

Edwards civilian nominated for top aviation award

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by Diane Betzler
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8/18/2010 - **EDWARDS AIR FORCE BASE, Calif.** -- Maj. Gen. David Eichhorn, Air Force Flight Test Center commander, announced Aug. 16, that Air Force Materiel Command has nominated retired Air Force Colonel Louis C. Setter for this year's Wright Brothers Memorial Trophy.

Mr. Setter, a test engineer at the 419th Aircraft Maintenance Unit, will now go on to compete nationally for this year's prestigious award.

The award was established in 1948 by the National Aeronautic Association to honor the memory of Orville and Wilbur Wright and is presented once a year by the NAA president at the Aero Club in Washington, D.C.

The Wright Brothers Memorial Trophy is awarded annually to a living American for significant public service of enduring value to aviation in the United States, according to the award guidelines.

Colonel Setter's enduring value to aviation and the United States began in the early 1940s and, judging from his impressive resume, the pilot, test pilot, and engineer continues contributing to American aviation to this day.

Colonel Setter said he developed a love for airplanes early in life. He entered college in 1942 when he was just 16, and studied airplane design.

"I was in love with airplanes then, and I still am," he says.

In 1944, a young Mr. Setter feared he might be drafted while in the middle of a semester, so rather than run the risk of losing half a semester, he decided to put his education on hold and joined the Navy.

At the end of World War II, the then Seaman-navigator Setter was discharged and went back to Georgia Tech where he completed his studies and earned a bachelor degree in aeronautical engineering.

Armed with the degree, he applied to the Navy Air Corps.

"Their training program was full, so I applied to the Army Air Corps and was accepted," he said.

The year was 1948 and marked the beginning of an exciting and courageous flying career for this airplane enthusiast.

"I was a cadet at Randolph Field, Texas and started out flying a T-6 prop trainer," he recalled.

A year later, Cadet Setter graduated from jet fighter pilot training at Williams Field in Arizona, and began flying P-80 fighter jets.

He says one of his most memorable years was 1949. "I got discharged from the Army, sworn in to the U.S. Air Force and was assigned to the 31st Fighter Wing at Turner Air Force Base in Georgia. I got my pilot's wings and was commissioned to 2nd lieutenant; I got married and bought a new car, all in the same day," he said, adding, "That was a very busy day."

A veteran of two wars, the list of aircraft Colonel Setter flew in and out of battles grew impressively long.

Over the next two decades he was considered a pioneering Air Force combat aviator and was now flying F-84s and became an operations officer, instructor and evaluator for F-84E, G and F models.

"I flew an F-84E across the Atlantic and landed in Greenland, Iceland, Scotland and England," he said, adding that he had many exciting adventures in that aircraft.

"Once, while landing in England during a torrential rain storm, I went sliding down the runway sideways," he said, adding that sometimes he got more excitement than he bargained for.

Two years later he flew the F-84G across the Pacific Ocean to Japan using celestial navigation, learned procedures for dropping atomic weapons and tested the feasibility of air refueling from a KB-29 tanker, all of which had never been done in a fighter before.

"It was kind of scary. We knew we had to refuel over Hawaii otherwise we wouldn't make it to Japan," he said. "Jet fighters run out of fuel in a hurry," he said.

By 1954 he was operations officer for the F-84F Fighter Squadron and heavily involved with flight testing the supersonic version of the fighters. It was at this time he was called to the legendary U-2 program, a strategic reconnaissance program headed by the CIA.

Colonel Setter became the fourth pilot to fly the Lockheed-built U-2 and later became a pilot instructor and began training civilian pilots.

One of his more famous students was Francis Gary Powers, an American pilot whose CIA U-2 spy plane was shot down while flying a reconnaissance mission over the former Soviet Union airspace, which became known as the U-2 incident back in 1960.

Setter also developed and tested navigational techniques, designed and built cruise computers for long-range jet fighters that were used during the early U-2 missions. That equipment later became standard for the U-2 aircraft.

While flight testing the U-2, Setter performed hundreds of air starts and credits the early model pressure suit for saving his life while soaring to altitudes of nearly 70,000 feet.

"Engines weren't designed in those days to operate at those high altitudes. There was almost no air up there and the engines were starved for air and would quite often flame out," he said. Thus the reason for practicing air starts.

The colonel explained that when the engine flamed out, his pressure suit would blow up much like the astronauts' suits do today, and that kept his body from blowing up.

"Without a pressure suit, I would have died within six seconds after flaming out," he said.

The colonel said testing the high altitude air starts are some of his most memorable moments, "those tests were just scary as hell," he said.

Of the four instructor pilots for the U-2 program, Colonel Setter is the only living instructor left. He was awarded the CIA Bronze Medallion for instructing civilian pilots and for the engineering contributions he made later in the program.

Colonel Setter's experience didn't end there, however. After his long-term involvement with the U-2 program, he moved on to other interests after becoming intrigued with the short/vertical takeoff and landing aircraft.

"I was astonished the first time I saw one hovering over the base," he said.

And so off to helicopter pilot school he went to get a feel for the STOVL aircraft.

By 1965 Setter was in charge of two vertical takeoff and landing test programs at Wright Patterson AFB, Ohio. The X-19 and the XC-142.

Later that year he went on to become base commander of Antigua Air Station in the British West Indies, and after two years in that position, he moved on to become chief of engineering for the Oklahoma City Air Logistics Depot at Tinker AFB, where he was promoted to colonel.

He became commander of North Base in 1969 and the U-2 operations officer at Edwards.

When bomber programs came onto the scene in the early 1980s, Colonel Setter became test director for the B-1, B-2 and B-52 test programs and later became a consultant to the Airborne Laser Test Management program and experienced his first successful shoot down of a missile using a directed energy weapon.

Currently, the retired colonel is a leader in the Bomber Combined Test Force at Edwards, where he directs missions on the latest hardware and software updates to all strategic bombers that have direct impact on today's combat operations and strategic deterrent.

Throughout all of his accomplishments, Colonel Setter remains unaffected and says simply, "I'm just a worker who's been lucky enough to do just about everything you can do in the Air Force."

At 85, he continues working for the Air Force, because he enjoys it. "I think it's important that we keep contributing," he said.

Colonel Setter's name was submitted to AFMC by Lt. Col. Hans Miller, 419th Flight Test Squadron commander. Colonel Miller wrote in his submittal report that Mr. Louis Setter has done it all.

"He's a true leader and pioneer in multiple disciplines -- pilot, engineer, manager, logistician."

General Eichhorn said he was pleased that Headquarters AFMC nominated Edwards' candidate for the Wright Brothers Memorial Trophy.

"Please extend your congratulations and wish him the best of luck as he competes at the next level for the 2010 Wright Brothers Memorial Trophy," General Eichhorn said in his nomination announcement.

Colonel Setter says he doesn't expect to win, but considers it an amazing honor for having been nominated.

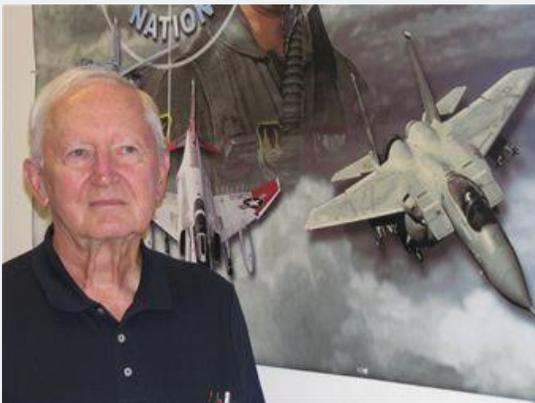
If he does win the award, his name will be thrown out there with the best. Some past winners of the honored award are; USAF Gen. James Doolittle, best know for the infamous raid on Japan; Neil Armstrong, the first man to walk on the moon; John Glen for his service as a military pilot, NASA astronaut and U.S. Senator. Glen is best known for becoming the first American to orbit the Earth.

"The people I've known in the Air Force are the best. The Air Force is the right place to be for me," the colonel says.

Comments

No comments yet.

Photos



Retired Air Force Col. Louis C. Setter, 419th Flight Test Squadron, has been nominated by Air Force Materiel Command for this year's Wright Brothers Memorial Trophy. The trophy is awarded every year to a living American for significant public service of enduring value to aviation in the United States. (Air Force photo by Diane Betzler)

