



Col. Mary Feik, 89, is considered by NASA to be one of the most influential women in aerospace.

Photo by Capt. Allen Moore, Virginia Wing; background photo courtesy of Aimée Harbin

89 and Still Inspiring

By Mitzi Palmer

Aviation legend Mary Feik busier than ever, traveling the country in support of CAP's cadet program

At age 89, Col. Mary Feik of the Maryland Wing shows no sign of slowing down. She is still soaking up as much flight knowledge as she can. Still traveling around the world representing women in aviation. Still flying her own Piper Comanche, making house calls in her pickup when fellow flying buddies need help diagnosing what's wrong with their airplane.

Keeping her batteries charged

Feik says the most important thing in her life is the CAP cadet program.

"You have no idea how wonderful the teenage cadets are to me," she said, adding the teenagers keep her batteries charged. "I get so much sweet attention from the cadets that I feel like I've already gone to heaven. Seriously."

Unlike most women one year shy of turning 90, Feik strives to stay knowledgeable about the latest aviation developments.

"My function in life now is to stay ahead of technology," she said. "I have to find out how they do repairs with carbon fiber. I know there will be cadets who ask me. As an old lady, I don't have all the answers. I have to keep learning."

Traveling and learning

Even though Feik has been retired since 1985, she maintains a busy schedule traveling across the country speaking to crowds about her journey and experiences in aviation. In the past three years alone, her appearances total 71.

Modesty is important to Feik. At CAP gatherings she never sits at the head table and doesn't even wear her uniform. Instead, she dresses in a business suit and wears her jewelry on her lapel.

"I always sit with the cadets," she noted. "I feel

During a break at the 2013 Virginia Wing Conference, Col. Mary Feik talks with Capt. William R. Cowherd, commander of the Virginia Wing's Fort Pickett Composite Squadron, about her work as chief aircraft restorer at the National Air and Space Museum. Photo by

Capt. Allen Moore, Virginia Wing



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Col. Mary Feik always gravitates toward the cadets, who enjoy her company as much as she does theirs. More often than not she is on hand to present the Mary Feik Achievement award to deserving cadets, like Cadet Master Sgt. Shawna Mumma of the Virginia Wing's Fredericksburg Composite Squadron, pictured here with Feik and her ribbon at this year's Virginia Wing Conference.

Photo by Capt. Allen Moore, Virginia Wing

NAA to Honor Mary Feik with 2013 Katharine Wright Trophy

Col. Mary Feik will be awarded the 2013 Katharine Wright Trophy in November.

The award is presented annually to a woman who has contributed to the success of others or made a personal contribution to the advancement of the art, sport and science of aviation and space flight over an extended period of time. The award was named in honor of Orville and Wilbur Wright's sister, Katharine, who was a crucial supporter of her brothers' timeless work in development of the first airplane.

The trophy is administered by the National Aeronautic Association in partnership with The Ninety-Nines, the International Organization of Women Pilots.

Feik will be joined by Kim de Groh, a senior materials research engineer at the NASA Glenn Research Center, who is being honored for her tireless efforts in mentoring young women for over two decades and for her numerous technical achievements in the advancement of materials durability in the space environment.

“The Katharine Wright Trophy was established 30 years ago to acknowledge the important role women have played in aviation. We are extremely proud to award the Katharine Wright Trophy to Col. Feik and Ms. De Groh for their outstanding careers in aviation and aerospace,” said Jonathan Gaffney, NAA president and CEO.

The award will be presented at the NAA Fall Awards Banquet on Nov. 12 at the Crystal Gateway Marriott in Arlington, Va.

comfortable with them, and I get a lot of information from them about how they feel about CAP, and that's what I really want to know."

Feik recalls a recent favorite trip to a conference in Texas.

"I was standing in line for dinner and a man came up to me, asked to take a picture with me, then hugged me and started to cry," she remembered. "He said, 'Ma'am, my cadets love you.' Sadly, I don't know who it was, but these things happen to me often and it keeps me going."

There are no signs Feik will be slowing down anytime soon.

"I feel like I'm investing in the future and this country," she said about her CAP involvement. "And I think a lot of people in CAP feel that."

Feik has been awarded an honorary life membership in CAP — one of the organization's highest honors. She also has a cadet award named after her — the Mary Feik Achievement, earned by more than 24,500 cadets since it was established in 2003.

A lifetime of aviation

Feik, who overhauled her first auto engine at the age of 13 and was teaching aviation mechanics for the U.S. Army Air Corps at 18, is considered one of the most influential women in aerospace by NASA and others. Her biography is lengthy and her list of achievements impressive.

Perhaps one of her most noteworthy awards to date is the Federal Aviation Administration's Charles Taylor Master Mechanic Award she received in 1996 in recognition of her many contributions to aviation safety. Feik was the first woman to ever receive the award, named for the Wright brothers' mechanic and engineer.

During World War II, the Annapolis, Md., resident became an expert on several fighter planes and is credited with becoming the first woman engineer in research and development for Air Technical Service Command.

"Basically my job, even as a teen, was a master mechanic in charge of flight training," she said. "I was a test pilot for 9,000 hours and wrote the flight training manual for the airplanes."

Feik, who wasn't allowed to study engineering in college — even with a 4.0 grade-point average — because she was female, got her first job in the Army Air Corps. She worked for 20 years with males only — airmen and sergeants.

"I had a wonderful, wonderful career working only with men," she said. "They pushed me and I worked hard."

Feik has also helped restore famous planes at the National Air and Space Museum. She stills works as a professional restorer of antique and classic aircraft.

Her husband of 54 years, Robert Feik, passed away in 2004, and was also a Maryland Wing member. He had a noteworthy career in aviation as well, serving as a chief scientist for Air Force Communications Command. This year, he was inducted into the Air Force Cyberspace Operations and Support Hall of Fame.

Feik's daughter, Lt. Col. Robin Vest, and son-in-law, Col. Warren Vest, are also CAP members. ▲



At aviation shows like this "Women Can Fly" event held earlier this year at Warrenton-Fauquier Airport in Virginia, Col. Mary Feik is like a magnet for Civil Air Patrol officers and cadets who are always eager to get their picture taken with her. Here, Feik, center, poses with members of the Virginia Wing — from left, Cadet Chief Master Sgt. Aaron Corbett, Cadet 2nd Lt. Gina Scalzo, 1st Lt. Kelly Muzzin and Cadet 1st Lt. Elena Shriner.

Photo courtesy of Christine DeLude