

THE SKY, THE DREAM: FLYABOUT

By Ikuo Shimizu

“AirVenture Oshkosh” is a massive event for which 700 to 800 thousand aircraft enthusiasts get together at Oshkosh, Wisconsin every year. In 2008, just like every year, all sorts of exciting aircraft, such as F-22 or V-22, and a lot of war birds, played an important role. But unlike at an ordinary air show, those who take centre stage for this event are EAA members. Throughout the event period, thousands of their light aircraft, home built planes, and classic planes are landing and taking off, so that they proudly put up a banner announcing “the World’s Busiest Control Tower” at the control tower. The Oshkosh event is not only about being a ground-level spectator, but also an airborne participant.

In this month’s issue, I would like to write about this young woman, Monika Petrillo, who was born and raised in Munich, Germany, and is now working as a script supervisor in Hollywood. Monika is not an airplane maniac, but is full of adventurous spirit. While growing up in Germany, she believed that anyone who gets a pilot’s license is part of the lucky elite. However, she set her mind on getting one herself at age 24, after having had an opportunity to fly in the United States.

Monika grabbed the attention of aviation fans by putting her self-produced film about an “airplane voyage” on the screen at the theatre of the EAA museum. The title of that film is “Flyabout.” It is quite an interesting piece of work. It is the story of her “self-searching trip” overlapping with a spectacular tour of circumnavigating the Australian continent in a group of several airplanes. When she stepped forward to take questions after the screening was over, a number of audience members praised her with complimentary words.

This film is basically a documentary of her finding herself. It starts off with her getting a license and reporting that to her father. Her father, who was 58 at the time, adding to the fact that he had always been interested in flying a plane himself, was probably slightly envious of his daughter which drove him to immediately getting a license too.

This father and daughter had always been getting along well and traveled through Europe, Africa, etc. together. “Since we both have a license now,” she asked him one day, “why don’t we try to visit the place we have never been to in a way that we have never traveled before? Flying around the Australian continent along its coastline, how about that? A trip that can’t be made any other way except by airplane!” And even better, flying the plane together with her father! At the end of a long search for the right tour, she found this group tour that uses a few Cessnas, and the only qualification to join this tour was to be able to land in a crosswind - “We’ll work that out,” she thought.

The tour was made up of five single-engine planes like the Cessna 172. Participants of the tour were all married couples in their 50s or 60s. Monika was the youngest and the only female pilot. Learning that the others were all veterans with experiences of thousands of flight hours, she became a little nervous at last.

Prior to the departure of the tour, there was a test of everyone’s flying skills. Monika easily passed this test. But since her father had had few chances to fly since he had gotten his license, they tried to fly around the airport before taking the test. This was the very first time for them to take off and land together, and something unexpected happened. Just before the touchdown by her father, Monika felt that the plane might

stall due to its too slow approach speed which unconsciously made her snatch the control wheel out of his hand. This was the first “unpleasant thing” that happened between them. Until this trip started, Monika had been expecting to take turns with her father in flying the plane, however the tour leader assigned her to be “pilot-in-command” of their plane. Each airplane could have only one PIC, and her father had even less flight experience than she did. That was the birth of the “captain,” with only 140 flight hours.

On the second day of the trip, they were immediately confronted with a challenging time: they had to fly beneath the clouds, only 300 feet above the ground, where there was a downpour of rain and heavy fog. Making the situation even worse, they had lost the leader’s plane, which meant they had lost the direction toward the runway. It was a tense scene but in the end they managed to land by finding their way to the ground in zero visibility through radio contact with the other members.

Taking a look at the other parts of this four-week trip, what was so special about it was the magnificent experience of a blue sky that goes on forever and the beauty of nature as far as the eye can see. Their five Cessna planes just flew about freely in the sky with the backdrop of these fantastic views. There were some relaxing times too, such as learning about the culture of the Aborigines, meeting some crocodiles up close, playing with kangaroos for the first time in Kakadu National Park, splashing about with “spitting fish” in Lake Argyle, and so forth. Some of the most amazing points of this trip are the great natural wonders that can only be seen from the sky, such as a series of strange rock formations called the Bungle Bungles, or the “Horizontal Waterfalls” in the ocean at the Northwestern tip of the continent.

On the other hand, the tension between Monika and her father over the struggle to find the best way to share the cockpit was becoming more serious as the trip went on. There were several times when she could not help putting her hands on the control wheel while her father was flying the plane. The father would say that she was being too nervous, and the daughter would say “I can see that you are stalling, and I have a responsibility to fly this plane safely...” For the first time, Monika encountered the situation of being more experienced than her father, and felt what she describes in the movie as “the shift of generations.” Among Aborigines in Australia, there is a custom called “Walkabout” where those who are grown up will set out on a journey to face their own selves alone in nature. This trip, having her family’s lives in her hands and making a journey by plane, was in many ways comparable to a Walkabout, her “Flyabout.”

Through this trip, Monika had most surely become independent, and her father had accepted that his daughter was no longer a little girl, but a mature person who could keep a plane under control better than he could. Monika has successfully combined a story of family drama with an extraordinary air journey, unimaginable to people in Japan, told against the backdrop of amazing Australian scenery.

“I will never forget that exhilarating feeling and the sense of accomplishment when Brisbane appeared on the horizon. Did I say I once thought flying was a hobby reserved for somebody else? – What a fool I was! Flying is reserved for whoever dreams of it. So if you have a dream, don’t put it on the shelf. Go for it”, Monika says. Monika lived a fantastic dream of self-discovery from the sky.

According to Monika, those who buy this DVD are mostly fathers of daughters. Perhaps that could be because many fathers may have similar experiences when faced with the situation that their daughters find their wings. The DVD of this movie does not have subtitles but can be purchased at www.flyaboutmovie.com, and Monika would be happy to send it to Japan.