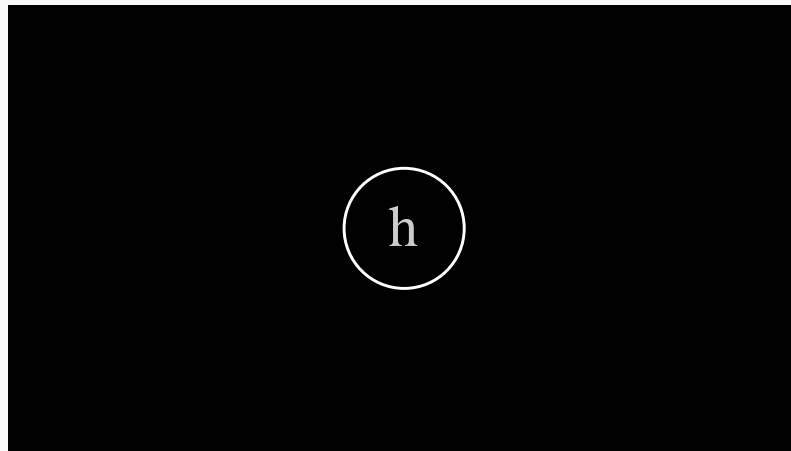


The world's oldest pilot, an Iowan, takes flight on his 99th birthday

Mike Kilen, mkilen@dmreg.com 7:20 p.m. CST December 21, 2016



Ernie Smith of Red Oak, Iowa, is the oldest active pilot in the world according to Guinness World Records. Rodney White/The Register



(Photo: Rodney White/The Register)

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Ernie Smith is considered the oldest active pilot in the world. He says he'd rather be the world's youngest, but at any age there's no better place than in the air.

So on his 99th birthday Wednesday, the Red Oak pilot easily stepped up into the tiny 1968 Cessna 150, roared the engine, and took off south down the runway.

He's been flying since he got his first license in 1946, cruising over the farm fields of southern Iowa and into his favorite view — the rising sun.

"I don't know how you could see anything nicer," Smith said.

As he piloted the plane to 3,000 feet, Smith said he loves it so much that he could fly for an hour, go have a cup of coffee at the Red Oak Municipal Airport, and fly another hour, if his budget allowed.

He figures there can't be any pilots with more takeoffs and landings. He budgets enough to rent a \$90-an-hour airplane and take three or four short flights a week.

After word got out that a California pilot was claiming to be the world's oldest pilot, Smith's family applied to the Guinness World Records, which confirmed in September that Smith was the record-holder. Federal Aviation Administration officials also confirm that he is the oldest license holder in its records.

"I couldn't care less," Smith said, with a laugh.

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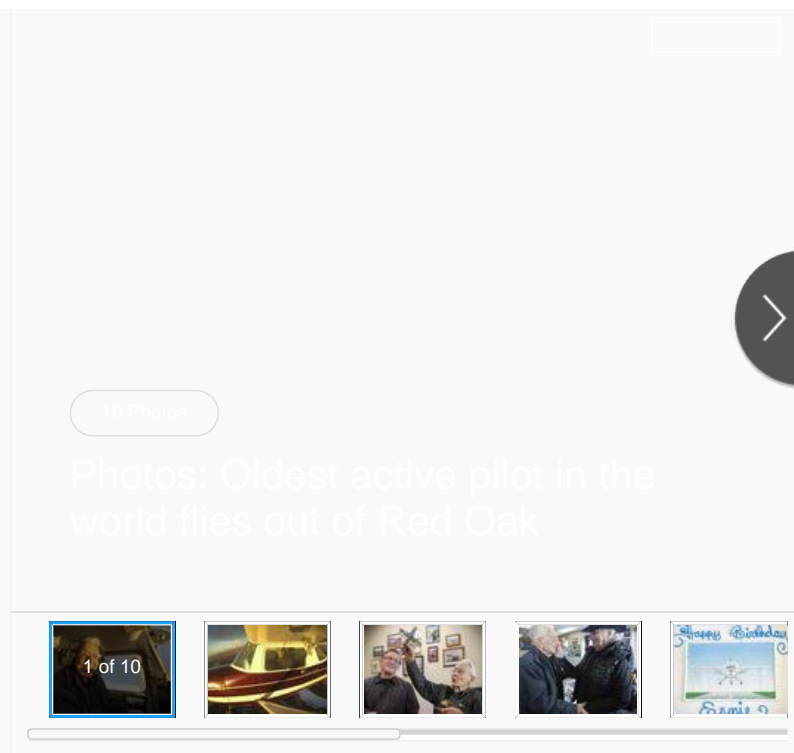


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He fell in love with flying as a farm boy. He was given a dollar to go to the carnival in town. But he learned a man was giving airplane rides for a buck, so Smith walked a mile to find him. It was a thrill to look down on the land from high above. When he returned to the carnival, his friends on the Ferris wheel laughed because he had no money to ride.

"I was a whole lot higher than that," he told them.

After that, when pilots zoomed overhead for training during the war, he would run to the fields waving his white flags at them. One time he heard a plane overhead while taking a bath and was so excited that he jumped from the tub to see it overhead, only afterward realizing he was standing outside naked.

He would save \$2 to take 15 minutes of \$8-an-hour flight lessons, and finally got his license in 1946. When he got older, instead of buying a wristwatch, he spent it on flights.

Over the years, he flew to Canada to fish, to Boulder, Colo., and all over the Midwest, piloting "Cubs to Bonanzas and everything in between."

"He flew me to my wedding at the Little Brown Church in Nashua in 1963," said his son, Mike Smith of Omaha, who joined several others for his father's birthday celebration at the airport in the afternoon.



Ernest Smith of Red Oak, Iowa, pilots a flight on his 99th birthday Wednesday Dec. 21, 2016, out of the Red Oak municipal airport. Guinness World Records recognizes Smith as the oldest active pilot in the world. He still flies two to three times a week. He was born Dec. 21, 1917, and received his pilot's license in 1946. (Photo: Rodney White/The Register)

Norm Yeager, a flight instructor at the airport, said Smith is a terrific pilot. He remembers his textbook landing in a 15-knot crosswind.

"I'm trying to just follow in his footsteps," said Yeager, who is 82.

The airport specializes in pilot longevity. During one FAA presentation in 2015, four pilots were given awards for 50 years of flying, said airport manager Kevin McGrew.

Hanging on the wall near Smith's birthday cake was this plaque: "Time spent flying is not deducted from one's lifespan."

Age doesn't matter, Smith said. His health has been good most of his life. Every two years, he has with little trouble passed his medical exam and flight test required to fly, he said.

"Flying doesn't take special skills," he said, leaning in to lower his voice. "But there are some guys who shouldn't be flying, and I've ridden with them."

Smith has needed his skills a few times. Once, his airplane was malfunctioning and he had to throttle hard to clear the airport fence before its tail ripped through stalks of corn. Another time he made an emergency landing in South Dakota during a rainstorm.

He drove a beer truck for a living, retiring 32 years ago, and he got second looks as he pulled the truck up to hop in an airplane. He hadn't been drinking, of course, and rarely has done so during his healthy life.



Ernest Eli Smith of Red Oak, Iowa, shows a hammerhead stall with a gift model P-51 Mustang on his 99th birthday Wednesday Dec. 21, 2016, at the Red Oak municipal airport. Guinness World Records recognizes Smith as the oldest active pilot in the world. At left is airport manager Kevin McGrew.

(Photo: Rodney White/The Register)

But by age 80, his wife, Leila, convinced him to give up flying. After her death six years ago, his buddies at the airport convinced him to give it a go again.

"Nothing to do," he said. "Why not?"

His family says it has kept him from being sad and lonely after his wife's death. His favorite route is over the old farm northeast of Red Oak, where he recalls the wooden silo that once stood. As a young boy, he would swing 6 feet in the air from a loose cable attached to it. Even then he liked to fly.

"I would fly every day," he said. "But especially on my birthday."

As Smith flew his plane over the East Nishnabotna River Wednesday, proclaiming it the "crookedest" stretch of river in Iowa, he took in every detail of the familiar land below.

After another textbook landing, he was asked how long he would keep flying.

"As long as I live," he said.

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