Alumni in profile

Nancy-Bird Walton AO, OBE, Hon DSc., Hon MEng (1987) 1915-
Woman in flight

Pioneer aviatrix Nancy-Bird Walton became Australia’s youngest ever female commercial pilot at the age of 19. She was also the first female pilot in the Commonwealth to fly professionally.

On August 11, 1933, Nancy commenced her flying lessons, under the tutelage of Sir Charles Kingsford-Smith, in a De Havilland Gipsy Moth aeroplane. In her quest for engineering knowledge, she used to visit the hangar at Mascot and was given the job of cleaning the spark plugs with a wire brush dipped in raw petrol on Kingsford-Smith’s Southern Cross.

After she attained her commercial licence, Nancy Bird and co-pilot Peggy Mcllllop embarked on a tour of country shows, offering joy rides and barnstorming exhibition flights.

During this time Nancy Bird was asked by the Royal Far West Children’s Health Scheme to station herself at Bourke following the tragic death of a woman still 100 miles from any medical help by road. She was then able to fly a patient to a doctor or a doctor to a patient. Nancy Bird also flew its clinic sister every six weeks to isolated settlements in the remote Outback beyond Bourke.

During World War II, Nancy-Bird, now Walton following her marriage, was commandant of the Women’s Air Training Corps of Australia, which recruited and trained women to serve in the air force, if they were ever needed.

After the war, Nancy-Bird Walton founded the Australian Women Pilots’ Association. She wrote two autobiographies, one in 1961 “Born to Fly” and “My God! It’s a Woman” in 1990.

Nancy-Bird Walton was bestowed an Order of the British Empire in 1966, an honorary Masters of Engineering from The University of Sydney in 1987, and an Order of Australia in 1990.

Robert Russell, Portrait of Nancy-Bird Walton nla.pic-an 11333638
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