

On July 15, 2019, Phyllis (Penney) Gaul celebrated the 72nd anniversary of her first solo flight. The pillow she is holding was made by a friend to commemorate that flight.



THE SKY'S THE LIMIT

Phyllis Penney Gaul soars into aviation history

“Acadia gave me independence. It gave me an introduction to a lot of wonderful people who became lifelong friends.”

By Rachel Cooper ('89)

When 17-year-old Phyllis Penney left Newfoundland in 1942 to attend Acadia University in Nova Scotia, she was moving to another country. Away from home for the first time, she had no inkling that five years later she would make aviation history as Newfoundland's first female pilot.

Yet this would not be her first encounter with aviation history. On May 20, 1932, when Phyllis was six, Amelia Earhart landed at the Harbour Grace airstrip in preparation for the historic flight that would make her the first woman to fly solo across the Atlantic. Phyllis's father was given the honour of driving Amelia from the airstrip into town and back.

“There was no room in the car for me, but my older brother Bob was allowed to go along with our dad,” Phyllis recalls today. “Amelia sat in the front seat, and her two crewmen sat in the back with Bob. Not to be left out completely, I ran beside the car as far as I could.” She was nine days short of her seventh birthday.

Phyllis was an independent spirit, and when she arrived at Acadia she embraced her studies and the University's activities. But World War II was casting a long shadow. A visit to Acadia the following year by Bob and their cousin Bill, both in the navy, stirred Phyllis to make a choice. “There was too much pull to go home and help in the war effort in some way,” she says. “I returned to St. John's and worked for the Royal Navy's Captain of Destroyers.”

Taking Flight in Gander

In 1946, after the war, Phyllis moved to Gander, where she began working at KLM Royal Dutch Airlines as a ground attendant and secretary to the station manager at the Gander Airport. She also joined the local flying club.



When she took her first solo flight in a Piper Cub on July 15, 1947, she entered the history books.

“That's a memory that will always stay,” Phyllis says. “You're up there, and once you take off, it's nobody except you and the sky – and the ground, of course. I can't tell you how exciting it is to think that you can do such a thing.”

The town of Gander later named a street after her and the North Atlantic Aviation Museum created an exhibit dedicated to Phyllis as one of the Women in Aviation. Over the years, it has not been unusual for Phyllis to receive a phone call or an e-mail from somebody wanting to do a school project about her.

In 1950, KLM transferred her to Montreal where, two years later, she married Richard Gaul, whom she had met in Gander and become friends with in the flying club. They raised four children, two girls and two boys, and although Phyllis's flying was now on hold, her interest in travel persisted. When the children were older, she returned to school to become a travel agent, a career that took her all over the world. She now lives in Victoria, B.C.

Penney Gaul is now an MD specializing in diagnostic imaging.

Phyllis and her son Richard Gaul, May 2019. Although Richard did not graduate from Acadia, his time here allowed him to develop skills and confidence to pursue a successful career as a photographer and producer in New York.

While Phyllis never returned to Acadia to complete her degree, she also never forgot it. “Acadia gave me independence,” she says. “It gave me an introduction to a lot of wonderful people who became lifelong friends.”

The Next Generation

As her children grew, Phyllis often talked enthusiastically about her university experiences. “When we grew up, we knew a lot about Acadia,” her daughter Kathy says. “Even though we were in Montreal, Acadia was probably the first university we heard of.”

In fact, two of Phyllis’s children attended Acadia. Penney Gaul (’80), now an MD specializing in diagnostic imaging in Calgary and Vancouver, is in Acadia’s Sports Hall of Fame as a swimmer. She is one of only a handful of Acadia varsity athletes to have won four conference championships. As a member of Acadia’s impressive women’s swim teams of the late 1970s, she added two national titles as well.

Penney’s brother Richard also attended Acadia for two years. Although he did not complete his degree, he has fond memories of Acadia, Penney says.

Kathy, who studied at the University of New Brunswick, was also a champion varsity swimmer. She and Penney competed against each other in the regional championships and then at the nationals, and both were winners at different times.

“One of the reasons I went to Acadia was I knew of Jack Scholtz, the swim coach, and several of my swimming peers in the Montreal area were either planning on going to Acadia or were already there,” Penney says. “The swim team provided me the comfort of belonging somewhere. It was a perfect fit. And the foundation I got on the academic side put me in a great position to be successful in medicine.”

Penney is immensely proud of her mom. “She was constantly doing courageous things – to keep things interesting or to make things better or just to see what would happen,” Penney says. “I think her story is a real reflection of the type of people that go to Acadia and succeed.”

Today, Phyllis remains an independent spirit. The years since her time at Acadia have been good, she says. “I’d encourage anybody, whenever new opportunities arise, to take advantage of them. Learn to fly!” And she laughs.

Acadia Reminiscence



“For Initiation Day in September 1942, all the first-year students had to wear many layers of their clothes inside out and backwards as well as don some interesting headgear or hat – as well as gloves and boots. We were quite the vision! When I look at the photo now, I laugh. I remember the fun as if it were yesterday. I loved my time at Acadia.” – Phyllis Penney Gaul

“One of the other swimmers and I were hitchhiking to StFX in Antigonish to see a football game and Dr. Beveridge, who was Acadia’s president, picked us up – it was such a small town – and he drove us there and drove us home. I also remember going to the homes of several of the students who lived nearby, for Thanksgiving dinner, or even a Sunday dinner. I just felt as though I belonged, and I felt safe there.” – Penney Gaul