

DECADES IN THE SKY

TWO LIFELONG AVIATORS DEDICATED TO THE ART OF FLYING

BY EMILY MAHON

“Flying is almost like a way of life.” This statement, said by 84-year-old pilot Denes “Dan” Pandur, rings true for most everyone who is involved in aviation. Being a pilot involves long days of lessons and long nights of studying, hours and hours spent familiarizing yourself with aircraft and the physics of flight; and accepting the ever-present possibility that something might go wrong. So what inspires people to dedicate their lives to the art of flying? To find out, I spoke with two pilots who have spent the majority of their lives in aviation: Dan Pandur, who has been flying for 65 years, and Gordon Welsby, who has been flying for 66 years.

Pandur had been long fascinated by model airplanes and watched with awe as American airplanes took to the sky during his childhood in Hungary. He began his flight journey at 19 years of age by flying gliders. After escaping communist Hungary, Pandur was able to come to Edmonton, AB, and begin work as a mechanic, which provided him with an introduction to flying.

He enjoys flying single-engine, recreational planes, but his favourite aircraft is his World War I replica biplane. Pandur also likes flying in the desert because of the more predictable conditions for soaring. Now he teaches flight lessons in Westlock with a special focus on Challengers. For those thinking of pursuing flying, Pandur knows that students must have a true passion for becoming pilots. “You have to like it for more than a whim, more than saying, ‘Oh, I’m going to get my pilot’s license,’ because those people never finish,” he says. “Flying is something that you never finish learning.”

Eighty-three-year-old pilot Welsby



▲ Westlock area aviators gathered in mid-2021 to recognize the lifelong contributions of two legends, Dan Pandur (left) and Gordon Welsby. The aviators in attendance were trained and/or examined by Pandur and Welsby.

is a good example of that sentiment. Born in Kirkland Lake, ON, Welsby received his certification through the Royal Canadian Air Cadets when he was 17 years old, earning a place on the Canadian International Drill Team, which took him to the U.S. for competition. At 19, Welsby joined the Royal Canadian Air Force and stayed in the Force for 35 years. During his storied career as an aviator, Welsby participated in peacekeeping tours in Damascus, Lebanon and Northern Israel, and Vietnam. He flew targets for the U.S. Navy, became a flight instructor where he helped rewrite the WWII syllabus, became the CO of a radar station, was Chief of Standards at a flight school, and did an exchange to instruct with the Royal Air Force in England for two years, among other adventures.

Selected by the Air Force to be an

instructor, Welsby has continued that career into retirement, teaching students out of Westlock, AB. “I’d have to really think twice about what’s been most enjoyable: My Air Force flying or meeting all these people and instructing them,” Welsby says. “Those are probably the most meaningful experiences in my life.”

Pandur and Welsby instill that same love for the art of aviation in their students. Bill Mahon, a student of both Pandur and Welsby, explains, “Dan Pandur made it real and Gordon Welsby has taken that torch. It’s just the joy of my life to be part of a community like Westlock and the comradery that Westlock offers.”

Flying may be something that you never finish learning, but these aviators have shown that flying is also something you never finish loving. 🛩️