

50 years and counting: Master Mechanic award recognizes lifetime accomplishment

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There's the Lifetime Achievement Award at the Grammys, the annual Cecil B. DeMille Award at the Golden Globe's and the NFL has the Pro Football Hall of Fame. But did you know the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) bestows a lifetime achievement award all its own?

The Charles Taylor Master Mechanic Award, named after the Wright brothers' mechanic credited with designing and building the engine for their first successful aircraft, recognizes individuals who have exhibited professionalism, skill and aviation expertise for at least 50 years in the aircraft maintenance profession known as "master mechanics." Stringent requirements for the award include a 50-year career in aviation without a single FAA violation (30 of those years as a certified mechanic, repairman or avionics technician) and three recommendations from FAA mechanics or repairmen. Recently, the names of three American Airlines team members were added to the official Roll of Honor:

Dennis Staffier, Aircraft Maintenance Technician, BOS

Dennis Staffier always found the idea of working in aviation appealing. He enjoyed taking things apart when he was growing up, and he grew up next to the airport, so enlisting in the U.S. Air Force after he graduated high school was the next step to making it happen. Dennis then attended East Coast Aero Tech, where he received his Airframe and Powerplant (A&P) license. After a stint with Butler Aviation, he went to work for Allegheny Airlines, where he's been for the past 47 years through its transition to American Airlines.

Bob Kopec, Aircraft Maintenance Technician, MIA

Bob Kopec II began his career in aircraft maintenance with American Airlines in Los Angeles in 1966. After high school, he enlisted in the U.S. Air Force and worked as a jet fighter crew chief for four years before joining the

airline. One of his first assignments with American was to work on the Boeing 707 and 727. After three years, he relocated to Dallas Love Field for a year, then relocated to San Diego where he spent the next 22 years. In 1986, he made the move to MIA where he has been working ever since.

Norm Oakley, Inspector, CLT

Growing up, Norm Oakley knew he wanted to do something as a mechanic, but he took a longer road to get to aircraft maintenance. He started working with Reynolds Tobacco out of high school, with a goal of hiring on at Piedmont Airlines. He persisted in checking openings, even quitting his job with Reynolds so he could be available for Piedmont. His persistence paid off and he was hired in 1966. During his time, he worked interiors and heavy maintenance, before becoming an inspector in 1977. His work has taken him around North Carolina, with a brief stint as a Boeing 767 engine inspector in Scotland, before he landed at CLT in 1989.

Each of these men received a distinctive certificate and lapel pin. The FAA even gave them the option of requesting a stickpin — similar in design to the lapel pin — for their wives in recognition of their support of the recipients' aviation maintenance careers.

"It's quite an honor to receive this," Dennis says. "A lot of this is about the time I have put in, but I work with very worthy AMTs [Aircraft Maintenance Technicians] who are more than capable, and I'm thankful for that."

Gratitude proved to be underlying theme for all the recipients. "Being given the opportunity to work for American for the past 50 years is an enormous professional accomplishment," Bob says. "I'm honored to be able to say that I've spent my entire career with an outstanding company that also happens to be the largest airline in the world."

But, surprisingly, all of this honor and celebration doesn't always come at the end of a long career. For some, it's just the beginning. "This honor really means a lot; there are no words," Norm says. "I look forward to the next 50 years — it's really 50 years and counting."

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