

How Thursday's Child Flew: Richarda Morrow-Tait

The first woman to pilot an aircraft around the world, but Richarda Morrow-Tait's adventure was one fraught with mishaps and law-breaking, meaning it was nothing short of a miracle that she even made it. Moreover, Richarda was the youngest woman to fly around the world, completing her journey at the age of just 24. Yet she never received the acclaim or credit she deserved and today, her name has been all but forgotten. Yet for one year, and one day, Richarda attempted something no woman had done before and few believed Richarda was capable of. This is the story of her journey, one that is quite frankly astonishing and almost impossible to believe.

The Prudent One

November 22nd, 1923. Prudence Richarda Evelyn Routh was born in Cambridgeshire, England. But, rather alarmingly, Richarda, as she liked to be known, was not exactly what her father had hoped for. "As far back I can remember," Richarda once said, "it was always said that my father was so angry when I turned out to be a girl that he refused to speak to me on the day I was born. He'd already had two girls and I was to be called Richard – that's how I was christened 'Richarda'. So I was a third daughter. But no matter how depressing that could very well turn out to be – I did have one terrific consolation. I was born on a Thursday."

She was, of course, referring to the nursery rhyme, 'Monday's Child', with 'Thursday's Child' having far to go. It would be worth remembering this for later on. From 1932 to 1940, Richarda attended the Perse School for Girls in Cambridge, but as a child her mind often wandered into flights of fancy. She wanted to fly. Even as a little girl, she wanted to fly. Her dream? To become the first woman to fly across the world. For 1932, such dreams seemed, as Thursday's Child, far to go.

As she grew, Richarda, now going by the nickname 'Dikki', started working as a temporary stenographer, assigned to assist a mechanical engineer named Norman Morrow-Tait. Norman worked in the British government's Ministry of Supply at Cambridge. He was more than a decade older than Richarda but enchanted by her bright ginger hair and her effervescent smile. It was, of course, love at first sight.

The two were soon courting and would marry just two years later. They were engaged within months of meeting one another but Adolf Hitler put a stop to the wedding, albeit not personally. The end of the Third Reich in the May of 1945 had the wedding of Richarda and Norman back on track, marrying a short while later on July 21st, 1945. By that point, Richarda had started going by her middle name, putting an end to the affectionate nickname 'Dikki', which itself had put an end to 'Prudence'.

With the wartime ban on civil aviation lifted, Richarda joined the Cambridge Aero Club, earning a private pilot's licence. She had long harboured ambitions to fly and, encouraged by her husband, she would do just that.

The New-Fangled Flyer

Richarda first took to the air in the January of 1946 and took her lessons on weekends. Soon, she became the very first woman to obtain a civil flying licence in Britain since the war had ended. Nothing could really stop Richarda. After her first flying lesson, she found out she was pregnant but kept flying anyway.

On October 10th, 1946, she gave birth to a healthy baby girl, who Richarda had named, beautifully, Anna Victoria Airy Morrow-Tait. Airy! I told you Richarda loved to fly. Motherhood, however, would not stop Richarda from flying, something she was criticised for at the time, an age when women were expected to stay home and care for the little one. It needn't matter. Norman was there for Anna.

Richarda regularly dreamed of the impossible and became ever more enthusiastic about an attempt to fly a plane around the world, something no woman had done before. And she was serious. With her good friend Michael Townsend, Richarda started shopping for a plane to complete the endeavour. The two selected a Percival Aircraft, a Proctor IV (G-AJMU), which had evolved from a wartime plane with a nifty haul of records to its name. But what to name the plane?

Well, Richarda remembered her daughter's favourite nursery rhyme which was, funnily enough, also Richarda's favourite nursery rhyme when she was a child: 'Monday's Child'. And in that nursery rhyme, 'Thursday's Child' with far to go. It was the perfect name for the plane: Thursday's Child. And on May 31st, 1948, 24-year-old Richarda announced to the world her intention to become the first woman to fly around the world. Nobody paid much attention to her. There would be no grand send-off or newspaper inches dedicated to her endeavour. Many had tried and many had failed. Some had even died, including Amelia Earhart, who was 15 years older and a hell of a lot more experienced than Richarda.

But for her, there was no turning back now.

The Start of Adventure

The plane, Thursday's Child, was a single-engine plane, which had been used as a communications aircraft during the war. For the trip, it was outfitted with extra fuel tanks, giving it an estimated range of 1,850 miles or 2,977 kilometres. Richarda, just 24, was a good pilot, but she needed the help of Michael, just 25, who Richarda had bumped into at a party. He had been a childhood friend of Richarda. At the time, Michael was a geology student at Cambridge and a former member of the Royal Air Force. He agreed to accompany Richarda on the flight and spent four months preparing for it. He would be the navigator. But for these two people, Richarda and Michael, nothing could prepare them for what was to come.

On Wednesday, August 18th, 1948, as Norman and Anna, just two-years-old, watched on from the ground, Richarda and Michael set off. Norman was all too aware of the dangers the flight posed. Amelia Earhart had gone missing just a decade earlier. The shock of her disappearance was still felt. Was Richarda foolhardy? No. Because she knew she was coming home. Or, at least, that's what she believed. Richarda, the pilot, and Michael, the navigator, lifted off from Cambridge and flew to Croydon Airport in London to officially begin their flight around the world. They anticipated it would take just six weeks. It really didn't.

"I have given her every encouragement to make this flight," Norman told the little press that bothered to turn up. "I used to fly myself and know how much flying can mean to anyone. Dikki is a wonderful person full of determination and courage." Richarda had worked so hard to make it this far. But she was leaving behind more than her family. She left behind scandal and shame. The overwhelming reaction to her endeavour was a negative one. The press and the public were outraged that she would leave her little girl behind. The press, mockingly, dubbed Richarda the 'flying housewife'. Richarda's resolve, however, remained steadfast.

She was airborne. But would she make it?

The Flying Star

Richarda's flight would become a series of adventures and disasters but the flight progressed by Richarda's determination and drive to succeed. She headed east. But the first setback occurred before the flight even took off. Just four days before, Richarda had crash-landed in Cambridge whilst practicing for the flight. She was unhurt but it appeared a bad omen for the trip ahead. Upon landing in Marseille, visibility was so poor that once more, Richarda was forced to make a difficult landing. Flashbacks of Cambridge undoubtedly flashed across her mind. One of the wings was damaged, as was the propeller and undercarriage. She was so disheartened she announced she was abandoning her flight and would return to England once repairs were complete. Such thoughts did not last long.

Just two days later, she announced she would continue with her flight. She took off from Marseille and landed later that day in Malta. From there, she flew to Cyprus, Iraq, Bahrain, then what is now the United Arab Emirates, and on to Karachi in Pakistan and Delhi in India, the latter of which she had to flee from illegally. Everything was going smoothly until more trouble arose on September 7th, 1948.

Another difficult landing saw her plane severely damaged at Dum Dum airport in what is now Kolkata. Richarda and Michael would have a seven week wait for parts to arrive to repair the stricken plane. The timeline of completing the trip in just six weeks went out of the proverbial window. It was not until October 22nd when Richarda and Michael set off again.

They were heading for what is now Yangon in Myanmar, and then on to Vietnam, Hong Kong and five stops across Japan as Richarda skilfully piloted the plane across Japan. But the next leg of her journey would be the most difficult. It was over a long stretch of water from Hokkaido in Japan to Shemya Island at the western tip of the Aleutian Islands in Alaska. Considering Amelia had gone down over water, one can only imagine how fast Richarda's heart must have been beating as she left Japan behind.

This was it. Her most difficult stretch yet.

The Dangers

Due the length of the flight, some 1,570 miles or 2,527 kilometres, Richarda was escorted by a US Air Force B-17 bomber. Well, that's cool. Richarda and Michael set off on November 3rd and along the way, they encountered many violent storms, almost certainly what brought down Amelia's plane. About nine hours into the flight, the B-17, worryingly, lost contact with Richarda. Nobody knew what had happened to them. Mercifully, they were okay. Richarda had successfully landed on Shemya Island. She had piloted the tiny, tiny plane through vicious storms for 13 hours and 20 minutes straight. She was a damn good pilot.

They had lost contact with the B-17 after the radio onboard Thursday's Child was damaged by a storm. "Over the Pacific," Richarda told reporters later, "We landed with only five gallons of gas, or 20 minutes flying time. I think we ran the last of [the journey] entirely [on] Ave Marias." Richarda was lucky, this time. She had made it through one of the most difficult parts of the journey, but still, there was a long way to go.

November 11th. Richarda and Michael left Shemya stopping at Adak and Cold Bay as they made their way to Anchorage. Once more, they encountered difficult conditions, the fog greatly reducing visibility. Even worse, the airfield they were heading for? Its airstrip lights had failed. Two B-17's were dispatched and a Civil Aeronautics Authority plane to help Richarda guide her plane down. She made several attempts to land but she couldn't, so the crew at the airport, realising Richarda's fuel was running out, scrambled to their cars to line them up along the runway, their headlights helping to guide Richarda down. Ambulance and rescue vehicles were put on alert but Richarda safely landed the plane to a gentle and controlled stop. Richarda later said:

It's sure good to be down. I only had enough gas left to circle the field twice more. They talked us in three times before we made it and I was extremely frightened. I didn't care how I landed as long as I got down.

Yet again, delays followed, stuck in Anchorage for 10 days with engine trouble, probably because of how cold it was. Once the engines were repaired, Richarda took off for the Yukon Territory but because of reliability problems, she followed the highways below in case she had to make an emergency landing. Sadly, on her 25th birthday, she crashed. The sub-zero temperatures caused the plane's carburettor to fail and Richarda was forced to make a crash-landing. The army plane that was following behind dropped emergency supplies whilst the Alaska Highway Patrol went to rescue Richarda and Michael. They were unharmed but the plane? It lay in ruins. The landing gear and the wings were practically not even there anymore. It was, to be frank, a terrible 25th birthday. With money running out, a despondent Richarda later recalled:

"What I need for a birthday present is a miracle."

The Miracles

Once more, Richarda contemplated abandoning her journey, but she had already come so very far. "Personally, I would love to go back home, but I will not abandon the flight under any circumstances. My biggest problem is obtaining finances, not securing the parts for my plane." The damage would cost \$2,000 to repair, money Richarda did not have. Luckily, and this is true, a passing trucker then drove by and, feeling sorry for Richarda, offered to put the plane in his truck and drive it down to Edmonton for the repairs.

Richarda and Michael were flown aboard a B-17 to Edmonton but shortly after they landed, Michael decided to return to England to complete his studies at Cambridge. "When Michael leaves me," Richarda told reporters, "I will have to get another navigator or go on alone but I definitely will fly home." Her plane did not arrive in Edmonton until January 24th, 1949. The damage was severe. It would now cost \$3,800 to repair. About \$45,000 in today's money. But Richarda? She was practically penniless. So she abandoned the plane.

In February, she hitchhiked to Alaska to raise some additional funds, but unfortunately, along the way she was robbed. She was now completely broke. Even worse, immigration officials denied her entry into Alaska. But she was not giving up. And in March, she headed for Seattle. On March 21st, with the help of a Seattle dentist and a few others, a replacement airplane had been found. It was a surplus Army BT-13 Vultee Valiant. It cost just \$600. But because it was an American military plane, it could only be owned by an American citizen and piloted by an American licence holder.

It was in Seattle where she met her new navigator: Jack Ellis. A native Londoner and former RAF navigator. That's handy. He saw this as an opportunity to get back to England to see his wife. And by the end of March, Richarda had raised the money she needed. How? Two people she did not know simply gave her the money. She got her American licence and christened her new plane, 'Next Thursday's Child'.

A New Thursday

Across America, Richarda and Jack found the plane grounded by customs officials on several occasions, forcing delay after delay. When the plane was impounded in Chicago, Richarda had had enough. And so, in the early hours of the morning of May 28th, 1949, Richarda and Jack snuck into the hangar where the plane was impounded without anyone noticing them. They got in the plane and made a break for it. To say she created something of an international incident is an understatement.

She fled for Buffalo but the authorities were less than pleased with her. Problem after problem arose. Even worse, Jack's wife had arrived from England, once more leaving Richarda without a navigator. Luckily, her first navigator, Michael, had completed his studies and so he flew out to Buffalo to help Richarda end her nightmares. Commercial airlines cost a lot then so for Michael to fly out meant a lot to Richarda. But it wasn't the end of her legal problems, which kept mounting up. In Canada, officials told her to go home and 'look after her baby'. On August 12th, with Richarda back in the air, the Royal Canadian Air Force sent one of its Lancaster bombers from Nova Scotia to escort Richarda's plane to Maine.

Not long into the flight, Richarda attempted to give the escort plane the slip, suddenly swinging her plane's nose around and changing course. Instead of doing as she was told, Richarda was now heading out across the Atlantic, of which she had been refused permission to do. The escort plane stayed with her until she landed in Greenland. The Canadians were not bothered. She was now outside of their jurisdiction and no longer their problem. Thank God, they thought. She was almost home. Her husband Norman said:

I shall be very glad to see Dikki. But I shall be doubly glad to let her feed and bathe the baby. I'm tired of playing mother... I am very proud of my wife. She is full of pop and very brave and I want her to finish this flight because it means so much to her. I fell in love with Dikki when she was 17 and even then she was talking about this trip.

Once more, Richarda was held up by bad weather but she made it to Scotland despite the storm. Soon, she set off for Croydon Airport with Michael, her navigator, right with her. And you know what?

On August 19th, 1949, Richarda and Michael landed in England. Richarda had done it. The first woman to circumnavigate the Earth. She had done what Amelia Earhart had died trying to do. And she had, as she had promised, made it back to her daughter.

Little Renown

Richarda's endeavour, however, was met with little fanfare. People judged her negatively for 'abandoning her child' and 'leaving her child with the father' for a full year. And a day. The newspapers were critical, too, saying that Richarda had 'abandoned the maternal duties of a housewife'. She got no recognition whatsoever. Well, almost none. Her husband and daughter were immensely proud of her. As soon as she stepped out of the cockpit, Norman handed her a bouquet

of gladioli and the two shared a loving embrace. Photographers waited and took pictures. She had no idea what the trip had cost her, but Norman estimated the total cost was around \$12,000. About \$140,000 in today's money.

Richarda sold her plane to the Cambridge Aero Club who, to honour her remarkable achievement, scrapped the plane in 1952. She got little recognition for her feat, but she had with her two mementos: a tattoo she got in America. And a new baby. Yes, Richarda had not seen her husband for one whole year. Yet when she landed in Croydon, she was pregnant. I wonder who the father could be? Was it Michael, her navigator, by any chance?

We were to be away for six weeks. We reached Calcutta on the 18th day and we [were] stuck there for six weeks. It was there that Michael started being beastly to me.

Poor Norman. He had been faithful and cared for Anna for the entire year but now the love of his life was pregnant with another man's child. That child, Giles, was born in 1950 and christened 'Giles Townsend'. Norman filed for divorce on grounds of adultery and left Anna in Richarda's care. On March 24th, 1951, Richarda would marry Michael.

"I have an electric sewing machine. I make things for the neighbour's kids for a few odd shillings. As for domesticity, I'll meet any housewife with a cooker or a sweeper or down on my knees, even, and show her as good as she can give." – Richarda.

Rather than international acclaim, Richarda faded into history, living off public assistance. She may have been the first woman to fly around the world, but there was no great praise. She was even ridiculed for it. She maintained her pilot's licence into the 1960s but eventually, the world at large simply forgot her. She said:

"I had more trouble on the ground than I ever had in the air."

Richarda Morrow-Tait died on December 17th, 1982 of a blood disease. She was just 59-years-old. The iconic pilot was gone. Although she did write her memoirs before she died and they are a must read.

They are the story of how Thursday's Child flew.

The Amazing Adventures

72 years ago, Richarda, a former artist's model and nightclub worker, found herself, at the age of 24 with an 18 month old daughter, setting off in a plane to become the first woman to circumnavigate the world, a feat that had killed her hero Amelia Earhart just a decade previously. To say she encountered trouble along the way is an understatement. And to say she broke the law and her vows on more than one occasion, including breaking a plane out of Chicago, is also an understatement. How is there not a Netflix series of this?

She and Michael, and sometimes Jack, made it around the Earth in one year and one day, slightly more than the six weeks planned. And yes, she finished her journey in a different plane, but it doesn't make her feat any less remarkable. In fact, for all she endured, it makes her feat all the MORE remarkable. Richarda received next to no acclaim for what she did and today, she has been

completely forgotten. But God, there should be statues and buildings named after her across the land. Admittedly, land she often crashed in to, but still...

Some believe her 'scandalous affair' with Michael or her 'abandoning Anna' are the reasons why the public and media wanted nothing to do with her or her achievements. Anna was in capable hands with Norman and as for the affair? It doesn't mean she was a bad person nor does it lessen her achievement. Nor is it anyone's business to comment on her private life. What she did in the air was nothing short of astonishing. You can separate the person and the achievement and the achievement was unparalleled.

Today, for those who know her name, Richarda is a hero, an inspiration for women who choose to fly today, a reminder that one's dreams, no matter how farfetched they appear to be, can be made possible, even when the impossible seemingly keeps happening to you. The satisfaction of Richarda's adventure is all that matters. She did it. She did the impossible.

She flew where no woman had been before.

"No woman had ever flown around the world and I wanted to show what an ordinary housewife could do." – Richarda.

Taken from harkaroundthegreats website, "Stories of Her".

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