

Air and Space this Week

Item of the Week

GERALDINE “JERRIE” MOCK

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Many aviation “firsts” and records have been set by military test pilots and other professional aviators. But one “first” of significance had not been striven for since Amelia Earhart’s disappearance: the first woman to fly solo around the World. That all changed in 1964, fifty-nine years ago this week. And the pilot wasn’t previously known to the public; she was the “Flying Housewife,” Jerrie Mock!

1964

I always have a difficult time explaining the 1960s to someone who(se parents) didn’t live through them. Each year has its own character. 1964 was the leading edge of the most-rapidly changing part of the decade.

The nation was still reeling from the assassination of JFK the previous November. Ex-VP President Johnson ran for (re)election and won in a landslide over Arizona’s Barry Goldwater. The Beatles were at the forefront of the British Invasion of music. Cassius Clay beat Sonny Liston and became Muhammad Ali. A terrible earthquake hit Alaska. Sidney Poitier won the Best Actor Oscar. Nelson Mandela went to jail (but he’d be back!). New York hosted a major World’s Fair. The first BASIC computer program was written. Three civil rights workers were murdered in Mississippi. The Viet Nam War began really heating up. *Mary Poppins* premiered. The Moog synthesizer was invented. MLK won the Nobel Peace Prize. NASA initiated Project Gemini and launches *Mariner 4* toward Mars. And finally, on May 4, the U.S. Congress officially recognized Kentucky bourbon as a “distinctive product of the United States.” [Actually, bourbon comes only from a specific region in Kentucky!]

The public began pushing back on the Viet Nam War and advocating for equal rights for women and minorities, a portent of bigger unrest to come. The government responded, working on a foundation laid by JFK, with the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and followed it with the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Title VII of the former named act is particularly germane to the focus of this Item. The main part of the CRA did not prohibit discrimination on the basis of sex. While Congress had already passed the Equal Pay Act of 1963, there was still a lot of inequities in place. An besides, without Title 7, it would become illegal to discriminate against a woman of color but not against a white woman.

There were a number of leaders in the burgeoning women's movement, but a lot of the change was being made at the grass-roots level, due to the actions of "everyday" women. One of them was ...

"JERRIE" MOCK

Geraldine Fredritz was born on November 22, 1925, in Newark, Ohio. She was quite a tomboy, and developed an interest in aviation when her father got them a flight in the cockpit of a Ford Trimotor. She was completely enamored, and actually took a course about engineering in high school as a result. She graduated high school in 1943 and went to Ohio State University to continue her studies in aeronautical engineering. Two years she married Russell Mock and left OSU to raise a family. Two children came within five years, another would follow soon thereafter. Being a housewife was both fulfilling and time-consuming, but she never lost her love for aviation. So she decided to learn to fly, taking lessons beginning in 1956, and obtaining her license in 1958. She and Russell acquired a single-engine 1953 Cessna 180 Skywagon, and began flying often. They named it the "Spirit of Columbus," but Jerrie liked to call it "38 Charlie," after the three last digits in its registration number, or just plain "Charlie."

The adventures and mysterious loss of Amelia Earhart were still relatively-fresh in people's minds, and WWII aviation exploits, and those over Korea, were recent memories. Flight records were being set with regularity, but nobody had stepped up to follow in Amelia's footsteps.

Jerrie often spoke of her love of flying, during one of which husband Russell made a joke about her flying around the world. That "everyday housewife" took him quite seriously. The Mocks made a number of major modifications and upgrades to *Charlie* to make him capable of (navigating) long over-water flights, acquiring some sponsors along the way, especially the *Columbus Dispatch* newspaper. It would be quite the adventure. But the Mocks were not the only ones thinking so.

The National Aviation Association was the "gatekeeper" of aviation records. The Mocks had worked with them to plan Jerrie's flight to make sure she could achieve official recognition as the first woman to fly around the world. The paperwork was in order, the flight plan was set, and the flight would begin in Columbus, Ohio on April 1, 1964.

Then the NAA informed Jerrie that another woman was also planning to become the first woman pilot around the world. Joan Merriman Smith planned to follow the exact route Amelia Earhart would have completed, and she was scheduled to depart on March 17.

Having two women competing, and the Amelia Earhart angle, really piqued the interest of the press. Reporters got to calling Jerrie the "Flying Housewife." My, how things change.

THE FLIGHT

Joan Smith was heading west to circle the Earth clockwise (as seen from above the North Pole); Jerrie Mock was going to fly the eastern way around. But, two weeks' head start was too big to overcome, so Jerrie and her team prepped like crazy, and she was able to take off from

Columbus on March 19. The press would keep track of her progress, and that of Joan Smith, portraying it as a race, even though neither had planned it that way. Jerrie's first leg was to Bermuda, and she landed there with no problem.

The second leg, however, involved an Atlantic crossing, with a quick stop in the Azores. Jerrie was beset by both ice and desert dust, suffering icing and loss of ground visibility along the African coast. Her next field was in Cairo, but her navigation was off due in large part to the dusty weather. She landed on the Inchas Air Force Base; at least she was in the right country. But she was most definitely in the wrong place, as evidenced as the quick appearance of armed soldiers. A woman in a dress flying a single-engine Cessna was not a threat they had trained for! The mistake was quickly taken care of, and Jerrie made the short hop to Cairo. She even got a chance to visit the Pyramids.

After Cairo, Jerrie's next stops included Saudi Arabia, where a woman pilot created quite a sensation (recall that SA only recently allowed women to drive cars!). Then came India, Guam, Wake Island, Hawai'i, Oakland, and home. There were some mechanical and other issues along the way, including brake problems and more bad weather. But she overcame them all, and landed successfully back at Columbus on April 17, 29 days, 11 hours, and 59 minutes after she had taken off.

The media had continued to follow the flights throughout. They liked the competition angle, and the Earhart connection, especially since Joan was following the exact same (and more dangerous) route. Joan's aircraft suffered more, and more serious, mechanical breakdowns, so her trip ended after Jerrie's, in spite of her two-day head start.

Joan Merriam Smith completed her flight, scoring a number of "firsts," too. She, not Jerrie, won the prestigious Harmon Trophy in 1964. She went on to earn an airline transport rating, at the young age of 23, and was a member of the Miami Chapter of the Ninety-Nines. She died in the cockpit of a plane that crashed in the mountains north of LA on February 17, 1965.

OTHER RECORDS

Jerrie Mock set two NAA- and FIA-recognized records with her circumnavigation flight. But she wasn't done with the records; she would set six more in the next four years. She had seven recognized "firsts," including not only the first woman to fly solo around the world, but also the first woman to pilot across the Atlantic and the Pacific Oceans. Not bad for a "Flying Housewife!"

RECOGNITION

Needless to say, Jerrie Mock's aviation feats earned her a lot of recognition. Some of it was at the local and state level, but she also won the FAA Gold Medal for Exceptional Service, the Glenn Hammond Curtiss Silver Medal, the Amelia Earhart Memorial Award, and many more. She was enshrined in the National Aviation Hall of Fame in Dayton in 2022, posthumously (she

had passed away on September 30, 2014). Jerrie Mock was cremated and her ashes were “returned to the sky” from a Cessna 180.

Her famous aircraft, *Charlie*, now is proudly on display at the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum’s Udvar-Hazy Center.

Please share Jerrie’s inspiration story with any young girl in your life! Especially since it’s Women’s History Month.

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