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**DEMAND
IS HIGH
FOR FEMALE
MECHANICS**

Lori MacNichol
**MOUNTAIN AND
CANYON FLYING**



PHOTOS COURTESY OF LORI MACNICHOL

IDAHO-STYLE

Mountain and Canyon Flying

It's a big leap from owning a sewing business to being acknowledged as one of the world's leading mountain and canyon flying instructors, but Lori MacNichol, WAI 12132, was determined to fish the best spots in Idaho's remote backcountry and flying was the quickest way to get there.

And the rest, as they say, is history...

A native of the San Francisco Bay area, Lori started flying lessons at age 23 at a dirt strip near Redding, California. Her instructor, Jane LaMar, had heard about the resort town of McCall, Idaho, located in the mountains north of Boise, so Lori and Jane decided to fly there in a Piper 140 as part of a long dual cross-country.

While in McCall, Lori saw the opportunity to combine her two passions: fishing and snow skiing. Soon after returning home, she sold her business sewing dust covers for computers and moved to Idaho in 1982.

Living in McCall began Lori's lifelong relationship with

mountain and canyon flying. After earning her private certificate and buying a Cessna 182, during the next five years Lori often flew as a private pilot to fish and camp at the numerous remote backcountry airstrips that dot the Frank Church "River of No Return" Wilderness and the Sawtooth Mountains.

by Tom Snow

With many remote ranches and resorts dating from the 1930s that are only reachable by air or on horseback, Idaho has a long history of challenging mountain airstrips located far from civilization. Other strips were developed over the years by the state of Idaho and the U.S. Forest Service to provide access to the area, which is prone to forest fires.

Destinations like the beautifully irrigated 3,400-by-150-foot Johnson Creek Airport (3U2), which is located in a watershed gorge at almost 5,000 feet MSL, have become popular for fly-ins by the Recreational Aviation Foundation (RAF), which



(top, left) Lori with her Super Cub at snowy Castle Creek Hideout in Idaho. (top, right) Mile Hi, Idaho, is a nice respite for two parked Cubs. (bottom, right) Lori and her instructor Jane LaMar flew this Piper 140 on her first dual long cross-country flight from Enterprise Sky Park, California, to McCall, Idaho.

often holds work weekends at Idaho airstrips to help with maintenance, and type clubs such as www.SuperCub.org.

The 1994 publication of *Fly Idaho*, a guide to 83 backcountry airstrips, inspired some flatland pilots without proper training to explore the area with fatal results.

"I will never forget my first solo trip into the backcountry," Lori says. "I didn't even have 60 hours of PIC flight time, but I figured it was no big deal—I live here." In the days before GPS, she felt quite pleased to find her intended destination, a short mountain strip in the bottom of a river canyon. Fortunately, after circling down from 10,000 feet to pattern altitude, Lori realized she was in way over her head and flew back home.

She credits flight instructor, close friend, and mentor Lyn Clark with teaching her how to operate safely in the backcountry. However, it was not until 1988 that Lori began to pursue a professional pilot career eventually earning her commercial, instrument, multiengine, CFI, ATP, and single-engine seaplane ratings.

In 1989, with only 800 hours, Lori landed her first Part 135 job with Stanley Air Taxi in Stanley, Idaho, and she loved it right away. "Even though I often flew groups of rafters and kayakers to the same Indian Creek airstrip eight or 10 times a day, flying in the backcountry never got old because every approach and landing was different."

Some four years later, she and her family moved to Portland, Oregon, so she could build as many hours as possible as an instructor for Bowen Aero in Scappoose, Oregon. Fire watch flights for Weyerhaeuser supplemented her income, and she even flew bank checks "back in the day."



"A growing number of bent airplanes and body bags showed there was an urgent need for a comprehensive and structured mountain flying course that included tasks and objectives with completion standards."

Lori had thoughts of flying for United Airlines, but she loved backcountry flying and by then she had two children, son Neil and daughter Madison. "I recently ran across a poem written years ago by Madison which includes a line about the mountains calling my name," she adds.

Raised in a family that included several ministers, Lori is quick to credit her success in aviation to a strong Christian faith. "I always felt a calling to fly—it's my mission. I finished my ratings at Rexburg, Idaho, which was a spiritual experience, since that area is predominantly Mormon. I went to church every Sunday and was able to understand the simple but complex idea that God moves in magical ways throughout our lives."

During the 1994 summer season, Lori worked in Challis, Idaho, as a CFI. In addition, she flew Cessna 206s in a Part 135 air taxi operation and as an overhead fire patrol air attack pilot. It was during this time that she reconnected with Lyn, then chief instructor for McCall Air Taxi. They shared the grim job of helping the sheriff's department recover bodies from backcountry crash sites.

Evening discussions with Lyn about "accidents that didn't have to happen" led them to jointly develop a mountain flying seminar curriculum to help general aviation and forest service pilots avoid deadly mistakes.

"Flying in confined areas below the canyon rim is an unforgiving environment," Lori emphasizes, "because your go-around goes away."



"A growing number of bent airplanes and body bags showed there was an urgent need for a comprehensive and structured mountain flying course that included tasks and objectives with completion standards," Lori adds.

Word soon spread about the course, and by 1997 Lori and Lyn, along with fellow instructor Amy Hoover, had the beginnings of a business that today is known as McCall Mountain/Canyon Flying Seminars.



(top, left) Yellow Super Cub rests on mountain top in Mile Hi, Idaho. (top, right) Approach to Papua, Indonesia, Wamena Mountains. (bottom, left) Happy Canyon, Utah. (bottom, right) A snowy afternoon at Lori's flight school, still the same building she first visited in 1981 but a great new sign 30 years later.

Tragically, Lyn died in a 1997 crash, and Lori eventually bought out Amy and became sole owner of the business. She had to supplement the business by transporting hunters in the fall and corporate flying out of Sun Valley, Idaho, in King Airs and Citations.

Lori became a single mom in 2000 and credits her mother, who by then had moved to McCall, with helping with child-care while she was away flying. "At other times I had the kids take the school bus to the airport after school, where they watched TV in the lobby—a combination of *The Lion King* and John and Martha King—and once old enough, they worked for me washing planes and driving the fuel truck."

She also went back to her roots as a seamstress and started making cargo nets for several models of aircraft. In addition, she worked part time over the years as a real estate agent specializing in backcountry properties.

Today, Lori's seminar business is self-supporting mainly because of the popular two-, four-, and five-day mountain flying courses offered during Idaho's relatively short summer-time flying season. Ranging in price from \$2,295 to \$6,995, the courses are expensive, especially since aircraft rental is not included. However, the continuing popularity of the courses, with many pilots returning for advanced training in subsequent years, proves their worth.

First offered nearly 20 years ago, the courses typically attract about a dozen planes and pilots, with each pilot paired with an experienced instructor for one-on-one flight training. Extensive ground school sessions on various subjects are combined with early morning flights in calm air to explore different landing strips in the area selected

with the pilot's individual capabilities in mind.

Since Lori can only fly with one attendee at a time, she hires a group of veteran instructors who collectively represent 140 years and 75,000 hours of Idaho backcountry flying experience.

A few rental aircraft are available, but pilots are encouraged to bring their own planes, most of which are taildraggers with large tundra tires like Lori's Super Cub. Tricycle-gear Cessnas are also suitable for landing at many mountain strips and low-wing planes, although generally not recommended, are accepted on a case-by-case basis.

Lori reports that her most popular course offering is the \$6,995 all-inclusive, five-day Middle Fork Lodge Excursion. Pilots often bring their families to stay with them at the popular resort.

Four-day fall and spring mountain flying courses based in Bluff or Moab, Utah, help Lori extend her short season. Customized flight training in McCall is also available between the scheduled courses.

Among the first subjects taught in all of Lori's courses is how to do an emergency "canyon turn," which is designed to get a pilot out of trouble if confronted with a dead-end box canyon while flying below the rim.

Step one is to slow down to "canyon speed," and always stay close to the right side of the gorge. Although it takes awhile to get accustomed to hugging the canyon wall, with rocks and trees whizzing by just off the right wing, flying slowly makes it possible to accomplish an amazingly tight 180-degree turn. Also, another advantage of everyone flying on the right side of a canyon and avoiding the middle is that hopefully you don't meet another plane coming the other way.

Stabilized approaches are another important subject emphasized early in every course. Also, since go-arounds are not possible at many "one way" mountain strips, surveying the landing zone from overhead and picking an abort point is critical to safety.

Lori is often hired by the U.S. government to train special ops pilots prior to deploying to Afghanistan. "It's been an honor to be involved with these pilots and sharing my knowledge with them has been a major part of my mission for the past six to seven years," she says, with conviction.

With snowfall in McCall averaging over 50 inches each winter, it's hard to generate flight training revenue during that season of year. "For several years I offered wintertime training in planes equipped with skis," Lori notes, "but I spent too much



Lori with daughter Madison

*Every day is a journey on what I call 'my forever trail.'
But I can say I am still kicking dirt in the
backcountry, and many thanks for lifting me up.
Aviation is not just a job; it is family."*



Lori with son Neil

time digging myself out after landing in snowdrifts, and now I limit skiplane instruction to the classroom."

Although a long ride on the airlines, five trips to Indonesia to train pilots for Susi Air have been a welcome winter income supplement. Lori's training has been well received by the pilots, who are British, Finnish, Australian, and many other nationalities.

She was approached by the unique regional airline due to a series of fatal crashes, which showed the need to develop a mountain, canyon, and jungle flying curriculum for Susi Air's aircraft and simulator.

In addition to the world's second largest fleet of Cessna Caravans, Susi Air uses turbine-powered Pilatus Porter taildraggers to deliver supplies to tribes living by the most challenging jungle strips imaginable. "Some mountains in Indonesia have never been charted," Lori adds, "and airplanes are the only connection to the outside world for these people."

"I always wear a cross when flying in Indonesia, and I can tell

when Christian missionaries have been there” she says. “Groups like Mission Aviation Fellowship (MAF) do great work.”

A growing source of income and exposure for Lori’s business comes from speaking at various aviation events, including the Northwest Aviation Conference, EAA AirVenture Oshkosh, AOPA regional fly-ins, and Arizona Pilots Association meetings.

Lori is now married to John Gregory, a pilot who owns several airplanes and shares her love of backcountry aviation. “We met in 2003, when he attended one of my seminars, and I caught him sleeping through my class on density altitude,” she says with a laugh.

John owns an Idaho backcountry ranch with its own airstrip called Castle Creek Hideout, a property which is only accessible by wheeled vehicles a few weeks a year when the river level drops during the summer dry season. Weather permitting, the couple flies there in a skiplane and spends the holidays in the recently winterized cabin.

Holidays have been especially difficult for Lori ever since her son, Neil, died at age 21 in the July 2015 crash of his newly purchased 1954 Piper PA22 taildragger while flying home from Moab. The cause of the crash is still under investigation.

“He had already logged 1,200 hours and was well on his way to an ATP and a career in commercial aviation,” Lori says, tearing up. After 11,000 hours in the air, she has lost other loved ones in crashes, including Lyn, but this one had the power to devastate her.

“Losing a child is the worst for a parent. If it were not for my faith and the support of many of my flying friends, who keep me busy and flying, I am not sure just what state I would be in today. Every day is a journey on what I call ‘my forever trail.’ But I can say I am still kicking dirt in the backcountry, and many thanks for lifting me up. Aviation is not just a job; it is family,” Lori shares.

Lori’s daughter, Madison, is very close to her mother. While not a pilot, Madison helps her mom with the family aviation business wherever she can.

Lori and many of her close friends turned 60 this past April. The 5-foot-3 inch pilot plans to continue doing what she’s been doing for years—hopefully saving lives by teaching mountain and canyon flying.

“I look forward to going to work every day,” she says. “I have two female students now, and their career opportunities are fabulous.” ✈

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Tom Snow, a former sports and outdoors writer, co-owns T. J. Snow Company of Chattanooga, Tennessee, a manufacturer of resistance welding machinery. A pilot since 1980, Tom is proud to have had WAI President Dr. Peggy Chabrian as one of his early instructors. He flies a Bonanza for business and a Super Decathlon for fun. Always interested in mountain and canyon flying, Tom traveled to Idaho and flew with Lori MacNichol last September.