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Bill Riley Receives Master Pilot Award

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FAA honors Air Evac Lifeteam pilot and Flight Simulator Instructor with prestigious award.

More than 55 years after his first solo flight, Bill Riley was honored by the Federal Aviation Administration with the prestigious Wright Brothers “Master Pilot” award. Riley, a flight simulator instructor for Air Evac Lifeteam, received the award from Randy Ottinger, FAA Safety Team Program Manager. The Wright Brothers “Master Pilot” award honors pilots who have at least 50 years of safe flying.

“This award recognizes the lifetime accomplishments of pilots,” Ottinger said. “Requirements to receive the honor include professionalism, skill and aviation expertise. Pilots must be a United States citizen and have 50 years of U.S. piloting experience and hold a Civil Aviation Authority or Federal Aviation Administration license. Up to 20 years of military service may be credited toward the 50 years.”

His interest in flying began when Riley worked for his uncle.

“My uncle John was a bomber pilot instructor in World War II,” he said. “He had a machine shop and built farm equipment. He hated sand blasting, so he traded me one hour of flight instruction for every two hours of sand blasting I did in the machine shop.”

His completed his first solo flight in a Cessna on May 19, 1965.

Riley served his country during the Vietnam War. When he was drafted, Riley served as an artillery supervisor for his first tour.

“I wanted to make the military my career, but not in artillery,” he said. So, Riley went to flight school. He retired from the United States Army in 1994 and went to Atlanta.

“I got the contract to provide helicopter EMS service for the 1996 Summer Olympic Games,” he said. “I leased a helicopter for that and flew 26 patients. The crowds were so great that the ground EMS units couldn’t get through to the hospitals.”

He continued in the industry and came to Air Evac Lifeteam in 2005, starting his career as a line pilot for the Scottsboro, Ala., base. Riley became a flight instructor for Air Evac Lifeteam in 2016, and now serves as a flight simulator instructor at the company’s national headquarters in O’Fallon, Mo.

Receiving the “Master Pilot” award is quite the honor, Riley said. “At least I’ve lived long enough to do it.”

Today’s safety enhancements are significant for the Helicopter Air Ambulance industry. Riley said Night Vision Goggles, a glass cockpit and autopilot make flying safer than it’s ever been before. Glass cockpit is so much safer. “I have friends flying for other companies who are very envious of our (Air Evac Lifeteam) equipment. If a pilot doesn’t lose his/her cool, there is no reason they shouldn’t have a successful outcome.”

His advice for those who dream of flying helicopters, “It’s all about attitude,” Riley said. “If you’ve got a good attitude and pay your dues, there are lots of opportunities. But you have to work your way up to them.”



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