

WORLD

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Melissa Pemberton Mixes Aerobatics and Adventure

By Jim Froneberger

HER WEB SITE is called *sportsgal.com*, and if there ever was a web address that fit Melissa Pemberton that is it. Not only is Melissa an Unlimited-level competition and airshow pilot, she also leads a life of adventure that most people her age can only dream about.

She has traveled all over the world flying aerobatics – from Alaska, to Central America, to Europe, to Asia, and to Australia. For 2011, she will participate in at least three different airshow acts on the North American airshow circuit. And when she wants to keep the wings level, she flies backcountry charters in Alaska and volunteers for humanitarian bush flying missions in Africa.

If Melissa's aviation exploits are not enough, she also skydives, paraglides, rock climbs, and BASE-jumps off of buildings and cliffs. Her husband, Rex, enjoys these same extreme sports and is also a world-class mountain climber, having climbed all of the tallest peaks on the planet.

And by the way, she's done all of this before her 27th birthday.

Aerobatics Take Hold

Melissa grew up in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and all through high school, she focused her athletic abilities on competitive rock climbing

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while winning numerous competitions. But thanks to her grandmother, she was soon introduced to the thrill of flying and aerobatics.

Her grandma lived on an airpark in Butler, Pennsylvania, and owned a Cessna 150 Aerobat. Every time Melissa went to visit, the Aerobat and Piper Cub in Grandma's hangar captured most of her attention

Her grandma began taking her flying in the Aerobat when she was only three years old. When she got older, her grandmother also gave Melissa her first taste of basic aerobatics. "She would take me flying and she would build it up like a roller coaster and she would say, 'Ready. Here we go!' and we'd go into a loop," remembers Melissa. "She would let me open the window and try to grab clouds and do all the stuff that a little kid wants to do. She is really the one who inspired me and was my whole exposure to aviation."

Melissa's grandfather was former test pilot Leo Janssens. He taught Melissa to fly in her grandma's little Cessna and also taught her basic aerobatics. "I remember the first time I asked to fly aerobatics by myself," says Melissa. "Grandma just leaned back in her chair and said, 'You climb up high, and if you get scared, just pull back power and let go.' I did my first snap roll in that plane. If you keep it within the speeds it does it beautifully. I had to build up the nerve for that. It was exciting. I'll never forget that flight."

After high school, Melissa went to Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University's Arizona campus to further her aviation education. Arizona's desert landscape offered her ample opportunities to engage in both of her passions – rock climbing and flying. And it was in Ari-



Melissa Pemberton flies a sparkling metallic-blue Edge 540 (photo by Scott Slocum).

zona where the aerobatic bug really began to bite.

Melissa's goal was to be a bush pilot, flying in support of missionary and humanitarian efforts in remote areas of the world. So while in Arizona, she began taking lessons in a Citabria to learn the basics of flying from remote, backcountry airstrips. Her flights in the Citabria soon began to include aerobatics, as the urge to turn the world upside down grew stronger.

In the summer of 2003, Melissa went to Oshkosh and saw the first Stars of Tomorrow team coached by Sean D. Tucker and Michael Goulian. These young, energetic aerobatic pilots inspired Melissa to take her aerobatic flying to the next level. "I've got to go fly a Pitts," she said to herself when she returned to Arizona. "I've got to try this."

She found Hank Canterbury in nearby Glendale, Arizona and began training in his Pitts S-2C to enter the world of competition

aerobatics. Before Melissa could fly the Pitts solo, however, the insurance company required that she have 55 hours of dual instruction. So Hank had to ride along with her through her first two contests until she had built enough hours to solo the Pitts.

In less than one year under the coaching of Sergei Boriak and the mentoring of Wayne Handley, Melissa went from first-time aerobatic contestant at the Sportsman level to third place overall in Intermediate at the 2004 U.S. National Championships. Then, in 2004, Sean D. Tucker invited Melissa to be one of three pilots chosen for the Stars of Tomorrow 2005.

As Melissa moved on to the Advanced level, she soon found the Pitts to be a bit limiting, so she decided to acquire a Zivco Edge 540. "In Arizona, I would always see Kirby Chambliss flying around in his Edge," she says. "I also aspired to try out for the Red Bull series, and I



knew the Edge was the plane you needed there. It was also a great competition airplane.”

In the Edge, Melissa quickly advanced to the Unlimited level of IAC competition, and in 2006 at the age 22, she became the youngest female ever to be a member of the U.S. Unlimited Aerobatic Team at the U.S. Nationals. As a member of the U.S. Unlimited Aerobatic Team, Melissa was eligible to travel with the team to the



2007 World Championships in Spain. Instead, she wound up touring Australia with her Edge and missed the trip to Spain.

Jumping from Almost Anything

At about the same time that she began getting serious about aerobatics, Melissa also decided to learn to skydive. A rock-climbing partner in high school was a jumper, so she had been fascinated by the sport for a long time. Now that she had to wear a parachute for aerobatics, she figured that was a pretty good excuse to learn how to skydive.

In much the same way that her aerobatics career has evolved, Melissa has also seen her involvement in parachute jumping expand.

Left: Melissa performs in her Edge 540 during the 2010 season (photo by Ken Cheung). Right: Painting with smoke (photo by Jim Froneberger).

She now specializes in freeflying, a form of skydiving where the jumper free-falls feet first, head first, or in a sitting position rather than the traditional, “belly-to-earth” position. In late 2010, Melissa became part of the world record for the most women in a freeflying formation (41).

While most skydivers are content to just jump out of perfectly-good airplanes, Melissa and Rex also participate in another variation of skydiving called BASE-jumping. In BASE-jumping, a building, cliff, or bridge is used as the “jumping-off point.” BASE is an acronym that stands for four categories of fixed objects from which



Rex and Melissa BASE-jump from the KL Tower in Malaysia (photo courtesy of Rex and Melissa Pemberton).



Melissa still enjoys rock climbing (photo by Nathan Gerdes).



Melissa and Rex in their wing suits (photo courtesy of Rex and Melissa Pemberton).



Rex Pemberton.



Rex at the summit of Mt. Everest (photo by Ed Diffendal).

someone can jump: Buildings, Antennae, Spans (bridges), and Earth (cliffs). While static line BASE jumps can begin as low as 150 feet above ground, most traditional BASE jumping allows for parachute opening at least 500 feet above the ground.

The primary BASE-jumping that Rex and Melissa do today utilizes a special skydiving suit called a wing-suit. One of the greatest risks of BASE-jumping is impacting the object being jumped from during free-fall. (Melissa suffered a broken leg in such an accident a few years ago.) With a wing-suit, the jumper can “fly” with some control and fly away from the object.

Love at First Jump

Rex Pemberton also grew up as a rock climber. He and his brother went on climbing trips all over Australia, and eventually all over the world. But as Rex grew up, so did the size of his targets. He started mountain climbing, and in 2005 became the youngest Aus-

tralian to climb Mt. Everest. He continued his climbing quests and became the third-youngest person in history to climb the highest mountain on each of the seven continents (The Seven Summits).

But he didn’t even stop there. As he climbed mountains, he wondered what it would be like to fly off the peak using a paraglider. So Rex decided to take up skydiving (his brother had learned to skydive, as well) and very shortly after that, added BASE-jumping and paragliding to his list of high-adventure activities. “As a climber you’re trained and your mind is set to hanging on,” Rex explains. “So it is a really weird transition to take that first jump off the cliff and be completely free of that object.”

Rex has parlayed his climbing adventures into a successful business as a Keynote speaker, and he develops adventure-themed corporate leadership development and teambuilding programs. His client list includes numerous Fortune 500 level companies including HP, Google, and McDonalds. Rex has delivered presentations on all seven continents.

In 2008, Rex met Melissa while she was traveling Australia in her Edge 540. They both enjoyed climbing, BASE-jumping, skydiving, and other extreme sports, so they began hanging out together. You could say it was love at first jump.

Rex was traveling back and forth from Australia to the United States so much for his corporate programs that he and his firm’s partners soon decided he needed to relocate to California. As fate would have it, Melissa was also thinking about returning to the States. They decided to come to the U.S. together.

Rex was able to get Melissa a spot with a corporate group he was taking to Antarctica on a leadership development program. Two weeks before the trip he thought, “You know, this just feels right. I’m going to propose while we’re down

there.” So on top of a small mountain on the side of scenic Paradise Bay, Rex proposed. They were married in May 2009.

Ironically, Rex had also had some exposure to aviation growing up, although he has only recently begun training for his private pilot license. His uncle flew aerobatics in an Extra and also was involved with warbirds. His grandfather flew Hawker Hunters and had flown with the Red Arrows. “I had been up in my uncle’s Extra a few times, and had been exposed to aviation through skydiving,” says Rex. “I had always had an interest in aviation-related sports but never had a real inclination to learn to fly until now.”

Airshows Become the Focus

After her invitation to participate in the 2005 Stars of Tomorrow, Melissa began to dabble in airshow flying. Her first airshow was in 2005 at the unique private airshow held at the Paraiso Winery in the Santa Lucia Highlands east of California’s Salinas Valley. Melissa was



Melissa barrel rolls around Rex (photo courtesy of Rex and Melissa Pemberton).



Melissa is now performing with Skip Stewart, Rich Gibson, and the Shockley Jet Trucks in "Tinstix" (photo by Scott Slocum).

paid in wine from the winery, but she wasn't old enough to drink it!

Once she got the Edge 540, she added to her solo repertoire and joined with Rob Holland for "Rivalry," a unique guy vvs. gal, biplane vs. monoplane act that featured a mock competition between Melissa in her Edge and Rob in the Ultimate Biplane he was flying at the time.

After meeting Rex in Australia and returning to the States, Melissa refocused on her airshow flying and began working together with Rex to build a unique new act incorporating aerobatics and wing-suit skydiving.

Melissa follows the jump aircraft to altitude in her Edge, and after Rex exits in free-fall, Melissa follows him down, barrel rolling the Edge around Rex to create a corkscrew effect in the sky. Rex can obtain about a 3:1 glide ratio in his wing-suit, and from 10,000 feet, he gets about three minutes of flight time. This allows for about three passes up and down the flight line at an airshow.

Since Melissa is also a wing-suit skydiver,



Tombstone Riders: Melissa (center) with Jim Leavelle (left) and Carol Pilon (photo courtesy of Carol Pilon).

the couple can perform skydiving and wing-suit exhibitions as well. Melissa's jump suit is made from Nomex so it can also double as a flight suit, allowing her to rapidly transition from skydiver to aerobatic performer.

Melissa loves to perform internationally, so she has marketed her aerobatic act worldwide. In 2010 she performed several airshows in Europe, including Belgium's Sanicole Airshow. She also became the first woman to fly an airshow in Spain. When in Europe, she rents an Extra 300S from friends to avoid the time and expense of shipping the Edge.

In 2010, Melissa also was a hit in El Salvador at the Ilopango Airshow where she flew *Tinstix* with Skip Stewart. That opportunity led to Melissa flying *Tinstix* with Skip at two other locations – Cape Girardeau, Missouri and Janesville Wisconsin – when Skip's regular partner, Patty Wagstaff, was unavailable due to her job flying fire bombers in California. Melissa will again perform with Skip and the rest of the *Tinstix* team in 2011.

In yet another performance opportunity for 2011, Melissa has joined with Carol Pilon to create the new *Tombstone Riders* Wild West-themed wing-walking act. Melissa will fly Carol's Stearman at certain show sites, playing the part of "Delta Dawn." (Carol uses multiple pilots to increase her scheduling flexibility.)

"It's going to be a lot of fun for the kids," Melissa predicts. "We'll stay in character for the whole show, dressed up in the Wild West clothes. Carol's going to have a really awesome final pass that I won't tell you about, but it's going to look great." With Melissa flying the Stearman, they will be a rare all-girl wing-walking act and will also be offering the Edge 540 solo and wing-suit acts as part of a package.

But even with such busy airshow schedules, Rex and Melissa still find time to do other things. Rex recently participated in a project where they took twelve wounded military veterans up a 20,000-foot mountain in Nepal near Mt. Everest. A documentary was filmed on the entire climb and will be released in the spring of 2011. Melissa has recently begun work flying backcountry charters for Summit Air out of Yellowknife, Canada.

As this issue was going to press, Melissa was planning to travel to Ghana in western Africa for a month in late February to volunteer with an organization called Medicine on the Move (MoM). MoM is working to improve medical services in Africa by flying medical personnel to remote locations and transporting sick and injured patients by air from remote areas to modern medical facilities.

"When I first got into flying, my goal was to be a missionary pilot," concludes Melissa. "That's still my passion, and I try to do that kind of flying every chance I get. It's always such an incredible experience."