



Fighting to Fly

Alverna Williams in her younger days.

by Rick Bowers

In 1944, after a long battle with the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), Alverna Williams became the first pilot with a physical disability to be licensed to fly an airplane by the agency, she says. In fact, as a bilateral lower-extremity amputee who stands just 2 feet tall without prostheses, she could also be the smallest.

Although Williams was born a “normal” size, she was run over by a streetcar when she was just a year old and had to have both of her legs amputated above the knee. Though she used prostheses when she was very young, they were so uncomfortable for her that she stopped wearing them and decided to walk on her hands instead.

“I never had any problems with my arms,” she says. “I learned to walk with them, and it just came natural.” In fact, she sometimes wears shoes on her hands.

“When my mother was trying to teach me to wear prosthetic legs, I found the shoes quite attractive,” she explains. “My mother said, ‘If you practice, you can take the shoes off the legs and play with them.’ And that’s how I started wearing shoes on my hands.”

She has even worn high heels at times. “Well, not high high,” she says with a laugh. “But I did learn to tap dance with shoes on my hands.”

Small in stature, but big in heart, the now 85-year-old Williams says she has done everything. “You name it,” she says. “I’ve done it. Nothing has ever scared me. I can’t ever remember being afraid of anything or anybody.”

Throughout the years, she’s been an acrobat in the circus, part of a trapeze act, a tap dancer, and part of a motorcycle act.

“When I was growing up, our neighbor,

a dance teacher, took an interest in me,” Williams explains, “because her son did. He wasn’t my age, but he thought that I was somethin’ else. So, naturally, everything that she could teach me to please her son was an investment for her. Of course, I always had a lot of strength in my arms, and I learned acrobatics that way.”

Williams was only about 15 when she went to work for the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus, and her mother went everywhere with her because of her age. She only stayed with the circus for about a year, however. “It wasn’t something that I liked, and I was real temperamental about it. It was a hard life.”

Then, at age 25, she learned to fly.

“There was a new airplane on the market called the Ercoupe that only had two controls instead of three, which meant that you really didn’t need legs to fly it,”

she explains. "By that time, I guess I was a little popular for some of the things I did in life, and I was approached about flying it."

Though she was able to fly with no problem and fulfilled the requirements for a license, the FAA refused to give her one, she says. "Aviation was pretty much open to everybody, and then I came along, and they said, 'No. She can't do that.' So I talked to my lawyer about it, and he said, 'Yes we can.'" She had three strikes against her in the FAA's eyes: She was a woman, young and disabled. "They tried to cause me a lot of trouble, and I returned it. I had to take them to court and I won the case. But I never would have gotten anywhere if I hadn't done it that way." By doing so, she paved the way for others with amputations and other disabilities. "I thought that I would be quite an asset to aviation, and I guess I did add something, especially through suing the government to get my license."

A lot of Williams' can-do attitude comes from her childhood. When she was just a girl and asked her mother for a glass of water, her mother joked that she should get it for herself. Williams quickly climbed up in a chair and then onto the counter to get a glass from the cabinet and then filled it with water.

It was liberating, she says.

Many years later, she would climb up into a plane for the first time and take to the skies. Though it's been almost 60 years since she pioneered aviation for people with disabilities, aviation is still in her blood, and the 85-year-old, who still flies, can be seen every now and then high up in the sky, alone and unafraid, soaring among the clouds. ■

Interesting Facts About Williams

- At age 50, Williams, who had dropped out of school as a child to join the circus, decided to improve her education by enrolling in college and earning an associate's degree in psychology.
- At 85, Williams swims regularly for exercise.
- Williams can still tap dance with shoes on her hands.

Do You Believe You Can Fly?

by Rick Bowers

Ever had the desire to fly a plane and thought that you couldn't because you are an amputee?

Well, don't listen to that voice in your head that tells you that you can't. A lot of amputees have gone on to get their pilot's license and have either flown for fun or for profit. There's Alverna Williams, a bilateral lower-extremity amputee, Scott Cook, an above-elbow amputee, and Dr. William "Bill" Bernard, an above-knee amputee, to name just a few.

American Air Flight Training (AAFT), a flight school located at DeKalb-Peachtree Airport in Georgia, has trained pilots with physical disabilities for years through its Wheelchair Pilot Program.

Some people want to learn to fly for sport or recreation, and some want to learn so that they can fly for their business, says Steve Shaner, owner and president of AAFT. Others, he says, just find it "an uplifting experience."

Over the years, some individuals have paid for the training from their own pockets, but others might need a little help, and the flight school has an arrangement with a company called Pilot Finance, Inc., that will help finance the training for qualified individuals.

Shaner, who is also one of the school's chief instructors and an FAA examiner himself, says his students with physical disabilities haven't had any problem getting licensed to fly. "There's a process that you go through from the beginning," he explains. "Of course, you have to pass a flight physical and get a medical certificate. The doctor evaluates your medical history and so forth, and you may need some documentation with that. And then, if the doctor feels that everything is okay, he recommends you for a Statement of Demonstrated Ability. That's where you get with an FAA inspector at some point in your flight program and demonstrate that you have the physical capability to operate the controls to the level necessary to be safe. And then, at the end of the program, you take a routine FAA check ride for your private license just as anyone else would."

Interested? ■

For more information, contact Steve Shaner or Clint Rogers at 770/455-4203, or visit the AAFT Web site at www.fly-aaft.com