



STEVE KROG
COMMENTARY / THE CLASSIC INSTRUCTOR

Welcoming Young Women Into Aviation

Christina Kucevar's aviation journey

BY STEVE KROG

WOMEN HAVE MADE A significant contribution to aviation since the Wright brothers first flew in 1903. Blanche Scott was the first woman pilot in 1910 when the airplane she was taxiing “accidentally” became airborne. In 1911 Harriet Quimby became the first female licensed pilot in the United States. Good friend and pilot Col. Adria Zuccaro is the mother of one of my previous students, Page, and the commander of the U.S. Air Force 128th Refueling Wing based at General Mitchell International Airport in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

Even though women have made great strides in aviation, a somewhat common experience was brought to my attention a day ago when a pilot, Erin Brueggen, EAA 842239, who trained at my flight school and is now flying for a charter operation, was asked if she was a flight attendant on the charter flight she was piloting. Her response was polite but firm, “No, I’m flying this plane. If you want me to be a flight attendant, I’ll sit here on the ramp and socialize with you, but that won’t get you home to your families.” Not expecting her comment, the person who made the statement was a bit taken aback by her response.

I sympathized with Erin, but it made me think about what is being done throughout the aviation industry to attract more female pilots and do away with this stereotype.

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Christina Kucevar smiling after a concentrated load of stalls in the 7EC.

I have had the distinct pleasure of teaching and flying with many women. Some want to learn to fly for pleasure while the majority are focused on flying as a career, either charter, corporate, or airline.

In early April, I received a call from a local high school guidance counselor. She had a student expressing an interest in learning to fly and asked if I would meet with her. I said yes, definitely, and a time was arranged for the student to visit the airport and shadow one of the female instructors I have on staff.

The visit was made, and the young student, 17-year-old Christina Kucevar, EAA 1468563, was seriously interested in learning more. A week later she attended a Girls Can Fly event we hosted. This allowed her to meet and talk with a number of female military, commercial, and general aviation pilots. At the conclusion of the event Christina searched me out and said she wanted to do a discovery flight and see if she truly liked to fly. The discovery flight took place several days later, and she was completely hooked on aviation.

Christina wanted to begin flying as soon as possible but also asked about working at the airport to help pay for her flight lessons. I’m always looking for young people who are willing to trade work for flight time so we agreed on a working arrangement. She is also an accomplished softball player/pitcher and her high school team was playing in the local sectional tournaments, so flying had to wait until the softball season concluded.

Yesterday, Christina completed her 10th hour of dual instruction, flying both a Cessna 150 as well as a Champion 7EC tailwheel airplane. Between flights we had time to cover some ground school and talk about her aviation interests.

I asked her to explain how she became interested in pursuing flying. She said when going on family vacations they would fly commercially. "I soon learned to love the aspect of flying and always thought the best part of the vacation was the flight to and from," she said.

During the past two-plus weeks, Christina has met and conversed with a number of the local pilots. When asked what she thought of the airport and flying community, she said, "I've met so many people already and everyone is so friendly, all very supportive of what I'm doing and offering to help in any way they can. You're definitely not just a number here. I was certainly a little nervous the first time I came for a flight lesson, but everyone greeted me, making me feel immediately accepted and comfortable. Now that I've flown, I've learned that I love to fly, and I love it even better after every flight."

Christina is entering her senior year of high school, and I asked what she intends to do after graduating. Prior to flying, she was considering studying biochemistry. But after starting flight lessons, the plan has changed. She's now in the process of visiting colleges offering flight training. She would also like to pursue a sport pilot instructor rating and do some instructing for me next summer.



After completing her morning flight, Christina Kuchevar was found washing the wings on the 7EC Champion she has been flying.

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First Officer Erica Larsen Shoemaker at home in the cockpit of the Embraer 190.

“Learning to fly has opened up a whole new world to me,” Christina said. “Flying is in my blood, and I want to pursue an aviation career. A year ago, I never imagined that I would be doing this. Thankfully, I took the time to mention I might be interested in flying to the high school counselor, and now here I am.”

When asked where she envisioned being in five years, she said she expects to be graduated from college and building flight time, probably as a flight instructor. Then she hopes to move on to a regional carrier and finally a major air carrier.

Flying is not all fun and games. Maintenance, cleaning, and servicing aircraft is involved in the support of good, safe training aircraft. Christina learned this the second day she flew. Airplanes always need to have a good belly cleaning several times a year, and she jumped right into doing this on one of the airplanes. I’ve always felt that if a young person comes back after spending a day cleaning aircraft bellies, they’re sincerely interested in flying. She has learned how to clean, wax, fuel, clean windows, check air pressure, and remove bugs.

One final question I had for her was what she would recommend to other young women who may have even a slight interest in flying. Her response was immediate, “Find and do a discovery flight, check out flying clubs and organizations like the Ninety-Nines and Women in Aviation. Get involved.” Christina, in fact, has applied to and been accepted in the local airport youth group that focus on building airplanes. During the school year she will be devoting one or two evenings a week helping build a second Van’s RV-12.

“Now that many of my friends know that I am taking flight lessons, they all want to ask me questions about it. You may find that you have several more young women wanting to take lessons,” she said.

I love to fly, but at my age I get even more enjoyment from sharing the love of flight with students young and old. It’s a passion that I hope I can continue sharing for many years to come.

Looking back, one young woman, Amy Biondich, earned her private pilot certificate over the summer and then went on and became an emergency room doctor. She obtained an instrument rating the following summer and now flies primarily for pleasure but sometimes for work.

Another young woman, Erica Larsen Shoemaker, launched her aviation career here during the summer after her senior year of high school. Then she attended one of the well-known aviation universities and earned all her ratings. Asked to stay on as an instructor after graduating, she taught many other young women to fly before being hired by an airline. She now flies internationally for one of the major air carriers.

On one of her visits after starting her airline career, she shared a story with me. She was flying with a captain who didn’t think much of women in the cockpit. One of the legs of a trip required landing at LaGuardia with a nasty crosswind and light rain falling. The captain said, “You’ve got this approach and landing, young lady,” thinking she would have difficulty handling it.

Much to his surprise she set up a bit of a crab, aligned the airplane with the centerline on short final, lowered a wing, and then proceeded to make a beautiful landing in the Embraer 190. The captain asked where she had learned how to do that, and she replied, “I started out in J-3 Cubs and learned how to land in all kinds of wind conditions.” The captain accepted her as an equal thereafter, and the two worked well together whenever they were flying the same flight.

Having young women who have trained here stop to visit and share some of their flight experiences makes me so proud. It’s fun to listen to their enthusiasm and how they have dealt with different situations.

Today in the world of aviation, approximately 6 percent of the pilot population is female. Increasing that percentage is a responsibility for all of us. The women who I’ve had the opportunity to train are above average pilots deserving an equal opportunity for pilot slots.

Keep flying safe, and don’t be afraid to open the aviation door to a young woman. She may be a captain on a flight you’re taking some day, if given an opportunity. **EAA**

Steve Krog, EAA 173799, has been flying for more than four decades and giving tailwheel instruction for nearly as long. In 2006 he launched Cub Air Flight, a flight training school using tailwheel aircraft for all primary training.