

Member Spotlight Mary Ann McClellan

Mary Ann's Flight History



“My daddy was terrified of flying, and when we were young he made us all promise never to get in an airplane!”

However in 1967 I went to work with Jim McClellan and Jerry Sorrell in the drafting room. At that time we found a new type of drafting material called Mylar, and at noon the three of us would go to Leverage Park and throw indestructible airplanes made from the Mylar. Flying interests would be the bond of our friendship through all the years.

Jim already had his private and commercial ratings and was getting instrument and instructor's ratings. Jerry was just starting to take lessons, and got his private license during that time. So I was surrounded by airplane talk. One lunch hour Jim asked me if I would like to go for a ride in the Bellanca airplane he co-owned and I said, "Yes". We circled Clark County, and he let me take the controls, and I was hooked. Another time he took me on a longer ride to a pretty reservoir with a grass strip. He no more than stepped out of the airplane when a bee stung him. He leaped back into the airplane and flew to Yakima. He kept telling me on the trip how to use the radio. I was clueless. After we landed and stood around for a while, he told me he is deathly allergic to honey bee stings and goes into shock within 15 minutes. Fortunately he was only strung by a yellow jacket that day. But I thought I should learn more about flying. I told my husband Bob that I wanted my half of our income tax refund to get my pilot license. He just laughed, thinking it was a joke. I begin training with Aero Sport at Goheen Field, as they guaranteed me my private license for a flat \$550. I took my first lesson April 12, 1974.

At that time Aero Sport was a grass field with power lines on the south end, trees at the north end, and narrowed in the center over a culvert. I flew a Cessna 150 during private pilot training, made my third solo cross country landing at Pacific City, and practiced landing at places like Morton, Packwood, Flying M Ranch, and Vernonia. Vern was my instructor, but when he got agitated with me for not learning something, he would send me up with Jim, who was instructing at that time, and within 5 minutes I would understand what I needed to do. I got my Private Pilot License September 9, 1974 with 40 hours under my belt. Before they would recommend me for my Private Pilot test, I had to land and take off from McClellan Field, Jim's short one-way grass strip. I was pretty good at grass strips, but I did not use the radio much until I started Instrument training. Feeling I needed to be more proficient, I began training for my Commercial license, which I obtained Dec. 24, 1975.

I did a lot of 'bush pilot' practice, and on July 3rd 1975, as a brand new pilot with not a lot of flight time and little good sense, I took my family, joined six other planes, and made my first International Flight into Canada, clearing customs at Victoria. I flew north of Vancouver Island, doing beach landings on outgoing tides, landing and camping on a remote island, and landing on logging roads along the Wakeman River in Canada where some the largest grizzlies are. In fact, their tracks covered ours when we returned from fishing. I was flying a "doggy" rental Cherokee, and the radios failed (or never worked). So I flew wing to wing with Jim McClellan in his Cherokee on that trip. My first beach landing was at Nootka. It had a crescent shaped beach, and Vern had drawn a line with his heel in the sand, indicating where to land. I put it on the line.

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The second was at Calvert Island. It had a straight narrow sand beach next to a steep bluff littered at the base with lots of wood that had been heaved ashore by storms. There were 21 people in all, and we got clams, camped, and had great time. It was a time of lowest tide (and we came to realize) the highest tide.

We had to push our planes as close to the cliff as possible to stay out of the surf. Knowing we had to leave the next day when the tide would reach the bluff, we prepared to take off on the low tide. We were socked in with fog! We had one more low tide that day and waited anxiously. The ceiling lifted to a little over 50 feet off the water. Gordon went up in the Aztec to check things out, find where it was clear, and radioed back his findings. We all took off and headed to Port Hardy. With no radios and slightly more than 40 hours flying time, I anxiously followed Jim trying to keep him in sight between the sea and the low ceiling. I promised God I would never put myself in this situation again, and offered a prayer of gratitude when we broke into blue sky. I also learned about wing tip vortex when I followed Jim too close, landing back at Port Hardy.

My husband Bob and I bought a Cessna 172 that was fully IFR equipped on August 13, 1975 for \$10,500 in Monroe LA, and flew it home. I called her "Louisiana Lady". I learned a long crosscountry is only a series of short cross-country trips. But August is not fun weather to fly in, as we dodged thunderstorms all the way home.

I got my instrument rating in the Cessna 172 on March 30, 1977. I joined the 99s and was a member until 2002, when I thought I would never fly again. I flew the last Power Puff Derby, racing from Palm Springs, CA to Tampa FLA with Billie Dutcher as my co-pilot the first week of July 1977. We encountered a lot of bad thunderstorm weather coming and going. When we arrived in Tampa a severe thunderstorm was gathering over the airport with wildly switching winds. I was the last airplane to land before they closed the airport. The line-boys rushed out and grabbed the wing struts while they tied the plane down.



"There were 21 people in all, and we got clams, camped, and had great time."



Planes parked at the Ocean



Landing on a logging road

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We were told to stay in the plane until the storm subsided, and we watched the wildest electrical storm I have ever seen. All planes behind me had found other safe airports to land and were disqualified from the race for not arriving before race closure. En-route home, between El Paso and Tucson the air became difficult to see through. There was no known storm or clouds in the area, so I couldn't figure why visibility was getting worse and worse - smog, maybe? But near Tucson, AZ I exited a violent dust or sandstorm, called a "haboob", that rose over 8,000 feet, and stretched like a curtain as far as the eye could see, looking both right and left. What a "bump" that was, exiting that storm! We stayed overnight at Tucson. I took the air filter off the plane, took it to the motel, and swished it in the bathtub where it left a layer of mud on the bottom of the tub.

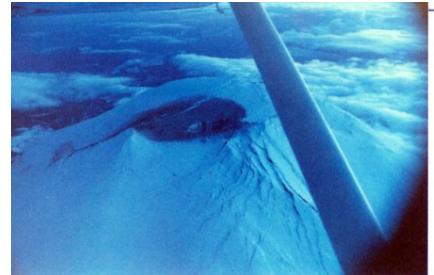
A milestone flight was when Mount St. Helens first came to life with a small eruption on March 27, 1980. I phoned Jim McClellan, and after work we flew over it in my Cessna about 5:30 that evening. I got a picture of the first vent hole, only hours after it happened. We were likely the second people to see the volcanic vent, as all other airplanes had been socked in by weather prior to that. After it erupted I flew low over the debris flow when it was still steaming and looked like a moonscape, and circled the dome once since then.

Another flight I consider a milestone was flying the canyonlands six months before they closed it to low flight. Between September 28 and 30, 1985, with Jim McClellan and his son in the Cherokee and Jerry Sorrel as my co-pilot in my Cessna 172, we flew low and slow over Arches, Canyonlands, Capitol Reef Barrier, and Zion, "snugged" in close to Bryce, and dropped into the Grand Canyon at Kanab, following it all the way to Boulder City. On the way home I lost power over Tule Lake Airport, CA with a stuck exhaust valve and had to leave my airplane there until it was repaired. We flew 21 hours on that trip.

I flew my 172 with Jerry and Jim to the Alvord desert where I landed on the gravel road leading into the community of Fields, taxied into town to the service station, and got the best old-fashioned milkshake we ever had. We taxied back to the straight stretch of road, took off, and landed on another dirt road to soak in the Alvord Hot Springs.



"Louisiana Lady"



Mt. St. Helens – before eruption



Mt. St. Helens – during eruption



Landing on recently erupted mountain.

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For several years Jerry Sorrell co-shared the use of the Cessna 172 by helping me with expenses until I sold it January 30, 1986. The most frightening flight I experienced happened between Ogden, Utah and Boise, ID.

We had been visiting in Ogden and wanted an early start home to beat afternoon cumulus buildups over the mountains. I arrived at the airport early Sunday morning to find the 172 had a flat tire. I tried to get someone to fix it, but it I was informed no one would be available until after church or dinner. So I finally got it changed about 4:00 PM.

There were already thunderclouds over the notch to Burley, Idaho, but I could see a lot of space under them. As I approached the notch, I got caught in updrafts of 3,000'/min. I reduced power and turned away. I tried another area and got sucked up toward the clouds again. So I decided to fly around the end of the range. I began to see lightning in the clouds, and as I got to the end of the range I hit severe downdrafts. I absolutely could not maintain my altitude, had the nose pointed up till the stall warning device sounded, was still descending fast, and not making any headway against a strong headwind. It was very turbulent. The kids were screaming in the backseat. I asked my husband, "What do I do when I reach the ground?" He said, "You land!" I realized I needed to turn 45 degrees out of the headwind and give the storm a wide berth, which I did.

I had two power packs in the tail, and often had trouble with loose fuse holders. The turbulence knocked out the power packs, so I had no power from them, and everything they operated stopped working - radios, navigation equipment, etc. I navigated to Boise by way of a chart and a liquid compass. When I got to Boise I circled the airport a couple times, and the tower gave me lights to land. I had good training and knew what to do. However, there were dual runways, and I learned after I landed, I had taken the wrong one



Airport in the Canyonlands



The views of the Canyonlands were breath taking.



My husband Jim enjoying the hot water

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I asked for maintenance, which was not available on Sunday and that late in the day. I had to call the tower on the phone and tell them I needed to depart on lights. I flew home the old fashioned way, using compass and charts.

My logbook now has 618 hours. I thought I would never fly again, but after marrying Jim, while I get a lot of time as baggage in the back of his RV4, I do have a stick, so I am often his auto-pilot on long trips. I am excited about the RV7A we are building and look forward to being up front with dual controls. After 27 years of not flying and at the age of 76, I am apprehensive about learning to fly a new airplane, complying all the new regulations, and using all the new technology and radio work required. But I do see it as a new challenge and look forward to it. – Mary Ann

