MAN PROVES HE CAN STILL FLY A PLANE AFTER 100 YEARS

News / Events / Festivals

Percy Skinner decided he wanted to celebrate a milestone birthday in a unique way.

“I turned 100 years old on June 17,” said Skinner. “Now I’m looking forward to 200.”

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Percy arrived at the airport along with several family and friends. They all were eagerly anticipating watching the man celebrate his milestone birthday with a milestone moment.

With a gallery of close to 25 supporters and loved one looking on, 100 year old Percy Skinner got clearance for takeoff, zipped down the runway, lifted the nose of the plane up, and returned to the air.

“When I was 8 or 9 years old, I remember when I was a kid, working out in the field, I would see an airplane go over, and I would say, ‘if I ever get the chance, I’m going to be up there,’” said Skinner. “It finally happened on August 19, 1943.”

That was the first time he piloted an airplane. Since then, Skinner has flown all makes and models of aircraft, which led him to eventually acquiring his pilot’s license.

But Skinner didn’t show up at the airport on this day to reminisce about the past. Instead, this day was entirely designed to focus on the present and his ability to recall and reconfirm that this centenarian has still got what it takes to pilot a plane.

“I intend to fly that plane just like I used to,” said Skinner, referring to the one-engine Cessna sitting idly on the airport tarmac behind him. “I intend to do everything.”

“Everything” means start the plane, taxi down the runway, take off and land.

When asked if he could remember, in order, all the things one needs to do to get ready to pilot an airplane, Skinner’s 100-year old brain rattled off every detailed step in succession.

Percy Skinner, using his walker, gingerly makes his way to the cockpit of the Cessna airplane, sitting on the tarmac of Oceana County Airport.

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“First, you fasten your seat belt, then turn the gas on,” he said with confidence. “Set the brakes, and then turn all the radio switches off so when you start the plane, it doesn’t put a load on them.

“Put your carburetor heat on cold, and your mixture on rich.

“Then, you prime it if it needs priming.

“Turn the master switch on, and start it, and once it’s started, check the oil pressure.”

While Skinner planned to fly the plane entirely by himself, he did have a co-pilot alongside him in the cockpit just in case he needed help.

Frank Witt, whose side job is being a flight instructor, rode along during the flight.

Although Percy Skinner remembers, in detail, how to pilot a plane, he had some help, if he had needed it. Flight instructor Frank Witt (left) commandeered the co-pilot seat during Percy’s milestone flight.

“Percy knows all the ins and outs of flying yet,” said Witt, just prior to hopping into the passenger side of the cockpit. “I will assist him whenever he needs it.”

Around 6:15 p.m., Skinner got up off the picnic table he was sitting on, slowly grabbed ahold of his walker, and gingerly walked toward the airplane. His 100-year old frame, though hunched over and moving very, very slowly, eventually made it to the pilot seat and, with assistance, he climbed in. Skinner had a few questions for his co-pilot, but once he got the answers he needed, he started the propeller and began taxiing the plane down the runway.

For just the second time in 26 years, Percy Skinner was ready to re-acquaint himself with the friendly skies.

“This is 5795 George taking off on runway 8,” Skinner said in his headset.

He was given clearance for takeoff.

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