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Mary S. Feik, retired aviation engineer, dies



Mary S. Feik was an aviation engineer who restored historic aircraft and taught aviation restoration at the National Air and Space Museum's Paul E. Garber Preservation, Restoration and Storage Facility in Suitland. (Handout / HANDOUT)



By **Frederick N. Rasmussen** · Contact Reporter
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Mary S. Feik, an aviation engineer who restored historic aircraft and taught aviation restoration at the National Air and Space Museum's Paul E. Garber Preservation, Restoration and Storage Facility in Suitland, died June 10 of complications from cancer at her Annapolis home.

She was 92.

"Mary was an amazing person, and she broke the glass ceiling in so many ways — as a person and as a pilot," said Phil Woodruff, former Federal Aviation Administration public affairs officer who later joined its aviation education division.

"I got to know Mary through my education work and later with the Civil Air Patrol," said Mr. Woodruff, an Upper Marlboro resident who is now retired. "She was always eager to participate in anything that benefited adding to the knowledge of young people and the community at large."

The daughter of George Stan, an automotive mechanic, and Mary Martin, a bar owner, Mary Stan was born

in Cleveland and raised in Tonawanda, N.Y., where she graduated from high school.

As a girl, she learned automotive mechanics from her father. By the time she was 13, she had overhauled her first automobile engine, a Ford Model A that she and her father had purchased for \$35. By age 18, she had turned her attention to aircraft engines and military aircraft.

"My father had a repair shop, and we were raised during the Depression, in a time when you had to help out to survive," Ms. Feik told The Christian Science Monitor in a 1984 interview. "As a preschooler, I remember having my own creeper to go under the cars and hand my dad the tools. I was the tool manager."

Ms. Feik took her first ride aloft when she was 7, in a World War I-era JN-4 "Jenny" barnstorming biplane. She later decided she'd like to pursue a career in aviation engineering.

But "her efforts to study engineering in college were rebuffed when a registrar told her, 'We don't take women,'" her daughter, Robin Vest of Jeffersonton, Va., wrote in an email.

Ms. Feik was working as a Teletype operator for a newspaper at the outbreak of World War II when she noticed an advertisement noting the immediate need for aircraft mechanics because of the war.

She was accepted by the Army Air Forces, and after several weeks of training, the 18-year-old began teaching enlisted noncommissioned officers to perform crew checks to make sure an airplane was ready to fly.

"Often, I didn't have anyone in class as young as I was, but it wasn't a problem — after the initial astonishment," she said in the 1984 interview.

In 1943, Ms. Feik was sent to Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Dayton, Ohio, where she was named the first woman engineer in research and development in the Air Technical Service Command's Engineering Division.

There was resistance to Ms. Feik taking on the job until a sympathetic engineer saw her sitting on a bench and said, "Oh hell, I'll take her," she recalled.

She designed a routine for pilots to follow as they underwent high-performance combat training.

The job required her to fly aboard various fighter planes, but being a woman almost derailed her career because she needed permission to go up. A division chief wrote in a memo that the only thing standing in her way was the fact that she was a woman, Ms. Feik said in the interview. But once officials acknowledged that she was fully qualified, they "had no choice but to let me fly."

During the war, she logged more than 6,000 flight hours in fighter, attack, bomber, cargo and training aircraft.

She also qualified as a Boeing B-29 Superfortress flight engineer and was an engineering analyst in test aircraft. Other planes she flew included the North American P-51, Lockheed P-80, Bell P-59 and the North American B-25 Mitchell bomber.

Once, while testing a B-25 with broken landing gear, wind shear caught the wing and the plane cartwheeled across the runway. The Capital newspaper in Annapolis, recalling the incident in a 2009 article, said that Ms. Feik exclaimed "Wow!" as she merged from the wrecked aircraft. "What a ride! Let's do it again!"

She also worked on the development of the Captivair program, an early simulator used for training fighter pilots.

Ms. Feik explained how she got along with her male counterparts during the war.

"I tried not making a big deal out of it, doing it quietly and nonchalantly. I did it by the book, too, so the only difference would be that I am a woman; they wouldn't have anything else to pin on me," she said in the 1984 interview.

She served until 1952, then decided to assist her husband, Robert Lewis Feik, whom she married in 1950, in his work. He was a civilian employee of the Air Force Communications Command.

She raised their daughter, and when her husband was assigned to Scott Air Force Base in Belleville, Ohio, during the 1960s, she worked for the Red Cross, caring for wounded Vietnam War veterans.

The couple purchased a home in Annapolis in 1953. Mr. Feik died in 2004.

Ms. Feik, who continued flying until she was 80, had owned a Piper PA-24 Comanche and a Piper PA-20 Pacer.

"Nothing gets me higher than flying. Nothing gets me higher emotionally," she told The Baltimore Sun in 1977.

From 1977 until retiring in 1986, she worked at the Garber facility in Suitland, helping build reproduction World War I airplanes and restore several aircraft.

"I never heard anyone say a bad word about Mary. She did everything she could to help people," said Mr. Woodruff. "She was a very effervescent person who made everyone feel like they were her best friend."

Because of her years working with the Civil Air Patrol, she was designated a life member and was presented its Distinguished Service Medal and given the rank of colonel. Her Annapolis squadron was rechartered as the Col. Mary S. Feik Composite Squadron.

In 1996, she was the first woman to receive the Charles Taylor Master Mechanic Award by the FAA in appreciation of her service and expertise. Other honors include the National Aeronautic Association's Katherine and Marjorie Stinson Trophy in 2003, the Frank G. Brewer Trophy in 2006 and the Katharine Wright Trophy in 2013

She was named a Maryland Aviation Pioneer in 1998 and was inducted into the Maryland Women's Hall of Fame in 2015.

Her portrait was presented to the First Flight Shrine at the Wright Brothers National Memorial in Kill Devil Hills, N.C., in 2014 as she was inducted into the First Flight Society.

Reflecting on her lifelong fascination with airplanes, Ms. Feik told The Capital in 2002, "My love of airplanes hasn't diminished one iota. It's still a thrill to watch a plane fly."

Plans for a memorial service are incomplete.

In addition to her daughter, she is survived by two grandchildren and four great-grandchildren.

frasmussen@baltsun.com

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