

James C. Ray

James C. Ray, a strong-willed, eternally optimistic, and intensely honorable aviator and philanthropist, was born in San Francisco in 1923. His entrepreneurial nature and “can do” attitude was evident from an early age and proved invaluable to his success—whether returning a battle-damaged B-17 and his crew to their base in England or in business dealings after the War.

His founding support was crucial to AOPA’s ability to launch the You Can Fly program in 2014 and to accomplish our shared goals of building aviation STEM curriculum for American high schools, establishing a nationwide network of flying clubs, getting Rusty Pilots back in the left seat, and improving the flight training experience for new pilots.



B-17 command pilot James C. Ray, center, with his co-pilot and bombardier.

As a steelworker in 1941, James and his civilian crew were sent to Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. They witnessed the Japanese attack from just a short distance away, and shortly thereafter James enlisted in the Army Air Corps. He demonstrated an aptitude for flight training, and ultimately served as a B-17 command pilot with the Eighth Air Force, 447th Bomb Group, based in Rattlesden, England. Eventually, James attained the rank of Major, and was awarded the Air Medal and Distinguished Flying Cross, with Oak Leaf Clusters, two of the highest honors bestowed upon military aviators. He firmly believed the self-discipline and self-confidence he learned during flight training helped him achieve his future success in life and business.

Aviation remained an ever-present part of his life. One of his favorite aircraft was a Cessna 170B, which he flew to 58 countries in the 1950s. For more than 29 years, James flew Cessna pistons, turboprops and jets, Cirrus aircraft, and a Stemme motor glider. He was at home in the sky.

During a span of more than 40 years, James was actively engaged in venture capital investments as a seed investor and advisor to more than 300 startup technology companies including Cirrus Aircraft and other aviation concerns. His investments, advice, and endorsements made these companies stronger and more attractive in the marketplace.

In the same way, James engaged with AOPA to make our business practices stronger and to build a sustainable You Can Fly program based on sound management and accountability.



AOPA President Mark Baker, left, and James C. Ray.



James C. Ray.

Through his family foundation and his unflagging advocacy for entrepreneurship and aviation, James made and continues to make an indelible mark on the education of young people—especially aspiring aviators. Much of his philanthropy was done anonymously and the success of the people and institutions he helped was the greatest thanks he wanted to receive.

James promoted by example the values of self-discipline, self-confidence, hard work and responsibility for one's own actions. His life's work lives on in all of us who knew James and who continue to build on the legacy he left for us to carry forward.