

The Hawk Eye

It's hard to keep pilot Arnie Sperfslage grounded

By Bob Hansen for The Hawk Eye

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Burlington's Arnie Sperfslage is hard-pressed to explain why he would jump repeatedly out of perfectly good airplanes. But jump he did.

Seven years ago, when he reached the watershed age of 70 — an age when most of us are struggling to navigate a rocking chair — Sperfslage made 70 parachute jumps throughout the year to celebrate his birthday.

Those descents were another manifestation of his passion for all things about flight. Air adventures of all sizes and shapes have been an important part of this retired dentist's life since he first encountered a neighbor's plane parked in his grandfather's tree.

"When I was small, I used to spend a lot of time at my grandfather's farm south of Mount Pleasant," Sperfslage remembered. "His neighbor, Dan Guegler, had a yellow Piper Cub that I thought was just about the most wonderful thing in the world. One day, Dan and his Piper Cub got into trouble and ended up parked in a big tree in my grandfather's front yard.

"I was just 5, but to this day I remember looking up at that yellow plane sitting in the tree, and from there on I was hooked. I loved airplanes and everything about them, and while the other kids were playing cowboys and Indians, I was playing airplanes."

That fascination with flight continues today, and Sperfslage now can show off a patch-decorated leather flying jacket he recently was awarded for successfully taking part in an aviation organization's flying challenge.

The Iowa Aviation Promotion Group is a non-profit organization whose mission is to grow aviation by increasing the number of pilots, aviation users and aviation supporters within the state.

Sperfslage's initial contact with the group was unplanned because he was attending a "fly-in" breakfast where pilots gathered at airfields to enjoy pancakes, doughnuts and coffee and to swap flying stories. There, a fellow pilot mentioned he was going to take part in the "Fly Iowa Challenge."

Ever alert for a challenge involving flying, Sperfslage asked what comprised the competition. He learned it required flying into each of Iowa's 115 public-use airports. This, Sperfslage realized, was the type of challenge for which he had been looking.

In 2017, he recruited a friend, Dale Schmidt, to join him, and in six days the pair bounced onto paved, graveled and dirt runways throughout Iowa while earning the organization's coveted jacket.

"It's hard to believe how many public-use airports there are in Iowa. Seems like they are everywhere and there are all kinds of landing surfaces, so it gets to be kind of an adventure" he said. "Places like the Amanas still have a sod field and I don't think it has ever been mowed.

"I also remember the landing at Ackley. It was on top of a hill and requires a quick stop at the end. It was all really interesting."

Between a Piper Cub in a tree and a tour of Iowa landing fields, Sperfslage logged a series of "really interesting" flight adventures. They began when he was a student at Mount Pleasant's Iowa Wesleyan College, where he found his flying experiences severely limited by finances. Then he discovered an innovative way of getting into the air.

The pilots have a saying: "While all take-offs are voluntary — all landings are mandatory." But the young college student discovered not all landings must be done in an airplane. He learned the college had a parachute club, so he trained to become a parachute packer for the club.

By spending many of his non-collegiate hours preparing parachutes for club members, Sperflage was able to earn enough credits to make his own jumps.

But Sperflage's Mount Pleasant college days were not all text books and hurling himself out of airplanes. He managed to win the heart and hand of Lois, and they married while students.

Those college days were extended when the couple decided Sperflage should pursue a degree in dentistry from the University of Iowa in Iowa City. "Dent school" was a financial struggle, and the couple found housing at the university's iconic married student "temps" alongside the Iowa River. But there was little money for Sperflage to pursue his flying passion.

In 1968, Sperflage completed his dentistry studies. He and Lois contemplated a move to Burlington, but they knew a military commitment loomed in the future.

"I was looking at setting up a Burlington practice, but friends told me of other dental students that had made big investments in office and equipment only to be drafted," Sperflage explained. "Lois and I then talked it over and figured it was best I simply enlist and get that out our future right away."

Sperflage took his dental degree to the Air Force and was assigned to Patrick Air Force Base in Florida. Even before the couple arrived, he learned non-flying personnel could join a base aero-club, where a flying license could be had for about one-third the cost of the civilian market.

"The day we arrived at Patrick, I was over signing up for the club and left Lois at our new home supervising the moving in by herself. She couldn't have been too pleased with that," he laughed.

The possibility of an Asian posting loomed over the couple, but luck was with them, and Sperflage remained in Florida for the entirety of his military service.

"There was some thought I might stay in the Air Force, but my father-in-law was battling cancer, so we thought it was best to return to Iowa, and I bought a practice in Burlington," he said.

Sperflage eventually purchased a Grumman Cheetah low-wing monoplane. It was a “fixer-upper,” but after a long period of restoration and repair, the Grumman and Sperflage took to the skies in trips that never end.

Three adult children and their families are scattered from Indiana to California, and the Sperflages use their plane to maintain close family ties.

“To drive to see my daughter in Indiana takes about seven hours, but I can fly there in just two hours,” he explained. “We can go to Wisconsin to watch a grandson play baseball in the afternoon, have a pizza with the family and be home that night.

“Lois and I have been to all four corners of the U.S. Flying just allows us to go just about everywhere we want.”

Sperflage has retired from dentistry and has given up jumping from airplanes, but the love of flying still burns bright. And when weather and schedules permit, the flying dentist probably will be off exploring a distant corner of the U.S., or perhaps just another sod airfield in Iowa.



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