

Williamsport Women

by MARY SIEMINSKI, JANET HURLBERT

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Alma Heflin McCormick (1910 — 2000) had a lot of aviation firsts to her name. Look Magazine on Feb. 10, 1942, listed her as: First girl apprentice, first girl aircraft sales manager, first girl "air jeep" pilot, first girl air tour director, first girl pilot in Alaska, first girl test pilot.

This no-nonsense "girl" was the woman Alma Heflin. Born in Winona, Missouri, she was a child when a small plane made a forced landing in a field near her home. Fascinated, she decided then and there that she was going to be a pilot. Heflin was a college-educated elementary school teacher when she earned her private pilot's license.

She wanted to start her own flight school and, in 1936, wrote to another female pilot, Amelia Earhart, for advice. Earhart's answer is preserved in Heflin's scrapbook, held at the Washington State Historical Society in Tacoma. Earhart believed that "women should fly and fly as much as they can afford" because "only deeds count," according to Columbia, Summer 2017. In 1937, Heflin attended the Dallas School of Aviation in Texas.

Piper aircraft

After years of scrimping and saving, Heflin ordered her own plane from the Piper Aircraft Co. and went to Lock Haven to pick it up.

Impressed with her moxie and experience, William T. Piper, founder and CEO of the company, offered her a job. She started as an apprentice mechanic, working in the shop. Gradually she mastered all phases of production, despite the stress, she said, of "working with men who did not want women in their 'man's world,'" according to News Journal, of Wilmington, Delaware, published on April 13, 1942.

After moving to sales, she was promoted to publicity director for the company. In 1938, she led the Light Plane Cavalcade of 189 small planes from New York to Miami, where the Municipal Airport hosted the All-American Aerial Maneuvers, described as "one of the most impressive events in civil aviation in the U.S.," according to General Aviation News published on June 7, 2015.

Alma Heflin is the only female pilot among the 20



PHOTO PROVIDED

Alma Heflin McCormick spins a prop on a plane. This picture was provided by "Click, the National Picture Monthly," published in 1940.

flyers listed in the flight schedule labeled "Williamsport, Pennsylvania Air Mail Day, May 19, 1938," found at the Eagles Mere Air Museum. Celebrating 20 years of air mail delivery, the promotional activity that day featured air mail pick-ups from many towns in the Williamsport area. Heflin was flying Plane No. 5, a Piper J-2 Cub. Plane No. 3 that day, the first ever J-2 Cub built (Nov. 1937), now hangs in the National Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C.

In 1940, Heflin bought a new plane, a J-4 F Cub Coupe, Piper's first plane with side-by-side seats, and she and Margie McQuin, a Piper stenographer who had taken flying lessons, made a cross-country trip to Alaska. Heflin's memoir, "Adventure Was the Compass," published by Little Brown in 1942, is hair-raising in some parts and humorous in others, but always insightful about the people they met.

Lycoming Motors

The women's first stop after taking off from Lock Haven was Williamsport, for a final check by Lycoming Motors on the brand-new airplane, which they had named Mr. Shrdlu. To balance the plane, the engineers advised them to reduce the weight in the luggage area. So, "we discarded a pair of shoes apiece, two dresses, a coat" wrote Heflin. "Out came a jar of cold cream that weighed as much as a quart of gasoline." Out came Margie's electric iron.

Out also came the 30-30 rifle popular with deer hunters in north central Pennsylvania. The Winchester 30-30 would have been useful if they had crash-landed in the wilderness and needed food.

Heflin and McQuin sometimes piloted the plane in dresses and high heels, but often they did so under difficult conditions that would have challenged the best of pilots. Without modern navigation equipment, they regularly drifted off course and had to rely on their wits to locate landmarks.

They flew across the United States in 13 days. Denied a direct flight across Canada to Alaska because of Canadian wartime restrictions, they landed in Seattle and had Mr. Shrdlu put on a freighter bound for Juneau. The Alaska Miner reported that "Armed only with a Flit gun [insecticide] and an 853-pound airplane as their motive power are the pair of air-minded lasses on a skyway vacation who dropped out of the clouds onto the Fairbanks airport last Monday night. Behind their 65-horsepower Lycoming motor, with their backs resting against a 25-gallon gasoline tank, Alma Heflin and Margie McQuin had flown from Lock Haven, Pennsylvania to Seattle, and from Juneau to Fairbanks" on July 16, 1940.

Test pilot

Heflin returned to Piper in Lock Haven, but with WWII looming, she agreed to be a test pilot for the planes that Piper was producing for the U.S. Army. She tested the Piper O-59 Grasshoppers (Flying Jeeps), which were rolling off the assembly line every 20 minutes. Her first test flight was on Nov. 12, 1941. Hers was a grueling and dangerous job that required nerve and determination, qualities she had certainly shown on the expedition to Alaska.

In July 1942, Heflin married Air Force pilot Archie McCormick, whom she had first met on her 1940 Alaska adventure. After the war, she earned master's and Ph.D. degree and had a distinguished career as an educator, writer and child psychologist.

She died in 2000 at the age of 90. Both she and her husband are interred at Arlington National Cemetery.