

Staff Photo

FRED E. HUMMEL (center) HOLDS OX-5 CLUB AWARD FOR HIS 'DEVOTION TO ADVANCEMENT OF AVIATION'  
With Him Are Circuit Court Judge William E. Spain (left) and Veteran Pilot Bill Davenport

## Aviators Honor 'Early Bird'

Fred E. Hummel is an Early Bird of Aviation, even though he was grounded shortly after he won his wings in flight some 63 years ago.

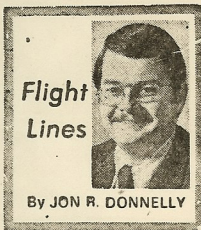
Bisenthiasm for aviation — frequently translated into action — has earned Hummel a number of aviation honors in Virginia. The most recent honor was a trophy presented last week by the OX-5 Club of Virginia, a group of men and women who, like Hummel, are aviation pioneers.

Flight became an obsession for the 78-year-old Richmond resident when he was a teenager in his native Milwaukee, Wis.

Using plans drawn up by the famous Glen Curtiss, young Hummel spent a year building a glider. His first flight was from a cliff overlooking Lake Michigan in June 1911, eight years after the Wright Brothers became airborne at Kitty Hawk, N.C. The flight, which ended on a sandy beach below the cliff, earned him a niche in the Early Birds of Aviation.

To qualify for membership in that elite group, "you had to have flown sometime between the years 1903 and 1916," recalled Hummel, seated in his comfortable home on Cary Street Road. "You also had to have flown at least 250 feet."

Hummel said he's sure he qualified on the distance re-



By JON R. DONNELLY

quirement because "the cliff was some 300 feet high." He later modified the wood-and-cloth craft by adding landing skids and wheels. "Landings," he said, "were very rough on the knees of the pants" until the modifications were made.

While they didn't encourage their son to fly the primitive craft, Hummel's parents didn't oppose his activities either, he said. "I think my father was glad to get me off the street," he said.

Poor eyesight prevented Hummel from realizing his dream of becoming a pilot, but his obsession with aviation continued when he moved from Milwaukee to Hopewell with his parents in 1920.

His father was a founder of the Hummel-Ross Fiber Corp. and the younger Hummel eventually headed the company until 1947, when he sold the organiza-

tion to Continental Can Co. and retired.

During his years with the fiber company, he recognized the "natural link" between business and aviation which, he said, prompted him to buy and develop Hopewell Airport.

"Airports attract business," said Hummel, citing as an example Continental Can's decision to purchase the Hummel-Ross complex. Hopewell Airport definitely "was a drawing card."

Hummel's purchase of a summer home on the Rappahannock River in Middlesex County led eventually to the creation of another airport in 1925.

Known as Hummel Airport, and donated by him to the county in 1970, the facility originally was aimed at encouraging outdoor recreation, such as fishing, in the area near the town of Topping.

Another factor in the creation of the airport was the fact that Hummel's wife was an accomplished aviator in her own right and frequently flew the family between Hopewell and Topping. Mrs. Hummel was the first woman to receive an Air Transport Rating, among the most difficult and demanding ratings a pilot can earn.

In addition to developing two airports in his adopted state, Hummel also served two terms as chairman of the Virginia Ad-

visory Committee on Aviation.

His enthusiasm for aviation extends to lighter-than-air craft, the dirigibles which had their heyday in the 1920s and 1930s.

"They were magnificent ships," he said, recalling a transatlantic flight aboard the famous German dirigible Hindenburg from Lakehurst, N.J., to Frankfurt. It was the next to last flight the giant airship made before exploding and burning at Lakehurst in 1937.

Hummel's award from the OX-5 Club may be the last official act of the group, which was formed in 1955 but which has been dormant since 1962.

The group is made up of people who flew aircraft powered by the Curtiss OX-5 engine, designed during World War I. The 90-horsepower engine "probably powered more types of planes than any other before or since," said Richmond Circuit Court Judge William E. Spain, president of the club.

Since the OX-5 was popular during the 1920s and early 1930s, "there aren't many of us left who flew it," Judge Spain said of the club.

The inscription on the plaque presented to Hummel is a simple tribute from a group of "johnny-come-latelys to a real aviation pioneer," said Spain. "To Fred E. Hummel, for His Devotion to the Advancement of Aviation."