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Longtime VI Aviator Honored With Two Most Prestigious Awards in Aviation

After a distinguished career spanning over three decades, pilot Paul Vikander receives both the Wright Brothers Master Pilot Award and the Charles Taylor Master Mechanic Award from the FAA

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Side-by-side, Paul Vikander recently, and at age 16.

After over three decades flying the skies over the Virgin Islands and its Caribbean neighbors, pilot Paul Vikander has been recognized by the Federal Aviation Administration for his skill and service within his chosen profession.

“I never expected it,” said Mr. Vikander, when speaking to Consortium journalists about being selected to receive the Wright Brothers Master Pilot Award, and the Charles Taylor Master

Mechanic Award. “I just felt really good.”

After getting his start in aviation by joining the Civil Air Patrol where he lived in Kansas, Mr. Wikander came to the Virgin Islands after meeting his St. Thomian wife-to-be Margaret in Puerto Rico, where he was stationed as a member of the United States Coast Guard. They were married in November 1961 and settled on St. Thomas. Earlier that year, Mr. Wikander had earned his Air Crewman Wings, which identified him as part of an elite cross-military community of highly trained specialists.

Before the decade was out, Mr. Wikander was flying in Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands, taking skydivers and aerial photographers into the clouds, as well as people who just wanted to take in the view from tens of thousands of feet in the air. He flew for WSTA-AM 1340’s live news reporting, and worked alongside the V.I. Police Department conducting aerial searches for stolen vehicle and bank robbery suspects.?

After his stints with several companies in the local aviation sector, Paul and Margaret Wikander launched Virgin Air in 1970, which flew daily between St. Thomas and St. Barthélemy, from whence Margaret’s father had emigrated. Virgin Air connected the hundreds of St. Thomians who had originally come from St. Barts with their relatives back home, providing scheduled air transportation and carrying mail, newspapers, and even groceries. “At one period of time I was bringing shopping lists down and my wife would go shopping, get all the food and stuff together, and pack it up in boxes,” Mr. Wikander recounted. Cargo rates were cheaper then — 10 cents a pound, he says. “We were just doing it as a courtesy to tie the people together,” he added, noting that back then, a voyage by sea could have taken up to three days between islands.

?Known as the third most dangerous airport in the world, St. Barts requires landing over a hill, down a slope, on a short runway, while contending with “very tricky winds sometimes,” according to Mr. Wikander. Having easily obtained the special certification needed to land at Gustaf III Airport, Mr. Wikander tackled the challenging flights to St. Barths daily. He quickly became one of the more experienced airmen on the route, and was asked by the French government to become a check airman for the airport, providing oversight and training to other pilots learning how to navigate that tricky airport. For his decades of valuable service to the tiny island, Mr. Wikander was in 2015 awarded the Honorary Citizen Medal of St. Barthélemy. To him, however, the daily flights that connected so many between St. Thomas and St. Barts was just “something you had to do”. It was his love for his wife and her family, Mr. Wikander told the Consortium, that powered his determination to do his part to strengthen the connection between the two islands.

Apart from St. Barts, Virgin Air, which changed its name to Air St. Thomas in 1993 after legal wrangling with Virgin Atlantic, had scheduled and charter flights to St. Croix, Puerto Rico, the BVI and the wider Caribbean.?

Over the course of almost 35 years, the Wikanders ran Air St. Thomas, with Paul serving in a variety of roles including Director of Operations, Chief Pilot, Company Check Airman, and Director of Maintenance, among others. During that time, Mr. Wikander accumulated most of his 28,000 flying hours.?

It is this stellar aviation career that has led to Mr. Wikander being tapped for the dual award by the FAA. The Wright Brothers Master Pilot Award, named in honor of pioneering aviators Orville and Wilbur Wright, was instituted in 2003 to recognize exemplary pilots who have flown safely for 50 years or more. The Charles Taylor Master Mechanic award, named after the Wright brothers’ mechanic, is presented to those who have displayed the highest level of expertise,

professionalism and commitment over half a century or more of aviation maintenance experience.

When the two awards are officially presented in August, Mr. Wikander will join the almost 8,500 recipients of the Wright Brothers Master Pilot Award and the over 3,500 on the Charles Taylor Master Mechanic "Roll of Honor". Even among these celebrated ranks, however, Paul Wikander's name will stand out as one of only around 10 people in the world to have been awarded with both prestigious honors.

When asked how he felt about being among such exclusive company, Mr. Wikander, who says he still takes every opportunity to fly he can get, said that he was grateful to have had the opportunity to contribute so much to the territory in which he lived for 63 years. "I'm happy because I've achieved." he said.

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