He stayed to himself most of the time. He was friendly, but he wasn’t as outgoing as Clinton, I’ll put it that way.”

Stamps flew Clinton when he was governor of Arkansas.

Jimmy Carter was “a very friendly guy, and he was just an old country boy,” Stamps said. “I flew him when he was running for president.”

Stamps was a pilot for U.S. Sen. Barry Goldwater, too.

If it had to do with flying, it seems that Stamps was involved.

He and his son, Jimmy, started a flight school in Russellville, which was connected with Arkansas Tech. They ran it from 1988 until 1991.

“We had 60 full-time students at this airport, which was really unheard of,” Stamps said.

“The best part about this ... all the guys who came here from Germany, the Netherlands, Italy and Holland, they’re all flying captain for the major, major airlines,” he said.

Stamps said those former students still keep in touch with him.

The veteran pilot’s experiences and cargo have been diverse.

“In 1991, when I retired, I was hired by the Chinese, and we lived out in Palau Island in the South Pacific between Guam and Philippines,” Stamps said. “We flew tuna fish, and I had my son as a co-pilot and my sister’s son as a flight engineer. We lived out there for three years. It’s a beautiful, beautiful island.”

Stamps’ son, also a captain, is a pilot in Thailand.

After Palau, Stamps was hired to fly a private Boeing 727 jet for a large pharmaceutical company in California.

“We toured 38 countries in 45 days. That was the first flight I flew with them,” he said.

“After that, we flew to different countries all over the place because we were based in Europe.”

He stayed with the company for six months.

Stamps said that after he retired in 1991, he started flying smaller jets for an eclectic clientele.

“The first one I flew was Mick Jagger. I picked him up on an island in the Caribbean, I think it was St. Lucia, and I flew him to New York. He was just a real, real nice gentleman. I was shocked because I didn’t like his music. The woman I flew with him

was the woman that committed suicide,” Stamps said, referring to Jagger’s longtime girlfriend, fashion designer L’Wren Scott.

“He came up into the cockpit, and they had been on an island out there that had a volcano erupt, and he wanted to know if I would fly over there so we could look at it, so I did, but we didn’t see much. We were at about 35,000 feet. The weather was real bad in New York, and the ride was real bumpy for them,” Stamps said.

Cameron Diaz is on the list of the rich and famous Stamps has piloted, too.

“I had gone to the airport (in Florida) to check the airplane, and while I was there, they said, ‘Hey, there’s a group that wants to go from Fort Lauderdale to Burbank.’ I said, ‘Well, I’m at the airplane; I might as well go.’ I didn’t have a uniform or anything.”

It was Cameron Diaz and her entourage of eight to 10 people.

“She’s giddy, like a high school girl, but she had just made the movie *In Her Shoes*,” Stamps said.

“She’s very, very nice. Very pretty. She had extensions in her hair — her hair was real long. We were flying a Gulf Stream, which is very fast. It took us about five hours to get to California. She had long hair when we left Florida and short hair when we got to California. I went back there to go to the restroom about three hours out, and she was on the floor picking up her hair that they’d pulled out. So she was very nice,” he said.

“Vic Damone, he is very, very nice. I flew him quite a bit. He got me drinking pinot grigio wine,” Stamps said, laughing. Not while flying, of course. “He said, ‘Hey, this is real good. You need to try this.’”

Stamps said his wife of 48 years, Paula, a former flight attendant, had her picture made with Damone.

The pilot’s illustrious career was recognized in 2004 when he was inducted into the Arkansas Aviation Hall of Fame.

“I was very, very proud; let’s face it,” Stamps said.

The man who spoke before Stamps had been captured by the Japanese in World War II.

“It was great hearing all this stuff. You think about his life and how different my life has been,” Stamps said.

When it was his turn to speak, Stamps said, “All I could think of was, ‘It’s a long way from Pea Ridge, Arkansas.’”

The Wright Brothers Master Pilot Award was presented to Stamps on May 10 at the Carlisle Airport. The award is given by the Department of Transportation Federal Aviation Administration. Stamps is one of 2,799 pilots in the United States who has been given the honor, and one of 30 in Arkansas.

“This one came as a shock to me. I didn’t even know it existed,” Stamps said of the honor. “It was quite rewarding for me because I’ve been there more than 50 years continuously.”

From his first solo in 1947 to the present, “that’s a lot of years,” he said.

Has he been lucky, or is he just that good? Stamps paused when asked the question, choosing his words carefully.

“I think God probably said, ‘This little guy needs help, so I’m going to stay with him.’ I’ve been lucky, and I’ve enjoyed it.

“I’ve had a career that is unbelievable, and that’s all I can say — unbelievable.”

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