



THE FIRST FEMALE PILOT IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA

**The First Female Pilot in Papua New Guinea**

*Author: Paul A.C. Richards AM, May 2021*



**Source: David Harvey Collection - Kundiawa Airstrip**

A very good friend of mine David Harvey OAM and his late wife, who is now in his 90s, spent some time in Papua New Guinea during the early 1970s as part of several visits as Baptist volunteers. Recently at my Probus Club meeting he showed a video of his exploits. 'Travel Papua New Guinea Style'. It obviously sparked vivid memories of those visits as he came across a book written by a female pilot Eileen Steenson who was a flying instructor in Australia and for a short period in New Zealand.

Eileen went to PNG and became the first female commercial pilot in that country. Her very descriptive writing of her time in PNG has been preserved in her book and makes a fascinating read. Here are some excerpts which my friend also experienced during his visits to PNG.

*I could now give my full attention to the circuit and landing. Flying over to inspect the strip—an operational requirement—I noted that, as was typical of Chimbu, there was a quartering tail wind of about ten knots. It was not strong, but on a strip of limited length this could mean the difference between running out of strip and stopping with a safe margin.*

*I must put the aircraft right on the threshold to ensure a safe landing run. Turning on to final I lined up with the strip, crabbing a little to allow for drift. I must lower full flap and reduce power a little, since an overshoot would result in my hitting the mountain at the*



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*far end. Yet one could not afford to undershoot, because at this altitude the aircraft would not pick up sufficiently if power was needed in a hurry.*

*The cliff face was coming up rapidly and I increased power a little in case of down-draught. As the aircraft skimmed over the gorge, I pulled the power completely off and eased the control column back against my chest. Golf Kilo Charlie flopped down like a big duck on all three wheels, and only light braking was necessary to pull up at the loading bay. My female passenger opened her eyes. "That's the best flight I ever had," she said. Her kind words did much for my morale, even though I couldn't help wondering if she really had expected ever to make Chimbu.*

*The young husband greeted his wife and proudly took the infant in his arms. The district of Kundiawa is densely populated and, as usual, those with nothing better to do had come to see the "balus" (big bird) arrive. Eyes nearly popped out as the "new fella Missus bilong Australia" stepped out of an aircraft without a pilot. Eventually the truth dawned, and although I had no way of knowing what the men were thinking, the less shy women made their reactions quite clear. They stroked my arms and legs, muttering admiringly, "Goodfella Missus captain bilong balus." I felt I should soon start purring. I was doubtful if these women had ever had a bath but I could not shrink from their admiring compliments. Besides, we girls had to stick together.*

*After the cargo boys had unloaded the aircraft, my new passengers, some Chimbu teenage girls, were installed for the return trip. A Roman Catholic priest assisted the girls with their seatbelts. The Reverend Father had probably never seen a woman commercial pilot before, much less operating in the Papua New Guinea Highlands, but nevertheless the sweet, white-headed old gentleman solemnly blessed his flock with no appearance of anxiety, and the pilot devoutly hoped that she was included. After all, although it would be easier to take off than it was to land, a high mountain had to be avoided shortly after becoming airborne.*

*When all was ready I picked up the mike and called, "Madang, Golf Kilo Charlie taxiing Chimbu for Goroka." This call also served the purpose of alerting other aircraft in the area of my intentions. As it was a one-way strip, take off would have to be made into the direction from which I had landed. This gave a quartering headwind, which was preferable to a tail wind. Intent on allowing myself every available foot of take-off run, I taxied right up to the leeward end. Like many other strips in Papua New Guinea, this one formed part of the local golf links where the small European population and a few of the more sophisticated locals enjoyed their leisure. The perimeter of the strip was indicated by a line of white cone markers, designed to break on impact, which were placed at regular intervals.*

*Pulling up parallel with the line of end markers and at right angles to the take-off direction, I did the pre-take off checks. Then, keen to avoid using up precious strip length*



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*while lining up, I assisted the turn with a little differential braking on the inner or starboard wheel. The result was better than I had bargained for. The castoring tail-wheel immediately whipped round ninety degrees, while the aircraft hardly moved forward at all. As the nose lined up with the strip I felt a slight bump at the tail, so, pulling the parking brake on, I opened the door and looked aft. A cargo boy was already tossing the shattered remains of a marker down the gorge. I jumped out to check the aircraft but discovered to my relief that the marker was the only casualty. With the last of the incriminating evidence down the gorge, the cargo boy called out, "Samtin natin [something nothing] Missus captain." I thanked him gratefully, and with an extremely red face checked that the strip was still clear before resuming the take off procedure.*

*The take off was uneventful, but apparently the delay in reporting departure had caused some concern at Madang. "Golf Kilo Charlie, are you airborne yet?" crackled over the speaker. I was in no position to reply just then, having just left the ground. Mixture, pitch, and flaps all had priority over radio. When a free hand was available I replied, "Madang, Golf Kilo Charlie, affirmative, departed zero seven. Estimating Goroka two four." After Madang had acknowledged with "Golf Kilo Charlie," I settled into the climb over rapidly-rising terrain.*

*The Chimbu Bluff on the left jutted out above the altitude of the aircraft, and although it was an excellent landmark it somehow seemed to wear a sinister look. By the time the Kaw Kaw Gap came up my face felt slightly cooler, although the shame was still very real. Changing from HF to VHF I called, "Goroka Tower, Golf Kilo Charlie, landing in four from the Kaw Kaw." Frank's voice came back. "Golf Kilo Charlie, this is Goroka Tower, report left base for three five right, wind one three, one zero knots." I had a slightly quartering tailwind but this was no problem on the long runways at Goroka, and in addition the grade tended to be uphill. Nearing the strip at right angles I reduced power, setting the aircraft up for the approach configuration. Just as I reached for the mike to report "base" the ever vigilant Frank came over with "Golf Kilo Charlie, clear to land three five right." I acknowledged with the call-sign, turning ninety degrees to line up with the runway. Then, progressively reducing speed and power while I increased the flap settings by ten degrees up to their maximum of forty degrees, I rounded out for the touch-down. The main wheels beat me to the ground, with the tail-wheel touching down a moment later. This was quite O.K. for a long strip but unsafe for a short one. Still, perhaps one tries harder on a short strip.<sup>1</sup>*

Another extract from the book was especially appreciated by David perhaps more than most people because in 1970 he landed at Goroka, and in 1971 flew in the "Milk Run" flight from Mt. Hagen to Lae, landing at a number of airstrips including Kundiawa in the Chimbu area, the airstrip that Eileen Steenson took off from in her story. Again in 1993, the last time I flew out of Kompiam was in the wet season in the middle of a rain storm. We flew up though a huge gorge with sides only vaguely visible through the pouring rain. There was a course a big



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difference from Eileen's flight. Our pilot knew where he was, and it was a long time short of "last light".

*When I taxied up, I alighted and asked one of the pilots if he would tell the chief pilot that I was overnighing at the hotel, since conditions were beyond my experience. Both men agreed that the normal route had closed but they assured me they knew a gorge which would still be open. Shaking my head, I replied, "It's no weather, and certainly too close to last light, for me to flounder round in unfamiliar gorges. I'm staying here." "But there's no need, Eileen," persisted one of the most likeable and most helpful of our Highland pilots. "Just follow us." I knew how easy it was to lose another aircraft in poor visibility, and with no observer I felt I could not cope with unfamiliar terrain at low altitude and still keep sight of the leader. Perhaps I was being cowardly, but I much preferred to miss out on the dinner party to which I had been invited that night. Once more I refused, while expressing appreciation of the offer. "But Eileen, you can be home in twenty minutes," persisted the more venturesome of the two. "There's nothing to it." Again, although weakening, I pointed out my inexperience in the area and the fact that darkness would fall in under forty minutes. Once more I was "howled down," and to my everlasting shame I finally agreed to follow the other aircraft.*

*Before the second aircraft had taken off the first one had vanished in the murk. Making a mental note that I would have to keep closer, I opened the throttle as the wheels in front lifted off. We were climbing south and I only managed to get patchy glimpses of the ground through wisps of cloud. There were no landmarks I could recognise, and the strain of keeping the leading aircraft in sight was becoming a nightmare. But there could be no turning back now; the loss of the leader would be followed by certain death. I had five passengers on board and I was responsible for them. Mountains jutted out of cloud on either side of the narrow gorge, while glimmerings of a river appeared below.*

*After an eternity of fifteen minutes the radio crackled and a voice came over. "You are now in the Asaro Valley, Eileen. See you on the tarmac." The leader could not have realised that I had no idea at what point we had entered the valley, although it must have been further south than normal. Visibility was so restricted that it was impossible to sight the aerodrome. All I knew was that it could not be very far away, because the first aircraft had already reported in the circuit. The next one would be reducing speed any moment for his approach, and I too must reduce speed and hold the course until the strip showed up. Yes, the second aircraft had been cleared to land. The strip would show up any moment now, but I must get lower to remain in sight of the ground—or what I could see of it. It was good to know that both other aircraft were on the ground—at least the risk of collision no longer existed.*

*"Golf Kilo Charlie, report position," came Frank's voice from the Tower. I replied, "Estimate position two miles south of the field, leaving 800 feet to maintain visual*



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*flight.” (Although I was only 800 feet above the terrain, in actual fact I was close to 6,000 feet above mean sea-level.) Frank acknowledged and said, “Report sighting field.” A solid wall appeared in front of me. I turned steeply on to a reciprocal heading, while pulling the power off to get below the cloud. Then at 400 feet above the terrain I set up for cruising, and once more resumed what I considered to be the track. Within seconds the blackness came down, so I had to turn again and descend. As conditions were a little better to the south-east, I decided to attempt to get underneath and approach from that direction. If I could only be sure of my position! As soon as I could see a few hundred yards of ground underneath I radioed a description, and obviously someone in the Tower recognised the area, because I was asked to “stand by” for a magnetic heading. Within seconds the heading was transmitted, and I turned until it was indicated on the compass.*

*Once more, as blackness began to loom up ahead, I descended as low as I dared. So great was my belief that the strip would show up any moment that I left it almost too late to do a 180-degree turn. Straightening up and heading for the only clear patch, I advised Goroka that it was quite impossible to penetrate the prevailing conditions, adding that I was maintaining visual flight somewhere south-east. Goroka gave me alternate headings, but after a matter of seconds all of them presented the same solid black wall. It was getting dark now, and I switched on the cabin lights in addition to the navigation lights which were already on. No, it was better without cabin lights. After all, the map was of little use when I did not know my exact position, and was in any case unable to follow a heading: I would have to concentrate on the ground.*

*Suddenly a muddy river appeared underneath. I knew I must land before darkness fell, and although the river was overflowing its banks, it must be the lowest part of the terrain. Goroka Tower gave very few transmissions now, possibly realising I was beyond the aid of any human being. I appreciated the silence because it gave me time to think. For the past ten minutes I had been wishing that I was carrying freight instead of heading five innocent passengers towards an untimely death. I advised Goroka that I was following a river in a roughly northerly direction, and that I would remain over it. My chances of flying into a mountain would be reduced while over the lower ground. Rapids began to appear in the river as the ground began to rise abruptly to meet the cloud base. I started what must be the last turn before I put the aircraft down on the rough terrain beside the flooded river. This would be similar to crashing in a car at eighty miles per hour, so it would be unlikely that there would be any survivors. I would advise Goroka when I pulled the power off for the landing. Then, as I glanced toward the outside of the turn before straightening up, I couldn't believe my eyes. I was almost sure I had glimpsed mown grass. Steepening up the turn, I came round once more to sight what appeared to be a freshly-mown strip, most of which was obscured in cloud. With a prayer of thanksgiving on my lips, I hastily grabbed the mike to advise Goroka that I was turning final for an unidentified strip, finishing with as cheery a “goodnight” as I could muster.*



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*The relief in the answering “goodnight” was very obvious. The aircraft came in to a smooth landing, and within seconds of switching off we were engulfed in cloud and darkness.*

*My prayer of thanksgiving must have resembled that of Mother’s so many years before. I turned on the cabin lights, to see five smiling faces which gave no indication that they had been aware of the ordeal through which they had just come. The tropical downpour was at its height and in contrast the cabin felt safe and cosy. “One fella master he come,” said one of the passengers, pointing to distant flickering lights. Soon three Lutheran missionaries arrived with spare umbrellas to escort us to a mission home.*

*As I entered the light and warmth of the living room with its cheery log fire, I felt almost as though I had returned from the dead. I learned later of the tense scene in the Control Tower at Goroka, during which those most concerned had listened in silence to the drama. The Manager, the Chief Pilot, and my two colleagues were among those present. I gathered that the scene must have resembled that of a pit-head at the time of a mine disaster. When one of my colleagues was later accused of persuading me to do the flight I completely exonerated him, since the choice had been mine.*

*Next morning this man was first on the strip to take off half my load; he thought I might not realise that it would be impossible to lift a full load off this small strip. I had already checked the performance chart in the aircraft and confirmed my suspicion that for the strip length and elevation the load would be drastically reduced, but I appreciated his consideration. The name of the strip was Rintibi, and although it was only six minutes’ flying time from Goroka I had not seen it during my check flights.*

*Missionaries and school children came down next morning to wave us goodbye. When I stepped on to the tarmac at Goroka a short time later, our cheery Manager was the first to greet me. “You’ve been a good girl, Eileen,” he said. This was not exactly what I thought of myself, but I loved him for saying it. Our Chief Pilot added, “I won’t have to check you into Rintibi now. You’ve checked yourself in.”<sup>2</sup>*

This is descriptive writing at its best. Sharing such experiences brings a greater appreciation of the skills especially in New Guinea of those who have played an important role in aviation over the years. Although a little less hair raising than Eileen’s flight it reminded me of my own experience in the very early 1960s having the pleasure of landing on the beach at Lake Pedder, a lifetime experience I will never forget.



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David's experiences in PNG has also been captured in his unpublished manuscript 'Papua New Guinea Memories'.

Here's an excerpt:

*Then it was back to Jacksons Airport with its bustling colourful crowd of humanity, some travelling to all manner of fascinating destinations, but most with nothing to do but watch. At last, our flight was called. By now we were beginning to think we were the "jet set". Boarding the aircraft, a Fokker Friendship, we settled down pleased to be out of the heat. At 12.50 pm we were off again. For a start, there were views down onto flat jungle and swamps. Miles and miles of swamp with a maze of sluggish-brown rivers, and then into broken cloud with glimpses of a very rough wild countryside with towering mountains and deep gorges, and occasionally a native village perched on a razor-backed ridge. Everywhere there were rivers, all of them rushing muddy torrents.*

*After a while we flew over the Huon Gulf with clear blue water and a backdrop of enormous cloud draped dark blue mountains. We could see a runabout with a long white wake and a couple of outrigger canoes, all a long way down. At 1.50 pm, one hour after take-off we landed at Lae. The sky was blue, the sun was shining and it was very hot.*

*Leaving Lae twenty minutes later we flew up the valley of the Markham river for what must have been fifty miles, and then over the mountains and down to Goroka, 5142 feet above sea level. The airstrip was wet from recent rain but was now fine and pleasantly cool. Twenty minutes later and we were in the air again. The country was very rough. Foot tracks could be seen wriggling along the ridges in all directions and native gardens hanging onto the sides of ridiculously steep hills.*

*The aircraft climbed solidly from Goroka until the countryside appeared to be thousands of feet below, and then quite suddenly we appeared to be only a few feet above the tree tops with big mountains above in the clouds on both sides. This we learned later was the Daulo Pass, 8,128 feet above sea level and gateway to the famed Wahgi Valley.*

*At 9.45 am we on our way for the 35 minute flight. I sat next to the pilot and took video shots. Kompiam airstrip is about 5,000 feet above sea level, with a drop close to the north-western side of about 1,500 feet to the Sau River. The whole area is surrounded by high steep mountains, Coming in to land the pilot circled, flying straight towards a steep high hill until the last moment before banking steeply for the final approach. There was a steep drop off at the landing end of the strip. The far end of the airstrip ends with a very high bank, so the pilot only had one chance to get the landing right. As usual a number of local people had gathered to see the aircraft land and our initial impression was that their clothing was more primitive than that seen at Kumbareta.*



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**Cessna 206 at Kompiam**

*In early November, we flew by MAF Cessna 206 to Mt Hagen for a three days shopping spree. On the return flight some members of the WATCH team accompanied us far as Kumbareta. Our pilot was new to the Kompiam run and after taking off from Kumbareta he got out a map to check the route. I cheekily asked if he knew where he was going. There is a big drop on the landing end of the Kompiam air-strip, a bit like landing on an aircraft carrier I would imagine, and on approaching the air-strip the aircraft hit a down draft. The pilot gunned the engine to gain height with the result that we hit the runway with a thump that Gary Le Cras heard away up at the mission station. We heard later that the undercarriage had been damaged, fortunately not enough to prevent the take-off for the flight back to Mt Hagen.*

*Another interesting diversion was the day RAAF Caribou aircraft landed and took-off frequently on the Kompiam airstrip on what, we were told, was an Operational Conversion Course for new pilots. It was not so interesting for the occupants at the local market at the far end of the airstrip. Every time an aircraft turned to take-off they were blasted with a cloud of dust.*

*The MAF Cessna eventually arrived in a rain squall just before 1.00 pm. We took off with the weather rapidly closing in. The pilot knew that once we got beyond the gorge the weather was clear, but nevertheless the three of us, the pilot, Janet and me, nervously peered out through the mist to the densely wooded sides of a gorge that appeared to be very close before the Cessna broke out into a hole in the clouds. At 1.35 pm we landed at the Mt Hagen airport, pleased to be there and again waited until Joan Ross and Sharon Martin arrived in the mission van.*

*On Tuesday January 26th, Janet and I left Mt Hagen airport at 1.45 pm to fly by a MAF Twin Otter aircraft to Tekin. There was considerable cloud cover and a strong gusty wind. Coming in to land was very bumpy. On board were national passengers bound for Oksapmin about 5 minutes flying time down the valley. On landing, the pilot advised them that they would have to walk as it was far too windy to risk landing there.*





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**Twin Otters at Tekin**

*Our main source of entertainment were the aircraft that landed regularly at the airstrip. MAF and Talair, Twin Otters and Islanders. Some wag had painted a sign "Tekin International Airport". In addition we found time for a few interesting walks around the area.*



*On Thursday the 11th of February, we left Tekin to return to Mt Hagen. The MAF Twin Otter arrived at 11.00 am, and first stop was Oksapmin just a few minutes flying time down the valley. At Oksapmin I managed to transfer to the co-pilots seat from where I could take better video shots, and could not have wished for better weather when flying through the spectacular Strickland Gorge. We landed briefly at an airstrip at a village named Iagali. About 3,500 feet above sea level, Iagali looked so lush and green in contrast to our experience of Tekin. In the air once more, we flew back through Strickland Gorge, and on to Tari in the Southern Highlands Province, home to the Huli tribe known as wigmen.*

*From Tari the aircraft climbed steeply in order to get sufficient altitude to fly through the notorious 9,000 foot high Tari Gap. It was there, two years previously, that an MAF aircraft crashed when the pilot and his family were returning from furlough. Tragically the entire family was killed.*



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*By this time, the afternoon clouds had built up, and after a very bumpy flight we landed at Mt Hagen at 1.15 pm, pleased to be back on the ground.<sup>3</sup>*

David also had the pleasure of visiting Lake Pedder before it was flooded. However, on that occasion it was on foot when he took a group of scouts by foot to Lake Pedder and to his surprise an aircraft landed on the beach in front of us piloted by Stan Tilley.

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<sup>1</sup> E.Steenson, *Flight Plan PNG.*, Published by Rigby, Adelaide (1974) pp. 64-67

<sup>2</sup> Ibid pp. 72-75

<sup>3</sup> D.Harvey, Unpublished manuscript, '*Papua New Guinea Memories*'