

Still Flying After A

By Robert Cummings

The airfield where Nancy Tier learned to fly is now a part of the Pentagon parking lot.

Since moving to Lakeville 20 years ago, Mrs. Tier has called the Canaan airport home. Now a great-grandmother, Nancy Tier has been flying for 60 years — every year of her life since she was 17.

Mrs. Tier's fascination with flight has been longstanding. "I wanted to fly ever since I'd seen a plane fly over," she said.

Her father finally acknowledged her lifelong wish and took Nancy to Hoover Field, in Washington, DC, where, for \$5 she went up for three minutes in an open cockpit biplane. By the time the Waco Nine rolled to a stop on Hoover Field's dirt runway, Nancy knew that she would become a pilot.

In 1927 that wasn't easy. First there was the expense. Flying lessons cost \$30 an hour at a time when \$20 a week was considered a good wage. Then there's the fact that Nancy Tier is a woman.

In 1927, the year that Lindbergh crossed the Atlantic, flying was still considered a man's domain. The fraternal order of flyers was unified in its belief that women did not belong in aviation. On Hoover Field that attitude was expressed by a policy that guaranteed young men a solo flight for \$300. Women who wanted to fly had to pay for each lesson until an instructor deemed them ready to solo.

Nancy Tier (then Nancy Hopkins) earned money for her lessons by building ship models: elaborate clipper on painted plaster oceans. The models sold for \$20 apiece. Her uncle, Charles Tier, *the Illustrator*, kindly contributed to Nancy's cause but her license was still a long time in coming.

She had three different instructors and had to start anew with each one. "I don't want to teach me," Tier recalled. "I think they wished I would go away."

But she didn't go away. She refused to be discouraged and kept coming back until she was allowed to solo. "One beautiful morning I made three perfect landings with an instructor named Powell and he said, 'I think you're ready to fly.'"

In those days she flew a Waco Nine plane with a Curtis-built Ox-Five engine. It was a sensitive combination

in the air. "You had to handle it very carefully," Tier said, "because it flew just above stalling speed — about 45 mph. We were taught to keep the nose down on the turns to keep from stalling out."

During the summer of 1928, Nancy went to Europe with her family. When she returned, all of the airfield's Wacos had crashed. That was the nature of the game in the early days of aviation.

In the late '20s there were limited opportunities for young pilots. "If you were a man, you could barnstorm or teach," Tier said. Teaching, however, was not an option for women. "If there was a man around, he'd get the instructing job first. And the commercial airlines, of course, wouldn't have you."

Tier persisted and eventually found a job as a hostess at Roosevelt Field on Long Island. She flew whenever possible, taking advantage of charter plane deliveries and pickups to add to her time aloft. By 1929, she had her limited commercial license and a new job as representative for the Viking Flying Boat Company.

The president of Viking Flying Boat, Robert Gross (who later bought the Lockheed corporation), assigned Tier to the demonstration and sales of his land-based plane, the Kinner Kitty Hawk. The wood-and-canvas biplane had room for three and a top speed of 120 miles per hour with the throttle wide open. Gross's slogan for the craft was "she flies like a hawk and lands like a kitten."

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ON THE STICK. . . at the controls of her Cessna, Nancy Tier takes time out to update the flight log. At 77, Mrs. Tier still flies frequently and races occasionally. In addition to flying, Tier has become the first president of the International Women's Air and Space Museum.

PHOTO BY MARY LOU ESTABROOK

ed fourth in the Dixie Derby.

Later that year, Tier entered the Ford Reliability Tour. It was a difficult race. The competitors were required to fly every day for 16 consecutive days regardless of weather. Beginning and ending in Dearborn, Michigan, the course traced a grand loop, with Edmonton, Alberta, as the northernmost point and Colorado Springs the farthest south. Many of the planes were forced down but there were no fatalities. Nancy Tier, the only woman in an international field of competitors, finished 14th.

"I had six forced landings before 1931," Tier said. "Most of the problems were caused by a weak valve assembly in the Kitty Hawk's engine." In each case she was able to land safely, make the necessary repairs, and take off again.

"All those years I flew with a spare cylinder in the plane and all the tools I needed to make repairs."

It wasn't until the 1936 transcontinental Bendix that women were allowed to compete with men in a world-class air race. A separate

women's trophy was set aside for the first female across the finish line. As it turned out, Louise Thaden beat the field — women and men — in her Beechcraft. Laura Ingolls took second and Amelia Earhart placed sixth.

In 1931 Nancy Hopkins met Irving Tier, an aerial photographer. The couple married a year later and moved to Cheshire, CT. In Cheshire they had their own small runway and an airplane hangar. There they raised their three children and continued to fly regularly.

Shortly after Pearl Harbor was bombed, Nancy Tier volunteered her services to the newly formed Civilian Air Patrol. She entered the CAP as a first lieutenant and flew a spotter plane in the Northeastern section of the volunteer air-net. The CAP was credited with reducing Germany's damage to American coastal shipping by 80 per cent. Eighteen years after the outbreak of the war, Nancy Tier retired from the Auxillary Airforce as Wing Commander of Connecticut.

Nancy Tier does not consider herself a feminist. "I just believe that there are women who can operate in the male domain as well as men. I feel that if a woman can do a job, she should just get out and do it — she doesn't have to be a part of a movement."

Mrs. Tier credited women's important role in aviation to a few determined individuals. "There were those who caught the dream, the possibility, and had the gumption to go after it. They just didn't let themselves be discouraged."

About a year ago Nancy Tier realized another dream with the opening of the International Women's Air & Space Museum in Centerville, OH. The Museum's collection is housed in a building that once belonged to Asabel Wright, the great uncle of Orville and Wilbur. For the past 11 years aviators and historians around the country have been collecting memorabilia for the IWASM.

Included in the collection is the cockpit of a Lockheed 10-10E, identical to Amelia Earhart's and the tailfin from Ruth Nichols' record-breaking aircraft. The museum also documents the entire history of women in aviation, beginning with Madame Thibale, Napoleon's air minister (of lighter than air craft), and continuing through a recently acquired collection of photographs from NASA.

In her first newsletter as president of IWASM, Nancy Tier writes, "This is a true beginning . . . So come and see us; pass the word on; help us grow; we are on our way!"

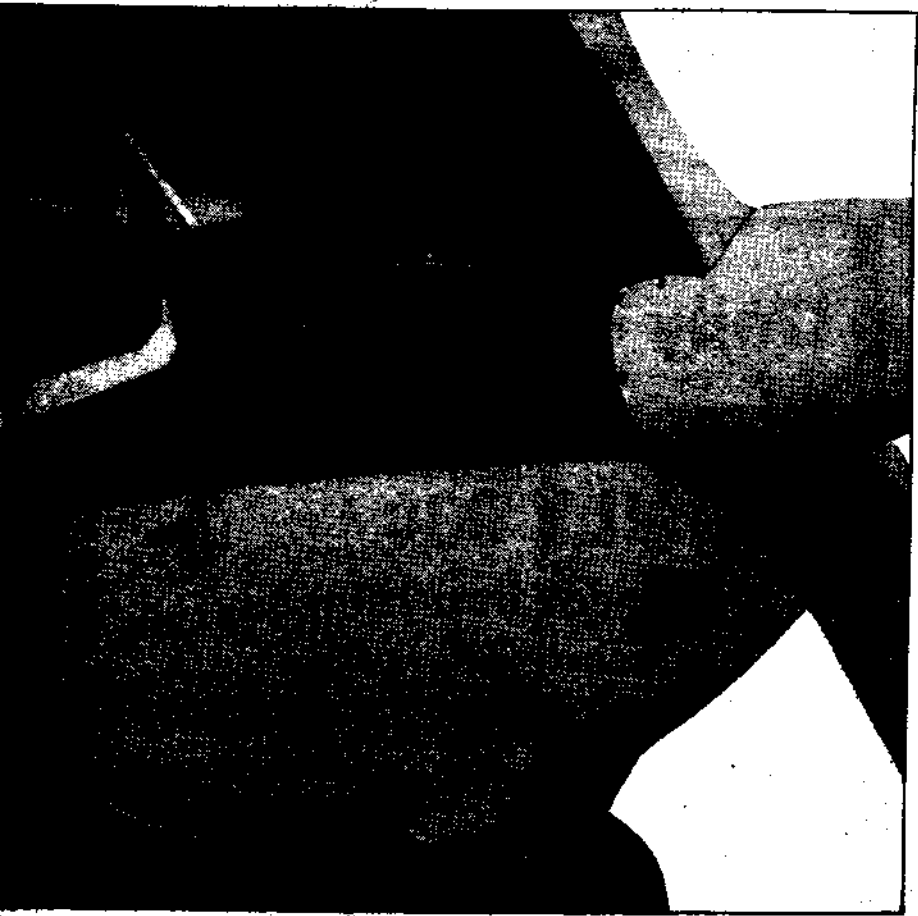


PHOTO BY MARY LOU ESTABROOK

ty's engine. Dilly, her Cessna 170A is 36 years old but flies as good as her name.