Women in Leadership

By Dr. Richard Kelley

There are many outstanding female leaders in Travel & Tourism, politics, business, the media, entertainment, sports, and science. That never surprised me because my mother Estelle L. Kelley, co-founder of our company, was a strong and outspoken leader at a time when opportunities for women were extremely limited worldwide by social custom, religious beliefs, and even by law.

I was recently reminded of how much things have changed in the 21st century when Meg Whitman, the former President and Chief Executive Officer of eBay (1998–2008), won the Republican gubernatorial primary election in California with a whopping 64 percent of the vote.

I also thought about women’s leadership in a personal and nostalgic way earlier this month when The Ninety-Nines, Inc., the premier women’s flying organization, held their annual convention in Kailua-Kona. I’d like to share those thoughts and some memories with the readers of Saturday Briefing.

The story really starts in 1897 when Amelia Earhart was born in Atchison, Kansas. When she was 23 years old, a chance ride in a small aircraft hooked her on flying. From that first flight, she went on to become one of our nation’s best-known aviators. Before she disappeared during a flight in the western Pacific, she set many aviation records, including the honor of being the first woman to fly solo across the Atlantic Ocean in 1928. That record flight took place only one year after Charles Lindbergh’s similar accomplishment. She was also instrumental in founding The Ninety-Nines and served as its first President.

Hawaii played a big role in Amelia Earhart’s career in aviation. She first came to Hawaii on the ocean liner Lurline, arriving on December 27, 1934, just five years after Roy and Estelle Kelley arrived in Honolulu from Los Angeles. That was also only one year after I was born here at Kapiolani Hospital. In addition to the bulky “steamer trunks” that travelers used during those days, Amelia had some extra baggage—a Lockheed Vega monoplane with its wings specially braced so that it could be lifted on and off of the ship’s deck without damage.

Amelia, along with her family and friends, stayed at the Royal Hawaiian Hotel, where Honolulu Sheriff Duke Kahanamoku welcomed her to the Islands.

There was little time, however, for leisure during the next two weeks. Earhart toured the neighbor islands with Stanley Kennedy, President of

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Inter-Island Airlines; planted a tree along side other “celebrity trees” on Banyan Drive in Hilo; lectured at the University of Hawaii; and prepared her aircraft for a long overwater flight.

On January 11, 1935, she took off from Oahu’s Wheeler Field to become the first pilot, male or female, to fly from Honolulu to Oakland, California. A monument on Diamond Head Road near the lighthouse memorializes that event.

Just two years later, in March 1937, Earhart began a journey to circumnavigate the world. It would not be the first time a pilot had circled the globe, but by taking an equatorial route of 29,000 miles, it would be the longest such journey. The first leg from Oakland to Honolulu was made in a twin-engine Lockheed Electra 10E and went fine. The second leg, however, did not get off to as fortunate a start. On takeoff from Luke Field on Pearl Harbor’s Ford Island, the heavily laden aircraft blew a tire and was severely damaged.

But Earhart was not easily deterred. She resumed her circumnavigation journey from Oakland in May 1937 and flew 22,000 miles eastward to Miami, South America, Africa, Asia, and New Guinea. On July 2, 1937, she started the final 7,000-mile section across the Pacific Ocean with Howland Island the intended first stop. Before she could reach Howland, radio contact was lost, and the aircraft disappeared. To this day, controversy surrounds the true fate of Earhart and her navigator Fred Noonan. Some believe they were captured by the Japanese military and later died or were killed.

It is not surprising that other women in Hawaii were inspired by the memories of Amelia Earhart to enter aviation.

I immediately think of my friend Marguerite Gambo-Wood who lived on Black Point on Oahu. “Ma Wood” was a charming aviatrix who started Gambo Flying Service in 1939. She is well known by World War II buffs because while giving a flying lesson early one Sunday morning in 1941, she

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suddenly found herself in the midst of a group of Japanese Zeros on their way to bomb Pearl Harbor. As memorialized in the movie *Tora Tora Tora*, she grabbed the controls, flipped her aircraft out of the way, and escaped unharmed.

Almost 30 years later, Ma Wood helped three other ladies get their start toward a career in flying. They were my late wife Jane, my sister Pat Kelley, and a University of Hawaii marine biologist named Lennie Muttick Sorenson. All became active in the Aloha Chapter of The Ninety-Nines and participated in many flying activities both here and on the mainland, including the famous Powder Puff Derby, a transcontinental race across the U.S.

Lennie Muttick Sorenson had a celebrated career in aviation. She was perhaps the first aviatrix to solo pilot a Cessna 182 across the Pacific Ocean, going from San Jose (California) to Honolulu, to Tarawa (Gilbert Islands), to Port Vila (New Hebrides), and finally delivering the aircraft in Brisbane (Australia). She went on to fly for Air Micronesia, affectionately known as “Air Mike!” She landed on fields covered with crushed coral on such islands as Truk (now known as Chuuk), Ponape (now known as Pohnpei), Palau, and Saipan. She became the first on-line female Captain for Continental Airlines and later occupied the cockpit’s left seat as a Continental 747 Captain, flying across the Pacific to places such as Narita, Japan, and Sydney, Australia.

Unfortunately, my sister Pat endured a battle with cancer and, although she survived her illness, had to give up flying.

Jane Kelley was a top pilot, too, with many ratings and was scheduled to be the first female pilot for Hawaiian Airlines. Regrettably, she lost her life a few hours after contracting a severe case of influenza while flying in an aerobatic contest in Arizona.

To recognize Jane’s life and many contributions to aviation, I established a memorial fund within The Ninety-Nines’ Amelia Earhart Memorial Scholarship Fund to provide scholarships for aspiring young women with goals of qualifying or advancing in an aviation-related profession. Many friends and associates contributed to the fund, including Ed and Lynn Hogan, then owners of Pleasant Hawaiian Holidays, our largest wholesale tour operators at the time.

Independently, Ma Wood established the Marguerite Gambo-Wood Fund through her will to fund scholarships for Hawaii aviatrixes. The fund is still active today.

I have been told that the Jane Zieber Kelley Fund has inspired other contributions, and the total amount available for scholarships has grown significantly in the past three decades.

It was particularly moving that my daughter Linda Jane Kelley was able to attend the recent Ninety-Nines convention on the Big Island. She not only represented our family, but got to hear just how much the fund honoring her mother, Jane Zieber Kelley, has meant to The Ninety-Nines and its members over the years.

Indeed, the connected lives of Amelia Earhart, Estelle L. Kelley, Ma Wood, Lennie Muttick Sorenson, Pat Kelley, and Jane Kelley are truly inspiring. Just think of what the next generation of women leaders will accomplish!