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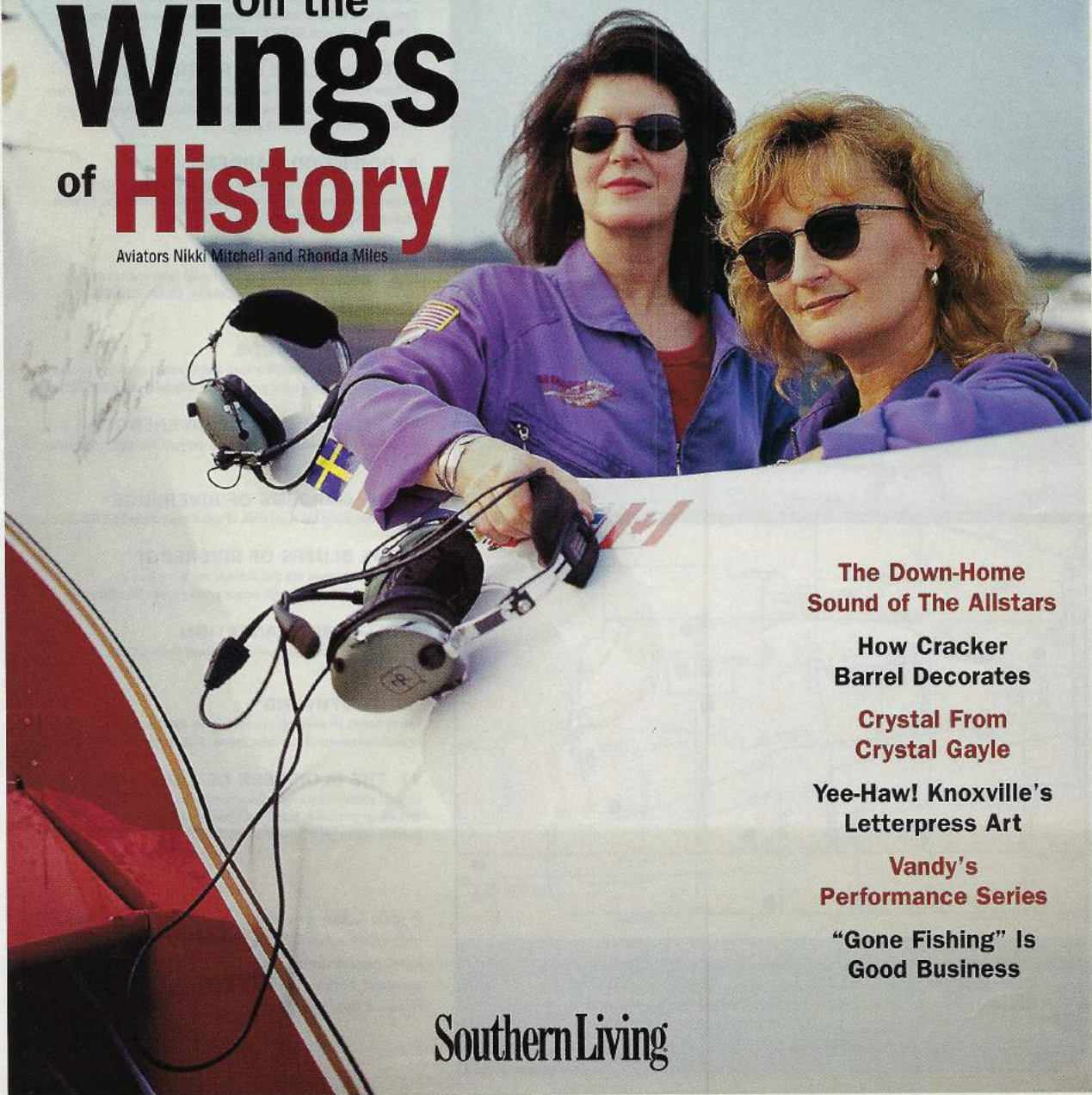
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On the Wings of History

Aviators Nikki Mitchell and Rhonda Miles



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Braving the cold, the danger, and the Russian bureaucracy, two pilots from the town of Lebanon forged a bond of friendship—and paid tribute to the women who flew before them.

PHOTOGRAPHS: ALLEN ROKACH

Flying Into the Past

Most of the time, Nikki Mitchell and Rhonda Miles each lead very different lives. Nikki runs country star Waylon Jennings's Nashville-based business, while Rhonda flies for the Cracker Barrel restaurant chain. But in 1998 they shared an adventure that built a bridge between former Cold War enemies and bound these two women together like sisters.

Rhonda and Nikki, both pilots, took off

chasing a dream with a purpose: to follow the flight path of the historic *Rodina* ("motherland"), which three Russian female combat pilots flew from Moscow to Siberia before World War II.

How They Met

Nikki, an Abilene, Texas, native, met Rhonda in 1996 when she needed someone to teach her the finer points of flying *Mary Beth*, the

Rhonda Miles (left) and Nikki Mitchell, posing with Nikki's plane, Mary Beth, built a friendship stronger than steel while re-creating a 1938 history-making flight from Moscow to Siberia by three Russian women.



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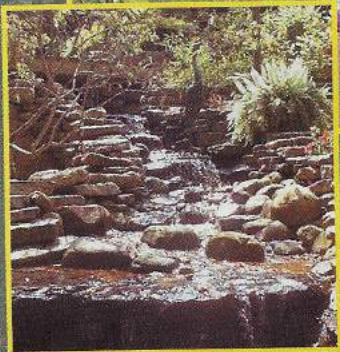
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Rhonda and Nikki re-created the path of the nonstop Flight of the Rodina but landed many times en route. "There were several places we would land with just a dirt clearing," Nikki says. "It was flat, and they had leveled it out. It was very, very, very primitive."

There were people I know who thought
we'd be turning back halfway.

Nikki Mitchell

1974 Maule M-5 that she had found in a barn.

"I was in the process of buying a single-engine tail-dragger," Nikki says. "I needed an instructor to help me make the transition from a nose-wheel to a tail-dragger."

Enter Rhonda, an Arkansas transplant and an experienced tail-dragger instructor. She became Nikki's instructor, and they hit it off right away. Both shared Southern senses of humor and a thirst for excitement. "My crop duster dad put me in an airplane at 3 months old," says Rhonda. "He gave me my love of adventure, my love of flying."

Within a short time, they strengthened their friendship enough to try the tribute flight to Valentina Grizodubova, Paulina Ossipenko, and Marina Raskova. The Russian women made the nonstop Flight of the *Rodina* in 1938, opening the air route from Moscow to Siberia for the first time. "I love Russia," explains Nikki. "I'm very big on their history, and Rhonda is just very adventuresome." Nikki and Rhonda wanted to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the Russian

event. The two Americans dubbed their proposed adventure the "Bridge of Wings" flight.

Financing the Flight

Originally they lined up corporate donors to fund the flight, but the closer they got to the trip, the more sponsors disappeared. "The main reason was that there was quite a bit of unrest and unpredictability in Russia," Nikki says. "We ended up with a few small donations. We pretty much financed it ourselves."

"We got so close [as friends]. I asked Nikki, 'Have you got the title to the Trooper?'" Rhonda says. "She said, 'Yes.' I said, 'I wanted to make sure, because I hocked it.' She was hocking my stuff. I was hocking her stuff. I really learned what it was like for the first time to have a really good friend."

Still the "Bridge of Wings" flight did have additional supporters. Nikki's boss, Waylon, helped sponsor by sending out letters and making phone calls on their behalf, and Cracker Barrel made a donation to the flight in support of its own pilot, Rhonda. And



Some people scoffed at the two pilots who wanted to fly from Tennessee to Russia and cross the Bering Strait. The trip required navigating mid-Atlantic air and Moscow's bureaucracy. "They thought we'd be turning back halfway," Nikki says. "I think they just thought that we'd taken on a much larger project than we realized."

manufacturers outfitted *Mary Beth* with state-of-the-art equipment, as well as donating labor.

Other Obstacles

Re-creating the Flight of the *Rodina* required navigating bureaucracy in the former Soviet Union. The American pilots began seeking permission from Russian officials early in the planning stages; still, the go-ahead came down to the 11th hour. "Five days before the flight we were at the bank hocking the last of our stuff. We got permission from the Russian authorities three days before we did it," Rhonda says.

Even then, they had other obstacles to fly through. For example, aviation fuel is not exactly plentiful in Russia, where few people fly purely for pleasure. In this and other instances, the Russian government came to the rescue, bringing them aviation fuel (avgas) on a military plane. In one remarkable instance, a village even forfeited its weekly ration of avgas, Nikki recalls. "When you have one plane coming in and out once a week bringing the needs of a village, that's a really big deal," she says.

The Russian people embraced the flight. "It was all over the news," Nikki says. "It had become such a big event. There was an air traffic controllers' strike planned—it was supposed to be all over the nation. But they agreed they would not strike until after Rhonda and I left Russian airspace. I've never experienced anything like it."

Mary Beth Takes Off

By the time the Russians gave the official go-ahead for the flight across 3,700 miles of their territory, Rhonda and Nikki were acting on faith that the flight would happen. But not everyone

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She was hocking my stuff. I was hocking her stuff. I really learned what it was like for the first time to have a really good friend.

Rhonda Miles

shared that faith. "There were people I know who thought we'd be turning back halfway," Nikki remembers. Few people saw them fly out of the airport in the town of Lebanon July 4, 1998, on the 15,000-mile trip north over Greenland to Russia.

The Russians, who insisted that Nikki and Rhonda have navigators and translators, arranged for them to fly with two accomplished native female pilots, Khalide Makagonova and Natassia Vinokourova. But this meant splitting up, putting each American in a plane with a Russian. "I was flying in a Russian An-2 with Natassia, and Rhonda was in the other plane with Khalide," Nikki explains. "I was glad it worked out that way. It was truly a unified effort."

A military crew in another An-2 accompanied them. "We were not just flying all over the place," Nikki says. "They were constantly talking over the headset and giving directions. They had total control over everything."

Across Russia With Love

The trip took 49 days from start to finish. Unlike their Russian predecessors who flew nonstop, the American pilots made 53 landings by the time they had circled the Northern Hemisphere. In the process, they witnessed how much

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For additional information about the aviators, see bridgeofwings.com.

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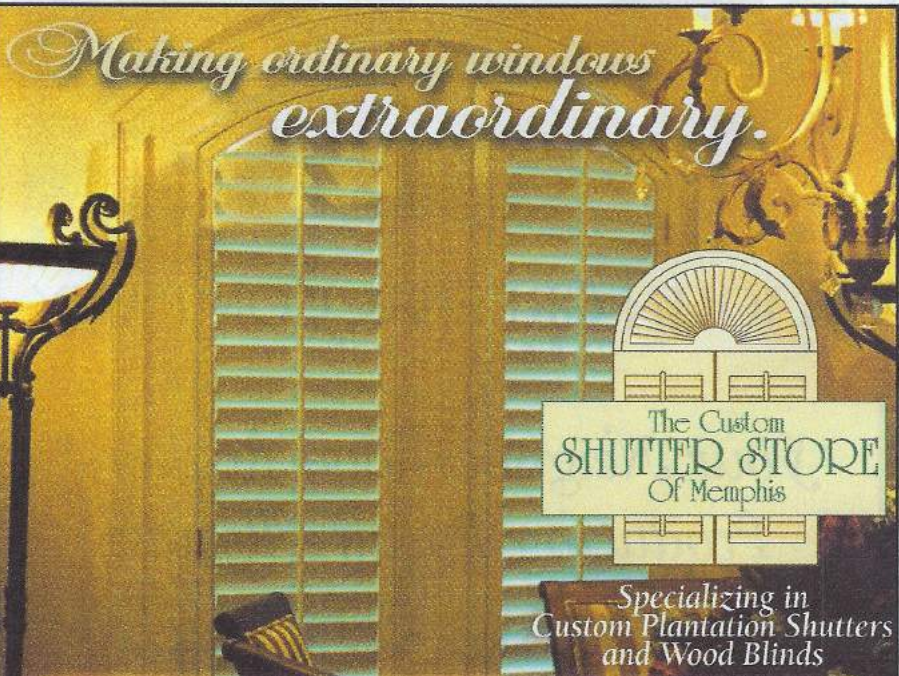
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AFTERMATH

Since the flight, Nikki and Rhonda have begun speaking motivationally about their international aviation adventure. Additionally, they're working on a documentary about the trip and a book that depicts the flight from their two different viewpoints. Between day jobs and speaking engagements they have already paid for most of the flight, but they continue to look for sponsors to fund the completion of the documentary.

"It will be a really, really interesting documentary that includes incredible archival footage from Russia," Nikki says. The film shows the psychological stresses of the trip, yet also how their friendship stayed strong. "We remain not only friends, but like sisters," Nikki offers. "We've been through probably more intensity than most friendships do in a lifetime."

Rhonda adds, "It was especially difficult on us financially, difficult emotionally. We were both stressed to the max." She continues, "Our hair was falling out. One of the things most people said to us when we got back was, 'Have y'all had a fight yet?' That was one of the incredible things throughout the flight—we have yet to have an argument."

Nikki also maintains friendships she made in Russia. She hopes to turn those relationships into a bridge between cultures. Recently, she traveled to Singapore to attend the International Women's Forum as the invited guest of someone she met in Russia.

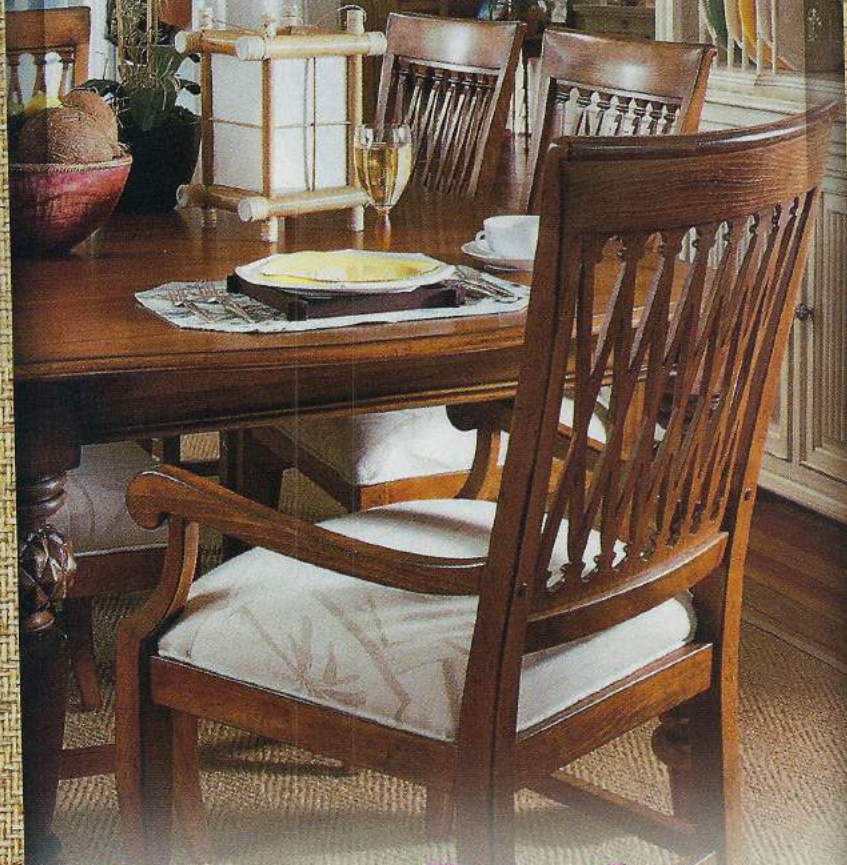
"I'm not sure where it all is leading, but I feel a definite pull," Nikki says. Not surprisingly, she especially sees her experiences as a basis for an expanding relationship between the United States and Russia—the reason she had dreamed of making the trip in the first place. "My focus now truly is to continue as I began in 1991—to pursue that understanding between peoples, to build on those similarities. That's the big adventure for me."



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