

By ROBERT PIERCE

• Daily Leader



Nebraska pilot Diane Bartels came to Liberal Saturday to share the life story of a pioneer in women's aviation.

Bartels said she has made it her life's mission to share the story of Evelyn Sharp ever since she found out about the pilot in the early 1970s.

"I decided that I did not want her to be forgotten," she said. "I do a lot of speaking nationwide at conferences in aviation, but I do a lot in small communities, too. I just know that there are a lot of people who still don't know about her."

Bartels, the author of Sharp's biography, grew up in northeast Nebraska, right across the river from Sioux City, Iowa, and she said she became interested in aviation from watching P-51 Mustangs fly over an Air Force base near her home.

"I knew from a very early age that I wanted to fly airplanes," she said. "When I had an opportunity to go up when I was about 7 years old in a small airplane, I knew I was going to make that happen someday."

Like Bartels, Sharp was also from Nebraska, and Bartels began training at the age of 24, the same age at which Sharp died in a plane crash in 1944 near Middleton, Pa.

"I flew every day that I could that summer after a year of teaching, except one day," Bartels said. "I got my license in less than two months. That just opened all kinds of doors for me. I met Evelyn Sharp in Ord, Neb. I started learning about her. I just became captivated by her story and also the community in which she grew up."

Bartels said Ord is about 160 miles northwest of Grand Island, Neb.

She said she began researching Sharp in her 20s, but it wasn't until

1996 that the biography was published.

"I wanted to join the Air Force when I graduated from high school, but my father didn't want his daughter in the military," she said.

"That was 1960. I went to the University of Nebraska, taught school for many years. I'm an educator by profession."

Bartels said after she got her pilot's license, she joined the Nebraska chapter of 99s, an international organization of licensed women pilots.

"Amelia Earhart was our first president in 1929, and I've been a member of the Nebraska 99s ever since," she said. "I decided that I wanted to do more with aviation when I retired from teaching. I do a lot of aerospace education now with young people through the Air Force Association, Civil Air Patrol in Nebraska."

Bartels said there are other connections between herself and Sharp as well.

“What makes me most proud and reflective is that the people, her friends who knew her as an adult and who know me as an adult, say that Evelyn and I share many of the same personality characteristics, which makes me think maybe that’s why I was able to write her story so effectively,” she said.

Bartels said she has researched other women pilots, but none to the extent of Sharp.

“I know quite a bit about women pilots,” she said. “I started reading when I was a little girl. There was no one except Amelia Earhart that anything was being written about. There are several women pilots that I know some things about, but nothing to the degree that I know about Evelyn.”

Bartels said there are many female pilots from the early days of aviation whose stories have not been told.

“For example, in my home state, there was a gal who was the first woman to fly in Nebraska,” she said. “Her story has been lost.”

Bartels said she is currently researching a project on 17 Nebraska women who were members of the Women Airforce Service Pilots at the time of that organization’s disbandment in December of 1944.

“I’m going to have a monument erected to them in the Lincoln Veteran Memorial Garden,” she said. “I’m going to put all their names on it and the cities from which they said that they had lived or called home. I’m also going to go back and try and find some relatives.”

Evelyn Sharp became one of the first women to ferry a U.S. Army Air Force fighter during World War II. She was killed in a plane crash on April 3, 1944, when the P-38 she was to ferry from

the New Cumberland Air Depot in Pennsylvania to Newark, N.J., crashed soon after takeoff.