

UFOs:

UNITED FLYING OCTOGENARIANS



Kevin McKinney

Ah, youth. Bart Bratko remembers well his adventurous younger days. Like the time, acting on a whim, he bought a Spanish fighter jet and for kicks, learned how to fly it over the Atlantic Ocean at speeds screaming up to 430 mph.

Yes, boys will be boys. Bratko was a mere 77 years old at the time.

"It was an impulse thing," recalled a slightly more mature Bratko at age 89. "The owner gave me an introductory ride (on the 1964 Casa Saeta) with loops and rolls and I signed the papers as soon as I landed."

If you haven't guessed by now, Bratko is a member of the United Flying Octogenarians (UFO) -- a group of active licensed pilots, who soloed in the air past their 80th birthday.

There are more than 600 of them worldwide, mostly in the United States and Canada. But UFO members reside in the Australia, France, Argentina and the United Kingdom.

Admittedly, the notion of old timers screeching through the wild blue yonder at a time in life when convention dictates they should be content sitting in a rocking chair with a good book, may raise an eyebrow or two.

But not to worry. These guys -- and girls -- have a lifetime of experience at the flight controls. They are properly accredited, cleared medically and sharp as a tack. Essentially, the unofficial UFO creed could read: Life begins at 80. Bratko and a host of UFO members like him are a living and flying testament to that.

For instance many UFO members, like Bratko, UFO President Alan Blair, 89, and UFO Vice President Bill Webber, 86, stay active as "Mercy Flight" or "Angel Flight" pilots -- answering emergency calls for air transport.

Aside from flying to their annual meeting at a different spot in the country each November, in the last two years UFO members have been flying to regional meetings all across the globe year round. The meetings, of course, are a great chance for fellowship.

"As they say 'the older you get and the more you tell the same stories, the better those stories get,'" said Webber, who just passed his medical exam for another year of flying. "And there have been wonderful stories."

Of course, UFO's do more than just tell stories when they get together. As a non-profit organization, they try to support a worthy cause or two each year with small contributions to worthy causes like the Paralyzed Veterans Association and the EAA Young Eagles.

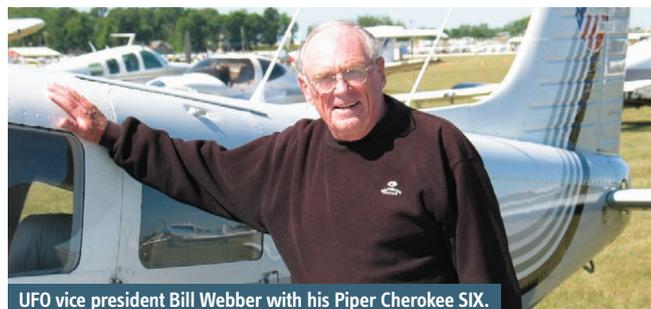
UFO was started in 1982 with about 25 pilots. The founding pilots, now deceased, were: J.L. Robinson, T. Jacks, E.K. Bates, Harold Hoekstra and Aubrey R. Stains. These days, UFO members consider

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After a decade in the daily newspaper business, McKinney opted for a less conventional lifestyle to explore the adventurous side of life -- and write about it. He lives in a boat yard bungalow where he also pursues his interests as a blues musician, artist and carpenter.



Bratko



UFO vice president Bill Webber with his Piper Cherokee SIX.

themselves ambassadors for their organization, always encouraging new members to join. Those interested can visit unitedflyingoctogenarians.org.

As for Bratko, UFO's secretary/treasurer, it was just a couple years ago that he decided to sell the Spanish fighter jet, citing exorbitant fuel expenses. After all, he was a little older, a little wiser. The Natick, MA resident sought out a new challenge -- an occupation, or preoccupation rather, more befitting the responsibilities of adulthood.

And so in his prime, aged 82, Bratko earned his flight instructor's license. That gained the soaring senior a place in the Guinness Book of World Records for becoming the world's oldest pilot to become an accredited flight instructor.

"At age 80 I wanted to better myself, especially my flying skills," explained Bratko, a WWII air force veteran. "So I took up the challenge and it took two years to get the rating."

Blair still flies his Cessna 414 out in California. "Once a pilot, always a pilot," writes Blair in Slipstream, the UFO's online newsletter. "Flying is the common bond that assures us that every pilot is a friend with common experiences to share."

UFO veteran members include Doris Lockness, 99, of Eldorado Hills, CA and the group's oldest member Ernest Trent, of Somerset, PA, is going strong at 103. Pilot/author Bill Fili, 86, who still flies puddle jumpers, is among the newer UFO members.

"When I heard of UFO a couple years ago I joined right away," said Fili. "It's a great chance for fellowship." Fili is a World War II fighter pilot who just finished writing a book, "Passage To Valhalla II" which honors WWII heroes.

Perhaps the most famous UFO pilot of them all is the dynamo known as "Mama Bird" -- the legendary Evelyn Bryan Johnson, who turned 100 years old this past November. Johnson, who since 1953 has managed the Morristown, Tennessee's Moore-Murrell Airport, has been admitted into several hall of fames, including the National Aviation Hall of Fame in 2007.

As an FAA-designated pilot examiner, she has administered over 9,000 check rides. Johnson logged more flying hours than any woman, 57,635.4, before glaucoma retired her in 2006. Mama Bird also has trained more pilots, given more FAA exams than any other pilot, and is listed in the Guinness Book of World Records.

When reached by phone recently, Johnson shared some of her experiences and mused: "You know as I look back on those 100 years, I wonder how I got that much done in such a short time."

Short time, indeed. You got to hand it to those UFO's. They have plenty more living to do. ■ K.M.



Bratko's Spanish Fighter Jet.