Diane Dowd: Marking Firsts in Military and Civilian Aviation

By Martin J. Pociask
Diane Dowd was the first woman in the U.S. Army National Guard or Army Reserve to qualify as a helicopter pilot, the first woman helicopter instrument instructor for the army, and the first woman to be type-rated in a Sikorsky S-76.

HFI: Diane, tell us about your childhood and when and where were you born.

Dowd: I was born in 1949. My home town was Windsor Locks, Connecticut, a small town on the west bank of the Connecticut River, about 12 miles north of Hartford.

Windsor Locks is the location of Bradley International Airport, which in times past was known as Bradley Field. When I was a child, my parents would drive my brother and me to the perimeter of Bradley Field, in hopes of being lucky enough to see a plane land or take off. Those trips to watch the airplanes piqued my interest in those marvelous flying machines.

After high school at the Loomis Chaffee School in Windsor, Connecticut, I attended Manhattanville College in Purchase, New York. Just down the street from my college was Westchester County Airport. Years later, this airport would play a major role in my life.

After graduating from college in 1971 with a BA in economics, I moved to Manhattan and got my first real job. I did technical writing for the American Stock Exchange. It was a decent job, but I was restless. Working in an office felt so confining.

After a year, I left my job and left Manhattan. It was time for something different, so I went to Europe.

HFI: That trip put you on a different career path.

Dowd: While visiting Venice, Italy, I met two marines who were taking a vacation before starting U.S. Navy flight training in Pensacola, Florida. It sounded so interesting!

When I got home from Europe, I contacted the navy, but they were not accepting women for flight training. I was disappointed, and I took a job with Aetna Insurance Company in Hartford.

One day, the Connecticut Army National Guard was recruiting in the Aetna cafeteria. I asked the recruiters if they were accepting women in flight training, and they said, “Affirmative!” The U.S. Army had just opened flight training to women. Applying required taking an aptitude test and a military flight physical.

HFI: You got your first ride in a helicopter.

Dowd: After passing the aptitude test, I flew in a Connecticut Army National Guard OH-6A from Bradley Field to the Coast Guard Academy in New London, Connecticut, for my military flight physical. The flight in the OH-6A was fantastic. I was hooked!

There were two different paths I could have taken in my journey to Fort Rucker, Alabama, and the army initial-entry rotary-wing qualification course. I could drill on weekends for a year with the Connecticut Army National Guard to earn a commission as a second lieutenant, or I could immediately attend army basic training and go to Fort Rucker as a warrant officer candidate. I chose the latter, because I was eager to get going!

HFI: Tell us about your army basic training experience.

Dowd: In March of 1973, I flew from Bradley Field to Anniston, Alabama, to attend army basic training at Fort McClellan. At that time, the U.S. Women’s Army Corp was still an entity unto itself. This meant women only at Fort McClellan, and basic training focused on introducing recruits to life in the army. I learned how to march, salute, and make my bunk the army way.

HFI: Then came flight training.

Dowd: Several months later when I arrived at Fort Rucker for flight training, I encountered a very different training atmosphere. The first month
of training was called preflight, and it was classroom only. This was the first obstacle for warrant officer candidates to clear in a succession of stressful milestones.

The Adjutant General of the State of Connecticut, Maj. Gen. John F. Freund, flew to Alabama for my graduation because I was the first woman in the Army National Guard or Army Reserve to complete the army initial-entry rotary-wing qualification course. After leaving Fort Rucker, I returned to Connecticut and was assigned to the 143rd Aviation Company of the Connecticut Army National Guard.

**HFI:** You continued your flight training.

**Dowd:** The following year, I returned to Fort Rucker and completed the army multi-engine fixed-wing qualification course. Now with an FAA commercial license in both rotorcraft and airplane categories, I began my search for my first job in civilian aviation.

**HFI:** You received an invitation to join a very special international group of women helicopter pilots.

**Dowd:** Shortly after I obtained my army aviator wings, I received a letter from Jean Ross Howard Phelan inviting me to join Whirly-Girls, the international organization of women helicopter pilots. I accepted her invitation and became Whirly Girl member #202. Numbers are assigned in numerical order as women join.

The Whirly-Girls was founded in 1955 when Jean and 12 other female helicopter pilots met in Washington, D.C., and decided to invite all female helicopter pilots in the world to join their group. In 1955, they could only find 13 of them. The Whirly-Girls now have nearly 2,000 members.

**HFI:** You credit your membership for opening doors of opportunity.

**Dowd:** My affiliation with the Whirly-Girls was the catalyst for entering civilian aviation. Jean, who was executive director of the Whirly Girls, had made her career in aviation, particularly rotary-wing aviation. Jean lived and worked in Washington, D.C., and had many connections in the rotorcraft industry.

She invited me to stay at her home and attend the 1976 Helicopter Association of America (now HAI) meeting in D.C. Jean introduced me to many people in the helicopter industry. My introduction to networking allowed me to make valuable contacts among HAA members.

One of these contacts led to my first civilian job as a helicopter pilot. At the HAA, I met fellow Whirly-Girl Nadine Fetsko. Nadine’s father, Jack Fetsko, had his own aviation business in Media, Pennsylvania.

Not long after I met Nadine, she called me to say her father was looking for a pilot for his Hughes 500 helicopter. I had been flying the OH-
6A for the Connecticut Army National Guard, so I told Nadine I would really like the job. I did not have a lot of flight time, but I was very eager. Jack took a chance on me, and gave me the job. I am very grateful for the opportunity he provided me.

HFI: You flew medevac flights. Tell us about a particular medevac experience that involved a chewing gum factory.

Dowd: One of the duties of my new job included flying for the Delaware Valley Burn Foundation. Burn victims would be stabilized at an outlying hospital and flown to one of two dedicated burn center hospitals in Philadelphia. One of my most memorable experiences was responding to a multiple burn-victim event on Long Island, New York. There had been an explosion at a chicle factory that produced the main ingredient in chewing gum. The explosion sent hot chicle, which is a gummy, sticky substance, flying through the air, and it landed on and badly burned many employees.

New York State authorities established a staging area on a taxiway at JFK Airport where helicopters could land and pick up burn victims to be flown to special burn centers in the area. At least eight helicopters landed at the staging area and waited to transport the burn victims. The victim I transported to Philadelphia was a young man, who I later learned did not survive.

In time, I moved on to my next venture, flying for Keystone Helicopters in Phoenixville, Pennsylvania. Keystone Helicopters was owned by the late Peter Wright, Sr. Peter had a remarkable aviation career that included flying for the Flying Tigers during World War II. My duties included flying a Bell 206 JetRanger to pick up cancelled checks from outlying areas and bring them back to Philadelphia for deposit in large banks.

One winter afternoon while flying west toward York, Pennsylvania, I encountered a snow squall so intense that I decided to land in a farmer’s field to wait until it blew through. As I shut down the helicopter and climbed out, several people approached the aircraft and asked me if I was one of “Charlie’s Angels!” They then invited me into their home for cake and coffee. Soon the snow shower had moved on, and I continued with my flight.

My next move took me back to Fort Rucker, Alabama. I took a position with a civilian contractor that provided helicopter instrument instructor pilots for the Army’s initial-entry rotary-wing qualification course. We flew the UH-1H specially equipped with bladder fuel tanks in the cabin that provided an additional 1+15 hours of fuel range.

Instructing initial students in instrument flying was a great way to enhance one’s own instrument flying skills. I learned a lot as an instructor pilot that would prove very useful in my next endeavor.

While in Alabama, I learned of an opportunity to return to the Northeast. I interviewed for the position of first officer rotary wing for the RCA corporate flight department, located at Mercer County Airport in Trenton, New Jersey. This was a dream job. Flying a Bell 212 with a Sperry single-pilot IFR [instrument flight rules] avionics installation was as good as it got in 1980. I was thrilled when I was offered the job. I packed up my little Toyota and drove north.

HFI: Why do you describe this as your dream job?

Dowd: In my new job with RCA, I encountered a whole different world. Our mission was flying...
company executives in well-equipped, meticulously maintained aircrafts. A brightly lit hangar with a shiny, clean floor spoke to the high level of care and commitment that is integral to a corporate flight department. I felt very grateful that I had the opportunity to work in this kind of organization.

More importantly, everyone was so nice! There was a supportive sense of camaraderie and loyalty amongst the employees. Everyone was committed to maintaining the highest standards of professional conduct. I had really hit the jackpot with this job.

I soon learned that RCA had decided to sell the Bell 212 and replace it with two Sikorsky S-76 helicopters. The S-76 was a new design and a foray for Sikorsky into the civilian helicopter market. It flew at 155 knots and carried about three hours of fuel. The speed and range of the S-76 made it a good fit for trips from a Manhattan heliport to Washington or Boston.

The corporate headquarters of RCA was located in the RCA Building at Rockefeller Center. It was convenient for executives to board the helicopter at one of the Manhattan heliports and fly to Boston, a one-hour flight time, or DCA, 1.5 flight time. The fuel range of the S-76 meant that we could fly these trips under instrument conditions, therefore enhancing the reliability of the helicopter.

HFI: There was another change.

Dowd: The world is always changing, and a big change hit RCA in 1985 when General Electric (GE) announced it was purchasing RCA. Another pilot and I were sitting in the crew lounge at the West 30th Street Heliport watching the evening news while waiting for our passengers. The news anchor read the announcement, and we were stunned. It was December 13, 1985.

GE had its own flight department located at Westchester County Airport in Purchase, New York, just down the street from where I had attended college. GE operated an S-76, so the transition for those of us who were asked to join GE was an easy one. Once again, I was very fortunate to be working with dedicated professionals who set high standards of performance.

HFI: There was a promotion.

Dowd: Several years after I joined GE, our chief pilot, rotary wing, decided to retire. Being chief pilot had long
interested me. I had strongly held convictions about setting priorities that would enhance a safety culture. I was also interested in mentoring junior pilots and helping them reach their full potential. I interviewed for the job, and was selected for the position.

Being a chief pilot was a total lifestyle change. Pilots who aren’t scheduled to fly can stay home on stand-by. Chief pilots go to the office every day. In addition, chief pilots must always be reachable, emphasis on always. It was a labor of love for me. I liked the people I worked with and appreciated the opportunity to try to make things better.

**HFI:** You continued to be active in the Whirly-Girls.

**Dowd:** While at GE, I participated in a number of helicopter-related associations. For four years, I was president of the Whirly-Girls Scholarship Committee.

At that time, the Whirly-Girls gave out two scholarships each year. One was for a helicopter rating upgrade, the other for an initial helicopter rating. I managed the selection process and had the pleasure of informing the recipients when they had won and meeting them at the Whirly-Girls Award Banquet during HAI HELI-EXPO.

**HFI:** You were also active in the Eastern Region Helicopter Council.

**Dowd:** From 1982 to 1985, and again from 1998 to 2009, I served on the Board of Directors of the Eastern Region Helicopter Council. The ERHC is an HAI Affiliate in the northeast. One of the founders of the ERHC is Matt Zuccaro, who is currently the president and CEO of HAI.

The ERHC promotes safety and professionalism in the helicopter industry. For many years ERHC has provided the interface between our industry and the public, and our industry and the government. In 1999, I became chairman of the board of ERHC. Our major concerns at the time were preservation of public-use heliports and mitigating citizens’ complaints about helicopter noise.

**HFI:** Can you describe how 9/11 affected operations for ERHC members?

**Dowd:** The tragic events of 9/11 hit the ERHC very hard. Many of our members had family or colleagues who were lost or directly affected by the tragedy. As chairman, I presided over our annual meeting in October of 2001. It was a somber event as some members shared their stories of personal loss. It was a time of great sorrow in our industry.

Added to the sorrow was the uncertainty the government had created by closing down the VFR [visual flight rules] corridors around Manhattan. The livelihood of many of our members depended upon having access to the public-use heliports in Manhattan. Gradually the airspace restrictions were lifted, but they return whenever there is VIP activity in Manhattan.

**HFI:** You served on one of HAI’s committees.

**Dowd:** For several years I served on the HAI Flight Operations Committee. This committee dove deeply into data to resolve regulatory
issues. One of the issues that most affected me and other corporate operators was Copter ILS [instrument landing systems]. This pertained to FAA Part 91 operators.

For years the FAA had allowed Part 91 helicopter operators to fly Copter ILS, which is very similar to Category II ILS in that the decision height [DH] is 100 feet above the runway threshold. Copter ILS approaches were drawn for general aviation airports such as Morristown, New Jersey, and White Plains, New York.

The FAA rescinded all Copter ILS approaches and decided to impose much tighter regulation. The Flight Operations Committee worked with the FAA to find a way to reinstate the approaches. Regulations were written that required special aircraft and aircrew certification and currency checks.

Several Copter ILS approaches with a DH of 100 feet have been reinstated, but they are limited to CAT II ILS runways. There is a Copter ILS approach at KTEB in New Jersey, but the DH is 200 feet.

HFI: When did you retire?

Dowd: In January of 2010, I retired from GE and have not piloted since then. I stay involved with the Whirly-Girls and serve as chairman of the Livingston Award Selection Committee. Nancy Livingston Stratford, one of the 13 original Whirly Girls, instituted this award in 1988 in memory of her late husband J. Arlo Livingston.

Arlo and Nancy founded a helicopter business in Alaska after World War II. At one time during his career, Arlo served as chairman of HAA. He was also a charter member of the Men’s Auxiliary of the Whirly-Girls. The Livingston Award recognizes a living Whirly-Girl who has made exceptional contributions to women in helicopter aviation.

HFI: Do you have any words of advice for tomorrow’s pilots and maintenance professionals?

Dowd: During my 35-year career of flying helicopters, I met many wonderful people. It was my good fortune to work with people I respected and admired. I encourage anyone who is interested in aviation to jump right in and get involved. Those of us who have been fortunate and had a career flying a helicopter know there is nothing quite like it. I love the sound of igniters snapping in the morning!

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Diane flying a Sikorsky S-76 in 1985.