

'Go-to guy' in North Iowa aviation dies

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MASON CITY — Jerry Dwyer was remembered Monday as a great pilot who devoted his life to aviation.

Dwyer, 85, died Saturday at the Muse-Norris Hospice Inpatient unit.

He is known to many in North Iowa as the man on duty at Mason City Municipal Airport early Feb. 3, 1959, when the plane carrying singers Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valens and J.P. “The Big Bopper” Richardson took off and crashed in a field a few minutes later.

All three singers were killed, as was pilot Roger Peterson.

Dwyer found the wreckage. The crash came to be known by the song lyric “The day the music died.” Dwyer was interviewed by media from all over the world for the next 50 years about his memories of that night.

But North Iowa aviation enthusiasts remember him for far more than one fateful event.

Pam Osgood, manager of the Mason City Municipal Airport, said, “I knew Jerry for over 25 years and his legacy at the airport began long before then. His love of aviation was known by all who met him throughout his lifetime.

“Jerry shared so many wonderful stories with me over the years of his love of aviation from the time he was a young boy and his lifelong passion of flying,” Osgood said. “Each story was unique and I always enjoyed hearing them. His detailed recollection of each one truly kept your interest. Jerry will be missed.”

Joni Dunn, a licensed pilot and longtime chairwoman of the Airport Commission, said, “Jerry was the finest pilot I have ever known. It was a natural thing with him, a God-given gift. He dedicated his life to aviation.”

Dunn said she and her husband, Mike, both were trained for their pilot licenses by Dwyer. She vividly remembers going up in a plane with Dwyer during her lessons and how he would simulate dangerous situations and ask her, “Now, what would you do?”

“He was a wonderful teacher,” she said.

Tom Hovland, a license pilot and current chairman of the Airport Commission, said, “I started flying with Jerry. When he was teaching you, there were three things you needed — a pilot, a teacher and a nice day.

“He was a phenomenal pilot,” Hovland said. “He was cool, calm and collected under pressure and in North Iowa, he was the go-to guy in aviation for many years.”

Hovland said there wasn't much Dwyer couldn't do in a plane. “Jerry could fly anything. He'd just jump in it and away he'd go.”

But he had another trait he will be remembered for, said Hovland. “He was a class act.”

Dwyer started flying at the age of 13. By age 15 he owned his first plane, a 1939 Aeronca Chief. He was so young that the plane had to be registered in his father's name, according to Globe Gazette files.

In 1949, he joined the Air National Guard and soon earned his commercial and instructor pilot ratings. He started Dwyer Aircraft in Oelwein in 1952 and moved to Charles City two years later to become the airport manager there.

He relocated to Mason City in 1957 as airport manager and started one of the first commuter flights from Mason City to Minneapolis.

In 2005, he was inducted into the Iowa Aviation Hall of Fame and had clocked more than 40,000 flight hours.

In 2008, Dwyer received the Wright Brothers Master Pilot Award and the Charles Taylor Master Mechanic Award, both from the Federal Aviation Administration.

Funeral arrangements are pending at Ward-VanSlyke Colonial Chapel, Clear Lake.