



A flying tribute to Mock's moxie

BY SPARKY BARNES SARGENT

# Spirit of Columbus



DARIN LACRONE

The Cessna 180 in which Jerrie Mock made her world flight is suspended from the ceiling in the Boeing Aviation Hangar at the Steven F. Udvar-Hazy Center in Chantilly, Virginia.



Dick and Ginger Merrill

There have been only a few women of other nationalities who have also flown solo around the world in a single-engine plane: Sheila Scott in a Comanche 260 in 1966 (United Kingdom), Judith Chisholm in a Cessna Centurion T210 in 1980 (United Kingdom), Gaby Kennard in a Piper Saratoga in 1989 (Australia), and Polly Vacher in a Piper Dakota in 2001 (United Kingdom).

But first, Dick wanted to request permission from Jerrie to copy her paint scheme. “I talked to Wendy Hollinger and Dale Ratcliff at Oshkosh—they had published the 50th anniversary edition of *Three-Eight Charlie* and had been in contact with her,” recalls Dick, “I told them what I wanted to do, and they gave me Jerrie’s phone number. So I called her a few days later and told her I wanted to paint my airplane like hers. She said, ‘That’s a wonderful idea. Come show it to me if you get it done.’”

Before we highlight more of the Merrills’ story, let’s take a closer look at Jerrie’s flight.

### **Spirit of Columbus**

Jerrie’s husband, Russell Mock, co-owned N1538C with Al Baumeister. Voicing a sentiment that may be familiar to other 180 owners, Jerrie wrote, “One of the reasons we had bought the plane was because his engine roared so dramatically at takeoff.” She apparently surprised her husband by wanting to make the world flight, and the co-owner didn’t think she’d really do it. When Jerrie first began planning the flight in 1962, she imagined it as a pleasurable journey around the world. Then it was



View of the *Spirit of Columbus* paint scheme at home in Tennessee.

COURTESY DICK MERRILL



This is the way N2961A appeared prior to being painted like the *Spirit of Columbus*.

COURTESY DICK MERRILL

Quick, how many American women have flown around the world solo in a single-engine airplane? Still thinking? The answer is two. Now, can you name either one of these intrepid women?

If you’re stumped, we’ll make it easy for you: In 1964, Geraldine “Jerrie” Fredritz Mock was the first to do so, in a 1953 Cessna 180. Thirty-nine years later, CarolAnn Garratt became the second, flying a 1993 Mooney MSE.

Jerrie’s interest in aviation was sparked when she went for a Ford Tri-Motor flight as a child. Later, she studied aeronautical engineering at Ohio State University, but in 1945 she married pilot Russell Mock and started a family. Though her life was, in some ways, typical for that era, it was also atypical due to her lingering love for aviation. She started learning to fly at age 32 in a Piper Tri-Pacer and earned her private certificate in 1958. By

the time she began the meticulous preparations for her world flight, this petite pilot had logged more than 700 hours. Described by some at the time as the “flying housewife,” Jerrie was 38 and a mother of three. An instrument-rated private pilot, she embodied a humble, quiet confidence combined with a spirited determination born of curiosity and inner fortitude.

In her book *Three-Eight Charlie* (1970), Jerrie wrote: “I discovered that there was a certain unknown factor, excitement maybe, that made it possible for me to do things that otherwise I couldn’t have done.” (A commemorative 50th anniversary edition was published in 2013.)

### **50 Years Later...**

Husband-and-wife pilots Dick and Ginger Merrill of Chuckey, Tennessee, enjoy promoting aviation history. Through the

years, Dick has developed a special feeling for Jerrie’s achievement—partially because he was a teenager living in Ohio when he heard the local news about the housewife who was flying around the world. He also read about Jerrie Mock in aviation magazines at the time, but hardly imagined that in 1980 he would purchase the very same make and model of the airplane that Jerrie had flown.

So when Dick’s 1953 Cessna 180 (N2961A) needed a new paint job, Ginger encouraged him to have it painted just like Jerrie Mock’s *Spirit of Columbus*. He agreed; they both felt it would be a great way to pay tribute to the first woman pilot to circle the globe solo in a single-engine airplane. It would also be a handy means to educate the current generation of pilots about Jerrie’s record-setting flight. Essentially, the Merrills didn’t want her flight to fade into forgotten history.



COURTESY DICK MERRILL

Dick and Ginger Merrill flew their Cessna 180 to the First Flight Society's celebration of the 112th anniversary of the Wrights' flight at the Wright Brothers National Memorial this past December. During the ceremonies, Jerrie Mock was inducted in the Paul E. Garber First Flight Shrine.

brought to her attention that she could be the first woman to make a solo round-the-world flight, and that opened the door for corporate sponsors including Champion, Textron, and Bendix. Lofty hopes and expectations from numerous supporters propelled Jerrie forward.

Christened *Spirit of Columbus*, the plane featured a red-and-white paint scheme that was finished barely a week prior to takeoff. Changes to the airplane included the installation of a new 225-hp Continental and large fuel tanks in the cabin where the passenger seats had been. With 178 gallons of fuel on board, the 180 had a range of 2,400 nm. Navigation equipment included a new compass, twin radio direction finders, dual short-range radios, and one long-range radio system with a trailing antenna. An autopilot system was also installed.

Then, shortly before Jerrie was to depart from Port Columbus International Airport on March 19, 1964, she learned that Joan Merriam Smith had made plans to be the first woman to fly solo around the world

(in a twin-engine Piper Apache). That upped the ante, and Jerrie's flight became anything but leisurely.

### Solo World Flight

For many pilots today, it's difficult to truly imagine flying around the world in a single-engine tailwheel airplane without the benefit of a copilot, GPS, and satellite weather radar. Jerrie battled a swirling cauldron of challenges, including thunderstorms, sandstorms, icing conditions, starless-night navigation, radio problems, carburetor troubles over a shark-infested sea, gale-force winds during landings, brake failure, foreign regulations, and red tape...and then, exhausted from flying, she tried to comply with her husband's demands for up-to-the-minute reports following virtually every leg of her flight. She carried a manual typewriter so she could type these reports for *The Columbus Dispatch*.

Russell persuaded Jerrie to stay ahead of commercial pilot Joan Merriam Smith. Ultimately, it was Jerrie who triumphed. But the com-

petitive pressures during the world flight mounted to the point where Jerrie was reluctant to talk with her husband on the phone to give him progress reports, and at times she was even embarrassed by his zeal for her to claim a place in history.

Jerrie wrote, "I decided that going around the world the way I was doing it wasn't much better than staying home." But she also wrote about numerous occasions when her flight was filled with times of serenity, excitement, and the joy of beholding awe-inspiring scenery and skylines. After flying more than 23,000 miles in approximately 29 and a half days, Jerrie completed her eastbound flight on April 17.

During her flight, she set two records, which were sanctioned and accepted by the National Aeronautic Association and the Fédération Aéronautique Internationale: speed around the world, Class C1-c, and speed around the world, feminine. President Lyndon B. Johnson awarded her the FAA Gold Medal for Exceptional Service in May 1964. In addition to establish-

ing many "firsts" for women, Jerrie received numerous honors and awards, including the FAI Louis Blériot Silver Medal, the American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics Special Award, the EAA Special Award, and the Amelia Earhart Memorial Award. She went on to set a number of speed records in a Cessna P206.

### 1953 Cessna 180—Take Two!

Dick Merrill learned to fly in a 1957 Cessna 172 when he was in high school, and he soloed in the spring of 1959 after he turned 16. But time and money for flying were scarce during his college career, so most of his aviation activity was limited to hanging out at the Ohio State airport and taking ground courses in the university's aviation program. He also visited Port Columbus, where Jerrie had begun and ended her flight.

By the time Dick was well-established in his career as a geologist for oil companies, he had earned his commercial certificate and instrument rating. He also had his flight instructor certificate and was living in Houston when he decided it was time to quit renting airplanes and own one. At first he thought he'd like to have a DeCathlon for aerobatic flying, and then considered a Cessna 170 so he could carry more passengers. At that point, someone suggested that he could haul a lot more weight with a Cessna 180.

So his quest began, and when he found one listed in *Trade-A-Plane* in 1980, he contacted the seller in Illinois. "He offered to fly it down at his cost, and I agreed that if I didn't buy it, I'd pay his fuel down and back," Dick recalls, adding, "I took it to a local shop, and they did a pre-buy inspection. I've owned it for 35 years, and now the 180 is like a family member; it's



### Flying the 180

The Cessna 180 has a long-standing reputation as a real workhorse, and those who own or fly them are staunch devotees of the breed. The 1953 model has a wingspan of 36 feet and measures slightly more than 26 feet from nose to tail. It stands 7 feet 9 inches tall on its slender spring steel gear and has a tread of 92 inches.

Dick's 180 has Cleveland wheels and brakes, carries 55 gallons of fuel, and burns about 12 gallons per hour. "My groundspeed is 130 knots. I'm a geologist, so I don't mind going slow and looking at the ground! I land about 60 mph, and I make every landing as if it's a short-field landing, so if I really have to make one, I'll be in practice," shares Dick, adding, "I wheel-land it almost all the time because I can land almost as short with wheel landings and can put it down more precisely. The key is airspeed control. It's a challenging airplane, and every time you fly it, it figures out a way to remind you that you need to pay attention to it all the time!"

### The Paint Scheme

Dick joined the International Cessna 180/185 Club right after he bought N2961A and recalls that "there was some talk about Jerrie among the members. One flew to Florida and brought her to a meeting in the early 1980s. She wouldn't fly the airlines to our meeting, but she'd ride in a 180!"

In the mid-1980s, Dick flew his son to D.C. and toured the restoration facility (now known as the Garber facility), where he saw Jerrie's 180. "I recognized her airplane, which was stored in one of the hangars there. Then a few years ago," says Dick, "I saw it again, when I was in the Udvar-Hazy Museum at Dulles with a group from

the Aircraft Engine Historical Society. Jerrie's airplane was hanging from the ceiling, and I took photos of it."

Based on glowing recommendations from friends, he took his 180 to Dial Eastern States Aircraft Painting in Cadiz, Ohio, in 2014. "I showed them about 30 pictures of Jerrie's airplane as it hung in the Smithsonian, and they duplicated the script and paint scheme almost exactly. At first they had a little challenge when it came to matching the colors," says Dick, adding, "they used Imron polyurethane and did a great job! As it turned out, I paid \$1,000 less for the airplane than I did for this paint job!"

### Flying Farewell

Sadly, Jerrie passed away before Dick had the chance to show her his freshly painted 180. She died at 88, at home in Quincy, Florida, on September 30, 2014.

"The family asked us to participate in scattering Jerrie's ashes," recalls Dick. "Tom Navar, a physician from El Paso, also has a 180, and he had visited with Jerrie one time. He had invented a device to spread ashes, which hangs on the strut of a 180 where the strut attaches to the wing. It has a radio-controlled flapper door in the back to release the ashes. Ginger and I led the formation over the Gulf of Mexico. Tom scattered her ashes from his 180." (One other plane was in the formation—Dale Ratcliff flew a Cherokee 180, and Wendy Hollinger accompanied him.)

### Mock's Inspiring Legacy Lives On

Applying the *Spirit of Columbus* paint scheme to his 180 has presented Dick with some other interesting and unexpected opportunities. For one, he was asked if his airplane could be used in a movie about Jerrie. "When I fly to places now where people recognize the *Spirit of Columbus* paint scheme, they have their pictures taken with the airplane," Dick shares, adding, "the First Flight Society has a meeting at Kitty Hawk on December 17, and they invited me to attend since Jerrie is the 2015 inductee in the Paul E. Garber First Flight Shrine."

Remember the old song "Don't Fence Me In," which conveys a wide-ranging love of freedom and exploration? Just as that lyrical cowboy didn't want to be fenced in, neither did Jerrie wish to be corralled within her cultural confines. She wanted to see the world from her own aerial perspective, and so she did, perhaps exceeding her own expectations. Today, her legacy continues to inspire others, thanks to the enthusiastic efforts of Dick and Ginger Merrill, whose airplane is a flying tribute to Jerrie's soaring spirit and remarkable achievements.

sort of become part of me."

Aside from its new paint job and a few enhancements, Dick's 180 still has a fairly stock appearance. He's proud of the instrument panel, saying, "It had nothing that lit up until about 10 years ago, when I installed an engine analyzer. But I've kept it pretty much original for two reasons. One, I didn't need more instruments—you know, the boys flew Berlin every day in the weather with this panel! Two, I didn't want to butcher the panel by putting anything modern in it."

N2961A hasn't been restored per se, but Dick has performed contin-

ual maintenance on it. Some of the work accomplished in recent years includes re-skinning the horizontal stabilizer and installing a True-Lock wheel-retention system, a Whelen LED beacon, Door Steward gas spring door assist on both cabin doors, folding seats, a shoulder harness system, and a P. Ponk Landing Gear Beef-Up Kit.

"Being an A&P and IA, I've slowly gone through the airplane and cleaned things up," explains Dick, adding, "I'm on my third engine—a Continental O-470-J—and second prop. I have logged just under 5,000 hours now, and half of that time is in my 180."



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