

March 2021 Speaker
Elizabeth Muir
Canadian Women In The Sky

Some years ago author-historian Elizabeth Muir decided it was time to advise her young granddaughter about a possible career she might enjoy. Liz suggested she might want to become an airline pilot although the odds would be daunting as, according to her, it is the profession in which women are least represented in Canada and the U.S. For inspiration Liz, who has never flown a plane, researched Canadian trailblazers, going back to the early days of flying, interviewing still-living pioneers and the families of those now dead. She has had two children's books – *Air Crazy: Fascinating Stories of Canadian Women in the Air - Air Crazy Too* -and one adult book – *Canadian Women in the Sky* -published on the subject.

“A man told me that if women were meant to fly the sky would be pink,” one pioneer told Liz. “The sky is often pink,” Liz pointed out, referring to sunrise and sunset. “Women who wanted to fly were called ‘crazy,’” Liz added. “There was no law in Canada against women being pilots but it was unacceptable; planes were regarded as a masculine machine. The belief was that nice girls don't fly.”

She recounted the stories of a number of pioneers. In 1910 Dolena Mackay, at age 22, became Canada's first female plane passenger, in a tiny biplane that was part of a sideline aircraft building business of telephone inventor Alexander Graham Bell. “It was rather fast and there was strong wind,” Liz quoted Dolena. “Fast” then was 40 mph. You had to be adventurous to fly. Planes were then open to the air and there were no passenger seats; only a board. Women were expected to wear dresses; pants were taboo.

Elsie MacGill is legendary. She had tremendous determination. After polio paralyzed one of her legs and she broke the other, she was determined to still walk, doing so with the assistance of two canes. In 1929 she became the first woman *in the world* to obtain a master's degree in aeronautical engineering. She oversaw the manufacture of Canada's Hurricane fighter planes for World War II, in charge of a staff of 4,500. “In those days a woman who married lost her job because it was felt she wasn't capable of handling work plus home life and that home life came first,” Liz explained. Elsie and the plant manager were fired for having an affair. (The same thing still sometimes happens today regarding office romances.)

In 1973 Winnipeg-based Transair became Canada's first commercial airline to hire a female pilot – Rosella Bjornson, then 26. Five years later Air Canada hired its first, Judy Cameron, 23. Each had considerable flying experience beforehand. Both women eventually were made captains. In 2000 Maryse Carmichael, then 29, became the first women selected to join the Canadian Forces aerobatic Snowbirds; she later became its first-ever female commander. In 1992 Roberta Bondar made history as Canada's first female astronaut to travel into outer space.

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According to Club historian Barbara McNutt UWCNY 1987 president Jackie Giles flew a small plane out of Buttonville Airport.

Susan Goldenberg