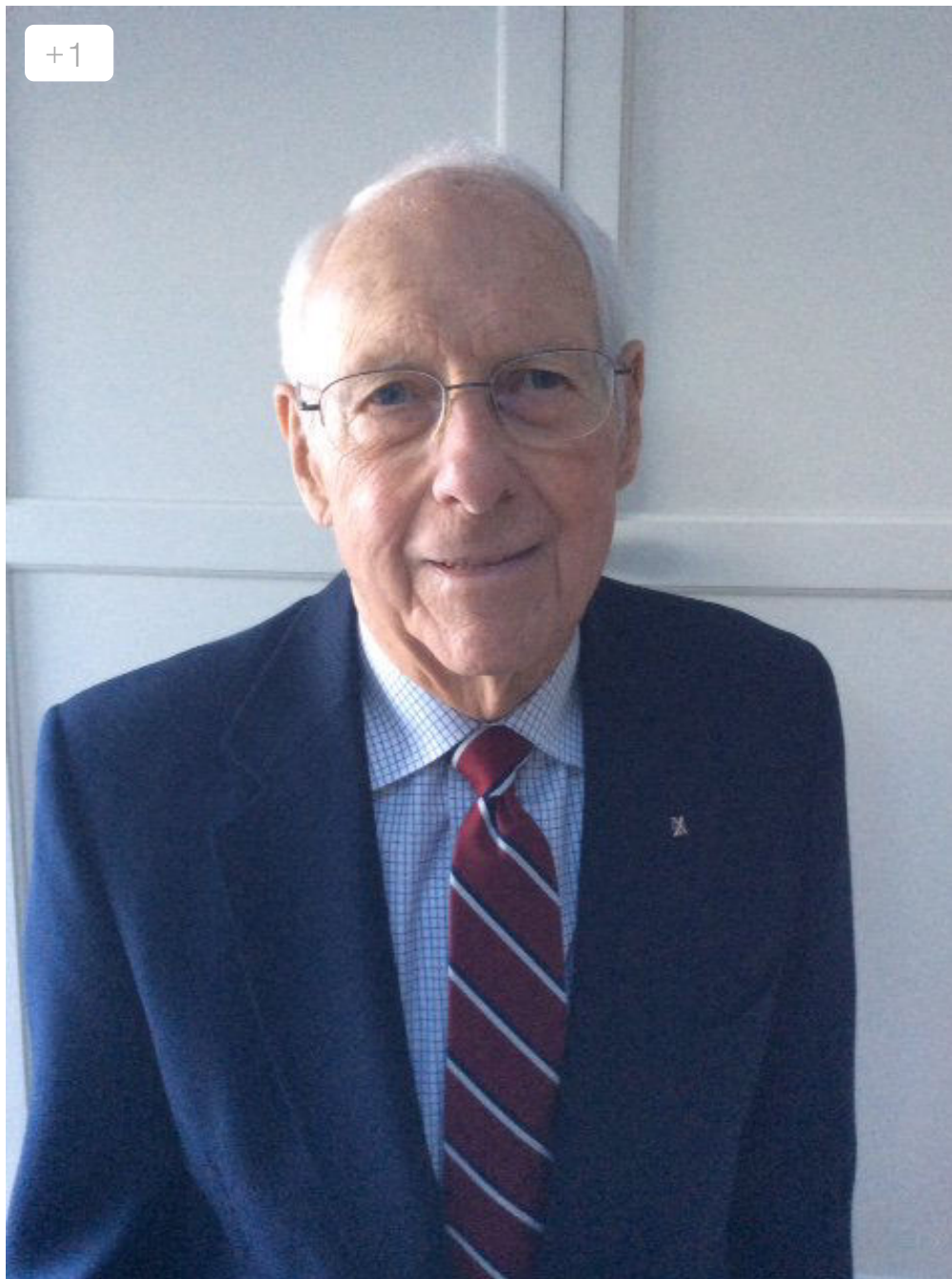


# Career takes pioneer and combat veteran pilot from military to Hall of Fame

By Steve Liewer / World-Herald staff writer Updated 1 hr ago (0)



Charles Bock



Eighty years and 10,000 flight hours after climbing into an airplane for the first time at the local airstrip, Council Bluffs native Charles Bock loves flying as much as ever.

These days, Bock, 90, putters about in a two-seat Europa that he built from a kit — not quite as dangerously as when he flew combat missions in Korea and Vietnam, or as swiftly as when he zoomed at Mach 3 as a test pilot in the sleek SR-71, one of many jets he flew during a 30-year Air Force career.

But it still gets the blood flowing.

“When you build your own airplane, you’re the test pilot,” Bock said in a phone interview from his home in Nevada.

In the Air Force, Bock earned the Distinguished Flying Cross, Legion of Merit and several air medals. The Society of Experimental Test Pilots chose him for its

prestigious Kincheloe and Tenhoff awards.

But today he'll get a special honor, back in his home state: induction into the Iowa Aviation Hall of Fame. The ceremony is at 4:30 p.m. in Greenfield, Iowa, about 85 miles east of Omaha.

"He has had a supersonic, stellar career in aviation," said aviation historian David Wendell, of Marion, Iowa, who will emcee the Hall of Fame ceremony.

He'll join Wilbur and Orville Wright (who once lived in Cedar Rapids), pioneer plane builder Glenn L. Martin, and astronauts Walter Cunningham (Apollo 7) and Peggy Whitson (International Space Station), among others.

Aviation pioneer Jerome Hunsaker, a native of Creston, is being inducted posthumously. He was president of the Goodyear-Zeppelin Co. and supervised the construction of Navy lighter-than-air airships in the 1930s.

"It's great," Bock said. "I feel like I'm in with a group of very distinguished people who accomplished a lot."

The son of a pharmacist in Council Bluffs, Bock and a friend used to pedal their bicycles to the airport to watch the airplanes.

"We were hoping maybe someone would take pity on us and give us a ride," he said.

For his 10th birthday, his parents bought him an introductory flight in a Piper Cub. He was hooked.

"I wanted to be a pilot. All my life, that's all I ever wanted," Bock said.

He graduated from Abraham Lincoln High School in 1943 and signed up for the Army Air Corps' aviation cadet program. He took a job at the Martin Bomber Plant at Offutt Air Force Base, building B-26s on the graveyard shift until his training slot opened the following year.

But by the time Bock finished his schooling to become a navigator on B-29 bombers, World War II had ended. So he used his GI Bill to earn a degree in aeronautical

engineering at Purdue University. Boeing hired him for a job in Seattle, but a desk job didn't suit him.

"I was a junior engineer, sitting at a big drafting table," he said. "I kept walking over to the assembly line and watching them put together the B-47s."

The Korean War bailed him out. The Air Force called him up, and this time sent him to pilot training in 1950. He chalked up 51 combat missions flying B-26 bombers in Korea.

After the war, Bock landed a coveted test-pilot slot at Edwards Air Force Base, in an era when test pilots were the cowboy gods later immortalized in the book and Hollywood film "The Right Stuff." He flew cutting-edge jet aircraft of every stripe. He was friends with future astronauts Deke Slayton and Gordon Cooper and also knew Chuck Yeager and Neil Armstrong.

He was the first pilot to fly the Convair B-58 Hustler, and in 1959, flew a B-52 that launched the first X-15 rocket plane.

Bock also flew bombers for the Strategic Air Command, including the B-29, B-50, B-45, and, at Lincoln Air Base, the B-47.

In 1962, he was one of eight pilots selected for a new Air Force astronaut program separate from NASA's.

"It made a big splash in all the papers," Bock said, but the Air Force program was scrubbed about the time the officers finished their training. He did get a nice

consolation prize: flying the supersonic SR-71 Blackbird.

“They threw me back in the briar patch,” Bock said. “I was quite happy.”

During the Vietnam War, he returned to combat, this time as an F-100 Super Sabre fighter pilot. He flew 52 missions before being sent to the Pentagon as chief of safety for the Air National Guard.

As his military retirement date neared in April 1973, Rockwell International approached Bock about becoming its chief test pilot. He flew for the company until 1981, and piloted the new B-1 bomber on its maiden flight on Dec. 23, 1974.

Bock married his high school sweetheart, Gere Chandler, who also was from Council Bluffs. They raised three children together. She died in 1986. He’s been married to his second wife, Joyce, for 19 years.

Though Bock no longer has family in Council Bluffs, he’s looking forward to his trip home. In his later years, he is now earning rewards from a long, pioneering Air Force career.

“I feel very honored,” Bock said.

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