

# A 100-year-old lowan and WWII pilot has wanted to skydive since 1942. He finally made the jump.

[Shelby Fleig](#), **Des Moines Register** Published 5:47 p.m. CT June 4, 2019 | Updated 6:40 p.m. CT June 4, 2019

Ronald Mason's tandem skydive from 13,000 feet last weekend was 77 years in the making.

Mason, 100, was prepared countless times to plunge himself into the Atlantic while a naval aviator flying anti-submarine patrol during WWII.

He never had to, despite bad weather and mechanical woes. Had he or other members of his squadron been forced to jump from their twin-engine planes, they were armed with 12-inch daggers to fight off sharks.

Since his application to be a parachutist was rejected in 1942 — likely because of a full quota or a greater need for pilots, he thinks — the lowan has been waiting for the right time to jump.

"I've always had the desire to make the jump," he said Saturday. "Fortunately, I was able to do that, and it was every bit what I had expected. I enjoyed it very much."



**Ronald Mason, 100, of West Des Moines, looks out over the Winterset airport in Saturday, June 1, 2019, moments before fulfilling his lifelong dream of skydiving. (Photo: Bryon Houlgrave, Bryon Houlgrave)**

Mason asked for a ride last Saturday to the Winterset airport from his retirement home, Edgewater at WesleyLife in West Des Moines. He didn't divulge to the driver what business he had in Winterset, so she was shocked to pull up to a hangar bustling with dozens of skydivers.

He hadn't told his family members beforehand, either; he didn't want to burden them with worry or guilt, should something go wrong, Mason said. But one of his lifelong friends, Dick Hanson, was privy to his plans. Mason told him not to show up, but Hanson did anyway.

"He's doing something at 100 that I've never dreamed of doing," Hanson said as John Huddleson, a tandem instructor at [Des Moines Skydivers](#), adjusted Mason's harness.

In jeans, a long-sleeve denim shirt and brown leather boots, Mason showed up to the club-owned drop zone with his aging briefcase in tow. His pushed-back white hair and full beard stuck out in the room full of professional skydivers in athletic gear.

"Normally, when people are that old, they don't get around very well. But I was very surprised at how young he actually looks," said A.J. Horrigan, the drop zone manager at Des Moines Skydivers. "And I heard he did a great job."



Ronald Mason, 100, of West Des Moines, gives two thumbs up after landing a tandem dive from 13,000 feet above earth with professional skydiver John Huddleson, right, on Saturday, June 2, 2019, at Des Moines Skydivers in Winterset. The jump fulfilled a lifelong dream for the centenarian, a World War 2 veteran who flew planes for the U.S. Navy. (Photo: Bryon Houlgrave, Bryon Houlgrave)

Senior citizens aren't uncommon at the club, Horrigan said, but the oldest jumper he remembered seeing in Winterset was 91. As of June 2019, a 102-year-old Australian woman [claims the title of oldest skydiver in the world](#).

Saturday afternoon, Mason and about 20 others climbed up a short ladder into the back of a specialty turbine aircraft the club leased for the weekend. The club owns a smaller plane that holds four people and reaches 9,500 feet, but this rented Viking Twin Otter goes as high as 13,000 feet, an altitude that provides jumpers almost a full minute of free-fall.

Seated spread eagle in the belly of the beast, flyers anxiously ascend for 15 minutes. Once at jumping altitude, the door slides open, and tandem jumpers inch to the edge of the plane until their feet are dangling.

Heads back.



Ronald Mason, 100, of West Des Moines, makes his way onto the airplane, a Viking Twin Otter, on Saturday, June 1, 2019, at Des Moines Skydivers in Winterset. The jump fulfilled a lifelong dream for the centenarian, a World War 2 veteran who flew planes for the U.S. Navy. (Photo: Bryon Houlgrave, Bryon Houlgrave)

“Do you think I’m crazy?” Mason asked with a grin when he shared his plans with a Des Moines Register reporter a month ago.

He's never been one to play it safe.

Born in Orient, Iowa, on Jan. 20, 1919, Mason grew up in the Great Depression. He had a number of difficult jobs as a young man, including digging ditches. Seeing his middle-aged boss work strenuously to break into the drought-hardened topsoil, Mason said he made a promise to himself that he'd achieve a higher calling.

He remained poor throughout his youth, he said, and for several months, became a "hobo," hopping trains along the West Coast, Canada and Mexico, and getting into plenty of trouble along the way.

Years later, he looked for work on ships docked in California, but couldn't get a union card for lack of experience. He and a friend considered stowing away, but changed their minds when faced with the daunting task of sneaking aboard a ship.

Instead, they both enrolled at a junior college in Los Angeles, where tuition was \$5 per semester. He met a former naval aviator while working odd jobs to pay for school.



The Kansas City Star ran a photograph and brief on Sunday, October 5, 1941, on Ronald Mason's "wetting-down" ceremony, in which naval aviators were celebrated for achieving their first solo flight. Mason is pictured center, smiling, being dragged out of the plane and drenched with water, as the tradition goes. (Photo: Kansas City Star archives/Special to the Register)

He was always fascinated by flight, he recalled in 1993 voice recordings detailing his military service that have since been transcribed into a short memoir.

"The war clouds were building in Europe and I told myself early on that if I had a choice of ways to serve in the armed forces, it would be as a naval aviator," he said in the memoir.

He dictated his story from a Mexican resort town north of Puerto Vallarta, where he and his late wife, Alice, spent dozens of winters in retirement. Alice died at age 96 in January 2017.

Mason still practices his Spanish. The language, he said, is "one of my great joys in life."

Evidence of his rebellious streak, Mason said he was part of a group of soldiers who would trade their abundant cartons of eggs in exchange for liquor from civilians in North Africa. That's where he "learned to drink," he said.

Every day since, for several decades, he's enjoyed two 2-ounce servings of Hawkeye Vodka on ice, he said.

"It's the cheapest thing I can find," he joked.



**Ronald Mason, 100, of West Des Moines, soars back to earth with professional skydiver John Huddleson after jumping from 13,000 feet on Saturday, June 2, 2019, at Des Moines Skydivers in Winterset. The jump fulfilled a lifelong dream for the centenarian, a World War 2 veteran who flew planes for the U.S. Navy. (Photo: Bryon Houlgrave, Bryon Houlgrave)**

Once a civilian, Mason went to law school at Drake University and worked as a lawyer for 30 years, representing the agricultural industry, including the Iowa Farm Bureau.

Before he retired, he started raising cattle and farming in central Iowa. He later started a real estate development company, which he still runs with his 76-year-old son, Ronald Mason, Jr.

His daughter, Linda Hunter, 73, is a writer. She was born while the family lived in San Juan, Puerto Rico — one of 32 moves the family made during Mason's naval career.

The siblings were shocked to learn, through [a Facebook post](#), that Mason had skydived without telling them, but both are glad he is safe and enjoyed himself, Mason said.

At 100, Mason also continues to help manage cropland in Dallas and Madison counties and is an owner of a local limestone quarry.

Continuing to work helps keep him sharp, he said. It's one of his secrets to a long life.

Genetics are on his side too: His mother lived to be 103, although she suffered health problems in her later years, he said.

"That's one of my goals now: to live to 103 and know what the hell I'm doing."





Ronald Mason, 100, of West Des Moines, right, talks with friend Dick Hanson after jumping out of an airplane on Saturday, June 1, 2019, at Des Moines Skydivers in Winterset. (Photo: Bryon Houlgrave, Bryon Houlgrave)

He works out for an hour each morning, spending 20 minutes on a treadmill and 40 minutes on machines that stretch and strengthen his muscles. On weekends, he adds extra balancing exercises to the routine.

He also reads voraciously, enjoys classical and Broadway music and watches some television, like documentaries and the news.

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Being social is important too, he said. He and Hanson, who watched him skydive, have met for lunch each week at Noah's Ark in Des Moines for the past five decades.

Minutes after making his perfect landing — hoisting his feet and legs up in front of him and landing on his backside — he was asked: Would you do it all again?

"Of course!"

"If I were younger, I'd like to become an astronaut if I could," he said after the jump. "But I'm still available — if any space organization, governmental or private, wants to have a 100-year-old go out in space, I'm ready."

