

Still winging it

At age 84, Mary Feik is the queen of all things aviation

By Theresa Winslow

Suffice it to say that most 84-year-old women aren't eagerly waiting to start restoration work on an antique airplane. And it's also a good bet that most octogenarians aren't fixing up a building on their property to serve as a small hangar, either.

But for Col. Mary Feik, none of this is out of the ordinary. Feik, who has an aviation award named after her and still travels across the country giving inspirational and educational talks for Civil Air Patrol, has had a history-making career as an airplane master mechanic.

Col. Mary Feik sits in an Air Force fighter jet — the A-10 Thunderbolt II — during a recent Tri-Wing Encampment visit to the Warfield Air National Guard Base at Martin State Airport in Maryland.

She designed trainers for World War II fighter pilots and flew more than 6,000 hours in a variety of exotic military aircraft to determine maintenance and safety requirements. She also helped restore famous planes at the National Air and Space Museum.

Feik was named one of the 100 most influential women in aviation and aerospace over the past century and is included in a NASA poster celebrating women in aerospace. Earlier this month, she was awarded an honorary life membership in Civil Air Patrol, one of the organization's highest honors.

"She was ... a role model for me," said Dr. Peggy Chabrian, president of the Ohio-based Women in Aviation, International. "She was one of the first female mechanics and a mechanic for over 50 years. She's a great lady and a lot of fun."

Feik's home outside Annapolis, Md., is a working monument to her life — part library, part exhibit hall and part elaborate maintenance shop.

It's all highly organized and meticulously preserved, however. She developed an eye for precision from her father, who owned an auto repair shop, and her first boss at a U.S. Army Air Corps base. (The corps later became the Air Force.)

Just as an example, she still keeps detailed charts on the tire pressures of her four vehicles. (Her 50th anniversary present in 2000 was a special-edition Toyota Tundra truck that looks brand new.) She fills the tires with one of her five air compressors, which are also used for painting, riveting and cleaning.

"She's terribly unique," said Ohio author Ann Cooper, whose recent book, "Stars of the Sky, Legends All: Illustrated Histories of Women Aviation Pioneers,"

includes a segment on Feik. "I've never met anyone who has anywhere near the same accomplishments. She's to be admired."

Down-to-earth

Despite all this, one of the most interesting things about Feik is that she doesn't consider herself or her career all that special. "Anybody, given the same circumstances as I had growing up could have done what I did," she said.

And Feik sees no reason to stop doing what she loves. She "retired" from work at air bases in 1975, then went to work at the Smithsonian for about 10 years. Since then, she's concentrated on her own projects and work with Civil Air Patrol.

"Besides all the stuff she's done with aviation mechanics, she just loves the cadets," said Capt. Brenda Reed of CAP's Maryland Wing. "I think she's great. She's very down-to-earth and doesn't want to be treated special.

(In fact, at banquets) she doesn't like to sit at the head table. She wants to be with the cadets."

Feik stills flies a Piper Comanche, which she keeps in Virginia, and is restoring the 1952 Piper Pacer P-20 for the company's museum. She has a daughter who is also in CAP and two step-grandchildren. Her husband of 54 years, Robert Feik, died in 2004 at age 85. He had a noteworthy career in aviation as well, serving as chief scientist for the Air Force Communications Command.

"A lot of people play golf," said Feik, a petite woman with close-cropped white hair and huge glasses who peppers her talk with lots of "sweethearts" and "cuties." "I'll be out there playing with my airplane."



Photo courtesy of Jenn Reed

Col. Mark Feik, center, enjoys visiting with Maryland Wing cadets Ali Globus, left, and Briana Gress at the 2008 Tri-Wing (Maryland, Delaware and National Capital wings) Encampment banquet at Camp Fretterd Military Reservation in Reisterstown, Md.



CAP National Commander Amy Courter, left, presents Col. Mary Feik with a framed print that celebrates the aviation pioneer's positive attitude, which inspires young and old alike. Courter also presented Feik with Civil Air Patrol's Lifetime Membership Award, one of the highest awards presented to longtime CAP volunteers.

cars, and she could learn the rest on the job.

She was right, and the earlier incident at the university was the only discrimination she ever faced. "I could do everything the men could do," she said. "We worked together as a team. It was incredibly interesting and challenging."

Maybe the only difference came when they posed for photos. Feik was told to exchange her coveralls for a dress, which she didn't mind.

"To me, flying an airplane is only half of what you should know about an airplane," she said.

The other half is how it's put together and maintained, she explained. "If you know the internal systems of your airplane, if you get into (trouble), it can save your life."

Feik said she kept working as a mechanic for so long because she enjoyed the challenges. When she tore down an engine or designed a unique piece of equipment, it was thrilling, she said.

As an example, she related the story of testing the 2,000-horsepower engine of a P-47 fighter, dismantling it, and then putting it back together. "I was in seventh heaven," she said.

Feik's advice for girls today is the same kind of guidance she got from her father, George Stan, who told her she could do anything.

"Go with your feelings," she said emphatically. "Be capable; be a lady. Show respect and you'll get respect. A girl has to be confident in her own abilities." ▲

Theresa Winslow is a staff writer for The Capital in Annapolis, Md. This story originally appeared in Capital Weekly on Aug. 24.

The plane truth

Feik didn't gravitate toward being a mechanic while growing up.

It's more accurate to say it gravitated toward her, in the form of a father who needed help in his shop near Buffalo, N.Y., during the Depression.

Feik welded when she was 11 and overhauled her first engine at 12. By the time she graduated from high school, she planned to parlay this background into a career in engineering, but she was rebuffed when a college registrar told her, "We don't take women."

Her father once again came to the rescue, finding her a job teaching aircraft maintenance in North Carolina. She didn't have any experience with airplanes at the time, but reasoned that the engines couldn't be that different from

CAP Col. Mary Feik stands in front of a new exhibit on Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP) during a ribbon-cutting ceremony at Vintage Aero Flying Museum. The ceremony was part of the Colorado Wing's Aerospace Education Day, which was observed on Sept. 20.



Photo by 2nd Lt. Teedd Harshaw, Colorado Wing