

MARY CASE

Hobby Airport Manager's career fueled by love of flying

by Marian Szczepanski

Mary Case, newly appointed manager of William P. Hobby Airport, has forged an impressive—and occasionally, unconventional—career that began, of all places, lying on her back atop her favorite hometown mountain (nicknamed Mary's Mountain by her family) in Sulphur Springs, West Virginia.

A small plane crossed the patch of sky visible through the trees, and Case, then a young teenager of humble means, thought, "I want to do that." Although a teacher advised her to "be more realistic" when she talked of becoming a pilot, her mother inspired her to follow her dream.

"My friends didn't encourage me to go off to college, but my mother told me, 'you can do anything you put your mind to.'"

Case recalls, describing her mother as "an amazingly forward-thinking woman for her area and situation." With her mother's help, Case applied for loans to fund her education at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University in Daytona Beach, FL. Of the 5,000 students at the university, only 135 were women.

"There was [more] focus on what you did because you were female. You always tried to do better than 100 percent because of that attention," Case maintains. Many male students were open-minded, but Case's flight instructor demonstrated a noticeable bias when a female hand reached for the throttle. After Case initiated a "heart-to-heart" discussion, she and the instructor came to an understanding.

"To make it up to you," he said, "we'll go out and do a whole session on spins." Smiling, Case recalls, "So, I forgave him!"

Case earned her pilot's license but ultimately switched to airport management. "When I started thinking seriously about my career, I knew I loved flying, but I didn't want to do it every day," she explains.

She joined the American Association of Airport Executives (AAAE) and began networking at conferences. When she graduated in 1982, the airport operations market was saturated, so her mentor advised her to work at an airport, regardless of the position, insisting, "Sweep floors, if you have to." That good advice led to a blue-jeans-and-hiking-boots interview at her hometown airport, where she promised, "I'll do whatever you need done."

What needed doing—parking and fueling aircraft, as well as loading golf clubs into limousines—paid only minimum wage, since the seasonal airport, active from March

through November, existed primarily to serve the Greenbriar Hotel, an upscale local golf resort.

Nevertheless, working at this “grass-roots airport” allowed Case to “live and breathe aviation.” A self-described tomboy, Case had grown up tinkering with vehicles, so she didn’t hesitate to unofficially apprentice herself to the airport’s mechanics. With their help, she pulled engines and changed out piston rings.

“At the time I didn’t know enough about...what systems I was disconnecting, so I’d get a roll of masking tape. I’d mark a number one on one side and one on the other side, so I’d know how to put it back together,” she said.

When the season ended, Case moved to the slightly larger Morgantown airport, which, likewise, allowed her to multi-task: fueling and moving aircraft, inspecting runways, even serving on the emergency response team.

“The fire truck was a pick-up with two 500-gallon containers in back,” Case recalls, and then added, “the audible alarm, activated by a button in the control tower, sounded like an air horn, blaring over the grounds. When the manager performed unannounced response-team tests, we’d get to the location [and find] him sitting there, looking at his watch to time us. Not very high-tech at all!”

Although asked to stay and eventually succeed him, career-minded Case accepted a job in Tulsa and a challenging transition from multi-tasking hangar-packer to airport operations officer. Three years later, she moved to Houston’s George Bush Intercontinental Airport operations division.

“The core of operations is making sure the airport is in compliance with Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) requirements,” she explains. “Such regulations cover everything from runway signage reflectivity to outside contractor supervision. Aside from the airfield,” she continued, “operations officers work with tenants—commercial and charter airlines, corporate and private aircraft operators, rental car agencies and food and retail concessions—as well as oversee airport roadways and garages. The eyes and ears of airport management, operations staff members serve as contact points in an aircraft emergency or handle such special conditions as pavement breakouts, which require runway closure.”

Case created a safety team, as well as a Houston Airport System (HAS) security program, while working toward and eventually earning her AAE accreditation, which she describes as “a mini-degree, like an MBA in airport management.” When an opening became available in the male-dominated maintenance division, Case, undaunted, applied.

“I knew there were a lot of things that I could prove about women being in this field,” she said.

Not surprisingly, the one-time mechanics assistant developed a great rapport with her staff because she didn't hesitate, literally, to get her hands dirty.

"I actually worked shifts with these guys, so I could understand their job duties," stated Case, who joined mowing, paving and parking lot clean-up crews.

Frequently, operations colleagues would introduce new female staffers to Case, now considered a mentor.

"I would feel a little old then," she laughs, "because they were right out of school. A lot of female interns would come up to me and ask how to break into the field."

The field's increasing openness to women was particularly noticeable to Case at AAAE conferences, no longer the "sea of [men's] suits" she had experienced as a new Embry-Riddle grad.

When named manager of Ellington Field in 1998, Case "was right back in [her] comfort zone...on the general aviation side [she] grew up in." Though much smaller than Intercontinental, Ellington offered Case the new challenge of managing the joint-use agreement between the HAS, which owns the runways and taxiways, and the military tenants (NASA, Air National Guard, Army National Guard and Coast Guard), which own their respective land and facilities.

The 9/11 terrorist attacks occurred during Case's Ellington stint, a day she describes, solemnly, as "surreal." A resident of Spring, she had stopped by Intercontinental's HAS office that morning and was immediately struck by "the lack of aircraft music. You don't ever hear nothing at all at Intercontinental," she declares.

Enroute to Ellington, she passed Hobby, also noticeably inactive. But it wasn't until she reached Ellington that the day's dreadful significance took form: military Hummers, mounted with cannons, patrolling the grounds, while F-16s roared overhead. "I heard F-16s every day, but it was strange to just hear them. The fact they were in the air for a whole new reason almost brought you to tears," she recalls.

Case notes that Ellington is also a repository of wonderful memories.

"My favorite airplane in the whole wide world is the Stearman," she says, producing a model and pointing out the features—open cockpit, biplane, radial engine (with propeller), tail dragger—with the enthusiasm of a child displaying a precious toy. "The Army started out their pilots in these. It's that grass-roots thing, the foundation; it's everything to me. I was flying a Stearman over Ellington one day. I thought, wow, I started out on Mary's Mountain, and now here I am, the manager of that awesome little airport down there. I'm up here with bugs in my teeth, but I'm so happy."

Is it any wonder Mary Case sips coffee from a mug proclaiming: I love the smell of jet fuel in the morning.

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