



Jean LaRene

Professional Pilot of the Golden Age
By H. GLENN BUFFINGTON

A Closeup of Jean LaRene in 1930 as an entrant in the Women's Air Derby, Long Beach to Chicago. (Photo-Associated Press)

The flying career of Jean La Rene had its start in 1928 when she learned to fly at the Municipal Airport, Chicago. During the following several years, she made a number of moves for employment while adding to her experience and flight time. Her comparatively low numbered license, 5700, received the 'Transport' endorsement on October 1, 1929, while she was employed by the Commandaire factory at Little Rock, Arkansas.

In the summer of 1930, while working for the American Eagle Company in Kansas City, Kansas, Jean flew in the second Women's Air Derby, from Long Beach to Chicago. She piloted an American Eagle Phaeton biplane, painted a canary yellow, to third place in this event. A charter member of the Ninety-Nines, Miss LaRene chaired the original membership committee and diligently served as the first Governor of the South Central Section from 1931 to 1934.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR: H. Glenn Buffington, 8401 Rainier Place South, Seattle, Washington, is Life Member 26 of AAHS—a native of North Dakota and was reared and schooled in Iowa and Missouri. He has been with The Boeing Company for the past 25 years as a flight technician and executive aid in the Production Flight Test organization. For two years prior to joining Boeing, he was a flight radio operator with Northwest Air Lines on their ATC routes in Canada and Alaska. He worked with Dr. John D. Brock of flight-a-day fame for 3 years after high school graduation and during the "lean years" in Kansas City attended three trade schools—Dickinson Business, Rearwin Flying School and Midland Radio. Today he combines the training in avocation and vocation.

(L to R) Henrietta Sumner and Jean LaRene photographed on the ground and looking over their plane at the Wiley Post Airport, before they tookoff in an attempt to break the women's refueling endurance record over Oklahoma City, Nov.-Dec. 1934. (Photo-International News)



A letter from Jean, written in a fascinating back-hand, in August of 1933, revealed: "I now have around 1000 hours solo time in various kinds of ships, including Swallow, American Eagle, Commandaire, Monocoupe, tri-motored Ford, Waco, Fleet, etc. Have a Rearwin Ken-Royce with Challenger motor, that I fly all the time. It is a fast plane and I use it for racing. It has pants on the wheels, cowling over the motor, and for racing we close in the front cockpit. It's a beautiful plane, cream and orange and black. In the 1931 Derby, flew the Ken-Royce but didn't win anything. In the 1932 Derby, I was forced down in wilderness north of Abilene, Texas, and had to walk seven miles before I came to a house, and then I was still eleven miles away from a town. No damage to plane, however.

"I am secretary of the Dallas Aviation School and have been there now for nearly three years. It is very interesting work. I take passengers on cross-country trips and every Sunday carry passengers on local hops as we always have a huge crowd at Love Field on Sunday. The people of Dallas are very air-minded."

While at the 1931 National Air Races, Jean flew the Rearwin to fourth place 'round the pylons in Event No. 26, a 30-mile race.

During the summer, fall and winter of 1934, Jean LaRene and two different partners made a number of unsuccessful attempts to break the women's in-air refueling endurance record of 237 hours 42 minutes, set the previous December by Frances Marsalis and Helen Richey over Miami.

These flights were made in a Curtiss Thrush, dubbed the "LONE STAR," and the service plane was a Stinson Junior manned by renowned pilots Kenneth Hunter and Earl Ortman. Jean's initial attempts to break the record were flown from Curtiss-Reynolds Airport, Chicago, with Mary Elizabeth Owens Campbell, Ft. Worth flier, as the second pilot. Bad luck frowned on them once, they were forced down by mechanical difficulties. At St. Louis and Chicago, the weather caused them to abandon their flight. One flight in this series started with a takeoff at 8:13 p.m., August 23, 1934, and was ended by engine trouble after 114 hours, just six hours short of five days round-the-clock flying.

Later in the year (1934), with Henrietta Sumner of Hollywood, California, as a partner, Jean LaRene made another attempt to hang up a new endurance record over Oklahoma City. After more than six days in the air, the flight was nearly ended. Lacking gasoline after bad weather

had caused them to fly to Dallas from Oklahoma City, they managed to refuel in time and start back to their home base. They headed north again when informed the weather over Oklahoma City had improved. They had been in the air continuously more than 156 hours, then. Their manager, Kenneth Hunter, reported the girls to be in good spirits, except for complaints about the cold weather. However, victory slipped away again due to a faulty engine.

Jean wrote of the experience: "On the flight in Oklahoma City was stayed up 198 hours and 15 minutes (8 days and 6 hours), and were forced down at eleven o'clock at night on account of motor trouble. The whole thing was, we took off with a motor that had over 200 hours on it since a major overhaul. So, of course, it couldn't be expected to run along forever. I think it did better than we all expected. It was just negligence on the part of the ground crew; the motor hadn't been properly taken care of, so that was that. I had to land that night with a heavy load, as they had just refueled us about thirty minutes before that. We had so much darkness to fly, more than day flying, that we had to refuel every night about 10:30. That was the most hazardous part of the whole thing, but really, a lot of fun.

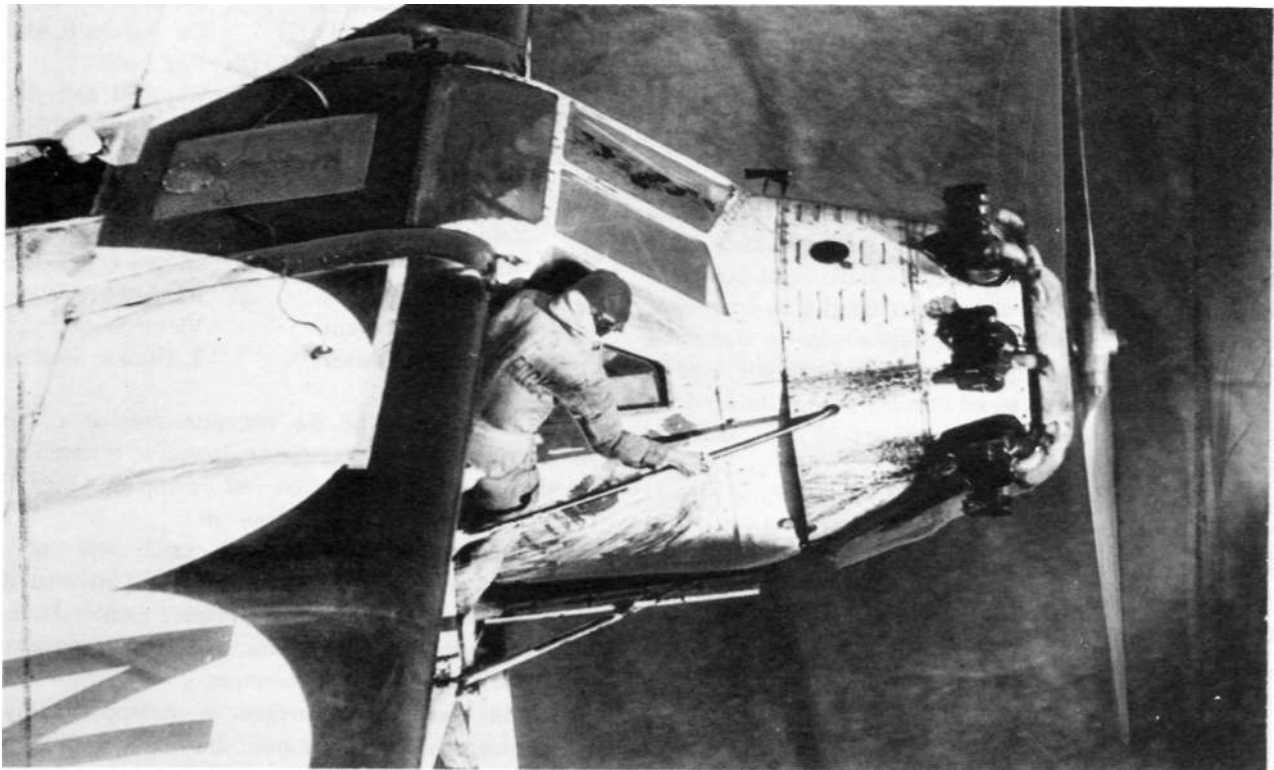
"I am not back at the aviation school now, but instead am connected with a new company that have just started up. We have the agency for the Waco plane, and will have other kinds soon. Don't know if I will try for the endurance record again, as it was mighty discouraging to get within 41 hours of your goal and then have to come down."

Further word from Jean in mid-July of 1935 reported: "I changed jobs the first of June, and am now working for the Lou Foote Flying Service at Love Field, and like it better than any position I have ever had. Am doing nothing but flying now, and it seems nice to be able to fly every day in the week. We have the agency for the Taylor Cubs, and then have a Stinson and a J-5 Travel Air open-job to fly, so am really happy. Am out in the territory most of the time demonstrating and trying to sell the Cub, and then haul passengers in the other two ships, too."

This epistle carried with it the suggestion that I take flight training with the Foote Flying Service, and it has always been rather a poignant thought that I was unable to do so. Jean expounded further, regarding her new boss and the superb Texas flying weather: "Mr. Foote is really a marvelous flyer, one of the best, and has been flying for nearly 18 years. He is an old army pilot, flew the mail and has had a world of experience. He helped survey all the American Airlines fields from New York to the Coast. This is really the place to be, to learn to fly, as we have practically all-year flying weather, and there hasn't been a day for months that we couldn't fly. I was up in west Texas last Saturday to Tuesday, and am out three or four days of every week, and I really enjoy it."

Subsequently, Jean LaRene and Lou Foote were married and after retirement they moved to the Hidden Valley Ranch at Lockhart, Texas.

Jean passed away in 1960 at Lockhart, following a stroke. Burial was at Laurel Lawn in Dallas, Texas. She had been a bright star in the galaxy of aviation personages.



Henrietta Sumner in a precarious pose on the cat walk during the LaRene-Sumner endurance flight.
(Photo—International News)