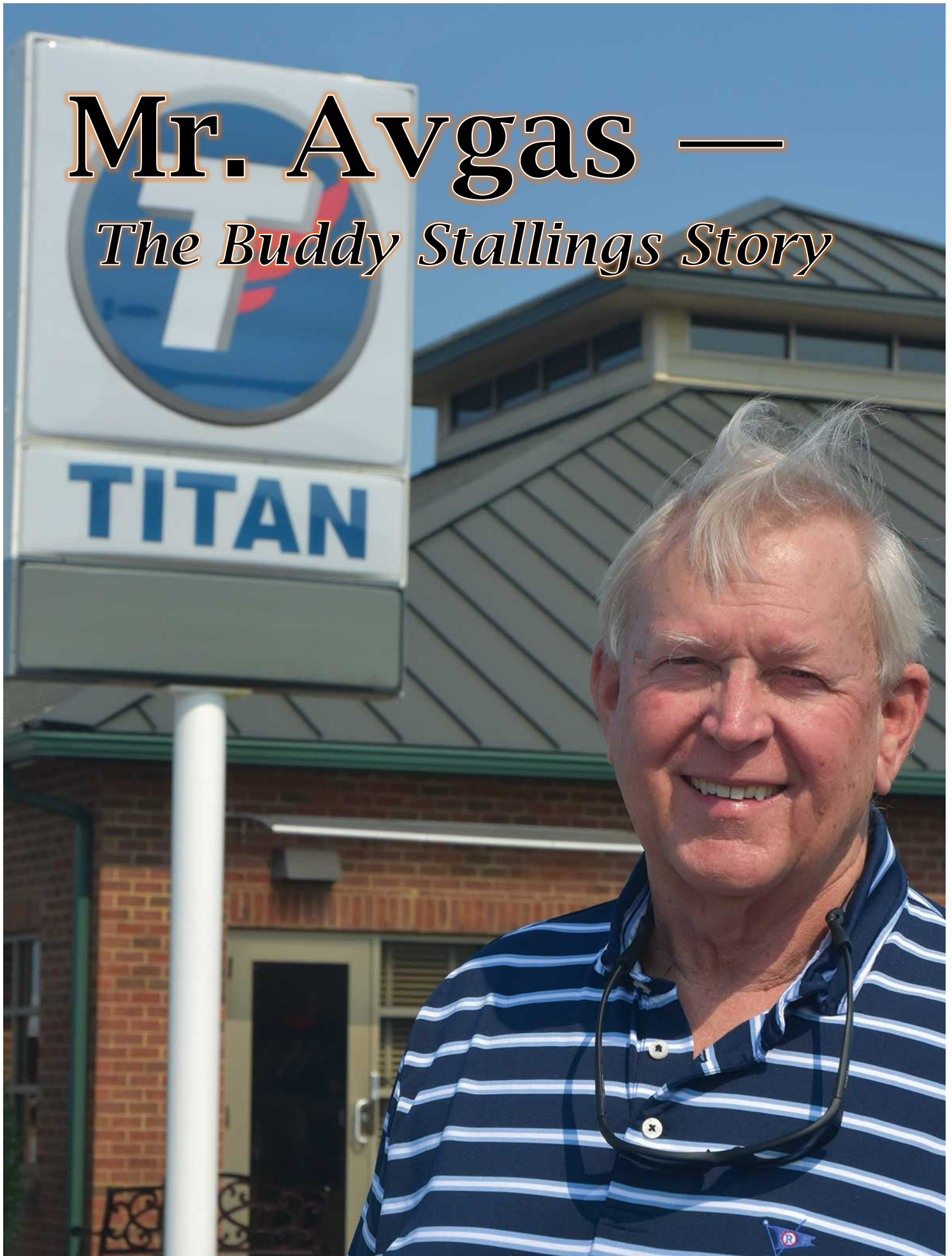


Mr. Avgas —

The Buddy Stallings Story



Mr. AvGas — *The Real Deal with Buddy Stallings*

By Mike Jones

Cessna Pilots Magazine, originally published: October 2021

Last month I introduced the readers of this journal to Captain Alex Mello. Alex flies for a major airline, is movie-star handsome, exercises exotic planes for owners too busy to fly them, and is PIC on the historic C-46 *Tinkerbelle*, a 60,000-pound World War II taildragger. But that's not the exciting stuff.

Don't tell anybody, but Alex has super-hero powers. He could be in a Marvel movie with Batman and the Hulk. Alex's special power is the ability make friends instantly, even at a distance. I saw this magic happen while hiking the flight line with Alex at the outdoor air-fryer called Oshkosh.

We already had walked miles that morning. We were hot, tired, and looking for a beer when Alex noticed a raven-haired beauty in a turbocharged golf cart, heading our way. As she was racing by Alex merely stuck out his thumb and lit up his amazing smile. She stuffed the brakes and drifted sideways like a NASCAR pro, asking "Where can I take you?" before the tires had stopped smoking. I'm not sure she even noticed I was there.

Turns out she is an executive at Titan Fuel, the company that delivers avgas and jet fuel to over 500 airports across the U.S. One thing led to another and before you could say "slip the surly bonds" I was lunching with Buddy Stallings,

the septuagenarian founder of Titan Aviation Fuels and a loyal Cessna pilot for decades.

Getting into the Business

Buddy Stallings founded Eastern Aviation Fuels, Inc., now Titan Aviation Fuels, in 1975. Today his company delivers avgas and jet fuel to FBOs and corporate customers all across the country. He's big smoke in the aviation world; those are Titan trucks delivering the avgas and Jet-A at Oshkosh and at hundreds of other airports. He's a handsome, straight-spined southern gentleman of 70+ years, with a robust mane of white hair, quick bright eyes and a sharp wit. Despite his successful career and impeccable reputation, he also is incredibly modest and unpretentious. We sat under the awning of a restaurant at AirVenture while he shared flying stories. But before we got to the hangar flying, I was curious about the passion which drove Stallings into petroleum distribution. It turns out he took a long, scenic route into founding his own business.



Buddy Stallings started his aviation fuel empire in 1975 in New Bern, NC mainly to accommodate his flying addiction. Today, Titan trucks pump Jet-A and avgas onto planes at 550 airports across the U.S.

Even though he had always wanted to be a pilot, as a young man Stallings had neither the time nor the money for flying lessons. He finished school and immediately went to work at a bank in Raleigh, NC. At the bank, he started — like just about everybody in banking — in the installment loan department. “That’s great training if you're

going to be in business, because you really get to understand money and credit,” he said laughingly, a skill which has served him well over the decades.

He dedicated part of his pay to starting a flying regime. Since he was working full-time, he only managed a trip to the airport once a week for a 6am lesson. But it worked: he earned his private ticket in June 1969.

But the family business beckoned, so he returned back to New Bern, NC where his parents owned a tire store as part of an oil distributorship. In short order, Stallings was running the tire store but hating every minute of it. In March 1975, Stallings leveraged the oil distributorship into aviation and started selling aviation fuel to local airports — “primarily, so I could write-off the costs of an airplane!” With Stallings’ gregarious personality and his passion for flying, the business prospered.

Just four months later, Stallings was confident he could make a living as an aviation fuel distributor. He quit the tire store and, with his dad co-signing a \$50,000 bank note to get the business started, Stallings made the plunge.

“My Dad, he really didn't want to do it, but my mother made him sign my loan,” Stallings chuckles as he recalls the debate in his parent’s house. “Isn’t it funny how things work out? If he was gonna have a minute of peace in his own house, he had to sign that note.”

For a short while, Stallings ran a one-man band. “I bought a tanker truck. I’d stay in the office till one o’clock, then a girl would come in and work the phones,” he recalls. “I’d take the tractor trailer, pick up a load of fuel, and go deliver it. It was a great day for the motoring public when I could afford real truck drivers; the safety level went way up!”

Inherently entrepreneurial, Stallings focused on service and expansion. One of his first “deals” was the purchase of a small regional distributor in North Carolina who sold fuel to five or six airports in the center of the state:



At heart, Stallings is a salesman and built his business using G.A. airplanes to offer better service than his competitors. He has flown hundreds of different airplanes in accumulating his 11,000 hours of PIC time, but the Cessna models are among his favorites. He put 2,000 hours of a Cessna 210 in his early years. Today his most common chariot is a handsome Cessna jet.

Knightsdale, Raeford, the Fort Bragg flying club. By combining those new customers with his existing ones, Stallings gradually grew the business.

Over the years, Stallings distributed for a number of different aviation fuel companies, including Phillips, BP, and Shell. As the company expanded this became a problem because every time they changed brands they'd have to go to every airport, take down the old signs and install new ones. In 2021 Buddy and his son Robbie, who runs the company today, decided to deploy their own logo which would allow them to mix-and-match avgas brands, from any supplier. Today, the Titan logo is splayed across about a thousand fuel trucks in the U.S.

A Competitive Advantage

In the early days, Stallings was the company's only salesman, and he recalled all the years of long meetings during the day and tedious solo flights at

night. “No question about it, being a pilot was a competitive advantage. I serviced all the new customers. I started in the eastern Carolinas, and became pretty big in the Southeast U.S. Then we covered pretty much from the Mississippi River east, and now we’re coast to coast.”

“I was doing this because I love airplanes, love flying, love flying people. It was natural for me to make sales calls in my airplane; and natural to put sales guys in airplanes,” Stallings explains. Around 1984 Stallings hired his first salesman, a gregarious fellow named Mike Allen who is now their sales manager. Stallings has four salesmen besides himself that fly to customers. “We provide them an airplane and they call on their customers. You don't have to fly do this job, but you will love it so much more if you do.”

In the early days, selling avgas was all about the relationships with the FBO owners. “In those days, most of the FBOs were mom-and pop-businesses. Say there was a guy who loved flying, maybe he had a charter business. He’d open an FBO, just to get the wholesale discount on avgas. When I flew in, they knew I already was a member in their club.”

Those personal relationships have persisted. “Up until probably twenty years ago, I knew all my customers; I knew their families, I knew their kids' names. All of them became good friends. Like Pat Epps, at Epps Aviation at Peachtree DeKalb Airport, in Atlanta. We’ve been there for twenty plus years. Bob Wilson, of Wilson Aviation in Memphis, Charlotte, Chattanooga and Houston. These are my personal friends. They're icons in the industry. All of them are just great, great people.”

But owners get old and families sell the businesses, and companies consolidate to gain efficiencies and marketing clout. “The FBO business now is dominated by chains like Signature and Atlantic,” Stallings concludes with a tinge of regret. “I don't know how that'll continue. The industry is changing.”

As the company grew, Stallings networked with flyers across the country, including some of the biggest names in the industry. Mark Baker, the president of AOPA, is a personal friend. “Oh, he loves flying. He’s got one of the best looking SuperCubs you’ve ever seen.”

Even the amazing Bob Hoover was a personal friend; Hoover served as the company spokesperson for almost two decades. According to Stallings, Bob Hoover not only was a great pilot he “was one of the finest human beings there ever was on the planet,” Stallings said. “Just a nice, nice, nice man.”



While his company has expanded and now his son runs the business on a day-to-day basis, Stallings still likes to keep his eye on the operations. Here long-time FBO employee Tige Dillard refuels the author's Cessna T210 from one of the thousand Titan fuel trucks that prowl many of the airports across the U.S.

Hoover and Stallings made a great marketing team. “At events like Oshkosh, we’d have a table reserved in the middle of a big tent for Bob, and he would hold court. People would line up to get his autograph on these prints of different airplanes he’d flown. No matter how long it took, he’d sit there and sign every one of them, usually with a personal note.”

One year, the governor of Wisconsin came to the show and asked to meet Hoover. Stallings warned him, “I’m sorry, Governor, you’re gonna have to stand in that line. If you break into that line you’re gonna make a lot of people mad!”

To his credit, the Governor took the hint and waited in line for his Hoover autograph.



Stalling's business is headquartered in a modern but modest office building in historic New Bern, NC. His equally modest office is filled with airplane models and dozens upon dozens of photos of aviators and friends. Stallings counts Bob Hoover as one of his best friends, best pilots and "a great, great, great man." The photo memorializes one great afternoon with Hoover, Stallings and their wives.

More recently, the Colonial pipeline "hacking" and resultant shut-down was a perilous moment for Titan. "We didn't have a single customer run out, but boy, we scrambled," he explained. "We trucked aviation fuel over the mountains of Tennessee to airports on the coast. We got Jet-A off the Plantation pipeline [a competing pipeline in

Richmond, VA]. We trucked fuel out of Tampa, out of Georgia, and out of Port Canaveral. But nobody ran out."

Planes and Pilots

Stallings, like most of us, began flying single engine airplanes but quickly moved to faster and more capable airplanes. He runs through the list like a guy remembering his ex-wives: "I had a Cessna 210, loved it, great plane, put 2,000 hours on it. Then a Cherokee 235, that's a rugged plane. A Seneca Two for a while, then an Aztec. I've had four or five Piper Aerostars, all in a row, plus a King Air for a couple of years," he said.

As the company expanded, greater opportunities came at greater distances. Titan upgraded to jets in 1991, first a Citation One SP and then a Bravo. Now the team uses a Citation Excel.

“I used to fly all the time myself, but [the Excel] requires two pilots. Plus, I’m really not interested in flying to Fort Lauderdale, and then Columbus, and Teterboro and back New Bern all in one days,” he explained. “Those are long days. So, we have two pilots that fly the trips I don’t want to fly or when I need to work.”

As we chatted and Stallings thought back through his flying career, he reminisced about two unusual flights. The first was after he had purchased a Citation in the United Kingdom and flew it home.



“Even today, I can see every landing in my mind. All that

water, across the North Atlantic. It was my first time over that much water and pretty damn cold water, too. I even had ‘drift down’ charts in my hand, just in case, which are what you use if you lose an engine and can’t hold your altitude. And the whole time, I was figuring and refiguring the point-of-no-return. After the point-of-no-return, the flight became easier: I didn’t have a choice.”

Another flight stuck in his mind, a cold, dry winter flight in a trusty Cherokee 235. Stallings was going westbound “like one or two o’clock in the morning” and he was flying through light snow. “I started to see a blue flame glowing around the propeller. Then blue flames around the cowling. Then more blue flames hopping up and down the windscreen. I didn’t know what it was,

Stallings and the author met at AirVenture 2021 and enjoyed a lively afternoon of hangar flying, punctuated by a string of visitors always eager to shake his hand. The Oshkosh airport is a Titan customer and Stallings’ trucks filled the fuel tanks on thousands of airplanes that week.

but the engine was running and the gauges were fine, there wasn't anything else to do. You know, night IFR, at 8,000 feet. So I just continued on and eventually landed.

“The next morning, I called this friend of mine, an old salt, an old aviator. I explained I had these blue flames on the windshield. He's said, ‘Yes, that's St. Elmo's fire. Static electricity building up. It won't do anything.’ Would have been nice to know that beforehand.”

Stallings has flown dozens different airplane types, including a brief moment at the controls of a B-17, and has posted about 11,000 hours in his logbook. He flew a B-25 to Oshkosh this year.

“I've got a very good friend of mine, a Delta pilot, he flies all of these warbirds, he's so good he could fly them from the back seat. He invited me to come fly with him to Oshkosh from Troy, Alabama, which I was very happy to do. But about ten minutes out, I figured out the joke: the plane had no autopilot. So, now my name is ‘Otto.’ I hand-flew that little lady right up here, four hours and 15 minutes, 8,000 feet, hard IFR. That's the most stick time I've had since I can remember. But it's a very stable aircraft, a little squirrely on landing, but he assures me I'd get used to that in a day or two.”

Over 40 years in the business, Stallings has met thousands of pilots but the one who stands out is Bob Hoover. “Absolute favorite; absolutely first-class,” Stallings laughs. “I only flew him one time, I picked him up in our Excel. I was worried to death having Bob Hoover supervise my landing. But I greased it that day!”

“Thanks for Your Business”

Stallings is a sophisticated businessman with a simple philosophy, which could be paraphrased as, *Do what you love, and do it with quality people*. He decries the “self-made man” theory and instead explains it takes a team to

build a business. “I’ve had so many good people working with me, building the business. You gotta have good people working with you to make it happen. I was very fortunate.

“My whole deal was simple: I love airplanes. I love aviation people. I’ve had the best time in the world and the best job in the world.”

About the Author

Dr. Mike Jones is an entrepreneur who uses his business expertise to help G.A. airports across the country improve their governance and operations, speeding them on their way to more revenues, grants, and community support. He also helps protect them from avaricious developers and reverse the damage caused by ineffectual politicians. He’s been writing for this magazine for nearly a decade, flown 800 Young Eagle missions, and put 4,000 hours in his logbook. He’s always accessible at PilotMike2012@gmail.com.

