

# Virginia Aviation History Project Report



## Sara Parmenter

by Linda Burdette

Sara Lester Parmenter doesn't remember the occasion, it might have been a birthday or some other event, but her father knew she loved airplanes and scraped up the money to give her a ride in a barnstormer's Waco. Mr. Lester couldn't have known then that he kindled in his seven-year-old daughter a passion for aviation that would last for almost eighty years (and still counting.)

Born in Jackson, Mississippi, Sara grew up in Jacksonville, Florida. It was an idyllic childhood, punctuated by that ride in the Waco. But in her teenage years, World War II came calling and Sara remembers when the German U-Boats began patrolling the eastern coast of the U.S. She remembers hearing the thud of the German torpedoes hitting the hulls of the Allied ships steaming out of the port. The next day, the beaches might be covered with the ship's cargo. Sara recalls "If it was what we called a 'banana boat', fruits and vegetables would be all up and down the beach. If they sank an oil tanker then oil would be all over the beach. Also, the beaches were perfect for dropping off German spies at night. They arrested several of them at a house not far from where we lived! It was pretty frightening."

Sara decided she wanted to assist with the war effort but for a 16-year-old, the opportunities were limited. With thoughts of that Waco flight in her mind, she volunteered for the Civil Air Patrol and their Cadet Training Program. Soon she was flying in the front seat of a bright yellow Piper J-3, assisting the CAP in their search for German subs. They operated from Craig Field and their constant harassment caused the German Navy to refer to them as "those pesky little yellow airplanes." One of Sara's favorite memories is when a U-Boat was damaged by a Cub rigged to carry a small bomb between the landing gears. She reports "it wasn't a big enough bomb to sink it but the sub was damaged by it and could no longer submerge. I think the Coast Guard came out and finished it off after taking the crew prisoner."

As the war continued and Sara grew older, she had dreams of joining the WASPs but when the war ended, the WASPs were disbanded and the Civil Air Patrol cut back its programs.

With the war over and her future looming, she decided that medicine was the field for her. She enrolled in the Cadet Nurse Program at Jacksonville's St. Vincent Hospital. In this program, the Government paid for training in hopes that the graduates would join the military but they were not obligated to do so. Sara knew even then that she was willing to enter the military and she enjoyed nursing, but she really wanted to be a pilot.

In the meantime, she decided to capitalize on her nursing education and try for medical school to become a doctor. She wanted to attend medical school by day and work at night, but when she interviewed at Emory University in Atlanta, she was emphatically told that the school workload would be too heavy and if her family couldn't afford the tuition, she shouldn't try medical school. At that point she decided to join the Army, pursue her career, and finally realize her dream of learning to fly.

Her first assignment was Percy Jones Army Hospital in Battle Creek, Michigan. Here she began her civilian flight training in earnest and in the spring of 1949, soloed in a J-3 Cub just like the ones she had co-piloted during her Civil Air Patrol days. (She recently pointed out that she soloed 60 years ago this past April 2009.) She recalls that her salary as an Army First Lieutenant was \$150 a month and that the flight costs were \$3 for the instructor and \$4 for the airplane.

However her flying plans were soon interrupted and she didn't complete her license. The "interruption" was in the form of Dr. Robert Parmenter. Percy Jones Hospital began to accept interns; before that, all the doctors were older, mostly married officers. One day, the young intern, Dr. Parmenter, visited the floor where she was working. She was engaged to someone else at the time, but that didn't last long after she met Parmenter.

When the Air Force split from the Army, she elected to go into the Air Force but Dr. Parmenter stayed with the Army. As one of the first nurses in the fledgling service, she was assigned to help set up a nursing unit at the new hospital at Eglin Air Force Base in Florida and there she and Robert Parmenter were married (despite the fact that her new husband wasn't interested in flying.)

In the early 50's, the Korean War began and Sara's husband was transferred to Germany. Sara applied for an Air Force transfer to Germany but the head nurse at her hospital didn't want to let her go, so she decided that her marriage was more important and resigned from the Air Force to accompany her husband to Germany. She joined the Air Force Reserves and eventually retired with the rank of Major. Understandably flying was very difficult in Germany, which was still recovering from the war and Sara was unable to continue her dream of flying there.

However upon return from Germany, Sara immediately began to pursue her pilot's license. Wherever they were stationed, Sara would join the flying club and continue to work on her flying lessons. In 1956, while stationed at Ft. Knox, KY, she bought into a partnership with a Stinson Voyager and when she left there, she sold the Stinson to her partner. She finally got her license at Ft. Riley in 1960. Because of starts and stops she had accrued 100 hours as a student.

After receiving her license, she purchased her first Cessna 140 and often used her aircraft to fly to her reserve duties. When landing at Forbes AFB in Topeka, Kansas, the air traffic controllers were surprised to have a woman pilot landing. "There was always this long pause on the radio when I checked in with the base controllers in my 140. I guess they weren't used to hearing a woman on the radio in those days."



Sara Lester poses in front of Percy Jones Army Hospital, Battle Creek, Michigan in 1949. Notice that she is wearing her "pinks and greens".

Unfortunately Dr. Parmenter eventually was assigned to a second tour in Germany and Sara sold the first 140 before undertaking the trip, although she does point out that she sold it for \$1,500 which in those days was a lot of money.

One interesting note from that time of Sara's life is her brush with celebrity. Her nephew, Tom Lester, played the role of "Eb" on the CBS TV sitcom, Green Acres, from 1965 to 1971.

One of COL Parmenter's final assignments was at Ft. Lee, Virginia, where he became involved in the North-South Skirmish Association. This group reenacts Civil War skirmishes and does target shooting with authentic Civil War era weapons and ammunition. When the Parmenters were later assigned back to Jacksonville and knew that they were getting ready to retire, their thoughts returned to Virginia. They decided to look for a farm here and when visiting Ft Lee for a skirmish, Sara was reading the paper and saw an ad for 40 acres in Cumberland.

Upon arrival, they were instantly captivated. The farm looked like her Grandfather's farm in Florida. The home was a pre-Civil War house which began life as a log cabin, and the deed can be traced back to a grant from King George. Additions had been constructed over the years and the oak beams were visible on the ceilings throughout. As a matter of fact, they soon found that the ancient wood was too hard for nails. Sara believes one of the pecans is the oldest and largest pecan tree in the Commonwealth of Virginia. It is thought to be one of a group of trees presented to landowners from George Washington. The Parmenters have kept

their home as a working farm, growing their own vegetables and fruit and even raising livestock for meat. For many years she bred and raised Pekingese dogs and also, for a while, peacocks. However the peacocks had their questionable moments. One of these moments occurred when she was working in her yard one day. She fell and broke both bones in one leg and couldn't move. She called and called for help. When her husband finally found her, he said that he'd heard a call like "help, help", but it sounded just like the peacocks, so he didn't investigate.



Sara ready for take-off in her Cessna 140

At any rate, in 1972, as their civilian life began, Sara decided to indulge her flying dreams in earnest.

She bought her second Cessna 140 and has owned that aircraft for 37 years. She traveled the Commonwealth of Virginia, pointing out that "airport hopping is still my favorite thing to do." Sometimes she would just take off and follow a country road to see where it led.

Her husband was, for many years, the Director of the Health Department for a seven county area in Virginia. Before his retirement, she would take him to medical conferences in the 140. She laughs as she recalls landing in her little 140 while other doctors were flying in much fancier and costlier planes. She thought she looked like someone driving a Tin Lizzie in a crowd of Cadillac's. But the other doctors all noticed the little woman flying the airplane.

She also takes regular vacations back to Florida, and at times she's been called upon to avoid weather and hurricanes. One dicey incident was when they were headed to Jacksonville, Florida for a visit. Her husband

noticed that the oil pressure had suddenly dropped. She shut off the engine, called mayday, and asked for the nearest airport. They routed her to Herlong Field. It was late in the evening and there were buildings along Highway 10. For a time Sara was concerned that she would have to land on the highway, but eventually saw the airport and glided to land. In all her years of flying, she's had about 5 emergency landings, but has always been close to an airport and able to land safely.

When asked about the challenges of flying a tail-dragger, she points out that she started with a tail dragger and is used to it. She learned to fly in J3's and Champs. Her experience in airplanes includes the 140, 170's, 150, 152, Stearman, AT6, Piper Cub, Champs, and Piper Supercruiser. She's flown a Comanche, but not solo and has "taken a turn" at flying a Citation, but only with the Pilot in Command closely watching.

Her 140 is more than an airplane. At this point it's an old and well-known friend. She doesn't want to fly or own any other airplane. She knows all its quirks and capabilities. After a recent engine overhaul, Sara kept complaining that the engine didn't have enough power. She knew it wasn't climbing out the way it should. Finally someone else landed at the airport in a 140 with the same engine and Sara insisted that the mechanic compare the engines. Sure enough, it turned out that the Sara's spark plug wires were incorrectly connected. As soon as the connections were fixed the airplane ran just as it should.

She hasn't personally encountered a lot of prejudice against women pilots. She's known a couple of instructors who didn't like women in aviation, but she's mostly ignored them and is quick to say that she's known many more instructors who were very supportive. One she remembers fondly is Jack Cutler, a former OSS member. He was very supportive when he checked her out in the 140 and used to brag frequently about her flying.

She says that the greatest thing in aviation for her is the camaraderie, the people you meet, the aviation family and community. Throughout her years of flying, Sara has made friends all over Virginia and has influenced many to fly. In 1999, she was honored with a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Commonwealth of Virginia Department of Aviation. She was so well known at the airfields in Virginia and North Carolina that she was unofficially known as Virginia's General Aviation Goodwill Ambassador.



Sara with her Cessna 140



Sara with Astronaut Edwin "Buzz" Aldrin at the 2001 Virginia Department of Aviation Conference in Washington, D.C.

But in 2004, the Department of Aviation made the title a formal one when it began the Aviation Ambassador program and asked Sara to appear on its public relations posters. Since that time, Sara has had even more fun traveling the state and

meeting folks. Many airports ask her to autograph her picture on the poster and she is always amazed at the number of young women who want to talk to her about her flying career.

But if you ask her about heroes, she never talks about herself. She will tell you firmly that her heroes in aviation are the World War II fighter pilots. She enjoys reading about them and their exploits in the war.

Sara is nonchalant about her aviation accomplishments. Like so many of the women who've blazed the trail for today's women aviators, she doesn't consider her history as anything remarkable. She is still pleasantly surprised when anyone refers to her as a role model and just relishes the attention she gets from younger pilots. She says "I haven't done anything special. I just found something that I love to do and have done it for a really long time." She doesn't realize how very special that is.

Sources:

Interview with Sara Parmenter, August 27, 2009

Virginia's Ambassador of General Aviation, Carolina Skies Magazine, August/September 2004



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