



# Ralph Patrick Sullivan

MAR 1, 1934 - FEB 23, 2006



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**R**alph Frederic Nelson, aviation pioneer, passed away on Wednesday, February 22, 2006 at Bethany Beach, DE. He was 71. He was born on March 1, 1934 in Beverly, Massachusetts to the late Graham Thomson Nelson and Mary Anne Bunk.

Ralph, affectionately known as "Beaver" by his grade school classmates, started his career in aviation early by soloing in a J-2 Cub on skis on his 16th birthday. After he graduated from Beverly High School in 1952, he joined the Army and served during the Korean Conflict as an Infantry Tactics Instructor.

In 1954, he left the Army and used his G.I. Bill benefits to earn his aviation instructor rating to become a University of Illinois flight instructor. He flew his way through college, became a member of the Alpha Eta Rho International Aviation Fraternity, and graduated with a Bachelor of Science in Speech in 1958.

Two days after graduation, he was working for the Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association (AOPA) in Bethesda, MD. Over the next 35 years, he would rise to AOPA's Senior Executive Vice President while initiating and managing a wide range of general aviation safety programs, including the national program of Flight Training Clinics, training more than 100,000 pilots and being a founder of the National Association of Flight Instructors (NAFI). His distinguished aviation awards include: Alpha Eta Rho International Aviation Fraternity Award, Washington Air Derby Association Trophy, FAA's Certificate of Commendation, National Air Transportation Association Meritorious Service Award, Department of Transportation Distinguished Service Award for Flight Instructor Programs, Aviation and Space Technology Award, Flight Safety Foundation Award, National Safety Council best training film of the year, FAA's Distinguished Service Award, and finally the Aviation Elder Statesman Award for lifetime service to aviation safety.

In 1994, he retired to his favorite beach home and continued his community service on the Sussex Shore Beach Association Board, managing community security and taking care of the beach lifeguards.



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He is survived by his son Graham, son Ralph Jr., daughter Pam, daughter Sandy, and seven grandchildren.

All services will be private. Arrangements are being handled by Parsell Funeral Homes & Crematorium, Lewes, DE.

In lieu of flowers, donations may be made to the National Association of Flight Instructors Foundation (NAFI Foundation), 35 E. Livingston Avenue, Columbus, OH 43215 where arrangements are being made to dedicate a "Ralph Nelson Memorial Flight Instructor Scholarship."

On-line condolences may be sent to: [condolences@parsellfuneralhomes.com](mailto:condolences@parsellfuneralhomes.com)

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