

Dee Brasseur – Living the Impossible Dream

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.

In 1965 twelve-year-old Dee Brasseur spent hours at RCAF Centralia peering through the fence, watching training pilots fly Chipmunks. She dreamed “the impossible dream”, wishing she could fly, but impossible - because she was a girl!

Years later, in 1998, she again saw planes taking off at Centralia for the Grand Bend International Air Show. When the CF18 Hornet returned to land, she felt a lump in her throat and a tear in her eye. She had achieved her dream! She had flown that plane at Mach 1.8, almost twice the speed of sound - 31.9 km/min! The next day she described her career and encouraged 1500 students to follow their dreams!

Like her father, Dee joined the military. In 1972, after months as a Dental Clinic administration clerk listening to dental drilling, Dee decided she wasn’t “being all she could be.” She applied for a commission. Posted to North Bay as an Air Weapons Controller she had regular contact with pilots and jet aircraft. After two introductory rides Dee started taking flying lessons.

When the military offered a trial program for women pilots in 1979, Dee was selected for the program. This opportunity was not as positive as she imagined! She loved flying! But she was frustrated by attitudes she encountered. A few men were supportive but many others within the macho environment abused the power of their rank. Women were often unnerved by unwanted advances and sexual innuendos. Officials tried to minimize publicity, but these women were in the public eye. Course mates envied their attention and tried to minimize their successes, suggesting women received privileged assignments. In spite of this, three of the four graduated with glowing colours!

Following wings graduation in 1981, Dee became the only female instructor. Finally, after a remarkable night emergency forced landing following an engine failure, did she feel accepted by male colleagues. In 1988 at age 35, she was one of two women given fighter pilot training. Again constantly compared with young men, often publicly, Dee excelled. In Cold Lake, AB she flew her “dream” the CF18 Hornet!



In 1994 Dee retired. Only then did she feel safe to discuss the sexual harassment she had experienced. Maclean’s magazine featured her twice in 1998, first in an issue on sexual abuse and again in their Annual Honour Roll, for her courage in dealing with it. On May 13, 2015, the Globe and Mail referred to her, “A retired air-force trailblazer provided the simplest and most compelling analysis of how to address these issues.” A CBC story on sexual misconduct in the Canadian Forces, described Dee as remarkably optimistic, when she said that, “given the military’s command-and-obey ethos, if leaders openly and definitively embraced the need for change, subordinates would follow.”

In 1995-96 Dee led the first female Canadian Precision Flying Team to participate in World Championships. Following 9/11 and Canada's commitment to the war on terrorism, Dee became an RCAF Reserve Officer, retiring in 2013.

Having recovered from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, in 2010 Dee started a One in a Million project to raise money for research, education, treatment and support for “Canadians Who Serve” and suffer from PTSD.

Inducted in 1998, Dee well deserves her membership in the Order of Canada!

