

## A sky king



Nikki Boertman/The Commercial Appeal

Bob Wilson, head of fixed-base operator Wilson Air, served 28 years in the Tennessee Air National Guard. He joins the Tennessee Aviation Hall of Fame Saturday.

### In Air Guard, business aviation, Bob Wilson has hit heights

By Jane Roberts

[Contact](#)

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For years and years, Bob Wilson lived a double life, managing the affairs of the Kemmons Wilson Cos. while the sun was out, then stealing away to fly nighttime missions for the Tennessee Air National Guard.

Saturday, he will join the state's heroes of flight -- including astronaut Margaret Rhea Seddon, FedEx Corp. founder Frederick W. Smith and Walter Beech, the brilliant tinkerer from Pulaski who ultimately founded the Beech Aircraft Corp. -- as members of the Tennessee Aviation Hall of Fame.

Wilson, 62, got there by dint of his ambition, serving 28 years -- the maximum allowed -- for a lieutenant colonel in the Air National Guard.

"The difference was, I could work all day, leave my office and fly a local training mission. I'd be in a whole other world. I always loved it and came away really refreshed," Wilson said.

Wilson signed on with the Air National Guard in 1966. By 1969, he was carrying cargo to war zones in Vietnam, fending off shots that downed many U.S. planes.

While the TV ads say National Guard duty takes two days month, Wilson often flew once a week, delivering outside equipment, paratroopers or cargo needed in war and peacetime operations on four or five continents.

"Many months, I would end up being gone 10 to 14 days. Often on very secret stuff," Wilson said, chuckling that he flew Delta Force missions "before I even knew what the Delta Force was." (Formed shortly after Vietnam, the unit's primary task revolved around counterterrorism, although it is capable of many mission profiles.)

In the 1980s, Wilson, son of Holiday Inn founder Kemmons Wilson, went to work to get safety equipment installed on the C-130 that ultimately made it much safer for low-visibility landings.

The trouble was, the military had few C-130s at the time and didn't feel like investing more in them.

"Bob talked to a lot of folks in Washington. He is a very respected businessman. When Bob speaks, a lot of folks listen," said Maj. Gen. Russ Cotney, commander of the nearly 3,700 Air Guardsman in the Tennessee Air National Guard.

When the hall of fame nominations came around this year, Cotney made his first, choosing to honor Wilson.

"Bob Wilson taught me a lot. I picked up a lot of good flying habits from him. He's the kind of person you want to follow just to see what he does in difficult situations."

Wilson got his first taste of the great blue yonder as a kid, sitting in his father's lap in the cockpit.

At 15, he had his student pilot's license.

"On my 16th birthday, I got my pilot's license, then I went and got my driver's license."

The Air Guard gave him a chance to fly with the country's great pilots, he said, "from airline people down to the farmers that flew with us."

He would trade nothing for it, saying simply that he'd hate to think he spent his life without it.

"Bob is an easy guy to fly with, and a great guy to be around," said Col. Harry Montgomery, head of the 164th Airlift Wing. "He didn't need to spend any time in the Guard, let alone 28 years. He's a great patriot for doing it."

Wilson's own theory is that that the country would be a better place if military service were not voluntary.

"I'm one that thinks the draft was a good deal; it would change a lot of attitudes if everyone would serve a year or two," he said.

When Wilson retired from the Guard in 1996, he was operations group commander for the Memphis-based 164th Airlift Wing, and he was also starting up Wilson Air Center, the fixed-base operator with its signature canopy at 2930 Winchester.

For seven years since, the readers of Aviation International News have ranked it the best FBO in the country, heaping praise on the staff for efficiency and service that mean a pilot 10 minutes away can have pizza, barbecue, even caviar waiting when the plane lands.

Everyone on the staff calls it the Wilson way.

"We do not say 'no' to customers," said Dave Ivey, manager.

"That was the creed in the hospitality industry. You exceed customer expectations."

--Jane Roberts: 529-2512

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### **Hall of Fame Induction**

When: 5:30 p.m. Saturday at the Tennessee Museum of Aviation, Sevierville

Other inductees: James W. Campbell, posthumously, created the FAA's Flight Instructor Refresher courses, still used today.

John Ellington, longtime commercial airline pilot and executive from Murfreesboro.

Dr. Charles Smith was both a physician and pilot for American Airlines. simultaneously. Today, he practices medicine as an FAA medical examiner in Nashville.