

AUSTRALIAN BIOGRAPHY

A series that profiles some of the most extraordinary Australians of our time



Nancy Bird Walton

1915-2009

Pioneer Aviator

This program is an episode of **Australian Biography** Series 1 produced under the National Interest Program of Film Australia. This well-established series profiles some of the most extraordinary Australians of our time. Many have had a major impact on the nation's cultural, political and social life. All are remarkable and inspiring people who have reached a stage in their lives where they can look back and reflect. Through revealing in-depth interviews, they share their stories—of beginnings and challenges, landmarks and turning points. In so doing, they provide us with an invaluable archival record and a unique perspective on the roads we, as a country, have travelled.

Australian Biography: Nancy Bird Walton

Director/Producer Frank Heimans **Executive Producer** Ron Saunders

Duration 27 minutes **Year** 1993

Study guide prepared by Kate Raynor © Film Australia

Also in Series 1: Neville Bonner, H.C. 'Nugget' Coombs, Dame Joan Hammond, Jack Hazlitt, Donald Horne, Sir Marcus Oliphant

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SYNOPSIS

In the early 1930s, aviation was opening up Australia and Nancy Bird began taking flying lessons at Charles Kingsford Smith's Flying School in Mascot. In 1934, she became the youngest commercially licensed female pilot in the British Commonwealth. The following year, she logged the fastest time between Melbourne and Adelaide.

Nancy became known as the 'Angel of the Outback' for her work with the Far West Children's Health Scheme. She flew many hours in her Leopard Moth, operating the first aerial baby clinic and aerial charter services. During World War Two, she became Commandant, Women's Air Training Corps, and in 1950 she founded the Australian Women Pilots' Association.

Nancy received the OBE in 1966 and the Order of Australia in 1990. She published two books: **Born to Fly** and **My God! It's a Woman**.

CURRICULUM LINKS

This program will have interest and relevance for teachers and students at middle to senior secondary and tertiary levels. Curriculum links include Australian History, Women's Studies, Contemporary Australian Society, SOSE/HSIE and English.

ACTIVITIES AND DISCUSSION POINTS

The Program: Story of a Life

- Did you know anything about Nancy Bird Walton prior to watching this program? If so, has your opinion of her changed in any way?
 - Why might the filmmakers have thought Nancy a worthy subject to be included in the **Australian Biography** series?
 - Does the program leave you with any questions about Nancy?
 - Imagine that you are a producer on the **Australian Biography** series and that you could have access to three people from Nancy's life—family, friends, colleagues, critics. Compile a list of four questions for each of these people, using this additional interview material to further develop the portrait of Nancy given in this program. How would you decide who might offer a valuable perspective on her life and achievements? Consider what new details you might gather when formulating your questions. Write a production statement outlining what you hope to achieve.
- The film-makers intercut shots of Nancy responding to questions posed by interviewer, Robin Hughes, with occasional photos and archival footage. Choose four family photos from different periods of your life and use them to construct a series of autobiographical snapshots. Who is in each photo? Who took the photo? Where were you? What was the occasion? What was the mood? Does the photo correspond with your memory of the time? What has happened to the other people (if any) pictured in the photo? How have you changed since then? Do you like the photo? Why/why not?
- Nancy shares a number of anecdotes from her life. Choose one of her stories and explain what it tells us about her. Imagine you could tell just one story from your life to convey a sense of you and your family. Write this story and then at the end note what you think it reveals about you.
 - Choose six adjectives to describe Nancy.

- Do you think Nancy would be satisfied with the way the program represents her?
- What do you think are Nancy's strengths and weaknesses?
- List three qualities you like about Nancy.
- Make a list of three questions you would ask Nancy if you had the opportunity to interview her. What do you think her responses might be?
- Imagine you wanted to make a feature film about Nancy's life. What would you call it? Who would you like to cast as Nancy? What song might you choose as the film's theme song? How would you structure the narrative?

Nancy's Story

- Nancy says that as a child, 'I used to dream I could fly', and that at the age of four, she was jumping off fences declaring, 'I'm an epiplane'. She knew what she wanted from life before she was even old enough to pronounce it properly. What did you dream about being as a child? Are these dreams still important to you? What dreams have you had to abandon and why?
- For Nancy, flying was 'the ruling passion of my life'. What is your passion?
- Nancy was born in a small country town in New South Wales called Kew, one of six children. During the Depression her father ran a general store. Nancy left school at the age of 14 to work as her father's bookkeeper and housekeeper, looking after her father and her uncle while her mother stayed in town with her siblings so that they could receive a decent education. Imagine you are Nancy. Write a letter to your mother describing your daily routine at this time. Remember Nancy says, 'It was a good life, but we worked hard', and she longed to escape out into the fresh air.
- Nancy went to her first air pageant at the age of 13 and was so thrilled by her first flight that she paid the pilot a week's wages (one pound) to take her up while he performed aerobatics. Imagine you are Nancy. Write an entry in your diary describing how you felt to finally fly.
- Everybody laughed at Nancy when she said she wanted to become a pilot, because no one believed she could make it happen. As her commitment became clearer, her father worried about the perils of a career in flight. She had also made herself indispensable as his bookkeeper and housekeeper and he was reluctant to lose her. Imagine you are Nancy. Write a letter to your father explaining why you feel you must pursue this course, despite his fears and reservations.
- What does Nancy mean when she says she went 'barnstorming'? How does she explain the derivation of this term?
- Nancy travelled around the country to various country shows and fairs, charging ten shillings for joy flights in the Gypsy Moth her father and great-aunt had helped her buy. During this period, she met Stanley Drummond of the Far West Children's Health Scheme. He invited her to fly the air ambulance out past Bourke. She tells a wonderful anecdote about collecting a poor man with pneumonia. How did she reassure his wife that she had delivered him safely to hospital? What did this man do in honour of her assistance?

- Working in inland Australia was rewarding, but it was also isolated and lonely. Nancy craved the company of other pilots. How important is it to have people around you who share your interests?
- In several scenes we see Nancy engaged in public speaking. What is your impression of her in these scenes?
- While Nancy was travelling through Europe, was she aware of the rise of Nazism?
- Nancy describes her relationship with her husband as a shipboard romance that lasted 51 years. At the end of the interview, when asked about the best thing that ever happened in her long life, she replies without hesitation, 'Falling in love and marrying the man I love ... better than flying'. What makes a successful marriage? What qualities does Nancy demonstrate in her professional life that would be assets in her personal life?
- During the war years, Nancy trained and recruited women to serve in the Women's Auxiliary Air Force. She was wartime Commandant of the Australian Women's Air Training Corps. Why were unions against women entering the air force?
- How does Nancy, in her late 70s at the time of this interview, account for her tremendous energy?
- Nancy has published two books: **Born to Fly** and **My God! It's a Woman**. Read one of these books and present a review of a chapter to the class.

Born To Fly

- Write a brief history of aviation in point form, noting dates, places and people of significance.
- The famous pilot, Charles Kingsford Smith, opened a flying school at Mascot in August 1933 and Nancy, having saved 200 pounds, was one of his first pupils. Write a profile of Kingsford Smith including an outline of his achievements.
- What can you discover about the Flying Doctor Service?
- Choose one of the planes Nancy mentions and write a report on it.
- What was Jean Batten's record and how long did it stand?
- In which season was the air turbulence at its worst? Apparently de Havilland, the manufacturers of Nancy's plane, were concerned about her flying in the conditions out there. Nancy describes the plane as bucking like a horse. How did she feel about the turbulence?
- Compare the times taken to travel from Melbourne to Sydney by horse in 1900 and by jet in 2000.
- Nancy says that at one period she became a very rigid pilot and failed to get the best out of her aircraft. Describe the conditions and the pressures she was under that led to this situation.
- What are Nancy's two reasons for her record of never crashing?
- While in Europe prior to the outbreak of war, Nancy attended the Paris Air Show. What sort of events would you see at such a show? She also studied civil aviation and organised an exhibition which she brought back to Australia. What was included in this exhibition?
- Nancy is a pioneer of the Australian aviation industry. Since she began flying in the 1930s, commercial aviation has revolutionised travel and business. Make a list of some of the benefits that commercial aviation has provided to Australia.

My God! It's a Woman

- What personal qualities would a woman need to succeed in aviation in the 1930s?
- Nancy mentions being inspired by three aviatrixes: Amy Johnson, who flew from England to Australia in 1930; the German pilot, Ely Beinhorn, who she later became friends with; and Jean Batten, who Nancy calls 'the greatest aviatrix of the early pioneer days'. Research one of these women and report your findings to the class. Who inspires you? Write a profile of your role model for a newspaper.
- Nancy says that most of the women flying in the 1930s were women of 'independent means'. What does that mean? How much would it cost today to attain a commercial pilot's licence?
- Research another woman who has succeeded in a field traditionally dominated by men.
- Using the internet, find out what percentage of pilots with a current commercial licence are women.
- Nancy only tells one anecdote about a man being reluctant to fly with her and needing a stiff drink before he would board a plane piloted by 'that little girl'. How do you think she would have dealt with men suspicious of her abilities?
- In 1950, Nancy founded the Australian Women Pilots' Association. What are the aims of this organisation?

FURTHER READING AND RESOURCES

Books

- Susanna De Vries, **Great Australian Women Volume 2: From Pioneering Days to the Present**, Harper Collins, Pymble, 2002
- Norman Ellison, **Flying Matilda: Early Days in Australian Aviation**, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1957
- Randal Flynn, **Nancy Bird: Born to Fly**, Macmillan, Melbourne, 1991 (This book is designed for primary school students.)
- Andrea Lofthouse, **Who's Who of Australian Women**, Methuen, North Ryde, 1982
- Sue Stafford, **Women With Wings: Portraits of Australian Women Pilots**, Powerhouse Publishing, Sydney, 2002
- Nancy Bird Walton, **Born to Fly**, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1961
- Nancy Bird Walton, **My God! It's a Woman**, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1990

Videos

- Australian Aviation: The Magnificent Years, 1920s-1970s**, National Film and Sound Archive, Canberra, 1996, 61 minutes
- Just Australian Planes**, Film Australia, 1988, 108 minutes
A compilation of documentary footage and newsreels. It covers the Royal Australian Air Force, the development of commercial aviation and all types of recreational flying.

Websites

ABC Online—Australians—Nancy Bird Walton
www.abc.net.au/btn/australians/bird.htm

Australian Aviation Archive
<http://users.chariot.net.au/~theburfs>

Australian Aviation History
www.jet-flight.com

Australian Aviation Museum
www.aamb.com.au

Australian Women Pilots' Association
www.awpa.org.au

Monash University—Nancy Bird Walton: Pioneer Australian Aviatrix
www.ctie.monash.edu/hargrave/nancy_bird_walton_bio.html

National Foundation for Australian Women—Nancy Bird Walton
biographical entry
www.womenaustralia.info/biogs/IMP0124b.htm

Women in Aviation Resource Center
www.women-in-aviation.com