

# Nancy Bird Walton

## Australia's Pioneering Aviatrix

*"Life was meant to be flown."*

BY CAROL KITCHING, Guest Author

At the tender age of 92, Nancy Bird Walton, Australia's premier woman pilot, still gets excited about flying. In 1933, when she was 17, she made the decision that life was meant to be flown, and today her interests revolve around aviation. In recognizing her contribution to the industry, Qantas announced it will name its first A380 after her. Nancy Bird will be flying for many years to come.

As a young girl, her dreams were about flying. "When I had nightmares and tigers and lions were chasing me, I could lift myself above them...and they'd run underneath!" Later, she was jumping off fences, waving her arms and yelling "epiplane." And on the swings, it was "Push me higher... push me higher. I'm a bird. I want to fly."

At 13 the dream became reality when she climbed into a Gipsy Moth for a joy flight and, giving the pilot a little extra money, he promised to throw in some aerobatics. "My sister said I came down looking a bit green, but I just loved it. Flying was the ruling passion of my life."

By the time she was 17, Nancy was flight planning in earnest. She bought herself a leather helmet, a short leather coat and a couple of cushions to compensate for being barely five feet tall and headed to Mascot's all-over grass strip for regular flying lessons. Her instructor was none other than the legendary Charles Kingsford Smith, who had skippered the first aeroplane across the Pacific in 1928 and had just opened his flying school. Nancy was one of his first students.



*Nancy Bird is first aboard the new Airbus A380, named for her, on its debut flight to Sydney in June of 2005.*

She was well on her way to becoming Australia's first woman pilot to earn a living from aviation and a legend in her own right. This was her destiny.

However, to earn a living from flying, Nancy first needed an aeroplane. When she was 19, with the help of a 200£ legacy from a great aunt and an equal amount loaned by her father, Nancy bought a battered Gipsy Moth, ironically, the same Moth in which she had taken her first flight.

"I began to wonder what I could do about my future. Pilots were continually proving records could be broken, and there were a few women up there with the best of the record breakers." Her aeroplane she named Vincere, meaning to conquer. "I was determined to carve a place for myself in aviation."

Her first thoughts were to go barnstorming, which in Australia meant flying

around the country, going to local agricultural shows and charging for joy flights. Nancy was often told by the guys that there was no room for women in aviation, barnstorming had been "done to death" and men were finding aviation a struggle. But she was determined. Nancy figured she needed a co-pilot if this plan were to materialize, and Peggy McKillop fitted the bill. Perfectly. Peggy had a pilot's license, she'd trained at the same time as Nancy and she was a bit of a whiz at aircraft engines and mending torn fabric.

In 1935 the two girls formed The First Ladies Flying Tour, and off they went around New South Wales, flying into country paddocks to do joy flights and attending the occasional country show or ball. Peggy McKillop as Big Bird and Nancy as Little Bird (with pillow) flew into history as the country's first female barnstormers.

There were no country aerodromes in those days. A landing ground near the country show was selected on an ordinary piece of ground. A truck was driven along the ground at 40 mph, and if the tires didn't puncture, then it was considered suitable.

In that same year, Nancy was approached by the Far West Children's Health Scheme in NSW to start a flying ambulance service. "While in Bourke, I met the Reverend Stanley Drummond, who was the Superintendent of the Far West Children's Health Scheme. And he asked me if I would station my aeroplane (now a new Leopard Moth) there and do their regular baby clinic service out back and beyond Bourke, and also be there for ambulance work if it was required. That meant flying a doctor out to a property or a patient into Bourke."

She went into the Outback in 1935, intending to stay six months, but stayed for three years, later moving to Queensland.

“Although I was too young to realise the true significance of it, people said to me in later years, ‘You don’t know what it meant to us knowing that there was an aeroplane in Bourke, that if there was an acute appendix or an urgent treatment was needed there was an aeroplane that could fly out to us.’”

In 1938, Nancy undertook a tour of Europe as the guest of KLM to learn all she could about traffic and passenger management in civil aviation.

She returned to Australia via the United States, and it was on this visit that Nancy discovered the value of knowing members of The Ninety-Nines. Bobbie Terry, the first woman in Australia to own her own aeroplane, nominated Nancy to The Ninety-Nines in 1937, and she became a member in May 1938. She remains a Life member.

“I had arrived in America on the Queen Mary, steerage of course. I booked into the Women’s Club Hotel where I found it was going to cost me for one day the equivalent of a week’s accommodation in London.

“Worried about my funds, I pondered whether I could afford the 25 cents to telephone and tell Betty Gillies I had finally arrived in the country. I finally took the plunge, and it was the best 25 cents I have ever invested.”

Betty insisted Nancy stay with her. Gratefully, Nancy accepted. “She became my best friend in America. I revisited her on several occasions, and she was responsible for me flying in three Powder Puff Derbies. We placed fifth in the first one in 1958. The next one we were disqualified as we had to land because of a thunderstorm. And the third one I flew as an extra pair of hands with Betty Gillies and her co-pilot.

“The Ninety-Nines were marvellous to me, all over the United States,” she said. “They offered wonderful hospitality and friendship, and that’s why I was keen to see a lasting connection with Australia.”

As a result of this comradeship between women pilots, Nancy felt that an Australian association could also be of benefit to its members. She founded the Australian Women Pilots’ Association in 1950 and remained president for five years.

Currently is has close to 600 members.

“The idea for AWP came out of curiosity because we had women, after the war, who were keen about flying. We were teaching these women how to look after an aircraft. A lot of women were flying during the war years. In England they took them into the Air Transport Auxiliary, but they ended up flying Spitfires. One of our pilots from Melbourne, Mardi Gething, flew 800 hours in Spitfires.

“People think that the breakthrough of women on multi-engine aircraft happened in the 1970s. But, this is not so. The big break came in the war years when aircraft (in Britain) piled up outside factories and there were not enough pilots to deliver them to the bases. The authorities had no choice but to use women. Eventually, women flew everything that came off the production line, even four-engine bombers.

“It is wonderful and so satisfying to see the progress that women pilots are making in Australia, and I am very proud of the fact that Qantas has over 80 women pilots on the flight deck, including thirteen 747 captains.”

Recently, Wing Commander Linda Corbould, the Royal Australian Air Force’s (RAAF) most senior woman pilot, became the first to skipper the largest aircraft ever to be operated by the RAAF, the C-17 Globemaster.

And according to Linda, the next step



*The Australian Ninety-Nines meet in Mudgee for the 57th Annual General Meeting of Australian Womens’ Pilot Association. Seated is Nancy Bird.*

is an all-female crew on the C-17 — maybe next year.

“Join AWP (Australian Women Pilots’ Association) and have friends in every state. Join The Ninety-Nines and have friends in many countries,” says Nancy.

When the new A380 flew into Sydney on a Qantas promotional flight on June 7, 2007, Nancy Bird was invited to be the first visitor on board. She enjoyed an hour’s flying while talking aviation to scores of Sydney media representatives. She receives one or two invitations every day to attend aviation functions, attends a few and still takes an active interest in AWP and local Sydney meetings.

Indeed, life for Nancy Bird Walton was meant to be flown.



*Nancy Bird Walton is interviewed by Royal Australian Air Force Wing Commander Linda Corbould, right, and RAAF pilot Samantha Webster in March 2007.*