

The sky is her stage



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Kurt Ellison

Aerobatic pilot Wanda Collins does a couple of loops in her biplane, designed for high speed stunts.

Woman flier dreams of stunt-pilot career

By ETHAN BARON
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WHEN WANDA COLLINS pulls her little red and white biplane out of a high-speed dive, her field of vision starts to narrow as gravitational forces pull the blood from her head, and sometimes her eyesight fades completely for a couple of seconds.

"When that happens, I just kind of listen to the engine to tell what the plane is doing," says Collins, 27, an aerobatic pilot and flight instructor at Watsonville Municipal Airport.

In other maneuvers, such as the "outside loop," in which she flies a loop with the cockpit facing outside the circle, she pulls "negative Gs," anti-gravitational forces that push her blood the other way.

"The pressure on your head is really tremendous," she says. "Your eyes feel like they're going to pop."

A licensed pilot since the age of 20, Collins has been stunt flying for four years, and her participation in the Watsonville airport's recent 50th anniversary air show marked her entrance into the male-dominated world of aerobatic performers. Of the 350 or so performing aerobats in the United States, only about a

half-dozen are women, says Rick Nadeau, executive director of the International Council of Air Shows.

Collins hopes to make a career out of aerobatics, performing on the air show circuit where top pilots can make as much as \$5,000 per weekend. But while the job pays well, rolling, spinning, looping and stalling within a few hundred feet of the ground presents serious risks. Four stunt pilots crashed at air shows in the United States last year, and all of them died, Nadeau says.

In order to get hired for the larger shows, Collins will have to work at making a name for herself. To that end, she is planning a world-record attempt in the "inverted flat spin," a feat that will require her to climb to 24,000 feet (breathing bottled oxygen), turn the plane upside-down, and spin 68 times before she gets too low to pull out.

Collins is now working on "gyroscopic" maneuvers, in which "the plane just kind of tumbles out of control," she says.

Usually, her Pitts Special biplane — consisting of fabric stretched over a wood- and metal-frame, an enclosed two-



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Watsonville flight instructor Wanda Collins is one of only about a half-dozen women-stunt pilots in a world dominated by male performers.

See STUNT page 2 ▶

VCP Biography - C

Woman flier intent on career as stunt-pilot

STUNT, from page 1

RP
P. 2

seat cockpit, and a 260-horsepower engine spinning the propeller — does whatever she wants it to.

"You just point and go and it'll do it," she says.

There are exceptions. Once, when she tried to pull out of an inverted flat spin, Collins found her efforts at the controls were having no effect on the whirling, plummeting aircraft. "The plane wouldn't get out of the spin, and I just tried everything," she says. Panicking, she pushed the rudder, throttled down and throttled up until the plane finally recovered.

Because her plane has short wings, Collins must rely completely on the power of her engine to keep her in the air. "My plane doesn't glide," she says. If she lost power, the plane would drop like a brick, and she would have to try to jump from the cockpit and descend by parachute, she says.

Going through her stunts, Collins routinely subjects herself to six or seven positive Gs and four or five negative Gs, she says. Such forces are equal to or greater than those afflicting an F-16 fighter pilot under all but the most extreme circumstances, says Sgt. Frank Kreisman of the United States Air Force. But while the fighter pilot wears a pressurized suit to counter G-forces, Collins flies in street clothes.

When attempting to maneuver her plane under particularly heavy Gs, Collins has to take her left hand off the throttle and yank on the control stick with both hands to get the plane to respond, she says. She has started training with weights to boost her strength so she can better handle the G-forces, she says.

Presently, Collins is certified by the Federal Aviation Administration to perform stunts at 500 feet above the ground or higher, and she hopes soon to get the FAA certificate for 250 feet, and some time after that to be certified to perform as low as she wants.

For Collins, stunt flying for a living would be the fulfillment of a dream born in her childhood, when she used to sit and watch planes taking off and landing at the airport near her grandmother's house, and she would fantasize about flying them. "I

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NOV 20 1993

— Wanda Collins, stunt flier

used to sit and draw pictures of airplanes all day," she says.

Her fantasy was quashed, however, when a friend told her at the age of 12 that only men could pilot airplanes, but women could be stewardesses.

She gave up on her dream, she says, until she left her home town of Topeka, Kansas for a Colorado college, and after two years of general education decided to study aviation. She took a job at a convenience store, working night shifts to fund her flight lessons, but found it took a week's work to pay for one lesson. So she joined the Army reserves, and got a scholarship for flight training, along with an obligation to spend the next eight years working it off in monthly and annual training sessions.

At one of those sessions, in Kansas, she met her future husband, who was also in the Army. Four years ago, Collins and her husband moved to Santa Cruz, and soon after she began work as a flight instructor in Watsonville.

Since starting work here, Collins has had two children, both of whom started flying even before they were born.

"On each baby, I flew all the way until I couldn't fit in the plane anymore," she says.

Her three-year-old son Nicholas knows all Collins' stunts by name, she says, and he flies with her, but not in the Pitts because he's too small for the seat. Although she would like to see him performing aerobatics some day, she doesn't want to discourage him by pushing the idea, she says.

Collins' husband Brian says he doesn't worry too much about Wanda's stunt flying. "It's pretty routine," he said, after watching her perform at Watsonville airport's anniversary air show.

To help fund her aerobatic career, Collins is seeking sponsors, who will be able to put their logo on her plane, get passes for free

stunt-rides to give to employees, and perhaps get their names written in the sky when she gets her smoke-trail equipment next month, she says.

She also offers rides in the front seat of her stunt plane for \$100, which includes any aerobatics a guest wishes to experience, and a chance to take over the controls and perform loops and rolls with Collins coaching.

Collins would like to use her

talents and her plane to help children succeed in school, and has started contacting schools about arranging stunt rides for students who meet educational goals. She is pleased with the way her life is going, and would like others to get what they want out of theirs.

"It's really important to go after your dreams," she says. "If it seems impossible, just, you know, go for it, and it'll probably happen."