

ORIGIN OF THE DICEY MILLER AWARD

By Dicey Miller

(Ed. note: Only four individuals have made sufficient contributions to aviation and the Association to be awarded the distinction of life membership in the AYA. Dicey Miller is one of them. The others are Otto Koppen, Ken Blackman and Roy Garrison.)

This article was written for those of you who wonder “who the h--- is Dicey Miller and why is she a life member of the AYA – what did she do?”

Actually, it all started 20 years ago when a very bored flight instructor in Atlanta had a chance to fly a snappy little airplane called a “Yankee Clipper”. She then spent the next ten years explaining that she was just a southern girl who “fell in love with a Yankee”.

Unfortunately, I was unable to convince my boss that we should trade off our Cessnas and Pipers and get a bunch of Yankees, at least a couple of them, to use as training aircraft. Bear in mind that we were the Southeastern distributor for Mooney. Mooney had no two-place trainer and to transition a Cessna 152 or Piper Cherokee pilot into the Mooney was a traumatic experience for the instructor. On the other hand, the little Yankee was absolutely ideal. Its critical speeds and landing characteristics were the same as some high performance aircraft, including the Piper Comanche (both single and twin), in which I was currently teaching.

About a year later, (December 1969), I moved to Seattle area and had a chance to prove my contention about the training value of the Yankee. I became owner, operator and chief pilot for Pacific Skyways and through a distributor at Paine Field, managed to acquire nine lease-back Yankees for rental and flight training.

Because there was no pilot training curriculum the local F.A.A. office was horrified. All of the publicity at that time had been stressing what a “hot” little airplane it was. The word was that it took a “real hot-shot pilot” to fly it, that you had to have at least a private license and a minimum of 100 hours before you could rent one and FBO’s were having their problems checking out would-be renters. Meanwhile the rival manufacturers – Beech, Piper, etc. were shrieking what a dangerous airplane it was.

It was in that setting that I wrote a Pilot Training Curriculum and Check-out Procedure, clear up through commercial, instrument and flight instructor. One of my instructors took 35mm slides to support the training and I qualified the entire package with both the F.A.A. and the Veteran’s Administration.

American Aviation later flew me back to Cleveland (where the factory was at the time), and I spent six weeks there turning my curriculum into what later became the basis for the Grumman-American Pilot Training Program. At this time only the Yankee existed, while the four place and maybe a retractable were still in the future. Thanks to all the negative publicity, they were also experimenting with changing the original wing on the Yankee, which eventually led to the birth of the Trainer.

When I was instructing in the Atlanta Area, I had worked on occasion with the F.A.A. Flight Instructor Refresher Team from Oklahoma City on several of their Instructor Refresher Clinics. Consequently, I had become pretty well acquainted with Pete Campbell and the team (when you are one of only two or three females among about 250 males, you do tend to stand out). So I made a point to attend all of the clinics which were scheduled in the Northwest, along with my instructors, who attended at Pacific Skyways expense. We demonstrated our flight training and checkout procedures, and the Yankee, to the F.A.A. and any instructors who wanted to give it a go...and guess what? The F.A.A. and most of the instructors (the good ones, that is!) agreed that “it was a damned fine little teaching airplane – if you learned to fly in it, you’d be SAFE in practically anything!” They too, fell in love with the sporty little bird.

We ran all of our student check rides through the F.A.A. inspectors rather than me using my designee status, because I wanted to prove my point. The inspectors later told me that the private pilot candidates who came from our school had the proficiency of commercial pilots and just plain “knew how to fly”. One of my nasty comments was “the Yankee shows off a good pilot and shows up a poor one. The pilots who say bad things about the bird generally are those who can't fly it. It's their fault, not the Yankee's”.

About this time American invited me back to Cleveland to address their dealer's convention to explain the success I was having with the Flight School. They also wanted me to introduce the Pilot Training Curriculum and fly prototypes of the Trainer and the new four-place, the Patriot. With regard to the two-place I told them that they took a perfectly good airplane and ruined it. All they really had needed was to change their advertising strategy. And that is why the AYA award for the Best Original Yankee each year at the convention is called the Dacey Miller Award – the original Yankee is my original love. I had designed a set of wings for the flight school and Yankee pilots. When you soloed you got a “half wing” and when you passed your check ride you were awarded your wings – silver for private, gold for commercial and one with a jewel in the center for an instrument rating. We awarded a larger pair of gold wings for the flight instructor rating, similar to the ones our instructors wore. When a renter checked out successfully with us, they also received an appropriate set of wings. These Pacific Skyways wings slowly began to become a status symbol. Among pilots in the know, the wings symbolized a “Yankee Pilot”. What you probably don't know is that those Pacific Skyway wings are now the AYA wings, with the PS under the star removed. I donated the molds and the rights to the design to the AYA. To make a long story short, we flew almost four years without a single accident or incident involving a Yankee or a Pacific Skyways pilot. The F.A.A. even began to use our operation as a counter to comments about the “dangerous Yankee”.

Personal family problems made it necessary for me to sell the flight operation and after a couple of gyrations it evolved into Skytrek Aviation with Ken Blackman. Ken was a musician in those days, part of a group called “Centerline”. His wife Jan was the vocalist (if you have been fortunate enough to hear her, you know how great she is). Ken had learned to fly in a Yankee in San Jose at an outfit called “Sport Aviation”, operated by Maynard Crosby. Maynard and I had talked several times previous to my selling out and at one time had contemplated combining forces. I kept in touch with Ken and kind of “mother-henned” the operation.

All of this brings us to a certain fly-in at Merced, California. Maynard invited the bunch from Skytrek to come down for the annual Merced air show and eleven airplanes from the northwest area flew down together as a “Flight of Eleven”.

This led to an amusing incident on the way down. We were getting ready to go into Eugene, Oregon for a fuel stop and formed up “in trail” in preparation for landing...eleven airplanes all strung out in a nicely spaced line. When our lead called in for landing instructions for the “Flight of Eleven”, the tower asked us to “make a 360 and let United in”. Then, in perfect unison, as if it had been rehearsed and practiced, we executed perfect 360's in place – much to the astonishment of the controllers, who said it was the funniest thing they had ever seen...11 little blips going around in unison in perfect little circles, all in a line.

It was at that Merced fly-in during June of 1976 that the AYA was born. As I recall, there were some 33 original charter members, made up of whoever was present at the fly-in and wanted to join. We signed up on the Back of one of the Fly-in posters, which is now framed and a part of the AYA archives. There were no officers, no bylaws, and no formal arrangements of any kind. We decided to use Skytrek for the base address and phone, with Ken Blackman serving as a sort of chairman. Jan Blackman, who worked in a bank at the time, agreed to ride herd over our little hoard of money (we each donated \$5.00 toward potential expenses). I volunteered to act as Secretary, to get out a newsletter, make up a membership application, etc.

The first 3 years of the newsletter were typed on my portable typewriter at home and Xeroxed courtesy of Boeing (I was working as a weight and balance engineer) after hours. These were mailed out to all the Yankee owners and renter pilots that we could get addresses on. During that time we settled on the name of the Association – since it was for preservation of the American Yankee, it obviously had to be the “American Yankee Association”. I donated to the Association the master molds for the wings and the right to use them and our membership ranks began to grow.

At this point we weren't really thinking about the 4-place airplanes. Actually, it was after quite a discussion that we decided to admit them – as “Associate Members”. After all, they were sort of “grown-up” Yankees, and they wanted in. After the whole line was dropped from production, there was no longer any question but that they were a part of the action.

Now, of course, our membership consists primarily of Grumman American and Gulfstream American aircraft, not American. But let us not forget that it all started with a sporty little airplane called an American Yankee, and a handful of people who were dedicated to preserving the aircraft and the image of the Yankee Pilot as something to be very proud of. Many of our early members who are airline pilots, fighter pilots, ex-fighter pilots or commercial bizjet pilots – pilots who proudly wear the Yankee wings – are more apt to tell strangers that they own or fly a Yankee than that they fly a 747 or F-16 or Gulfstream III or that they flew a P-51 or a Thunderbolt in WWII.

Today we are at a crossroads in our organization. Those of us who started it and nursed it along with the endless hours and personal financial support are tired and it is time for others to carry on. When I think of all the crises we have surmounted to be where we are today, I have the utmost faith in the Association and the membership to grow and keep growing. Keep the American Star rising. I firmly believe that eventually the aircraft will be back in production and the little Yankee birds and their descendants will once more be coming off the line!

I had acquired a nice little Cheetah and was looking forward to joining y'all at the convention, but unfortunately had another little problem with my heart – not serious enough to lose my medical permanently, just while on medication. But it was enough to make me decide that my Cheetah was too expensive a toy for me to support in my retirement, so I am back to passenger status. Maybe on one of those days I can manage to beg a ride with someone from the area.

As for the present, I retired from Boeing 3 years ago and moved to Mesa, Arizona. McDonnell Douglas Helicopters promptly recruited me to work in the Weight Technology Department. After fixed wings, helicopters are certainly different, but “weights is weights” and I am getting along real good and enjoying the challenge. I also have a small consulting business, primarily in creating custom loading systems for airliners. At the moment, America West and Evergreen are my primary customers, and they, along with my “regular” job, keep me pretty busy. If any of you would like to talk about the AYA (*or offer her an airplane ride – Editor*) you can reach me at home at (602) 985-6922 or work at (602) 891-6655.