

NAA NEWS

National Aeronautic Association



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'Mama Bird' Captures Wright Award

Evelyn B. Johnson--better known to her many student pilots as "Mama Bird"--has been selected by the National Aeronautic Association (NAA) to receive the Katharine B. Wright Memorial Award for 2002. The award is presented annually to a woman who has made a significant contribution to the art, sport and science of aviation, or who was instrumental in the success of another person by providing encouragement, support, and inspiration.

Listed in the Guinness Book of World Records as the woman who has accumulated more flying time than any other female aviator (her current total exceeds 57,000 hours), Ms. Johnson at age 92 continues to do today what she has been doing since 1947: teaching people to fly. According to Robert Woods, Director of the Aeronautics Division of Tennessee's Department of Transportation, "No other woman has trained more pilots or logged more hours in as many types of airplanes than Evelyn Johnson."

Donald Koranda, President of NAA, says Ms. Johnson embodies all of the qualities for which the Katharine B. Wright Memorial Award was created. "She has put her personal stamp on both the sport and science of aviation over much of her long life, serving as an inspiration to an untold number of students and other people in the field," he notes.

Born and raised in Kentucky, "Mama Bird" went to college in Tennessee where she began her aviation career. She first started working for a fixed-base operator, then took over in 1953 as manager of a local airport--a job, amazingly enough, she still holds. In 1958 she became a helicopter instructor, making her one of only four women in the world to hold such a rating at that time.

Among her many achievements in aviation, Ms. Johnson won her community's admiration for rescuing a badly injured helicopter pilot from a crash at the airport that she manages. When the chopper went down, she grabbed a fire extinguisher, crawled to the burning fuselage, turned off the ignition, brought the fire under control, and pulled the pilot to safety. Her courage earned her the Carnegie Medal for Heroism.

As a woman who started out in life as a school teacher and holds two degrees in English, Ms. Johnson found herself, at age 34, unexpectedly intrigued more by science than art when she saw an ad in a local newspaper for flying lessons. In one sense, her first lesson was more notable for

what she did on the ground than for what she did in the air. To take the lesson at Island Airport in Knoxville, Tennessee, she had to travel to Knoxville by train from her home in Jefferson City, transfer to a city bus and ride to the end of the line, walk to a boat ramp, and take a rowboat to the airport. That was on October 1, 1944. Five weeks later, she soloed in a Piper 33 Cub with no lights, no starter, and no radio. She soon earned a string of certificates: private pilot in 1945, commercial pilot in 1946, and flight instructor in 1947.

In the course of her long aviation career, Ms. Johnson has done just about everything related to flying and airports. She has participated in numerous air races, flown search-and-rescue missions, been named as Flight Instructor of the Year (1979) and served for 18 years as a member of the Tennessee Aeronautics Commission. She is currently an active FAA Designated Pilot Examiner and, in recognition of her service to the aviation community, was named an Elder Statesman of Aviation by NAA in 1993.

The Katharine Wright Award is presented to a woman each year at the meeting of The Ninety Nines, an organization of female pilots. The organization is scheduled to convene this year in July in Kansas City, Missouri.

NAA is a non-profit, membership organization devoted to fostering opportunities to participate fully in aviation activities and to promoting public understanding of the importance of aviation and space flight to the United States.