

Mother and Daughter Flyers

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What could be more appropriate for Women's History Month than to celebrate two aviation pioneers who achieved many of their flying feats right here in Greenwich?

The two remarkable women are Molly Cummings Minot Cook, who was recently interviewed by the Oral History Project, and her mother, Marian Engle Cummings, born in 1891 and who died in 1984. Together with Molly's brother, Wilbur ("Billy") Love Cummings, Jr., also a pilot, the threesome won the nickname, "The Flying Family of Greenwich."

Marian Cummings was the first woman to make a parachute jump and the first woman to hold a commercial license. Molly Cook, born in 1917, was also a flying marvel, earning her pilot's license on her eighteenth birthday. Soon thereafter, she and her brother, Billy, bought a small plane, a Luscombe, and began competing in meets.

Since both son and daughter inherited much of their mother's spirit, it may be worthwhile to know a little more about her.

As described by her daughter, Marian Engle was in her youth a force of nature. She proved such a challenge to her parents that she was sent east from her home in Seattle to be made a lady – a not entirely successful venture. From sliding down spiral staircases at her finishing school in Middlebury, Connecticut to illegally harboring

kittens in her room, she was a handful for the headmistress who nevertheless appreciated her spunk.

After graduating with honors and returning to Seattle for her coming-out party, she met Wilbur Love Cummings, a young New York lawyer out west on assignment. It was love at first sight. Their romance, on the eve of World War One, culminated in marriage. Then at the height of the Spanish Flu epidemic, the Cummings family traveled to New York for Mr. Cummings to resume his work there. On this perilous journey, the young couple had their two children, Wilbur, age Three, and new baby, Molly. To avoid exposure to the deadly flu, the young family wore facemasks and stayed in their cabin.

After a brief time in New York, there was a stint in Cuba where Molly acquired Spanish as her first language. Back in the states, the family finally settled in Greenwich and bought an old farmhouse on John Street.

But life in Greenwich may have been too uneventful for Mrs. Cummings. To feed her hunger for adventure, she began taking flying lessons at North Beach, now LaGuardia airport, soon earning her pilot's license. Mr. Cummings congratulated her on her accomplishment and asked if she would like an airplane. And so she got her first Reliant Stinson. Before long, mother, daughter, and son were all flying at Armonk.

According to Ms. Cook, Armonk was not a proper airport, but rather a potato field off Route 22 just long enough for landing small planes. Those must have been heady days for Greenwich's flying family. While daughter and son were earning their wings, their mother was busy racking up firsts and awards.

When Ms. Cummings earned her commercial license, another first for this pioneering woman pilot, her husband said she could put her training to use by flying him around, which she did. The two traveled in the states and in Central America, wherever Mr. Cummings had legal proceedings underway.

When in Greenwich, Marian Cummings was an award-winning horsewoman, an excellent gardener, and an artist. Later in life, she worked the family ranch in Montana, earning the nickname, "Hellcat," by those who soon learned there was no taking advantage of this woman rancher.

But the story of her prowess does not end there. It turns out she was something of an amateur archeologist, with a passion for Mexican artifacts. Flying over "middens," or mounds of cultural remains, with a friend from the University of Southern California, the two would mark a spot from the air, later going in on packhorses, digging up treasures eventually to be displayed at the University.

Mrs. Cummings must have been a powerful influence on her two children. They, too, followed in their mother's footsteps, both also accomplished and daring. While still in college, they became popular at "stunting" meets at airfields in Armonk, Hartford, and Long Island, among others.

Ms. Cook describes one maneuver involving a roll of toilet paper being thrown out of the plane at three or four thousand feet creating a streamer effect. "The trick was how long it took you to cut that strip twice," with your plane. She also describes an event called a spot landing, having to land your plane neatly and precisely within a circle made of flour.

All this was good practice for what was to come in 1942 when fun and games would be replaced with the serious business of piloting during wartime.

During the war, Molly Cook and her mother joined the Civil Air Patrol. Ms. Cummings' role was ferrying pilots between destinations stateside. Ms. Cook taught Morse code and aerial navigation. Her brother went into the Navy Air Corps as a transport pilot, taking new planes from factories here to England where they were deployed in the war.

It was on one of these trips that the family suffered a devastating loss. A plane piloted by young Wilbur Love Cummings crashed on takeoff, killing this cherished son and brother.

His death was not the first loss for this extraordinary family. The elder Mr. Cummings had been killed the summer before the war in a riding accident at the Montana ranch. He sustained several broken ribs and a punctured lung, dying within hours. After these losses, Molly Cook went on to marry and have a family of her own. She continued flying and engaging in many other interests, from ranching, to teaching art, to conservation, making substantial donations to the Land Trust.

But it is when she talks about flying that she is most clearly in her element:

" I loved stunting. In the summer...I would be in my white flying suit and helmet and goggles – oh, I was just the big cheese – and get into my little Fleet plane. All these people on Sunday, that was the thing to do in those days, that people would drive up to Armonk to watch the planes, sort of a – what would you call it – a bullfight feeling. Is the matador going to make it or – I'd go up and do a spin or a loop and a something, and then come down. Then we'd sit, and then somebody said, 'Well, I think I'll go up and amuse them a little bit.' It was fun on Sunday."

A wonderful way to spend an afternoon – and a life.