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FEATURED

Seeing the world from the front of a business jet

## **Langer is 2021 Iowa Aviation Museum Hall of Fame inductee**

by Dan Mundt

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At left: John Langer poses with a Cessna Citation X business jet, one of many business aircraft he flew during his career. Submitted photos

Below, left: John Langer in the early 1980s in the flight uniform he wore during overseas operations with General Dynamics. Business pilots usually wore standard business attire when flying stateside, but wore a company uniform overseas because they would often not be taken seriously without it, he said.

Below, right: John Langer stands on the wing of a Beechcraft T-34 as he checks out a flight instructor in the aircraft.



by Dan Mundt

**J**ohn Langer recalls watching airplanes fly over Denison in the middle of World War II - when he was about seven years old.

“I knew from that time on that flying was what I wanted to do for a living,” Langer said.

He pursued his passion and had a long career in aviation.

The Iowa Aviation Museum in Greenfield recently announced that Langer will be one of two 2021 inductees into the museum’s hall of fame.

Langer grew up on a farm south of Denison.

“I wasn’t very much interested in farming, although I liked tractors and stuff like that,” he said. “Farmers work too hard and they have to be too smart.”

When he was about 13, he joined a flying club with two Denison High School (DHS) upperclassmen, Gordon Hollrah and Bob Trexel, but the club didn’t have an airplane.

Langer took money he had saved for a 4-H project and instead put it toward the club’s purchase of an Aeronca Champion airplane from Norman Luvaas.

“Gordon Hollrah had taken some formal flying lessons and had soloed and there was no manager out at the airport, so Gordon became the instructor with a student permit,” Langer said.

They had fun teaching themselves how to fly.

“My folks didn’t know anything about this,” he said.

The club soon disbanded when Trexel went to college and Hollrah left to join the Air Force, where he would soon fly jet aircraft.

“They left the airplane here with me but I wasn’t quite as brave on my own, so I sold it,” Langer said.

As part of the “Diversified Occupations” program at DHS, he took a job at the Denison airport for credit toward graduation.

“I got a job pumping gas and helping the mechanic tear down engines and degrease them and things like that,” Langer said. “I kind of got my foot in the door learning about airplanes through that for two years in high school, and I worked there in the summertime.”

His mentor was Vern Weber, manager of the airport, who was a flight instructor and aviation mechanic.

“He helped me rebuild an airplane – one I bought pretty darn cheap,” Langer said. “I took lessons in that airplane. I worked at the airport, so I got the fuel at a pretty good rate and all the parts to rebuild the airplane at a good rate.”

He and Weber got along well.

“He just took care of me and pretty much taught me to fly,” he said. “I soloed one February morning, when it was below zero, in a (Piper) Cub on skis out there in 1953.”

Langer graduated from DHS in 1954 and had his mind set on joining the Air Force.

“I had seen their ads that said something about a two-year college requirement, but you could take tests to bypass it,” he said.

“I went into the Air Force in the summer of ‘54 – and found out that they had a hard requirement for two years of college. So there I was without the credentials to get into pilot training.”

He made the best of it that he could and worked to get a commercial pilot’s license and instructor rating through aero clubs.

“The last two years I was in the Air Force I was a full-time instructor for the SAC (Strategic Air Command) Aero Club in Omaha at Offutt Air Force Base,” Langer said. “So I kind of made lemonade out of lemons.”

That path worked well for him, though he regrets not having the opportunity to fly military aircraft.

“I worked at getting my ratings so I could fly corporate airplanes and I was lucky enough to get a job in Sioux City flying a converted Douglas B-26 for Western Contracting Corporation as a copilot,” he said.

Western Contracting built most of the dams up and down the Missouri River. The company also built interstate highways and had a dredging operation with a fleet of nine ocean-going dredgers.

The B-26 had a top speed of about 350 mph and could outrun the airliners of the day.

Langer was a co-captain of the B-26 for the last four of the eight years he worked for Western Contracting; he had about 5,000 flight hours with the company.

He spent the next eight and a half years as a pilot for a conglomerate in Dallas, Texas, called Ling-Temco-Vought, which owned a lot of airplanes and built an attack aircraft for the Navy.

In 1977, he took a position with General Dynamics Corporation, which produced the Gulfstream business jet.

“That was very lucky for me because I stayed there for 25 years and worked my way up through the ranks in their corporate flight department,” he said. “It was a pretty good outfit to be with.”

In March of 1980, Langer was the captain on the first corporate flight of the modern era between Egypt and Israel.

“I was told when I filed the flight plan it may or may not be approved,” he said. “I thought, ‘I don’t know that we can do that.’ Apparently there were things going on behind the scenes that I didn’t know about - and it was approved.”

He said the flight did not seem like a big deal at the time, but he still has the flight plan.

Langer became General Dynamics’ director of corporate flight operations in 1996 and remained in that position until he retired in 2002.

He received an award from the National Business Aircraft Association (NBAA) Flying Safety Awards program in recognition of 3,849,366 miles as pilot in command in 1983 and an NBAA Safety Award for 19,000 hours as pilot in command in 2001.

After retirement, Langer bought a Piper PA-11 that he flew for five years from the Denison airport “just for fun.”

He doesn't do much flying any longer.

"I don't have a medical (certificate) anymore; it's too expensive of a game for me to try to keep up with," Langer said.

Flying is much more expensive today than when he learned as a kid in Denison.

"Fuel is expensive, lessons are expensive," he said. "It's hard for a young guy to get into anymore."

Langer said now is a good time to become a pilot, however.

"There are thousands and thousands of airline pilots that are retiring," he said. "I think the way to do it now, instead of going to a four-year college, is go to an aviation-type university like Embry-Riddle or someplace where you could combine the flying with your education. The airlines really want those kinds of people."

He said he is honored to be inducted into the Iowa Aviation Museum Hall of Fame.

Langer was nominated by his niece, Martha (Lochmiller) Harris, after he pointed out to her a piece of land that was owned by Denison farmer and pilot Ralph Weberg, who was inducted into the hall of fame in 2001.

His niece said Langer should be in the hall of fame, too.

Langer told her he was unlikely to be added because Denison already has four inductees: Weberg, Clarence Chamberlin, Chuck Fink and Andy Anderson.

"I didn't think much about it after that, and then one day she called me and said, 'You're in,'" he said.

The Iowa Aviation Museum Hall of Fame induction ceremony will take place later this year.

Langer said flying never felt like work because he loved the job so much.

“I was interested in flying from a very early age on and never wavered from it,” he said. “I certainly got to see the world because of it and it provided me with a pretty good living.”

If he had it all to do over again, he’d do it exactly the same way – except he might get that two-year degree before joining the Air Force.

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