

# Clay Lacy



Clay Lacy and luck. The two might go together like a gull and flight if life hadn't proven otherwise. Oh, it looks like luck that this 50,000-hour pilot holds 29 world speed records, 30 different type ratings, and has intimate, left-seat knowledge of more than 300 various aircraft. Luck again, that in the 56 years of his career this Wichita farm boy-turned-entrepreneur has spent no more than one forgettable day outside aviation, preferring instead to style himself throughout a remarkable life as, alternately, masterful military jock, respected United Airlines captain, fearless experimental test pilot, dazzling unlimited air race champion, unbeatable aviation record-setter, and, as if that weren't impressive enough, flyer on whom Hollywood frequently calls.

Even he, at age 88 as jazzed to be flying as he was at 14, when first licensed, reveals a personal pact with providence: "Lucky me," he says. "Lucky me."



You know what? We're having none of it. To say Clay Lacy has soared to success on the jetstream of fickle fortune is to ignore the guts and pluck of a pilot so passionate about his profession – and his obsession – that by the time he retired from United Airlines in 1992, No. 1 in seniority after 40 stellar years, the radar of Lacy's life already was ablaze. Blindingly. These bright lights of Brilliant Things coming and going might pass as a particularly nifty spin of the wheel of chance. That is, if they weren't instead the logical gifts of a guy who always – yes, always – knew where his love was, and damned if his hard-work and talent weren't going to be focused there – in the air.

"I have really always been, let's say, extreme on being involved in aviation," says the pilot today as he shoots the breeze in his sleek Van Nuys, CA offices of Clay Lacy Aviation, the jets-only charter

that by the time the U.S. Air Force in '54 plunked you down in a Piper PA-12 for pilot training you already were a 3,000-hour old hand who had been co-piloting United DC-3s since age 19. It wasn't haphazard that the very next year the California Air National Guard would sign you up for seven years of "the greatest time," as you say, counting such good time gigs as the F-86, T-33 and C-97. And it was hardly the luck of the draw that during your continuing



A. Rating United in front of the first DC-3 and first (F47) aircraft he flew.  
B. U.S. Air Force Captain Clay Lacy, age 24.  
C. Some of Clay Lacy Aviation's professional team.



company and FBO he founded in 1983. This 120+–employee operation that encompasses aircraft maintenance, a management and a world-renowned aerial cinematography outfit, features a fleet of 25 of the most luxurious aircraft on the planet – from the \$1,275 per hour Learjet 24 to the \$6,500 per hour Gulfstream V. Fool enough to falsely accuse it of lacking glamour? Ha! Clay Lacy Aviation also has available a custom Boeing 727 that is fitted with all first-class seats, exclusivity, and other sumptuous trappings accordingly th at puts it in a class all by itself.

"I really really feel fortunate," Lacy adds in an attempt again to credit Lacy Luck for the won-the-lottery look of his working life (after all, rare is the envious aviator who daily deals in such fine and exciting phenomena of flight). "I'm fortunate to have done something every day of my life that I wanted to do. I was just so lucky it worked so perfect."

Very gracious, Lacy, but lame: The whole world knows it wasn't mere caprice



D. Lacy at age 5 building model airplanes and drawing of flying.  
E. Jack Conroy, Program Director Business jets, down to Clay "kisses it well. By got your ass up here."



United tenure, a heavy-four-decade real idiosyncrasy with all manner of DCs (3 to 7 to 8 to 10), Convair 340s and the Boeing babes (727 and her sister, 747), you already were cramming too many accomplishments to count into your 15 days of that month. Entire careers, in fact, like that of testing, demonstrating and selling such executive aircraft along the lines of the Learjet, as we well remember from your successful 1960s. Yet, there is something suspiciously more aloof in these relentlessly realized ambitions; we think it sniffs of passion.

"Boy, I knew when I looked down on the little houses and the world looked so clean from up there," recalls the aviator of the day at age 7, in the year his father died of tuberculosis, a stag-winged Beech lifted little Lacy high above the farm fields of Kansas, thanks to the dollar or so his mother paid for the ride. "I knew I wanted to fly."

The fascination with aviation fired the enthusiastic child-pilot through a teen-year career ferrying airplanes ("school? I think I was asleep," Lacy laughs) in the employ of Orville Sanders, one of the three men Lacy today is grateful to for being the fuel that fed his career's every good thing. "Boy, do I owe a lot to that guy," he says with the grace he typically affords the topic. "He wasn't a real proficient pilot but he was



children's causes and patron of aviation scholarships, he claims to be committed – and happiest – when sharing some of the gifts he feels have been so generously bestowed on him.

"Well...I didn't marry until after 40 and never had kids," Lacy says of the 120-hours-per-month ("every month") lifestyle he entertained for years. "The way I've been involved in aviation...well, I feel I've kind of led a narrow life in a way because of it."

Everyone's life should be so narrow. Geez, Lacy, wh at about Sinatra? what about Tom Cruise and "Top Gun"? What about the Fraizer and "The air talents are so

damn impressive that everyone from Hollywood higher-ups to brokers of global commerce want you? Okay, okay, says Lacy, maybe "I've been extremely fortunate, partially because (the entertainment industry) is here in California, and partially because I was demonstrating the Lear when it was new, but I really have met a lot of interesting, successful people – the most successful in town, in the country!"

Flying Frank Sinatra and "just about everyone in Hollywood" during his years selling Learjets was merely a thrilling prelude to the latest Lacy escape – a phenomenally successful foray into aerial



H. Clay and Johnny Carson.  
I. Mel Armstrong and Clay.  
J. Admission, on board jet cinematography in use.

cinematography. Owner of "Astrovision," an on-board camera system whose 360-degree rotation and 44-degree tilt allow for jaw-dropping birds'-eye photography, it was Lacy who first thought, *Duh!* a Learjet 25 would make a vastly finer camera platform than the stall-fighter B-25, for years the industry standard. Before you could say "cut and print!" he and his three Astrovision-equipped Lears had a worldwide monopoly on aerial photograp h and today shoot 50 days a year in airspace all over the world. Remember the fighters screaming across the sky in "Top Gun"? Well, that's thank Lacy for the footage. E. The flight path of Superman? Kudos to another Lacy entertainment. From in-flight promo shots of airlines' factory-fresh ships to the aerial drama of "Ice Station Zebra" and "Jet Pilot," Lacy's the man with the look of the clouds at his command.

"Oh, I've thought about selling the whole company and just keeping the photo business because it's something that I...it's a relatively personal...." Are you trying to say, Lacy, th at jetting from glamour capitol to vacation paradise – in town, says Paris Acapulco, Australia to the Cayman Islands – all in the service of work is just too, too wonderful to describe in words? "Well, it might have been smart," is what he will say in his disarmingly low-key way that for all his sophistication seems still Kansas in its lack of guile. "But even though I work a little harder than I like, it's not like digging a ditch. It's still fun. And being always kind



of an airplane nut my whole life..." Here, we feel compelled to interrupt: Clay Lacy? An airplane nut? You're pulling our.... But the man for whom 50,000 hours is mere pittance compared to the galaxies of mission he lavishes on his love – aviation – is too unmoved by his own ornament place in the flying instrument to take the ball of our tense. "Well," he humbly trumps us instead with a hint of what really makes him sing. "I've got a lot of airplanes now I always thought I'd like to have, you know?"

We know. In addition to his charter fleet of 25, 11 of which he owns, Lacy's most beloved babies are his personal DC-3, dolled-up by a handsome Gulfstream interior, loyal United logo, and tail number of his birthday, and, for sentimental reasons, a Learjet 24 once owned by friend and old legend Lear himself. Lucky duck.

And lucky us to have had this chat. Sir, you are a true gentleman and scholar of the air; this has been a pleasure.

"No, no," insists Lacy at the slightest suggestion of his life. "Lucky me."