



Australia's first female skydiver

Jean Burns

PORTRAIT OF A PARACHUTIST

By Greg Weir and Kelly Graham

Like so many skydivers over the decades, Jean Burns made her first jump as the result of a bet. But this girl was not like others. The seventeen year-old had already made history as Australia's youngest licensed female pilot.

Then, in 1937, she had another entry in the record books as Australia's first 'lady parachutist' to leap from a plane.

As a little girl, Jean had liked climbing trees and lamp posts to get to high places. Even while others were swimming, Jean's highlight was diving. The higher the better. She'd joined the Junior Royal Victorian Aero Club at fourteen and started flying lessons just before her 17th birthday. "The boys tried to get rid of me," she laughed, "but I stuck around!"

One day, while watching a parachute descent at Essendon, the plucky, pint-sized teen, who used a pile of cushions in the cockpit, made a bet with another pilot. He had declared that she wouldn't be able to jump from a plane. "Motormouth me said there'd be nothing to it," she recalled. "He bet me some flying hours on his account that I would not be game if he could arrange it." Well, arrange it he did. "And that's how I got sucked in!" explained Jean more than 70 years later. In the end, she did get those free flying hours.

Parachuting was very much in its infancy in the thirties. Since Australia's first freefall descent from a plane in 1926, the idea had caught on with RAAF pilots, trained how to use these so called life belts of the air. There was also a handful of barnstorming daredevils thrilling big crowds with parachuting displays. One of those parachuting performers was Felix Mueller, a pastor's son who'd been raised on a farm in western Victoria and shared a passion for flight with his business-minded mate, Reg Ansett. Mueller was happy to help Jean deliver on her bet.

Jean's first jump was at Essendon in November 1937, from a DH4, 'The Spirit of Melbourne'. At 3,200 feet, she snagged her rig as she started clambering out of the cockpit. Mueller had to jab at her equipment with all his force to get it loose. "Finally, I went overboard, like a bundle of washing!" she said. Jean told a reporter at the time that she screwed up her eyes and was filled with panic, her hand gripping tightly on her ripcord. "I pulled," she said, "and nothing happened." She could feel her heart pounding like a sledgehammer. Suddenly, she felt the drag of the parachute across her thighs. "I opened my eyes and looked up above me, and there, billowing like the wing of an angel, was my parachute. It was lit up by the sun and seemed to me to be one of the most beautiful and satisfying sights I'd ever seen."

At least, that was the poetic account published in the papers back then. Nowadays, Jean remembers very little about the first jump. She recalls Mueller in one ear reminding her not to lose the ripcord because he would have to send away to America for an expensive replacement. In the other ear, the pilot was telling her not to pull the ripcord too soon, or they would all be crashing down together.

It was reported that 2,000 people witnessed the descent. The brave Miss Burns landed in a nearby paddock and was dragged by the wind until a gallant Tiger Moth pilot ran over and smothered her chute.

EXPERT PILOTS ARE DANCERS, TOO.



Jean was an auditor's assistant in an accountant's firm. She stood all of five feet and half an inch (154cm) tall. Nobody had taken much notice of her as the kid who'd been hanging around hangars. But now, she was in the spotlight, feted as quite the media darling for her achievement. The papers dutifully reported Jean's return to work, surrounded by beaming colleagues. A few days later, she made the news again when she took a stumble down some stairs at the theatre. "Now that was exaggerated," she stresses. "It was just a little whack on the head and I got much worse than that on some of my landings!"

Jean enjoyed her second jump so much more than the first, amazed by the brilliant colours around her and delighted when some birds flew past. "It was very, very pleasant," she recalled, "and quite delightful." She absorbed the slight hissing noise as air passed through the vent in her American Russell parachute. And, once again, she had an untidy landing.

Soon after her first jumps, Jean received a letter from aviation officials, telling her she was not allowed to make parachute descents, but they would not prosecute. She doesn't know why, but they suddenly had a change of heart. Jean still has the paperwork listing the requirements for her to continue jumping and she remembers having to fold her chute in front of the right person to prove her ability.

In those days, she said they had to make do with the hangar floor for packing on. "I suppose things are much better than that today?" she asked, before learning that some things never change.

The persistent teenager continued jumping, but it wasn't for the fun of it. "I did get to like it, but I liked the money better!" she explained, "I was saving to buy my own plane." She travelled with Felix Mueller to air shows around Australia, thrilling the crowds with entertaining displays and interesting landings. On one jump, there was a single runway surrounded by grass in every direction. "Guess what I landed on?" she lamented. "I was dragged along the runway, taking bark off my knuckles, and I had to dress up for a ball that night, too." On another jump, Jean landed in a lagoon. "I came out covered in water lilies and smelling to high heaven. It was very embarrassing."

On her fifth descent, Jean delayed for a full 500 feet before pulling the ripcord, reportedly worrying some of the spectators.



Girl as Parachutist
MISS JEAN BURNS, of Rathdown street, East Brunswick, who made her first parachute jump at Essendon in November, has now received the approval of the Civil Aviation Board as a parachutist, provided the parachute is folded by a person who holds a licence for that purpose. She is Australia's first woman parachutist.

Parachuting Forbidden

No person shall drop from an aeroplane by parachute.
That seems clear, under Civil Aviation Board regulations. Dropping by other means is not forbidden, possibly because the dropper is in no condition to be prosecuted.
But Miss Jean Burns, 17, of Rathdown Street, East Brunswick, who has made two parachute descents, will not be prosecuted. An official of the Board said today that she would be advised that she had been at fault.
The old regulations, made before Commonwealth aviation legislation was found to be invalid, stipulated that nobody under the age of 21 should descend by parachute. Proof of ability to fold a parachute and carry out a dummy-drop was also necessary.
Because parachuting was becoming more general, the official added, the Board would soon consider drafting new regulations, and doubtless, if Miss Burns could prove her competence in other respects also, she would be granted permission to continue her descents.

"Once the chute is opened the descent is pure joy. All round you the country is laid out in vivid colours. It looks so beautiful from up in the sky, it makes you cry out for joy. For a few minutes you sit suspended like some kind of immortal being above the world. There is a wonderful silence, broken only by the sound of the air passing through the chute."

Jean Burns

Australia's first female skydiver



There was a particularly lucrative display in Townsville that earned the pair 125 pounds. The rig was said to have cost 80 pounds. It was a small but successful business, which allowed Jean to keep flying Ansett's Porterfield plane by day and study at business school by night.

Apart from the landings, there were some other painful memories. After coming down in the edge of a reservoir in Victoria, Jean was helped out by another teenage parachutist, Colin Cathels, who was the star of an aerial circus. He died a week later, in a skydiving mishap in front of a stunned crowd.

Over a year or so, Jean made about a dozen jumps. "We called the last three or four of them 'fun jumps'," she said, "but they were all aimed at getting me to hit the spot better!"

Then the war came along. "It ruined everything for us," said Jean. Pilots couldn't fly because of fuel limitations and many airmen were away at war. Jean got married, had children and the time flew by with school runs and lunches. There was no more flying and no more skydiving.

Some years ago, one of her sons persuaded Jean to consider flying again. But she found the trial flight quite boring, flying flat and level with so many rules. "I went go-carting instead!"

Nowadays she's a spritely 90 year-old, whose great grandsons are beginning to think she's pretty cool. A street in Essendon Airport was recently named Burns St in Jean's honour and she's looking forward to meeting the skydivers of today at the APF Conference. She wonders if the rheumatism in her ankles is connected to those heavy landings and she marvels at our modern equipment.

Modest about her role in history, Jean is amazed at how skydiving evolved to baton passing, let alone to people flying together in freefall formations. "I could never have done that!" she declared. "You'd have thrown me out years ago!"

"When I look at the newsreels about modern parachuting, I was just a wee drop in the ocean. Nothing like what you lot are doing today. If you'd all seen some of my landings, you'd have shuddered!"



finding jean...

The story of tracking down Jean Burns is as much about persistence as the woman herself.

A chance meeting at a BBQ in Gympie in 2006 led aviation researcher Greg Weir on an amazing search. He got chatting with a retired Qantas pilot, who turned out to be the son of the pilot who took Jean Burns up for her first jump. Greg wasn't sure if this incredible woman would still be alive. He searched through birth, marriage and land title records for months, finally finding the unassuming great grandmother, living an anonymous life in the suburbs of Sydney.

Jean started as a 'project' for Greg, but quickly became a friend. He engineered a meeting between her and another pioneer aviator Nancy Bird Walton, who'd both known of each other since the thirties but never met. Greg also arranged for a street to be named after Jean. He wanted others to hear and acknowledge this remarkable woman's story.

Awesome work, Greg! Thank you.

