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Book Review: Jackie Cochran: Pilot in the Fastest Lane

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***Jackie Cochran: Pilot in the Fastest Lane.* 2007. Doris L. Rich. Gainesville, Florida: University Press of Florida, 279 pp. \$24.95 ISBN: 978 0 8130 2506 2.**

Reviewed by Zitha Mokomane

This book explores the intriguing life of Jacqueline ‘Jackie’ Cochran, a pioneer American aviator, considered to be the one of the most gifted racing pilots of her time. It demonstrates how passion for something, confidence, and assertiveness can overcome all forms of adversity. Born Bessie Lee Pittman around 1906, Jackie rose from being a barefoot girl who, out of poverty, stole chickens to help feed her family to being a legend in aviation history.

The book is divided into 30 sections tracing different aspects of Jackie’s life. The first section, ‘Sawdust Road’ gives an overview of her early life, including: (1) her birth as the youngest of the five children of Mollie Grant Pittman, and Ira Pittman, a skilled carpenter and millwright who moved from town to town working in saw mills, (2) her first jobs which included helping expectant mothers before and after childbirth; working 12-hour shifts for 6 cents an hour in mills; and being a domestic worker and ‘shampoo girl’ in a beauty parlor, working 14-16 hours a day; and (3) her meeting of Robert H. Cochran, and ultimate pregnancy at 14 years. The second section ‘Becoming Jackie’ details her move to Montgomery Alabama where she began to flourish ‘in the heady urban atmosphere’, taking dancing lessons, working on commission, and eventually buying her first car—a Model T Ford—a purchase that played a major role in her aviation career:

“Unable to read well enough to understand the car’s repair manual but unwilling to pay for maintenance she made a careful study of the motor and within weeks was able to complete such complicated tasks as grinding the valves. Thus her first car marked the beginning of a lifelong ability to understand the mechanical function of the most sophisticated aircraft” (pp. 13-14).

From section 3 ‘Floyd’ onwards, the book begins to entertainingly describe Jackie Cochran’s bountiful social life and contribution to aviation history. This includes her meeting and eventual marriage in 1936 to Floyd Odlum, a wealthy industrialist widely reputed to have been one of the ten richest men in the world in the 1930s, and her first flying lessons which she began taking on July 23 1932 at Roosevelt Field on Long Island. Her other major aviation achievements highlighted in the book include, among others:

- Flying solo on August 1st, 1932—the ninth day of her flying lessons;
- Obtaining the flying license within three weeks of starting her lessons;
- Receiving the commercial pilots’ license in 1934—two years after starting lessons, and the same year she flew her first major race, the 12 000 mile MacRobertson Race from London, England to Melbourne, Australia
- Entering, in 1935, the prestigious Bendix, a cross-country race from Los Angeles to Cleveland, Ohio, in which no woman had ever competed. Although she did not win the race, her entry was a victory for women as she had ensured that they

could now compete in the race. Together with another female aviator, Amelia Earhart, Cochran's initial application to enter the race was denied on the grounds that the race was for men only. Cochran protested, she said, "I can't give up. If I concede on this, women will be barred from racing for years, maybe even forever." She succeeded in her protest and an agreement was signed that allowed Cochran and Earhart to compete in the race.

- Cochran's 1937 flight from New York to Miami in a record-breaking 4 hours, 12 minutes;
- Being the first woman to make a blind landing in 1939
- Receiving the Clifford Burke Harmon Trophy (a trophy awarded annually to the world's outstanding aviator) as the outstanding woman flier in the world in 1938, 1939 and 1940.
- Breaking the 2,000 kilometer international speed record in 1940;
- Appointment to the staff of the U.S. Army Air Forces and director of Women's Air Force Service Pilots (WASP) in 1943.
- Being the first woman pilot to break the sound barrier, in 1953.
- Establishing 69 intercity and straight-line distance jet records, between 1962 and 1964.
- Becoming, in 1975, the first woman to be honoured at the U.S. Air Force Academy with a permanent display of her memorabilia.

The last section of the book, 'The Last Years', states that Jackie Cochran died on August 9 1980, and that on March 9 1996 the US Postal Service issued an international airmail stamp honouring Jacqueline Cochran.

This is an entertaining and impressive book with an accessible writing style and organisation. It will be appreciated by many people, not only those interested in aviation. Perhaps the only minor limitation of the book is that it leaves the reader wondering if indeed, Jackie's assertion that Mollie and Ira Pittman were her foster parents was at all true. Although she denied her family and her past, the book provides evidence that Cochran remained in constant touch with them and provided for them over the years.