

Rosella Bjornson – First Canadian Female Airline Pilot

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.

Rosella's interest in flying ignited when, as a youngster, she flew with her father, sitting on his knee, holding the controls of his Aeronca Champ. Her seventeenth birthday gift was an easy choice for her parents - flying lessons! Her first lesson at the Lethbridge Flying Club was July 13, 1964. The Rosella Bjornson stamp was released where Rosella had her first lesson, on the fiftieth anniversary of that day.

When Rosella told her guidance counsellor she wanted to be an airline pilot, he laughed and told her "that wouldn't be possible because she was a girl". She accepted this information as feedback, but not the final answer! She knew she would need more than minimum requirements in order to poke her way into this male domain. She contacted Air Canada to ask about their pilot qualifications. Told they preferred to hire university graduates, Rosella enrolled in the University of Calgary Bachelor of Science program. During the summers she earn her Commercial Licence and Instructor Rating. As an instructor she'd build the required experience.

This turned out to be providential. In spare time Rosella earned Multi-engine and Instrument Ratings. She also chatted with pilots in the coffee shop. When she completed her Airline Transport Rating and applied for a job with airlines, she got the usual negative replies - except from Transair, based at the Winnipeg International Airport. Several Transair pilots knew Rosella and had observed her work ethic. Transair was in the midst of expansion and needed more pilots. Rosella had the qualifications they required.

In April 1973 Transair, Canada's fourth largest airline, hired Rosella Bjornson as First Officer on a Fokker F28 jet, the first woman in Canada to achieve this position, and also the first jet qualified female airline pilot in North America. As the first woman hired by a commercial airline in Canada, and the first woman member of the Canadian Air Line Pilots Association, she joined a fraternity of 2800 male airline pilots.



One would think Rosella had arrived. However, it wasn't always smooth flying for her. Being first in a field often leads a person to confront inconsistent policies or practices. Transport Canada wouldn't grant a Category 1 medical to anyone who was pregnant. Transair had no policy for pregnancy leave for pilots and wouldn't offer her sick leave because it did not consider pregnancy an illness. So they grounded her. Returning to work after the birth of her son, she was offered a course on the Boeing 737, so she commuted between Toronto and Edmonton. The company more readily accepted her second pregnancy but Transport Canada was slow to grant her a waiver to continue flying. Again she was grounded. Later, Rosella successfully worked with Transport Canada to change their ruling. Now pilots can fly with their doctor's supervision for the first six months of a pregnancy.

In 1990 Canadian Airlines International promoted Rosella to Captain, the first Canadian female airline captain, a position she continued to hold with Air Canada, flying 737s. With her wonderful sense of humour, Rosella is a gracious, highly skilled role model to Canadian women who have subsequently been hired by the airlines. Rosella retired in 2004, with over 18,000 flying hours. She continues to contribute tirelessly to the Ninety-nines and Canada's Aviation Hall of Fame.

