

Berkshire Eagle

A life filled with flights of fancy

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Monday, September 13, 2004 - GREAT BARRINGTON -- For as long as John Koladza can remember, his little brother Walt loved airplanes.

As young kids growing up in Connecticut, John, now 87, recalled that he and Walt would trek out to local airports as often as they could to watch the planes take off. The first time they did it, John was 9 and Walter was 7. And, to tell the truth, John was not much of an airplane guy. He would later have a successful career as a railroad man.

But, he said, his brother loved to watch the planes.

"The airport had grass runways. This was the 1920s, remember, but Walt and I would hike out there and spend the whole day watching them take off," John said.

Walt Koladza, who died Sept. 1, was a man who lived his life almost exactly as he wanted to -- watching planes, flying planes and teaching other people how to fly planes.

Koladza owned the Great Barrington Airport, and both John Koladza and Edward Ivas, the chief pilot at the airport, emphasize that the facility will continue.

"Absolutely," said Ivas. "We will be going forward as a full-service airport. That will not change."

Well, it will, a little. Walter Koladza, who had been a constant at the airport since 1942, will not be there anymore.

"Walt was a very people-oriented person," said Donald Moulthrop, who received his commercial and flight instructor's license from Koladza in 1949 and went on to a long and successful career as a commercial pilot for Northwest Airlines and, later, Delta.

"I think he could have made a living at just about anything he wanted," said Moulthrop. "He was a very good communicator, but he was also a very good listener, and that is rare."

Koladza purchased the airport in 1945 with a fellow test pilot, Charles Sharp, and a Great Barrington native, C. Louise Decker, the former owner of Louise's Beauty Shop.

Decker also was a pilot -- and Koladza's fiancée. They married and purchased Sharp's interest in the company in 1946.

"Louise was a beautiful woman," Ivas said. "When I first met her, she reminded me of Katharine Hepburn. And she was a fine pilot in her own right."

The Koladzas were married for 30 years. Louise died in 1975.

A segment of the population in the 1940s believed that the concept of female fliers was, perhaps, a little too progressive. Louise Koladza, who was as good a pilot as most men, blew that concept to smithereens. And it's at least partly why Walt always encouraged female fliers.

Several years after Joan E. "Betty" Vigneron and her husband, Morgan, both earned their licenses in 1964, Betty was considering a cross-country solo flight.

"That was actually my fault," said Morgan Vigneron, chuckling. "I had to get back to the East Coast earlier than Betty."

"Walt was very encouraging," said Betty Vigneron. "He said, 'Go for it. You can do it. I know you can.' "

So it was that in 1988, Betty Vigneron soloed from San Francisco to Great Barrington. She flew during the daylight hours; the trip took 2 1/2 days.

Vigneron is one of several local female pilots, including Valerie Locher and Glenna Blackwell, who fly out of Great Barrington Airport.

"He could chew you out," said Betty, "but he could also instill you with a great deal of confidence."

All of Koladza's students concede that Koladza was tough as a teacher.

"Tough but fair," amended Will Brinker, who got his pilot's license in 1975 from Koladza.

"He used to smoke a cigar when he was teaching," recalled Brinker. "And if you were doing something wrong, he'd start puffing on that cigar. And the more he puffed, the more nervous you got, and the cockpit would be filled with smoke. You couldn't even breathe, and then it became harder to concentrate. And you wanted to say, 'Hey, Walt, some of this isn't my fault.' But overall, he was pretty easy to get along with.

"He was a pilot's pilot," he continued "A gruff guy on the outside, very, you know, macho, but a softy on the inside."

"He was a test pilot during [World War II]," pointed out Morgan Vigneron, "and if you're a test pilot, you have to be very careful if you want to survive. He insisted his students be very careful."

"Oh yes, Walt was very tough," said William Weigle of Egremont, a commercial pilot who knew Koladza for a half-century. "But you don't have a lot of chances to make a mistake up there. You can't call time-out and take a lunch meeting. So he wanted to make sure people got it right the first time."

In fact, Koladza's friends and supporters, of which there are legion, believe that Koladza's principal contribution to aviation was training dozens of local men to be commercial pilots.

"He was very, very helpful to a lot of aspiring pilots," said Weigle.

"I don't know how many commercial pilots were trained under Walt," said Moulthrop. "A considerable number, certainly."

Koladza himself several years ago estimated he trained about 7,000 pilots overall, and probably more than 40 commercial pilots.

But his other contribution, which, according to Brinker has gone almost unnoticed by the town, has been to turn the Great Barrington Airport into "a community asset. Unless you are here on a regular basis, you have no idea what goes on here."

"We get local traffic and transient traffic," said Ivas. "The Berkshires are a popular spot. A lot of people fly up here from New York City."

Still, although Koladza may have been a community resource, an excellent teacher and a wonderful spokesman for aviation, he and his wife and all the employees of the airport made the place feel, well, neighborly. They clearly cared about pilots and their families and friends.

There were social events in the basement of the airport for many years, and Koladza was also president of the KB Club, which is the "Koladza's Boys' Club." That was a club that met regularly for many years.

But Weigle has his own story about how Walt and Louise Koladza took care of their own.

It was the night of Nov. 9, 1965, and Weigle, a commercial pilot, was leaving Norfolk, Vt. As he was pulling away from the runway -- boom! All the lights, everywhere, went out. The entire landscape was dark. It was the Great Northeast Blackout, which covered 80,000 square miles in the United States and Canada that night.

Weigle had flown blackout missions during the war, so this was nothing he hadn't seen.

"But that didn't mean I wanted to do it again," he said. "I was looking over where Concord, [N.H.], was, and there were no lights. Albany, New York, no lights."

Weigle radioed the Norfolk Airport to phone Great Barrington Airport and tell Koladza he was coming, and that he somehow needed lights.

Fortunately, as Weigle was about to land in Great Barrington, several local electrical stations regained power. But as he neared the runway, he saw that Walt and Louise Koladza had figured out the light problem. They had lined up several cars along either side of the runway with their lights on, to enable Weigle to land.

"I think it shows," said Weigle, "the kind of people they were."