

A PRACTICAL GUIDE  
TO SUCCESSFUL LIVING

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Come join two women and their dream to relive aviation history

# Flight of the Mary Beth

by Nikki Mitchell and Rhonda Miles, Nashville, Tennessee

**Nikki Mitchell:** Rhonda and I are so close it's hard for us to imagine a time we weren't a part of each other's lives. But every friendship, like every journey, has a beginning. Ours, fittingly, got its start at the little airport in Lebanon, Tenn., east of Nashville.

I went out there one day in June 1996 to check on the secondhand Maule M-5 I'd just bought, a plane that pilots call a tail-dragger because it has a wheel in the back (rather than under the nose as with most aircraft), making it ideal for landing on rough terrain. Sure, the Maule had seen better days, but to me it was new and exciting. I didn't have much experience at the controls of that type of plane, and I was thrilled I'd soon be flying a single-engine tail-dragger; it would open up a new world to me, the way stories of the pioneers of aviation had when I was growing up. I'd already named the Maule *Mary Beth*, in memory of a friend who had loved hearing about those heroes of mine.

*Not so fast*, I reminded myself as I walked across the tarmac that summer afternoon. *Before you take her up, you need someone to show you the fine points of flying a tail-dragger.*

That's when Rhonda Miles walked by. I don't know whether it was her confidence or sense of purpose that got my attention, or the iron and the foot-long needle she was carrying, but something made me ask what she was up to. She told me she was patching the canvas fuselage of her 1946 J3 Cub, and I thought, *Wow, this girl knows airplanes!*

Not just any airplanes, either. She had 3,800 hours of experience flying tail-draggers, vintage (like hers) and modern (like *Mary Beth*). Rhonda was a professional pilot. As soon as I found out she was an instructor to boot, I asked her about lessons.

**Rhonda Miles:** Our friendship took off from there. Real quick we moved beyond discussing the technical as-

pects of aviation to talking about anything and everything. About our jobs—Nikki is president of country-music star Waylon Jennings's company; I fly full-time for Cracker Barrel restaurants and part-time for Reba McEntire. About our travels—her interest in history had led her to Russia to research an elite, all-female squadron of World War II pilots; my taste for adventure had taken me to the jungles of a South Pacific island to search for the remains of a pilot from the same war.

As we talked about our families, we discovered both of us have flying in our blood. Nikki's father was a career Air Force man, and she was so enthralled by his stories that she got her pilot's license at age 18. My dad

in on an amazing achievement I'd learned about while doing my historical research. I told her about the three Russian women who, in 1938, took the *Rodina* where no plane had gone before—from Moscow to the southeastern tip of Siberia.

Right away I saw Rhonda was fascinated. "The sixtieth anniversary of the flight is in two years," I said. "What if we commemorated it by retracing their route using *Mary Beth*? Is it possible?"

"Sure, we can do it!" Rhonda replied. We shook hands on it. Just like that, two months after we met, Rhonda and I became partners in an incredible dream.

**Rhonda:** And just like that, our dream pretty much became our lives. At the end of every workday I met Nikki at her office to plan our trip. In order to make the commemorative flight and return home, we'd have to circle the globe. We set July 4, 1998, as our takeoff date. That gave us less than two years to work out a mind-boggling number of details—such as arranging for food, lodging and plane fuel along the route, which included some of the most remote areas on earth, and giving *Mary Beth* a complete overhaul so she could withstand the rigors of a 15,000-mile flight.

Night after night Nikki and I were at it till late, writing letters and making phone calls to try to raise interest in (and funds for) our project. We did plenty of praying too.

**Nikki:** So many people told us, "Forget it. Two women flying around the world in that little plane? You'll never pull it off." We got turned down more



is a crop duster in Pine Bluff, Ark., and I grew up riding in his ag plane. Even after 14 hours straight in that cramped cockpit, Dad couldn't wait to take to the air again. "C'mon, Toot," he'd say to me at night, "let's go look at the stars up close." I must be my dad made over again, because there's still nothing I love more than cruising the skies, anytime, anywhere.

**Nikki:** One afternoon as we were bringing *Mary Beth* in, I filled Rhonda



often than not. Yet amid all that seemed to go wrong, from time to time one extraordinary thing would go right and move us a step closer to realizing our dream.

For instance, the president of the Russian women aviators' association suggested that two of their pilots fly side by side with us to honor the *Rodina* and foster goodwill between nations. Rhonda and I were in awe: What started out as an adventure now had a higher purpose. Our dream was taking on a life of its own.

No one could move the lumbering Russian bureaucracy along, though. After we'd lined up sponsors and made arrangements for the rest of the trip, we were still waiting for the go-ahead from the Russian government on the commemorative route. In the spirit of international unity, we'd named our flight "A Bridge of Wings," but now those wings were having difficulty getting off the ground.

**Rhonda:** In the spring of 1998, while *Mary Beth* was being outfitted with her new engine, propeller, tail wheel, and navigation and communication systems, Nikki and I went to Moscow to meet with Russian aviation authorities to try to smooth out the problems.

So many people there were behind us, from the national aviation committee to local aeronautics clubs. Celebrations were already being planned for the beginning and end of the route. We hit it off immediately with Khalide Makaganova and Natalia "Natassia" Vinokourova, the Russian pilots who'd be flying with us. Their

faces lit up when we talked about our flight, and for the first time it occurred to me that Nikki and I weren't the only ones who had hopes riding on "A Bridge of Wings." Khalide and Natassia were eager to map out the landing and fuel points across the vast stretch of Siberian forest and marsh, but they were afraid that with the shaky Russian economy, there was little chance they'd get funding for their part of the flight. Since we had backing from a number of sponsors, Nikki and I felt confident we could help cover our Russian friends' expenses also.

**Nikki:** Though we hadn't yet received formal permission, our meetings with the aviation authorities went well. Rhonda and I returned to Nashville feeling good about our prospects.

Then some major sponsors (including the company that was to have supplied our fuel) pulled out. They said the Russian economy was too unpredictable, the whole flight was too risky, there was no way we'd succeed. Rhonda and I still believed in our dream, but how would we go on now?

Just as we were worrying about what to do, we got an e-mail from Khalide and Natassia. The mayor of Moscow had committed to funding their part of the flight! We couldn't let our friends down. We had to push on.

**Rhonda:** Nikki and I decided to go back to how we started—not with those big corporate sponsors, but with hard work, serious praying and

### Fly Girls of 1938

On September 24, 1938, three young Russian women—Captain Marina Raskova, Valentina S. Grizodubova and Polina Osipenko (pictured below)—left Moscow in a dual-engine ANT-37 dubbed *Rodina*. They were headed toward Komsomolsk-on-Amur in far-eastern Russia.

En route, *Rodina's* radio equipment and intercom failed. Fog and subzero temperatures made flying treacherous. Finally, a fuel shortage forced an emergency landing. Raskova had to eject from the plane. She spent 10 days without food or shelter while searching for her colleagues, who had crash-landed the *Rodina* in the Siberian wilderness. After locating one another the three made their way back to Moscow, where huge crowds gathered to congratulate them. The women had set a new distance record for female fliers: about 3,700 miles nonstop, an achievement that opened the doors for women pilots in the Russian military.

"The flight of the *Rodina* was crucial to aviation history," Nikki Mitchell says. "Part of our dream was to preserve that memory. As women pilots, we don't want to forget where we've been and what we've done." —Leah Zannoni, Editorial Assistant



our faith in our dream. If it was the Lord's will for our journey to be, he would help us make it happen.

We sat down and began working out a bare-bones budget for the flight. When Nikki and I talked about the support we still had, we discovered that while we might not have had some of the things we'd planned, we had everything we needed. Our families. Our friends here and in Russia. Our employers. Our remaining sponsors—mostly small, family-run companies, folks who knew what it was like to be a single-engine tail-dragger in a world of jumbo jets. Above all, we had each other, a bond that had become so strong we felt like sisters.

**Nikki:** Just three days before takeoff, the Russian aviation authorities granted us flight clearance. On July fourth at the Lebanon, Tenn., airport, with our family and friends to see us off, Rhonda and I hit the sky.

We flew *Mary Beth* via the North Atlantic to Russia, with our mechanic, Mikey Priest, and his assistant,

Rhonda's son Jeremy, traveling on commercial flights to meet us at various stops. I'd always thought land would rise abruptly from out of the ocean, but really it fades softly into view. Rhonda kept chuckling because I fell in love with almost every place we stopped—Greenland, Iceland, Norway.

**Rhonda:** Really, though, I too was amazed by how many places could qualify for the most beautiful spot on God's earth. And by how friendly and helpful people were wherever we went. We got great tips on flying conditions and landing approaches from local pilots. Everyone wanted to invite us to dinner and hear about our trip.

**Nikki:** On July 23 we made it to St. Petersburg, where Khalide joined us. For the trip to Moscow, she and Rhonda took *Mary Beth*, and I flew in another plane. A lot of people came out to greet us when we landed on the grass runway at Tushino airfield outside Moscow—reporters, TV

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**Tushino airfield, Moscow, July 27:** *Khalide, Nikki, Rhonda and Natassia with part of their support crew just before takeoff*

crews, Natassia and other friends.

The next day we met with the female World War II pilots whose exploits I'd been researching. We walked into a room full of women with medals all over their dresses, women who'd risked their lives to defend their country. It was humbling to be in the company of my heroes.

Then, on July 27 we took off from Tushino airfield on the first leg of the route commemorating the *Rodina*, flying in formation, with *Mary Beth* flanked by two Antonov AN-2s (Natassia and I in one, Mikey and Jeremy and the support crew with military pilots in the other).

Four and a half hours later we arrived in Kazan. A huge crowd was waiting by the hangar. Only when we shut down our engines did we realize a brass band was welcoming us with the "Chattanooga Choo Choo"!

**Rhonda:** Flying east the next day, I kept thinking how my dad would love that part of Siberia. Gorgeous farm fields as far as the eye could see—an ag pilot's heaven.

**Nikki:** In every Russian village where we stopped, people welcomed us with open arms. I think the fact that we didn't have corporate logos on our

flight suits helped them see we were all in this together to honor the achievements of our predecessors.

**Rhonda:** At a press conference later, we found out Russian air traffic controllers had planned to go on strike, but when they heard about our flight, they decided to postpone their action until they saw us safely through Russian airspace. Wow!

On August 5 we began the final leg of the commemorative route. We followed the coastline from Ayan to Osipenko, where the *Rodina*, running on fumes, had crash-landed in 1938. Our landing, like our whole trip, went unbelievably smoothly. If I hadn't been there with Nikki on that dusty airstrip, listening to the townspeople cheer, I would have thought it was all an impossible dream.

**Nikki:** After crossing the Bering Sea to Alaska and flying through the Northwest, Rhonda and I finally landed at the little airport in Lebanon, Tenn., 49 days after we had first taken off. As soon as we climbed out of the *Mary Beth*, I bent and kissed the ground. When I looked up and saw everyone who'd turned out to welcome us home, I knew our journey *was* a dream—a dream God had made possible through all the people he'd brought into our lives . . .

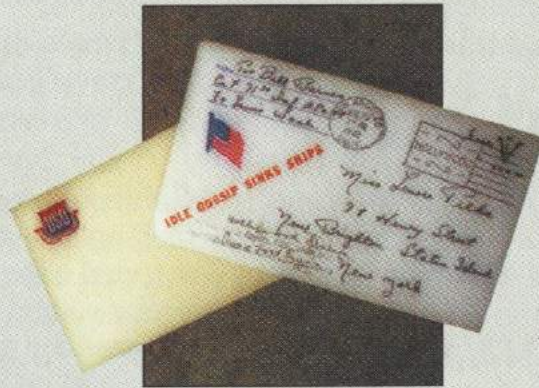
**Rhonda:** . . . starting with each other. As Nikki and I stood on the tarmac hugging our family and friends, I remembered how we had first crossed paths in that same spot just two summers earlier. That day neither of us could've guessed we'd end up flying around the world together. Just goes to show you that when the Lord brings people together, there's no telling how far he'll take you! ©



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