

Betty Pfister

by Robert W. Dietsch as told in the Membership Newsletter of The National Air and Space Society

One of the many airplanes destined to be featured at the National Air and Space Museum's Dulles Center is a little Bell P-39Q Airacobra. The P-39, now stored at the Museum's Paul E. Garber Preservation, Restoration and Storage Facility, is one of the World War II-era fighters that saw distinguished service in the Pacific and Europe. The P-39 was an outstanding tactical fighter.

The Museum's P-39 has an interesting history and even more interesting final owner -- Mrs. Elizabeth (Betty) Haas Pfister of Aspen, Colorado. She has enjoyed a truly exciting and challenging life and career, and is an enthusiastic supporter of the National Air and Space Society. After World War II, Mrs. Pfister bought the P-39 for \$1,000, dubbed it the Gallopig Gertie and flew it in air races. Her plane, manufactured by Bell at Buffalo, New York, was delivered to the U. S. Army Air Forces in November 1943. It never was used in military action, having last been assigned to the 464th Base Unit at McChord Air Field in Everett, Washington. Mrs. Pfister's plane carries the official designation P-39Q-15-BE, serial number 44-2433.

But this P-39's history pales in comparison to Mrs. Pfister's life and experiences. She was born in New York State and took her first plane ride, for \$5, while a freshman at Bennington College. She has said that "I landed and knew what I wanted to do -- learn to fly." She did just that. Her official career in aviation began in 1941 when she soloed in a (to use her own words), "in a teeny-weeny" 65-horsepower Taylorcraft.

In 1944, Mrs. Pfister received the Elder Statesman of Aviation Award, a prestigious honor presented by the Washington, D.C.-base National Aeronautic Association. The award has been presented annually since 1955; Mrs. Pfister was only the 11th woman to be chosen. In her nominating petition, there is a listing of her major accomplishments:

- Earned her wings in the WASPs (Women's Air Force Service Pilots) in 1943.
- Ferried military aircraft, including B-24s and B-17s.
- Earned commercial, instrument, and instructor ratings.
- Worked as a civilian flight instructor.
- Flew as a co-pilot in DC-3s on non-scheduled airlines.
- Earned her helicopter pilot rating in 1963.
- Flew as a pilot on the U.S. Team in the World Helicopter Championship in England and Russia.
- Received her rating as a glider pilot in 1966.
- Qualified as a lighter-than-air free balloon pilot in 1975.
- Owned and operated eight aircraft, including the Gallopig Gertie and Tinker Bell, a Bell helicopter model 47-G.
- Accumulated approximately 8,000 hours of pilot time.

She married Art Pfister in 1954, after meeting him on a ski trip in Aspen. He was a pilot who flew the "Hump" over Burma in World War II. The Pfister's have three daughters, of whom their mother says, "not one has the slightest interest in flying. And flying has been such a joy to me."

Mrs. Pfister's second career, involving a love for helicopters, started in 1963, when a Bell Helicopter executive arranged for her first helicopter ride. She recalls that "I was wearing a narrow black skirt and high heels. They had to boost me into the helicopter... But helicopter flying was the best thing I've ever done. I was absolutely carried away, it was so much fun." At another point, Mrs. Pfister has remarked that "I'd rather fly one hour in a helicopter than 100 hours in a plane."

As artist painted Mrs. Pfister's helicopter like a butterfly. She named it Tinker Bell. She founded Pitkin County Air rescue in 1968; it includes about 20 pilots who engage in rescue missions. In 1989, Mrs. Pfister learned about the "Night Witches," Russian women who flew combat missions in defense of Moscow in World War II. Mrs. Pfister visited Russia and visited with a number of "Night Witches," one of who had flown 520 night flights over Germany and was a hero of the Soviet Union.

Friends describe Mrs. Pfister as ebullient, full of friendly smiles and bubbling spirits. Her smile undoubtedly will be as wide as ever when she visits the Dulles Center and stands beside her P-39 Gallopig Gertie.