

# Kotzebue pilot nominated for Alaskan of the Year



Captain Thomas Richards, Sr. at the Alaskan of the Year Awards Banquet.

Photo by Bob Kowalik

by P.E. Hyslop

Tundra Times

A Kotzebue born airline pilot, four high school students, and a former Native senator were among those honored at the Alaskan of the Year Banquet held at the Anchorage Sheraton hotel on March 29.

Captain Thomas Richards, Sr. from Kotzebue was one of the nominees for the Alaskan of the Year Award. His professional career has spanned a range of aircraft from the Piper Cub through the Boeing 727, having served as a bush pilot, flight instructor, director of flight operations and has logged over 30,000 hours of flying - equivalent to almost four years in the cockpit.

He was nominated because his "life and career and his contribution to Alaska lies in that fact that a small-town Eskimo boy made the transition from a life of hunting and fishing to the jet age, and in the process inspired many others." Willie Hensley, who nominated Captain Richards, said he always held him in esteem.

"In the days when I was growing up he was a figure of admiration. A lot of people didn't fly around those days - bush pilots had an aura of great respect," said Hensley.

How did his career begin that drew him from Kotzebue? Captain Richards said he left Kotzebue when he was thirteen to attend the high school in Eklut-

na, a small town 26 miles from Anchorage. When he graduated he didn't have enough credits to attend college. He was delayed a while but when he left for Haskell Boarding School in Lawrence, Kansas, he started taking courses in engineering at the University of Kansas.

Captain Richards said he decided to fly during World War II. "It wasn't a tough beginning. The fact that I came from a Native background helped because I had so much encouragement," said Richards.

Encouragement came from Louie Rotman, a store owner who bought his first plane to fly; Noel Wien, who employed him as a pilot for Wien; and others. In addition, Richards received a lot of support from his wife. "I have had a lot of support through her. She holds down the fort in Anchorage where we have our permanent home," said Richards.

Captain Richards, who retired from Wien Air Alaska two years ago, now flies for Baker Aviation out of Kotzebue. "I hope to retire soon," he said.

What will he do after he retires? "Probably fly some more," he laughed.

Senator Frank Peratrovich (1895-1984) was one of the persons that was given special recognition. Elected to the Territorial Legislature in 1945 and 1949, he also served as a member (Continued on Page Five)

# Kotzebue pilot nominated for award

(Continued from Page One)

of the Alaska Statehood Committee and as Vice President of the Constitutional Convention. He served as Grand President of the Alaska Native Brotherhood and President of the Alaska Marine Workers. He served fourteen years in the Alaska State Senate.

The four high school students given \$1000 scholarships at the Banquet were Geraldine Sakeagak, Thomas Merculief, Valerie Davidson, and Ann Rowland.

The money for the scholarships came from proceeds from the banquet. Students use the money towards expenses at colleges and universities with four-year degree programs. If they leave the state, they must intend to return.

"The applicants can also be students already in college," said Sharon Eluska, chairman of the Scholarship Committee. "We try to base our awards on needs. We look at scholastic aptitude, potential, or returning to the state," Eluska added.

One of the recipients, Geraldine Sakeagak, 3.96 GPA, 17 year old senior from Barrow will attend the University of Fairbanks with a major in corporate law and a Native law background. She feels a lot of her accomplishments were because of her parents support.

"My parents have been the most influential in my life. Whenever I was in doubt, I always asked their opinion. They have given me confidence to do the best I can," said Sakeagak.

Thomas Merculief, 3.97 GPA, 17 year old senior from Tyonek will pursue his studies in pre-med. His final goal is to be a heart surgeon.

He has one piece of advice for other students in high school who want good grades, "just work, get work done before play."

Valerie Davidson, 3.8 GPA, a senior attending Ben Eielson High School in Fairbanks will attend the University of Alaska in Fairbanks, majoring in Elementary Education.



Photo by Bob Kowchuk

Left to right: Ann Rowland, Valerie Davidson, Thomas Merculief, and Geraldine Sakeagak

In the sixth grade, Valerie moved from the small town of Aniak where there were 96 students to a junior high school with more than 400 students. Her advice to other students who are making similar transitions is "it's tough at first, but take things as they come," and "it's a lot harder but you need to study

more."

She gives credit to her parents for being supportive of her endeavors. She said they never stressed winning in the sports she has competed, only that she do her best. This differed from some other parents attitudes.

"A lot of parents expect their kids to be in first place or in the

top ten. What matters to my parents is the experience of doing my best," added Davidson.

Ann Rowland, 3.94 GPA, couldn't be reached by phone before the newspaper deadline. She attends the Palmer High School and plans to go to the Whitworth College in Spokane Washington.