

A PILOT'S PERSPECTIVE:

Pilot Profile: Bette Akana

By Fred Benton

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Cool, calm, collected, competent: good things for a pilot to be; also good things for a mom, wife and business person to be. Bette Akana qualifies, in spades. She likes to describe herself as a very private person. That is true. It took me quite a while until I could sit down and talk to her about her flying background. And that was a fun conversation, sitting on a bench outside the Montague-Yreka airport office – a place where she first soloed and also where she worked for a while.

Talk about an aeronautical family – she was born Bette Stone. Her dad, Cliff Stone, was an army Air Corps pilot during the 1940s and later became a Lieutenant Colonel in the United States Air Force Reserves flying all over the world and an engineer for the Forest Service. He never lost his affinity for flight, and became a certified flight instructor (CFI), experimental aircraft builder and also taught the aviation ground school and instrument ground school classes for many years at COS. In 1968 he purchased a 1946 Piper J-3 Cub. (This aircraft became to Piper Aircraft what the Ford Model A became to Ford Motor Co. – an enduring corporate symbol. It was also used in WWII as a recon/artillery spotter airplane.) Bette said she was nervous about her first flight, but her mom Evelyn volunteered to go up first and told Bette how fun it was, and that inspired her first ride with her dad in 1968. No question then – she loved it and she was all in!

Over the next few years Cliff taught Bette, her sister Sherry and brothers Cliff and Tom to fly in that little yellow airplane with the red and yellow checkerboard tail and red lightning bolt, along with many other Siskiyou County residents.

On her 16th birthday, Bette soloed in the Cub with her instructor, Dad and Mom watching from the tarmac at the little Montague airport. On her 17th birthday, she took her private pilot checkride in the Cub and a Cessna 150 (as it had more of the instruments needed for the checkride).

I asked Bette what her longest flight was and she told me in 1978 she flew the Cub from Montague Siskiyou County Airport to Key West, Florida and back home with her sister (logging over 83 hours and 41 landings, with ground speeds ranging from 35 mph to 115 mph). Terry Weathers told me he remembered waiting, with the parents, for the girls to arrive back at Siskiyou County Airport. In those pre-

GPS/“glass-cockpit” days, that was a long haul in a simple, two-place slow-flying aircraft using sectional charts and an intermittent VOR (visual Omnirange) receiver for navigation (as it was solar powered). The Cub and the sisters made it back fine ...

When I asked her if she’d had any really scary incidents in the air, she told me that one morning her dad was teaching her how to perform loops in the airspace above the mills (because Phillipe Lane and Oberlin Road were good reference points to make sure you were lined up). As they completed the bottom of a loop, the Cub’s propeller stopped turning (the engine quit). Staring at a motionless propeller gets a pilot’s full attention. She said to her dad: “What now?” He said, simply, “We look for an emergency landing spot!” (The Cub has no starter and is started by hand-propping.) While looking for a good field to touch down in, he put the Cub into a steep dive and air flowing over the prop started it wind-milling and soon the 90 horse Continental roared back to life. Back to home base with no sweat.

There is a sadness in Bette’s aeronautical life-story. Her father Cliff Stone failed to return from a flight with friends to Eastern Oregon. A Civil Air Patrol search turned up nothing. Meanwhile, plenty of Cliff’s flying friends were volunteering as search pilots. (Officially, family members couldn’t fly in the search.) Nothing was found. The story ended when Cliff Jr. and a friend flew the Cub to Eastern Oregon for a last look – and found the missing airplane. No one survived.

From that experience, the local pilots decided to form a local group to foster aviation fellowship. That is how Experimental Aircraft Association Chapter 654 was founded in 1979. Terry Weathers and Bette were charter members and are still active today.

Bette was working on her commercial and instrument ratings when her father was killed. Knowing that he would have wanted her to continue, she finished her commercial, instrument and certified flight instructor ratings. She worked as a commercial pilot/CFI at Montague Aviation for Terry Weathers in the summer between semesters while completing her Bachelor of Science degree and eventually becoming a certified public accountant (CPA).

During this time she met another aviation enthusiast, Randy, and, as she put it: “I had an airplane (the Cub) and could teach him to fly and he was a certified airframe and power plant mechanic who could work on it...” Randy had been in the military working on F-14 Tomcats and loved to fly. Bette gave him dual instruction in the Cub and Terry Weathers gave him his private pilot checkride.

Well, of course that worked out well: they got married. Randy recently retired and, for fun, flies tow-planes pulling gliders out at Siskiyou County Airport. I ran into him a few days ago at Montague-Yreka Rohrer Field – he'd just flown in with Cliff, Jr., his brother-in-law, in a Cessna 210. After his time in the Air Force, Cliff, Jr. worked his way up to Captain for United Airlines and is now retired; he too is a Certified Flight Instructor.

Bette, following her dad's footprints, then Terry Weathers, began teaching aviation ground school at COS in 1999 and went on doing that for years. She will still do so when enough students are available to hold a class.

Are Bette and Randy's kids pilots? Well, their son is close to soloing, and their daughter – time will tell. They both passed the ground school with flying colors and have logged several hours in the Cub.

Bette's treasured Cub? It's still hangared in Siskiyou County – awaiting further adventures ...

She encourages the next generation to consider careers in aviation as there is a shortage of pilots and it is estimated to increase substantially in the near future. There are also scholarships available for training and aviation companies are hiring. Also, watch for Young Eagle Flights sponsored by the local chapters of the Experimental Aircraft Association in Southern Oregon and Northern California for a free flight for those between the ages of 8 and 17.