

Island Pilot ~ Jane Kelley

By Marijane Sipple

Jane Kelley and I were good friends long before we met in person.

One day I received a letter addressed to me in care of an aviation magazine that frequently used my articles, and my editor forwarded it to me. Jane Kelley, who was learning to fly aerobatics in Hawaii, read my article about beginning aerobatic flying, and wrote to tell me about how much she enjoyed it and asked questions about my own training.

We became frequent correspondents, comparing the planes we flew (Jane in a Cessna Aerobat and I in a Citabria), as well as our instructors, both stubborn males of German descent. Jane wrote about seeing a large school of sharks offshore where she was practicing on the North shore, and I replied by writing to her about my close encounter with a California Condor that wanted to fly in formation with me.

Writing about our flying experiences soon included exchanges about raising our children and favorite recipes. A flight canceled by severe weather was a common frustration. I urged her to visit me if she was in the LA area, and she promised to give me a flying tour of the Hawaiian Islands if I would visit her in Honolulu.

Jane had a great sense of humor. I was especially amused by her story about flying in the Powder Puff Derby from Calgary, Alberta, Canada to Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Beth Oliver, the friend who flew with her, had six children and Jane had five, making a grand total of eleven children motherless for the duration of the race. Upon arrival in Calgary, they met a team they would fly against in a plane called "The Sterile Stork" sponsored by Zero Population Growth. She said it was the only time the race officials gave a racing team the entry number Zero.

When my husband learned he was being transferred to Hickam Air Force Base (adjoining Honolulu International Airport,) I immediately wrote Jane with the good news. She said she would meet us at the airport as soon as I knew our arrival time.

Once we made the major decision to go by sailboat, I wrote Jane about our plans and told her I wouldn't have an arrival time. Jane lived on the beach below Diamond Head and asked for a photo of my boat so she could watch for us.

She didn't see us sail by, but she did see our photos and story in the Honolulu Star Advertiser.

Shortly after our arrival, I was busy stacking supplies in the cockpit that we didn't need (such as ten cans of corned beef hash) when I heard a voice call "Ahoy PUFF!" I popped up from the cabin to see a petite, cheerful girl dressed in jeans and a T-shirt holding a beautiful plumeria lei. I jumped on the dock and received a traditional Hawaiian welcome from Jane Kelley.

I gladly accepted her invitation to take me to lunch and on a "short tour." I should have known. The tour was of the general aviation side of Honolulu International Airport. The first person I met was John Bryan who owned a maintenance shop at the airport. While introductions were being made, a tall, lanky man emerged from a two-place aerobatic Pitts Special biplane. Art Daegling, Jane's instructor, held up his dirty hands in place of a handshake, and showed me the fiberglass attachments he had made so Jane could reach the rudder pedals. Jane jumped in to try them and promptly sank out of sight. Art sighed and said, "My next project will be a fiberglass booster seat."

Art, a retired Navy pilot who now flew for Hawaiian Airlines, managed to raise enough extra cash flying in the movie "Tora, Tora, Tora" to buy a Cessna Aerobat and a Pitts S2 to start his Polynesian Sport Aviation flight school.

My "short tour" ran overtime as we wandered past the T-hangers where pilots were busy working on their planes or just soaking up the Hawaiian sun and visiting. The pilots, bonded by their common love of flying aerobatics, were a mixed group when it came to background and aircraft.

Sam Burgess was a retired Air Force pilot who flew in WWII, Korea, and Vietnam.

He was flying a Jungmeister that he built himself and was currently building his own Pitts Special. Roy Collier, a professor at the University of Hawaii, was building an airplane in the living room of his house (with the patience of his lovely wife Gini). He was going to name it "Bird of Paradise." In the meantime, he rented Art's Cessna Aerobat. John Weiser, owner of KUMU Radio station, had a restored AT6-Texan.

Jane was the wife of Dr. Richard Kelley, a Honolulu pathologist at Queen's Hospital. When Richard's parents, Roy and Estelle Kelley, retired Richard agreed to work part-time at Queen's and devote his time to operating the family hotel business, the Outrigger Hotels and Resorts. After his parents moved into a penthouse apartment in one of their hotels, Richard and Jane moved into their large home right on the beach below Diamond Head.

They needed the space with their lively group of five: Kathy (19), Chuck (18), Linda (16), Bitsy (13) and Colleen (11). In addition to keeping her crew organized, Jane had logged over 2,000 hours and acquired an impressive list of ratings since she got her Private Pilot's license in 1968.

I was never able to understand the reason, but I never heard any of Jane's family talk about her flying. When they went on family vacations to one of the other islands, Jane would invite me and my son, Sean, along and we would fly with Jane in her Cherokee Arrow while the rest of the family took a commercial flight. Sean and I loved it!

Thanks to Jane I was able to explore all the Hawaiian Islands and fly into airports not used by the commercial jets. I especially enjoyed our flights delivering supplies to the Kalaupapa leper colony on Molokai. The landing strip there was unattended and had rocks and ocean at either end. I said a little prayer as we flew over the crashed planes that didn't make it.



We also flew into the remote and (at that time) unattended airport on Maui's Hana Coast to visit the grave of Charles Lindbergh, who died when he was living on Hana on August 26th, 1974, at age 72. It was a special trip for us. We likely would not have gone if we had known then more about the man so admired for his solo nonstop flight from New York to Paris in 1927.



Once Jane built up her confidence flying the Aerobat, she was hooked. She started working as an aerobatics instructor for Art Daegling, saving the money she earned to buy her own single-place Pitts Special.

One day following a practice session Jane was returning to the airport when the engine coughed and quit. She had just flown over a garbage dump and had the blue Pacific on all three sides. Making a 180 to return to the garbage dump was her only choice. Safely down, she wondered what to do next. Navy men working on the landfill arrived and informed Jane that this was NOT THE AIRPORT. They gave Jane a ride in their mammoth dump truck to the nearest phone so she could call a taxi.

Art said that was not good publicity for his plane with its brightly checkered PSA lettering to be sitting smack in the U. S. Navy Garbage Dump...right on the approach path to Honolulu International where any arriving pilots could see it, including the FAA.

Jane was always looking for a challenge and she got it when she finally got her Pitts Special, N21JK. I had never seen her so discouraged as she learned to manage the frisky biplane. Once that was accomplished her next goal was to get her ATP (Airline Transportation Pilot) rating.



Our membership in the Aerobatic Club of America (ACA) and the International Aerobatic Club (IAC) inspired us to write a monthly newsletter for the members of our chapter. It was then included in the publications of the two organizations. We had fun collaborating on stories about our members and activities. Just before the end of the month we would invade Richard's office at the Outrigger to print and address the newsletter to mail.

Jane managed to time it so we would finish just in time to join the Kelley family in their private dining room for a delicious meal by their French chef. I felt well rewarded for my effort.

As I made the difficult decision to leave Hawaii and start a new life in the U. S. Virgin Islands, Jane was there to guide me and support me in whatever decision I made.

The night before I left, I asked Jane if we could renew our previous correspondence. Jane grinned and said, "I would rather write a letter than talk to someone on the phone!"

When I sent Jane a Christmas letter, I included the results of a study done by Dr. Champe Poole titled "The Personality of the Aerobatic Pilot." Poole said his survey described aerobatic pilots as typical introverts...EXCEPT when surrounded by close friends and others interested in flying. Then they become extroverts!"

That was my friend Jane.