



Captain Dan Donovan 43,000 and counting

By Frederick Beseler

To recount Dan Donovan's long and distinguished aviation career would require a book—in multiple volumes. He has logged more than 43,000 flying hours and although retired from airline flying since 1984, he continues to fly and provide flight instruction. What his logbooks don't include are the many hours over 27 years that Dan served as safety chairman for North Central, Republic, and Northwest Airlines and as a safety advisor to other pilot groups including the Air Line Pilots Association (ALPA), plus his service to the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB), and the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA).

Dan, who lives in Brookfield, Wisconsin, will be inducted into the Wisconsin Aviation Hall of Fame on Saturday evening, October 29, 2011 in Oshkosh.

Dan Donovan is one of the most respected, admired, and decorated pilots in Wisconsin aviation history. It's no sign of disrespect to call him an "old, bold pilot." He has been flying ever since he was 13 years old—a little over 71 years ago—and for his entire career he has been a bold, leading advocate for ever-improving aviation safety.

His many aviation accomplishments

include the Air Line Pilots Association Air Safety Award in 1986 recognizing Dan for creating a safety structure for the pilots of North Central and Republic Airlines that became the model for numerous pilots' groups. In 2008, he received the Federal Aviation Administration's Wright Brothers Master Pilot Award, recognizing Dan for demonstrating professionalism, skill, and aviation expertise by maintaining safe operations for more than 50 years.

Like many pilots, Dan has a soft spot in his heart for the Douglas DC-3 that he flew in his early years with North Central.

Dan says, "Yes, I've received many awards and been recognized and so I've looked good, but it's all because of the many excellent people who have mentored and tutored me, and worked with me, for me, and around me. They made me look good. I consider this a great honor and privilege because it is recogni-

tion from my peers—my whole life has been filled with great people. Being inducted into the Wisconsin Aviation Hall of Fame is a great privilege."

In addition to his many years as an airline pilot, Dan has served the Wisconsin Civil Air Patrol as an instructor and check pilot for 30 years.

When asked if he'd had any close calls during his career, Dan can't recall anything serious. Dan's long, safe flying career is a testament to his careful, detailed planning and preparation that began his first formal flight lessons at age 16. His superb attention to detail began with Dan's first flight instructor. Says Dan, "Stewart Belchmuer was a wonderful, fun-loving fellow, but around an airplane he was all business. You really had to know what you were doing and why. He was a real stickler on proper procedures and you really had to do your homework. If you weren't prepared for the next flight lesson, he wouldn't fly. He just didn't think there was any point to going up if you weren't ready."

Clearly, Dan also had an aptitude for flying, soloing at eight hours. "I learned to fly in a Cub. In addition to stalls, Stewart taught me spins. I've met many

pilots today who have accumulated many, many flying hours but have yet to intentionally spin an airplane. They just don't teach spins anymore."

Dan does recall a North Central flight when he was taking off in foggy, IFR conditions. "Just as my first officer called rotate and we lifted off we got an engine warning light. We had to shut the engine down but continue the takeoff. And there was no way we could return to the departure airport in that fog.

"Fortunately we were flying a Convair 580. We shut down the failing engine and just continued on to our destination. That airplane really had power! Had we been in a different aircraft we would have really had to have been at our very best."

Dan says the Convair 580 was one of his favorite airplanes. "We called it our 48-seat fighter. It had power (two Allison 501 turboprop engines, each delivering 4350 shaft horsepower) and a cruise speed up to 300 knots!"

Like many pilots, Dan has a soft spot in his heart for the Douglas DC-3 that he flew in his early years with North Central. "We could do things with that airplane that were just about unbelievable! A great airplane."

Along the way, Dan served in the U.S. Navy and earned his



Bachelor of Science degree in liberal arts from Marquette University.

After the DC-3 and before the Convair 580 Dan also flew North Central's Convair 240, 340, and 440 piston-engine airliners and then brought the jet-powered McDonnell-Douglas DC-9 into service with North Central.

He also enjoyed flying the Civil Air Patrol's Beech T-34. "That was a good airplane for instructing. You could really let a student pilot go without getting into too much trouble...it was a six-G airplane, you know," says Dan.

Overall, he likes Cessna products. "They're good, solid, safe airplanes without any bad vices." Dan knows as he's flown them all, from the taildragger 120s, 140s, and 170s to the light twins. "You know, I was the first to fly a Cessna 172 into the State of Wisconsin."

His advice to young aviators just learning to fly? "Get with a good flight instructor and with a good aviation school like Gran-Aire. There are many good schools out there, but look for one like Gran-Aire at Timmerman Airport (MWC) near Milwaukee. They are well-organized, have excellent flight and ground school instructors and they do it right. They have the complete package that will allow a student pilot to get the most out of their time and money."

Of the many highlights of his career, Dan is proud of his work in developing and establishing the arrival and departure procedures that North Central Airlines used when the Experimental Aircraft Association (EAA) first held its annual fly-in convention at Oshkosh. Dan says, "We had three flights daily at Oshkosh—a morning, a mid-day, and an evening flight. The morning and evening flights we knew wouldn't be much of a



Dan Donovan, above, circa 1957, when he was flying for North Central Airlines. Left, ready for a Civil Air Patrol flight. Previous page, Dan in 1946.

concern, but the mid-day flight we knew would be a challenge. The last thing any airline wants is a mid-air collision.”

As he always has, Dan leads by example. And so he made the first mid-day North Central flight into Oshkosh during the fly-in. After landing, Dan called North Central operations and issued a directive that there would be no mid-day arrival or departures at Oshkosh during the fly-in until further notice and until the proper procedures had been developed to maintain adequate separation between the North Central airliners and the various homebuilt, antique, and warbird aircraft.

“My team worked with the FAA and Paul Poberezny at EAA and developed a good, workable procedure. It was another example of good aviation folks coming together to solve a problem,” said Dan.

At a reunion of North Central pilots, nearly every one of the 180 retired pilots attending had flown as Dan’s co-pilot at one time or another. An issue of “Clear & Sixty,” a Republic Airlines publication, noted that “Dan was legendary within the airline for his knack and enthusiasm for helping younger pilots learn the ropes and become experts themselves.”

Over the years Dan has been a member of many aviation organizations including EAA (lifetime membership awarded by Paul Poberezny recognizing Dan’s work on airline coordination during the many EAA fly-ins at Oshkosh), Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association, ISASI (International Society of Air Safety Investigators), and NAFI (National Association of Flight Instructors). He has been a member of ALPA and represented ALPA on numerous national boards, committees, and projects. In recent years, he served on NASA research projects evaluating and looking to the future of air traffic control. Dan’s good guidance and advice will continue to influence aviation for years to come.



Married for 61-years, Verna and Dan continue an active lifestyle that includes winter ski trips to Colorado.



Three generations of Donovan pilots (l-r) David, Dan Donovan, Jr., and Dan, Sr.

Dan doesn’t fly nearly as much as he used to, of course, but he still flies a Super Cub and Skyhawk regularly. He is now 84, and his wife, Verna, is 83, but you’d never know it. Married for 61 years they remain very active and were featured recently in “50-Plus” magazine. Both are avid skiers and they go to Colorado for skiing every winter. By the way, neither Dan nor Verna has any hesitation in tackling the black diamond trails! Verna is also a well-known doll maker and collector.

Another of Dan’s cherished accomplishments was teaching not only his son Dan Jr. to fly, but also his grandson. “I took Dan Jr. through his private, commercial, multi, instrument, and airline transport rating. He started with Simmons many years ago, and then flew for North Central and Republic. In fact, when he joined North Central I had the privilege of giving him his first IOE—Initial Operating Experience. And when I retired, Dan Jr. served as my first officer.”

Today Dan Jr. is a Delta Airlines Airbus A-320 captain with more than 25,000 flight hours and a couple years from retirement.

Dan recently taught his 17-year-old grandson, David Donovan, to fly. David earned his private pilot certificate in July. In an interview with the Lakeland Times, Lakeland, Wisconsin, David said, “Grampa teaches at 84 and has achieved great accomplishments in the aviation world. I am his last student. He gave me most of his private pilot books. He still does check rides for pilots but will not do another full rating from start to finish.”

Maybe, maybe not! Dan Sr. says his granddaughter wants to learn to fly as well. ✈️