

COUNTY LIFE

Section **B**



Patric Schneider

Sheila Beck of Georgetown is not your typical grandmother. Ms. Beck, who houses her Lone Star-styled Mooney at Georgetown Municipal Airport, is known by fellow pilots as a talented aviator and occasional aviation mechanic.

A WOMAN'S PLACE IS IN HER MOONEY

By **PHYLLIS MOSES**

When you first meet Sheila Beck, warm sugar cookies and spicy apple pies may come to mind. However, this vivacious grandmother has much more going for her than home-cooking.

In her hangar at the Georgetown Municipal Airport, you may find Ms. Beck installing an oil filter in her airplane or changing the oil in her car. Then again, you might see her taxi down a runway, turn into the wind and run the pre-take-off checklist. She has gained the respect of many male

pilots who earned their wings in the military and commercial airlines, as well as countless general aviation career pilots.

"Sheila is a fine pilot, a careful pilot who doesn't gamble and never takes a risk. She plans and plots her way to a successful flight every time. She's a real pro," said one fellow pilot.

The Beginning

Ms. Beck's love affair with flying began when she was a teenager, enchanted with the yellow Piper Cubs that flew along the Jersey Shore. She told herself, "One day I will do that!"

Marriage, four children and seven grandchildren occupied her time for decades. But she never forgot her vow to take to the skies. At the age of 54, Ms. Beck began flight training.

Learning to fly was not exactly a piece of cake. Although Ground School was a snap, the flying was not. Fear set in. Each time she took a lesson, she touched the plane and prayed.

Her first instructor liked to buzz cattle ranches north of Fort Worth. A farmer finally reported his N number to the Federal Aviation Administration and that put a stop to his fun.

Her next instructor was a 21-year-old with an "attitude," she said. Perhaps he didn't approve of "old" women learning to fly; he didn't last long.

The next instructor flew the plane every chance he got. Ms. Beck finally told him that she was paying for the plane and the instruction; she was supposed to do the flying. It began to appear there were many obstacles to getting that initial pilot's license.

The training planes were rentals: Cessna 150s, 152s, 172s and Piper Warriors. After

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Pilot: A woman's place is in her Mooney

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achieving her Private Pilot's License, Ms. Beck flew Cessna 172s, 210s, Archers, Arrows and Lances. She joined the Civil Air Patrol in Fort Worth so that flying would be more affordable, since the air patrol owned a 172 and 182.

Finding the Mooney

This association led to many adventures. Ms. Beck was tapped to be a pilot for Drug Enforcement Agency agents flying over North Texas looking for fields of marijuana.

The Customs Department recruited her to fly the Rio Grande River looking for smugglers of illegal immigrants. That excursion ended when her spotter saw new pickups being hauled across the river in Big Bend National Park toward Mexico. The spotter asked for a 360-degree turn over the action when the Mexicans pulled out their guns. A hasty retreat and a fast climb were initiated. Ms. Beck decided they should find someone else to fly that mission.

She later earned her instrument rating and continued training with the Civil Air Patrol. One weekend in Fort Stockton, where the pilots were working on mountain flying skills, a Mooney airplane showed up. At the prodding of her friends, Ms. Beck went to talk to the pilot.

The Mooney was an M20E, called a "Chaparral," the exact name she had given the bank account where her husband was saving up to buy a plane. Bingo! This was her plane.

The owner, sitting in the cockpit, was delivering the Mooney to a dealer in San Antonio. When Ms. Beck inquired about the status of his trip, he told her, "This plane is sold."

She responded, "If you think the deal you made on the phone in California is going to hold when you get to San Antonio, you have another 'think' coming."

She had no clue why she dared to say such a thing, but the pilot replied, "Get in." He flew her around the airport and when they landed, Ms. Beck said, "I'll take it."



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Pilot Shelia Beck lives out her belief in pursuing your dreams.

Much to her surprise, they took off and headed north to Fort Worth, where they consummated the sale. That was 14 years ago. Since then, she has experienced many challenging and happy times in her beloved Mooney.

The plane now sports a Texas Flag paint job, which has been admired all over the United States.

'Angels Around Us'

In 1994, on a return trip from Maryland, Ms. Beck had engine failure over Memphis. The Memphis Center, with whom she was in radio contact, turned her toward West Memphis, Arkansas, a place she knew from her Civil Air Patrol days.

There she was, over West Memphis airport without power. The controller asked her how she was doing. She replied, "It's real quiet up here."

The controller laughed and so did she, and the tension was broken. She made the runway and glided into a perfect landing. When she rolled onto the ramp, oil was every-

where. After two days and \$500 worth of investigating, a complete engine overhaul was recommended.

That led to the next phase of her aviation training: mechanical skills. Ms. Beck maintains that pilots must know the planes they are flying. Many a life-threatening hazard has been uncovered in time because of knowledge of the plane and its characteristics.

Her engine's latest overhaul is another intriguing story. Flying over Lake Buchanan alone, Ms. Beck heard a voice say, "You need to turn around."

She quickly scanned the instrument panel; everything looked fine. But then she heard the words again. As odd as it seemed, she returned to the Georgetown airport, still in disbelief.

Upon landing, she related the incident to her hangar neighbor. He told her he had a similar experience years ago working on a machine in a factory. The message he heard was, "Move away from this machine."

He moved away just seconds before the machine exploded, spewing hot volatile liquid that would have killed him.

"Apparently, angels are all around us," Ms. Beck said.

Ms. Beck also uses her flying skills to be an "angel" to others, participating in missions to Mexico that provide dental care to residents.

Some skeptics declare that women cannot have a passion as demanding and costly as flying and still maintain a successful home and family. Ms. Beck disagrees. She is a gourmet cook — dinner at her home will convince you of that.

She said she is grateful for the camaraderie at the Georgetown airport, from the airport staff to her fellow pilots.

"The love of flying permeates this place," she said. "Whatever God puts in your heart to do, just do it. Your life will be happier if you pursue your dreams, and do what you love."

Phyllis Moses, who lives in Sun City, writes about airplanes and people who fly them.