

John J. Bannister, Sr.

Richmond, Virginia



Inducted in 2016, John J. Bannister, Sr. while being hospitalized as a young boy met and was mentored by Dick Merrill, Virginia Aviation Hall of Fame member and one of the greatest aviators of that era. Upon graduation from Benedictine High School, where he was promoted to the rank of Cadet Captain his senior year and valedictorian for the class of 1938, he went to work for the Commonwealth's Unemployment Compensation Commission for four years. In August 1942 Bannister entered the U.S. Army Aviation Cadet Program and received his primary instruction at Rankin Aeronautical Academy in Tulare, California, training and soloing in a Stearman PT-17 to complete this phase of his Army aviation career. Bannister received basic training at Merced, California and then went to Williams Field in Chandler, Arizona for advanced training on the RP-322, Lockheed's predecessor to the P-38 Lightning. After being commissioned a 2nd Lt. in the Army Air Corps on July 28, 1943, he was assigned to the 36th Fighter Group as a member of the 383d Fighter Squadron in Van Nuys, California and was one of the first Army aviators to fly the P-38. His unit was deployed to England and on March 3, 1944 Bannister flew his first combat mission, a daylight bombing raid on Berlin. During World War II he flew 59 combat missions in the P-38 and over 70 missions in the P-51 Mustang, including flying air cover for the D-Day invasion of Normandy. His decorations include the Distinguished Flying Cross and the Air Medal with three oak leaf clusters. Upon completion of his active duty he joined the Air Force Reserve and transferred in to the Virginia Air National Guard, and was a charter member of the 149th Fighter Squadron of the VANG. While a member of the Air Guard, he secured a position with the Civil Aeronautics Administration, later the FAA, as an air traffic controller. Serving as Watch Supervisor and then Assistant Tower Chief, he spent his entire career at "Richard E. Byrd Flying Field", later Richmond International Airport. Bannister retired from the FAA in 1977 and was appointed to the Capital Region Airport Commission. In 1986 he became involved with the formation of the VAHS and the funding and construction of the Virginia Aviation Museum, where he was a docent for ten years. Bannister spent his lifetime in service to our nation during wartime, the Commonwealth, the County and the Capital Region of the Commonwealth, managing a safe aviation environment as an air traffic controller.