

CAPTAIN MARY CAMERON-KELLY - FIRST FEMALE AURORA PILOT

by Marilyn Dickson and Major (Retired) Karen Breeck MD

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.

Our 2018 stamp celebrates Captain Mary Cameron-Kelly's 37 year military career as Canada's first female CP-140 Aurora pilot.

Mary is a very proud Cape Bretoner having grown up in North Sydney NS, with her parents and two brothers. Mary had dreamt of one day being a pilot or astronaut, so no one was surprised when she decided to join the military in 1981 right out of high school; especially not her father who had served during the Korean War.

Although the Canadian Armed Forces was considered a world leader in the field of gender integration, Mary was a few years too early to be able to enroll directly as a pilot.

The Service Women in Non-Traditional Environments and Roles (SWINTER) Trials were underway to determine how best to integrate women into front line roles such as pilot. Although Mary tried hard to be accepted directly into the trial she ended up having to enroll as an airframe technician instead. Luckily for her, she worked mostly on the Aurora, the same aircraft she hoped to fly one day. She reapplied for the SWINTER trials, again unsuccessfully. Though she had to wait two years between each application, she persisted. In her spare time she earned a civilian pilot license. Her natural flying skills were noted and she was encouraged to enter the Webster Memorial Trophy Competition, which prides itself on finding "Canada's Top Amateur Pilot". Mary placed second in this national competition. Finally, in 1985 the SWINTER trials were closed. The military had been unable to provide any bona fide occupational reason why women should not be allowed into the pilot trade.

In 1988 Mary was accepted into military pilot training. With this change in job classifications, Mary also moved from being a Non-Commissioned Member of the military to being an Officer. Despite all her aviation training and military experience, she had to start over again and go through her second Boot Camp, and repeat ground school and basic flying skills, albeit this time on a Muskateer and Tutor instead of a Cessna!

After her Wings graduation in 1991, Mary was posted to fly the main airframe she had worked on all those years, becoming the first female Aurora (CP-140) pilot in the Canadian Armed Forces. There's nothing like really understanding the mechanics of the plane one flies to give a person confidence!

Within three years, Mary qualified as an Aircraft Commander, and then Maritime Patrol Crew Commander by 1995. Still in that flying role today, she has logged over 7,000 hours mostly patrolling Canada's East and Northern coasts. Mary recently commanded the team, which included six women, and is credited with the search and rescue of nine fishermen whose boat was sinking in Canada's far north. She also flew in the Arabian Gulf Operation Apollo in the fight against terrorism. Mary has become a wonderful mentor, reaching out and assisting younger people, particularly women, in their careers.

Mary is married to Aurora (CP-140) Aviation Technician Jim Kelly, who presently serves in the Canadian Armed Forces Reserves at Greenwood, NS. They have two young adult children, Cameron and Amanda.

