

# Generations of Pilots Continue to Fly

By Kim Lueck-Foss

Henry Irlbeck had no idea he would pass down a passion of flying to several generations of children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Henry, who was born and raised in Hinckley, joined the Army Airforce after Pearl Harbor was bombed. He flew B17s and B29s stateside. After being discharged when WWII ended he settled in Maplewood and continued to fly with his wife and five children, mostly out of Anoka Airport. He lived in Little Canada until his death. His three sons all owned and flew planes;

Tom Irlbeck got his pilot's license at 16 and joined the Navy in 1964 where he flew F-4 Phantom fighter bomber jets on the Enterprise Aircraft Carrier for two tours with 181 missions over North Vietnam. He went on to become one of the original 18 instructors at the Navy Strike Fighter Tactics Instructor Program in Miramar, California. It became known as "Top Gun," and grew to acclaim with the 1986 Tom Cruise movie of the same name. After he was discharged in 1969, Tom returned to Minnesota and flew out of MSP airport with North Central Airlines which became Republic, then Northwest Airlines. He retired as Captain from Northwest after 26 years. He flew gliders, Cessnas and RV planes. logged 406.1 hours in gliders. He flew the SZD-48 Jantar Standard 2 glider for 42.4 hours. He also enjoyed skydiving. He flew often and he flew almost everywhere and in almost every type of airplane. He flew often with his oldest son Jon in a Cessna 180. They would land on various lakes in Minnesota, carrying a portable ice fishing tent for their winter adventures.

He became the first to fly a friend's custom-built plane, reminiscent of a 1930's era WACO biplane, one of the first models of its kind. Friends and family spoke of Tom calling him a precise flier and larger than life. He had quite a reputation in Wisconsin, he did a lot of rides and a fair amount of flight instructing for people building the RV plane like he did. He tested almost 40 different airplanes of different types for different people.

He met his wife Katy while they were both in the Navy, she said of her husband "He was very kind, very nice and very intense. He knew right from wrong. He knew the way he

wanted things done. He didn't back down at all." She said he pushed his fighter pilot students, "the best of the best" to get even more out of them. He didn't give them any leeway, he had a good time with them.

When the movie "Top Gun" came out in 1986, it gave Tom's children a different glimpse of the man they called Dad. By then he was flying commercially. "I didn't even understand that he did that until the movie came out" said Jon who was a commercial pilot himself for 24 years. His dad taught him to fly when he was 14. His first flying memory with his father included his brother Kevin. They were 7 and 4 years old at the time. Jon sat in the front and Kevin in the back of the plane. "He was doing these over-the-hill- maneuvers," Jon said. "My brother's in the back seat, three years younger than me. You get a little weightless in your seat. You kind of float against your seatbelt a little bit. Like astronaut training. I was a little bit nervous, and my brother thought it was the greatest thing in the whole wide world, and I ended up becoming a pilot, and he ended up losing interest. I think he (my dad) was probably hoping that one of us would want to be a pilot, but he made it very clear that we had to do it ourselves. I think it was just the spirit of adventure in your life. Do you want to spend it in an office? Or do you want to be out and about and experiencing it through the air and being a part of the atmosphere. It just seemed normal to me from my earliest years."



Tom with other first Top Gun instructors, he is fourth from the left in the back row.

Bill Bresnan, president of the Experimental Aircraft Association (EAA) Chapter 66 in Fort Myers, spent 10 years building a 1930s-era biplane, one he named after his granddaughter, Lillian Rose. Tom Irlbeck logged 33.7 hours becoming the first to test-fly it for his friend. "He worked out all the bugs and things," Bresnan said. "I was heavily honored. He was willing to risk his life on my plane. I was just honored that he would trust my craftsmanship. It goes back to the roots of aviation. Knowing that this was the end of life, he got to experience the earliest days of aviation. "That was the 50th test flight he'd done. My plane was the 18th different type of plane that he'd flown. I learned so much from him already. I was hoping to learn so much more from him. He spent more

time in the air than on the ground. He had like 30,000 hours of flying time. That's unheard of." Added up, the time amounts to 3.4 continuous years of flying. "He was just a passionate outdoorsman," Kevin Irlbeck said.

"Fishing, hunting, biking, boating." The Irlbeck family had an airstrip and a hangar within sight of their backyard in Somerset, Wisconsin, where they lived from 1970-2015. Tom and Katy Irlbeck had been spending their recent summers in Bayport, Minnesota, but he still had a hangar in Osceola, Wisconsin, from where he flew his glider. Tom's Cape Coral winter home has a canal and a boat behind the backyard. He organized neighborhood bike rides throughout Cape Coral when he wasn't flying or boating. But his eyes often were looking upward.

Whenever Bill Bresnan and Tom drove to the Punta Gorda Airport together, Bresnan said he often noticed Tom looking out the window at birds navigating through air patterns and the surrounding clouds. "If there's any reincarnation, he's going to ask to come back as an eagle or something," Bresnan said. "He just loved being in the air." He died of a medical problem in 2018, at age 74 while gliding. Tom, who often saw the world from a higher place, lived and died doing his life-long passion of flying, spent his summers in Bayport and was living in Cape Coral, Florida at the time of his death.

Bob Irlbeck (77) is from White Bear Lake, owned a glider and flew gliders and did skydiving.

Paul Irlbeck (74) has homes in Wabasha and Elk Point, South Dakota. He was an airplane mechanic for Northwest at MSP for 11 years. He got his pilot's license at 26, he flew Cessnas, gliders and RVs. When he moved to Wabasha he built 23 experimental RVs in his workshop. He has an AP rating, is an experienced skydiver with over 900 jumps, and competed in Nationals in 1973.

Henry's two daughters were not pilots but enjoyed flying with their family; Gloria Hudoba (79) who resides in Chisago City married an Airman, Sgt. Gary Hudoba who was stationed for three years at Ramstein Air Base in Germany. Gary was not a pilot, but worked in communications in the Air Force. Gloria, an Army nurse, was stationed at the 67th Evac Hospital on the military airfield in Qui Nhon, Vietnam from March 1966-April 1967. Tom was on the Enterprise in 1967 at the same time Gloria was in Qui Nhon. She worked most of the time in the ER, which was called Receiving. Many patients arrived by helicopter.. she also flew in a helicopter, "birddogs," and C130s while in Vietnam, but was not a pilot.

Angie Retka (67) lives in Inver Grove Heights and co-managed Stanton Airport with her previous husband for almost five years.

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Henry also has grandkids who were pilots; Jon Irlbeck (54), resides in Arvada, Colorado, Tom's son, loved flying with his dad and is currently a pilot for United Airlines in Denver. He also likes to fly his hang glider.



Tom Irlbeck-Delta Airlines with his son Jon Irlbeck who was a pilot at Continental Airlines and now is a captain at United Airlines.

Josh Irlbeck (35), lives in Northfield, Paul's son, flies and owns Tom's Cessna 180.

Matt Retka (36), Angie's son is a pilot and owns a Taylorcraft that he rebuilt, raised in Inver Grove Heights, he graduated from North Dakota State University and now resides in West Fargo, North Dakota. He got his pilot's license at 17.

Henry's great-grandkids (Gloria's grandchildren) also have a place in aviation;

Jack Hudoba (23), has lived his entire life in Prior Lake (except for college) graduated in 2023 from North Dakota University with a degree in Air Traffic Control, and is currently working as a remote pilot operator at the air traffic control center in Farmington, with the goal of becoming an air traffic controller.

Olivia Hudoba (22) lived in Braham on Lewis lake and graduated from Ogilvie High School. She is attending Mankato State University, where she got her pilot's and commercial pilot's licenses. She will graduate with a degree in aviation in 2025. She is captain of the women's aviation team at Mankato. Her goal is to be a commercial pilot with an airline.



Olivia Hudoba on the day she soloed and got her pilot's license in June 2021. She is one of the 4th generation.

Henry would be proud of the accomplishments of his aviator family, knowing that his passion is strong and lives on. The Irlbeck/Hudoba family still shows a drive to continue in the footsteps of ancestors and loved ones that came before. Hopefully it will continue long into the future as this family grows and stays skyward.



Original "Top Gun" instructor thrived flying in his native Wisconsin and Minnesota and around the world.



Tom Irlbeck standing next to his F-4 on the USS Enterprise.



Tom Irlbeck built a RV-8 in his basement and painted it with the Navy colors and numbers which were the same as on the F-4 that he flew in Vietnam. 20,000 rivets in his home-built plane.



Tom Irlbeck in his glider with two of his granddaughters/Emily and Avery Irlbeck at Osceola airport where he had a hanger and was involved in the Young Eagles Program teaching young kids about aviation. Tom gave free glider rides to kids with interests in aviation.



Tom Irlbeck (2 yrs old) sitting on his Glayds Irlbeck's lap in the back seat of a Piper Cub, J-3 at the Benson Airport, 1945. Hank Irlbeck was at B-29 training when the picture was taken.





Tom near his hang glider that he flew while in San Diego.



Lt. Henry A. Irlbeck (Hank), Tom Irlbeck's father



Tom Irlbeck standing next to his father Hank Irlbeck. Lt. Henry A Irlbeck flew the B-29 bomber and Tom Irlbeck flew the F-4 in Vietnam and was one of the first Top Gun instructors in the Navy.



Tom Irlbeck standing next to the Airbus A320 which he flew when he retired from Northwest Airlines.



Sully (1 yr) by plane that his grandpa Dave Retka made for Matt when he was little.



Matt and Annie Retka with their children, Sully and June.



Olivia's race team on the ground in front of their plane.



Olivia and her race team inside their plane.



Tom Irlbeck and his RIO (radar intercept officer) walking off the USS Kitty Hawk while at port in San Diego.



Our team: Olivia Hudoba captain Jess Stelton copilot Laura Beinecke navigator Arianna Moore ground coordinator