



MELISSA PEMBERTON

Go Flying!

LEGENDS

It's been a rocky few years for this bright young star of the airshow world

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MAIN PHOTO John Parker



Melissa with 'Grandma Airport' (top left) and flying the stunning Edge 540

GF What happened when you lost your licence at just 19?

MP A family based at the airport asked me to do a fly-by at a wedding in the Pitts and I was like 'yeah of course I'd like to do it!' I asked the tower if it was OK, they said yes and I did it. I was involved in the Stars of Tomorrow airshow program and thinking wow, I'm going to fly Oshkosh. I was on top of the world. One of the guests built a file over the next month and presented it to the FAA. The next thing I knew I had an emergency revocation in the mail.

GF The consequences?

MP I was a 19-year-old aviation student and flying was my whole life. People do that stuff every day in reality, but I shouldn't have done it and I paid the highest price for it. Three years ago I was taking off from my home airport doing some clearing turns on the climbout as I always did. I got a call from someone at the FAA who said he thought it was reckless. I told him it was something I always did as a safety thing, something required for my airplane. I got a call the next day after he had checked my record. Something like that haunts you – it

stays on your record for ever. He gave me an emergency revocation and we went to court. Basically the FAA apologised and the judge told me to keep doing what I was doing. Sadly they still took my licence away for the next year. I was supposed to be going to my first world championships with the US team.

GF You disappeared after that...

MP I went out to Australia and while I was there my little brother passed away. These things really pulled me down and

case. It is all cleared now. These people have really tried to help me come back from this. At the other end there are people who think it's 'Melissa being reckless again'. That's not the case but people run with stuff.

GF Any silver linings?

MP It's tough with this kind of stuff; you're guilty until proven innocent. It laid a groundwork for people to watch me extra closely. With airshows there's no rule book on how to do it so it's a

the back of my mind. I have to take an extra level of precaution, of professionalism and if I don't do that then I'll end up paying for it in a big way. I'm also working with the FAA to become a Safety Team Rep so I can help other pilots to learn from my experiences.

GF How did you discover flying?

MP My grandma was really my introduction, she and my grandpa were pilots. She's always lived on the airport – we actually called her Grandma Airport!

she's amazing. Although she'd lost her medical by the time I learned to fly, she's been a real inspiration.

GF Professional role models?

MP Wayne Handley is my Aerobatic Competency Examiner. He has been an incredible mentor. With the licensing problems and the rumours especially, it is really hard stuff to go through but he knows me and he knows how I fly and has always stood by my side. Sergei Boriak has been a huge help and big influence with competition flying. He was world champion and used to fly with the Russian team. Sean Tucker and Mike Goulian were doing the Stars of Tomorrow program and they really got me into the airshow world. I went to school in Arizona so Kirby Chambliss was a huge influence on my flying. I chose the Edge after seeing him fly it. He has definitely mastered it way more than anyone else. He's got it figured out.

GF Will people ever forget?

MP If you achieve a certain level of flying and get to the point where you really stand out then nothing else matters. That's my goal.

// IT WAS THE LOWEST I'VE EVER FELT BUT I HAD A LOT OF TIME TO REFLECT //

then while I was BASE jumping I had a cliff strike and broke my leg. Bedrest for a month gave me time to think about all of this and it was probably the lowest I've ever felt but I had a lot of time to reflect on everything that had happened. We came back to the US and it's been a steady climb back up since then. I've built a good relationship with my local FAA and they've been great helping with airshows and waivers. Now they know what really happened a lot of people compare it to the Bob Hoover

scary world to step into. Having mentors keeping me in line has kept me safe. You learn from everything. The number one thing I took from it was to always think things through and be extra careful, don't do anything stupid – don't do anything you're not supposed to.

GF Older and wiser?

MP Definitely. I'm having to fly extra cautious and extra safe. My airshow is entertaining but at the same time I have to always keep all these other things in

They had a Cessna 150 Aerobat and a Seneca and they'd load up their six daughters in the airplane, so all my aunts and my mom grew up around aviation. Out of 20 grandkids I'm the only one who has learned so far. It's always surprised me but at the same time I kinda like it as we have a special bond. She was an instructor and also used to do the Powder Puff races. She and her friend Dotty watched some videos and read the manual and just went out and taught themselves aerobatics. I think