

Sheila Scott

A BIOGRAPHY

JUDY LOMAX



Contents

Acknowledgements	vi
Introduction	1
<i>Chapter One</i>	6
<i>Chapter Two</i>	16
<i>Chapter Three</i>	30
<i>Chapter Four</i>	41
<i>Chapter Five</i>	57
<i>Chapter Six</i>	73
<i>Chapter Seven</i>	89
<i>Chapter Eight</i>	103
<i>Chapter Nine</i>	115
<i>Chapter Ten</i>	127
<i>Chapter Eleven</i>	141
<i>Chapter Twelve</i>	157
<i>Chapter Thirteen</i>	169
<i>Chapter Fourteen</i>	189
<i>Chapter Fifteen</i>	204
<i>Chapter Sixteen</i>	221
<i>Chapter Seventeen</i>	234
<i>Chapter Eighteen</i>	245
Epilogue	255
('Dancing the Skies', by John Gillespie Magee, read at Sheila Scott's funeral and memorial services)	

Introduction

LITTLE DID I think, as I admired Sheila Scott's elegance and courage from afar during her few brief years of flying glory in the 1960s and early 1970s, that I would ever meet her, let alone know her so well that I would be with her when she died. When I was a young wife and mother, struggling with domesticity, Sheila Scott was my heroine – although I am not normally inclined to hero-worship. I followed her progress from one record-breaking solo flight to another with a mixture of awe and envy – envy that even after many hours in a minute cockpit she could emerge looking as if she had just left an expensive session in a beauty salon, and awe that she dared to undertake her long, lonely ordeals in the first place.

No sooner had she completed one solo flight round the world than she was planning another. Between 1965 and 1972 she broke over a hundred records, many of which still stand. She was, as her publicity handouts claimed, living proof that it was possible to combine femininity and success – and success moreover in aviation, still very much a male-dominated world. Then, as suddenly as she had flown to fame, she was no longer news.

It was a few years before her death that I first met her, in 1985, when I was researching for a book about women pilots. She sounded hesitant, but agreed to let me visit her, although she warned me that, as her circumstances were now considerably reduced, her flat was not at all what she would have wished.

As we talked on that first meeting she made veiled references to things she dared not talk about. She seemed nervous, chain smoking as she sat opposite me in her small basement sitting room and hunching her shoulders forwards. I wondered, but did not like to ask, how old she was; if I had, she would no doubt have lopped the usual six years off her age. Her hair was, as it always had been in press photographs and television interviews, immaculately blonde,

held back from her forehead by a hairband, and she had obviously spent some time on her make-up. There was a tautness about her bone structure which suggested tension.

Her flat was not the setting I had imagined for a retired heroine. A steep, narrow, open-runged staircase led down to it from the pavement. The sash window in her front room was so opaque from the constant cigarette fumes that it scarcely needed the concealment of the full-length net curtain. A narrow passage went straight from the front door past the small cluttered sitting room, a bathroom exactly the length of the washbasin and bath and the width of bath and toilet, and an equally small and cramped kitchen. The bedroom was little more than a wider extension of the passage. There was nothing luxurious, nothing elegant: it felt and looked like a place in which to survive, rather than to live.

By the time we had run quickly through Sheila's life story, the 'Darlings' which had dramatically underlined disaster areas – of which her life had clearly been full – had become less frequent. Already I was aware of the great effort which had gone not only into her flying achievements, but also into the public image she had presented during her heyday – quite how much of an effort I did not fully realize until much later.

There are people with whom one feels an immediate rapport even on a first meeting, and so it was between us, although it is difficult to say why – especially as it was apparent that we would differ on many things. It was a tribute to Sheila's generosity that she did not resent my intrusion, since I was writing on a subject for which she had been collecting material for years. Later, after my book had been published and had met with her approval – 'You told it how it was,' she wrote to me – she brought out a case of cuttings and notes: 'I could have saved you a lot of work,' she said, 'if only I'd known you better then.'

It was a chance remark of Sheila's towards the end of our first meeting which led me to my next book, about a German woman test pilot who, although technically a civilian, during the war flew such revolutionary aircraft as a glider the size of a jumbo jet and a manned version of the V1 which was to have been used for suicide attacks on Allied shipping. 'Hanna Reitsch – you must include Hanna Reitsch,' she said. 'Hanna was the greatest: she was never forgiven for her patriotism, you know.' Sheila admired patriotism as

much as she admired courage. When I later received a commission for a biography of Hanna Reitsch she was delighted.

‘Darling, you must come to Vienna.’ It was Sheila on the telephone, a few months later: there was to be an annual get-together of the European Women Pilots’ Association, of which Sheila was then president. ‘There will be lots of people there who knew Hanna.’ As I set out for Vienna with her, I was not sure whether I was her protégée, or her protector against the many plots and disasters which seemed constantly to threaten her. She undoubtedly had problems to contend with that weekend – problems about which she uttered dire warnings on the plane; on this occasion, at least, they were neither of her own making, nor imagined – although perhaps she exaggerated their significance.

The European Federation of Women Pilots – or, to give it its French title, *La Fédération des Pilotes Européennes* – meant a lot to Sheila. It meant as much to its French founder, who was determined that her language should be used for all Federation business and whose representative in Vienna spoke no English. Almost immediately a wrangle over whether English, as the international language of aviation, or French, as the mother tongue of the organization’s place of origin, should be used in committee discussions. Sheila, who was not a good chairman, was in despair. Somehow I found myself appointed interpreter, an uncomfortable position as I was not even a member of the organization.

At last, late in the evening, the committee disbanded. ‘Thank God for that,’ said Sheila. ‘Now let’s have a quiet drink.’ I had hardly taken the first sip when Sheila clutched my arm, staring fixedly across the hotel bar. ‘They’re here,’ she whispered.

‘Who’s here?’ I asked. She seemed to be looking directly at an inoffensive young couple.

‘They – you know who I mean,’ she hissed. ‘They track me down everywhere. Even here. I’m never safe.’ She was convinced that she was being followed by agents of some sinister undercover organization; after that, I was with her on many other occasions and in many other places when ‘they’ suddenly appeared.

Her fear seemed, briefly, real enough – but could it have any substance other than in her own deluded imagination? Was it a symptom of mental illness, or a hint of some real danger? Either way, she was clearly under such strain that I feared she would be unable to cope with the social functions which had been laid on for

us by the Austrian Aero Club. I did not then know her well enough to realize that of course she would rise to the occasion, looking magnificent in a long, high-necked green evening dress for a dinner and ball under a full moon, and flirting elegantly with the men in full-dress uniform.

When I invited her to stay with us for Christmas I kept my fingers crossed that the rest of my family would like her, for all her oddness, as much as I did, and that we would be spared the sudden stare and whisper of paranoia. We discovered yet another Sheila, a Sheila who could sit on the floor talking to a six-year-old without being patronizing and throw herself into games of charades without minding that for once her elegance was dishevelled. This was a Sheila who might have been, a family Sheila with an ability to care about each one of us as much as about herself, a warm, loving person waiting to be released from the cage which she had created around herself.

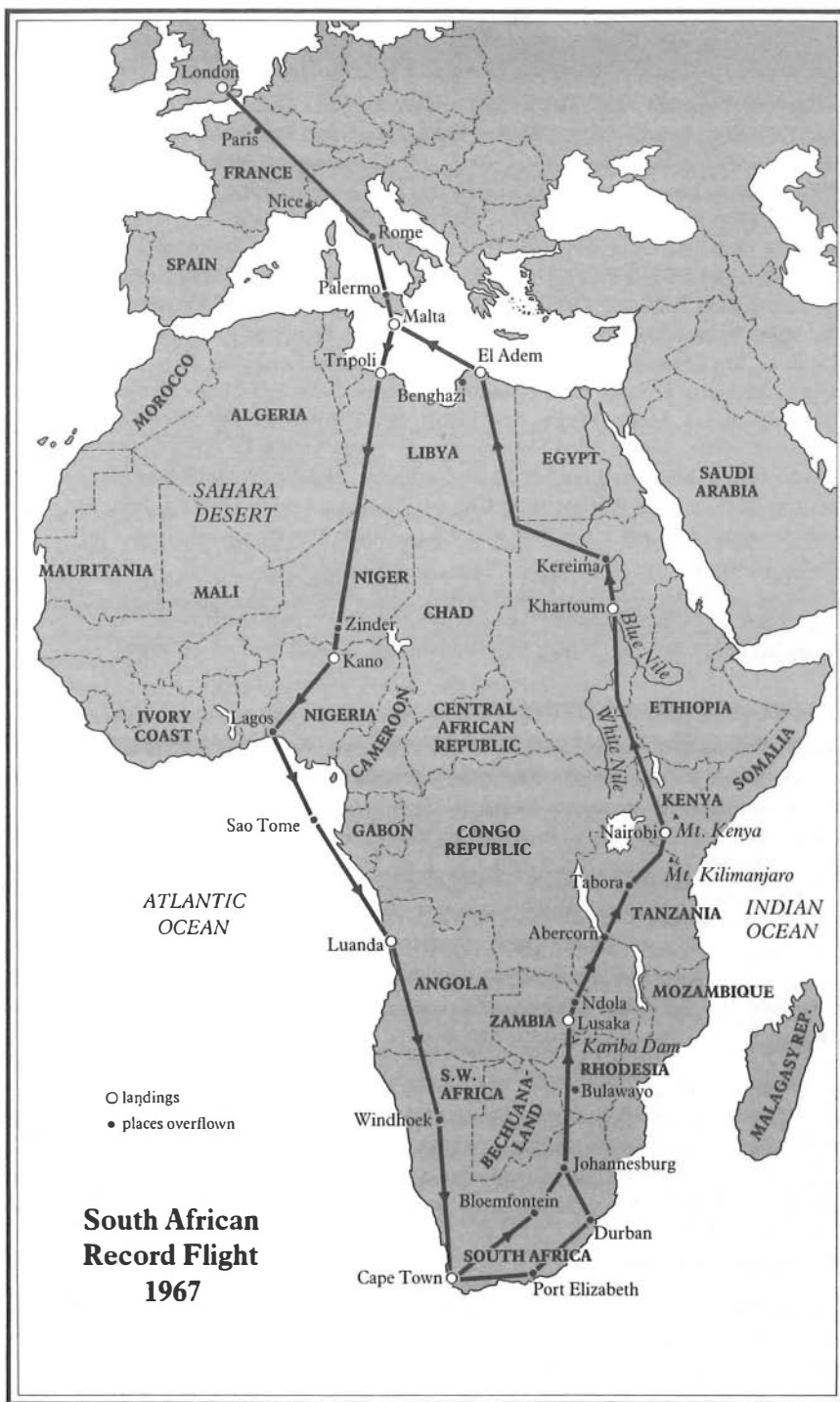
It was perhaps because we accepted Sheila as she was, and she us, without questioning, without setting limits or conditions and without infringing on individual privacies, that our friendship was never marred by friction. At times we found her exasperating – and vice versa; we often disagreed, but could agree to differ. I felt that she was lonely, although she knew many people, and hope that we made her less lonely for a while.

Sheila often felt – sometimes with cause, but more often without – that she was being used or plotted against not only by nameless agents but also by those closest to her. It was for that reason that I hesitated before suggesting to her that I might write her biography; but eventually, several months after we both knew that she was dying, I did suggest it, tentatively. She welcomed the idea.

I doubt whether it has come out exactly as she would have wanted. Since her death I have found out much that I can understand her wanting to forget; it was all, however painful, part of her. Some people may feel that I should neither have probed into areas of her life which she had kept secret, nor have revealed the negative aspects of her personality. There may still be many things about her which I do not understand; I have certainly had to leave out many details, and many people, because of restrictions of space.

But I hope that, by accepting her weaknesses as well as her strengths, and by attempting to understand her, I have shown her for what she was: a remarkable and an unforgettable person, who

overcame many difficulties – some of her own making – and who showed as she approached death the strength and the courage which she had often, but not always, displayed in life. One of her closest friends, Elizabeth Overbury, begged me to ‘come up with something that is – Sheila Scott!’ It is up to her and others to judge whether I have done so.





ISBN 0-89-174114-9



9 780091 741143