

Aviation Veteran Inducted Into Wyoming Aviation Hall Of Fame

Robert Johnson's Career Spanned Almost Half A Century

Robert "Handlebar" Johnson of Cheyenne, whose 45-year aviation career included serving as a control tower and flight service station operator, National Guard helicopter pilot and glider tow pilot at the Air Force Academy, is the 2004 inductee into the Wyoming Aviation Hall of Fame.

Johnson was selected by the Wyoming Aeronautics Commission at its quarterly meeting, and a ceremony marking his induction is being planned for January.



A Chicago native who moved to Bridgeport (NE) at the age of 5, Johnson caught the aviation bug about five years later, when he flew for the first time.

Spectators at a barnstorming exhibition were offered a ride in a Ford Tri-Motor for 50 cents, and Johnson managed to get the co-pilot's seat.

"Thereafter I wanted only to fly," he recalled. "I built basement planes with controls moveable to a degree, and spent hours with a comic book that explained the coordinated use of those controls."

Nine days after graduating from high school in 1942, Johnson enlisted in the Navy, but because he was only 17, he couldn't get into flight training. Instead, he became one of the first operators in the new and still secret field of radar.

After a seagoing tour on the destroyer USS McLanahan, he was assigned to Oceana Naval Auxiliary Air Station in Virginia. When civilian flying resumed after V-E Day in 1945, Johnson immediately started taking flight training and soloed for the first time in October of that year.

Once discharged from the Navy and back in the West, he took a job as a station agent in Rawlins for Challenger Airlines, which later merged with Monarch Airlines and became Frontier. He later worked as a station manager in Greeley (CO), and Rock Springs.

He joined the Army National Guard and was accepted for pilot training, finishing ninth in a class of 102. In the years that followed, he flew 45 different types of military liaison and general aviation aircraft, including on search missions and flights to deliver rabies vaccine and other emergency medical supplies.

He was accepted for helicopter pilot training in 1958, and became the Wyoming Army National Guard's first helicopter pilot, getting his certificate just minutes before a Casper pilot.

Also in 1958, Johnson began training as an air traffic controller for the federal agency that evolved into the Federal Aviation Administration. He became the flight service specialist and controller at the Cheyenne Combined Station Tower, where he worked for 18 years.

He was an active participant in the Wyoming Aeronautics Commission's aviation safety seminars that resulted in a significant reduction in general aviation accidents in the state.

Johnson retired from the FAA at the end of 1979, but was soon back at work, towing cadet gliders into the air at the Air Force Academy. After three years there, he signed on as a tow pilot for the Colorado Soaring Association at the Owl Canyon Gliderport near Wellington (CO), where he flew until July 1990.

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