

FELICITY BENNETT MCKENDRY – A Great Canadian Flight Instructor

by Marilyn Dickson

The Stamp Committee of the East Canada Section of the Ninety-Nines women pilots organization selects one Canadian female pilot each year, to honour with a commemorative stamp.

Felicity identifies two incidents, which inspired her to learn to fly. When she was a youngster, the Quaker Oats Company featured a “How To Fly” kit. The cardboard instrument panel had flight and engine instruments, which could be set manually. “Student pilots” also used a cardboard control column, throttle, rudder pedals and a well-illustrated booklet as they listened to 15-minute lessons on the radio. Later, while driving the tractor on her parents’ farm and watching Harvards practicing aerobatics overhead, she practiced driving the tractor straight, imagining takeoffs and landings.

Though interested in flying as a youngster, she attended Ottawa Normal School and began teaching at the Ontario School for the Deaf in Belleville. She spent her first pay on a membership in the Kingston Flying Club. While teaching, she earned her pilot’s licence in 1951. She competed for the Webster Cup for top Canadian amateur pilot, placing first in the flying segment and third overall.

Felicity’s instructor, Doug Wagner, offered her a job if she could complete her instructor qualifications by spring. She resigned from teaching and borrowed money to log enough hours to meet this challenge. Felicity says this was the best decision of her life - though she gave up a teaching career with a secure pension in order to follow her passion, which offered little financial security. On May 1, 1953 she began her flight-instructing career.

A few months later she met Spence McKendry, the man she married in 1955. When he was her student. Felicity encouraged him to complete a Commercial licence. At that time there was a “big demand for MALE pilots. As a female, I was not eligible.” Instead Spence became an air traffic controller. As they moved to various communities for his work, Felicity always found work instructing. With the births of their children, Felicity demonstrated that a woman could combine aviation and motherhood, at a time few women did so. She became one of the first Canadian women Chief Flying Instructors.

As a Designated Flight Test Examiner, Felicity enjoyed the career highlight of testing Canadian astronauts Steve McLean and Marc Garneau for their Private Pilot Licences, a requirement for space travel. She also enjoyed air racing, competing in the All Women’s Transcontinental Air Race in 1955 and 1956 and the Angel Derby in 1975. Racing gives pilots the opportunity to perfect skills they try to stress with students, a welcome challenge for instructors whose students usually do most of the flying.



Felicity was inducted into the International Forest of Friendship, a tribute to men and women involved in aviation and space exploration. In 2007 she received the National Parkinson Society of Canada Fundraising Award for her work in producing 10,000 calendars. Every year since Felicity decided not to renew her flying licence, she hires an instructor to fly with her for her annual birthday flight, celebrating her passion for flight.

The Felicity McKendry stamp designed by Suzanne Wiltshire features Felicity in a typical pilot pose, standing by the airplane strut. The First Day Cover features Felicity when she began her flight-instructing career sixty years earlier, in 1953.