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A Conversation with Sandi Pierce Melvin

Ed. Note: Recently, I had the pleasure of meeting the El Paso Chapter's newest member via the telephone. Sandi Pierce Melvin is such an interesting lady, I thought perhaps you would like to share the conversation.

By Marilyn Ratzlaff

"Sandi, I saw one of your shows a couple of years ago when it was in Oklahoma City and it was very impressive. How did you get started?"

"Well, I learned to fly in Austin, Texas, at Tim's Airpark. I got a job as a secretary for the Cessna dealership to finance the lessons. I started flying in September and had my Private license by December. That was in 1966, almost thirteen years ago. I ended up marrying my flight instructor, Wayne Pierce. I got my Commercial the next year

and my CFI a year later. Wayne also taught me aerobatics, which I loved from the beginning."

"When did you start performing in the airshows?"

"I started flying in the shows a couple of years after I learned aerobatics. I also did the wing-walking for the show. Wayne had been flying the shows for quite awhile, but it took about four years to really become well known. I have been performing seriously, on a full time basis for about nine years."

"Are you planning to continue with the airshows?"

"Oh, yes. I recently purchased National Airshows and I will be producing and promoting the shows in the Southwest primarily."

"How many pilots are involved in the shows?"

"None of the pilots are associated with the show full-time. I promote the shows and bring the pilots together for the show and then everybody goes their own way."

"Sandi, as I was watching your show, I couldn't help wondering about the danger involved. How dangerous is it?"

"Of course, all shows have some element of danger, but the pilots are professional and the planes are kept in top condition, so the danger is minimized. Then too, we fly in a controlled set of conditions and everyone tries to use good judgement. Occasionally accidents will happen, that's part of the risk a professional airshow pilot takes. Once in a great while the equipment will fail, but since we have a built-in altitude cushion and the shows are performed right over the airport, we could usually recover and land with no damage. As a general rule, accidents result from errors in judgement."

"When you say 'errors in judgement,' what exactly do you mean?"

"Doing something irrational. Sometimes a crowd will cause a pilot to push his capabilities and use poor judgement because he wants to be better than the other pilots. Manuevers done on the spur of the moment can also cause trouble."

"Have you had any close calls flying airshows?"

"Not in an airshow, no. Getting to the show was sometimes a problem, though. The planes are not instrument equipped, so even though I am instrument rated, it doesn't help much trying to get through weather."

"I know that you're also an aerobatic instructor. How do you teach beginners? Doesn't that increase the risk factor?"

"Not really. Beginners have lots of ground school and really, it's a mechanical skill, learning what to do when and then polishing the rhythm and movement. And, too, the manuevers are done high, about 3500 feet. That's plenty of altitude to recover."

"What's it really like up there?"

"It's fun! It's a challenge and it really keeps the pilot busy, really on his toes. It's a totally different environment and the equipment is different. Some people love it



During the early days, Sandi did as much wing-walking as she did flying in the airshows.

and others can't stand it. I'm really sold on aerobatics for teaching people how to fly. It's a terrific confidence builder and if it's done correctly, it's really not all that dangerous. It's really funny, I love to do aerobatics, but I can't stand to ride the rides at the fair. It bothers me tremendously. I think it's because I have no control and that's really where the fear factor comes in.

"Is that true with the students?"

"Oh, sure. They lack confidence in their ability to control the plane and they are afraid that their flying ability will hurt the airplane. As soon as they gain a little confidence, the fear is no longer a problem."

"I'm sure you've really had some interesting experiences as a result of your flying."

"Yes, I've really gotten to do some interesting things. Besides instructing, I was the General Manager for Sebring Aviation in Florida for awhile. But, one of the most interesting things I got to do was to fly as copilot on an old World War II bomber in the Fire Ant Eradication Program. We flew



The classic pose. Sandi and her baby, a Taylorcraft Experimental.



This Pinto-Jet is only one of the many types of planes Sandi has flown during the course of her career.



Every pilot's dream come true. Sandi actually got the chance to fly the Blue Angels' jet.

grids all over South Carolina, Georgia and Florida spreading a chemical that would kill only the Fire Ants. It took three applications before it was effective. The government stopped the program by banning the chemical. They couldn't prove it was bad, but they couldn't prove it was good either. One of the most rewarding things is the recognition that comes from flying the airshows. I got to be on the "Mike Douglas Show" and "What's My Line?" as a result."

"What's in the future? More airshows?"

"Definitely. But now it will be fun. The pressure has been taken off and I can control the number of shows and the type of shows I fly. I don't have to make a living doing this and I can really do it for the enjoyment of doing a good show. Besides, my husband and I are building a new home with our own hangar and 2600 landing strip north of El Paso, so that's going to keep me pretty busy."



In addition to all of her flight ratings, Sandi also holds an Airframe mechanic's license. The photographer caught her adding smoke oil to her Great Lakes during an airshow.