



Helene Young's two novels are set in far North Queensland. After reading 'Wings of Fear (Border Watch)' and 'Shattered Sky' Kathy Mexted tracked down the intriguing pilot / novelist.



When life INSPIRES ART

'Mayday, mayday, mayday. This is sailing vessel Silver Swan, Silver Swan, Silver Swan. Can anyone hear me?' Claire pleaded.

The screech of the wind and the roar of the ocean drowned out the answering crackle of static. Broken rigging beat its own rhythm of destruction against the boat's hull.'

This is not a real life scenario. It's the opening scene of Helene Young's second novel "Shattered Sky". Both her books are aviation based romantic suspense, and take the reader on a thrilling ride

from Cairns to various parts of far north Queensland with a couple of female pilots, their various government agency cohorts, and a good dose of pirates, bikies, yachties and handsome naval officers. They get shot at and shot down, they shoot back, crash, run, hide, fly around a cyclone, and ultimately save the day – all with a healthy smattering of romance and realistic "don't mess with me" professional girly attitude. If you've ever lived or flown in FNQ, you'll identify with much of the content, which touches on some topical issues.

Helene's interest in both writing and aviation began as a child. While her father worked away on Arctic oil tankers, he wrote fantasy novels for his children. Added to that was the family getaway at Currumbin Beach on the Gold Coast.

"In the late 60s and early 70s, aviation was still a novelty. The DC-3s and DC-9s flew so low over our house on approach to Coolangatta you could count the pop rivets, and when we heard them coming, we'd all run downstairs to watch" Helene says.

Helene has been flying for 22 years, but it wasn't her first career. She left school at 17, and worked for eight years teaching outdoor recreation, which included sailing, abseiling, kayaking and archery.

Somewhere in there she also worked as a gardener, waitress, night cook at the Spring Hill Hotel in Brisbane, a restaurant manager in The Lake District in England, and to keep it interesting, cooked at a psychiatric nursing home in North Wales.

While living in the UK, and given that the seeds of aviation had already been sown, Helene took the opportunity to go for a joyflight over Lands End. She had a boyfriend and an ex-boyfriend crammed into the rear seat of a C182. While the boys glared it out in the back, the pilot up front kindly let Helene take the controls, and we all know that's how the flying bug starts.

In her mid twenties, Helene returned to Australia with two new loves. Aviation, and an English souvenir named Graham. Thankfully, her second love approved of her first love, and when they decided it was time to "get serious about a career," Graham paid the bills while Helene poured her weekly 30 hours waitressing money into flying lessons.

"I had a female student who threw up every time she went for a flying lesson, yet she loved it so much she never gave up. She's now an airline captain and I think we're living proof it's never too late, nor too difficult to start."

"I did a one year full time course with Air Training Centre at Archerfield, and graduated just in time for the pilot's strike in 1989. Jobs were few and far between, but I was fortunate to be hired back by Air Training Centre as a Grade Three instructor. I hung around there for seven and a half years becoming a Grade One IFR/Multi instructor. I loved it. Once I'd gained a bit over 4,000 hours, I was employed by Sunstate Airlines, which has since morphed into Australia's largest regional airline. I've flown Twin Otters, Shorts 360 and Dash 8 - 1,2, 3 and 400s. I've also been a Training captain and a Check captain."

Helene says Debra Wardley's battle to be allowed to fly jets had a large impact on her, and she is thankful that women like Debra did the hard yards to pave the way. Though the industry average for women flying is still a low 4%, the Cairns base from where Helene flies, now employs 13% female pilots.

Although it can be tricky to break into what is still a predominantly male career, her role models and mentors have all been men, and she lists half a dozen who pushed her along.

"Sometimes I think they had a clearer idea than I did about where I was headed", she said. But could they have foreseen the writing career? Helene's day job inspires her writing, and it is easiest to write about what you know.

While walking her dog in the park, she became friendly with an older woman who

was doing the same. She later learnt this woman was a matriarch of a motorcycle gang, who had a couple of members on trial in Cairns for murder. Having also found a body washed up at Trinity Beach, and providing training for some of the Australian Coast Watch pilots, Helene's writing brain got to conspiring and voila! A trilogy.

The first book, "Wings of Fear (Border Watch)", has a very detailed chapter where a Dash 8 is shot down by terrorists, and the aircraft crashes onto the beach. This scene is so graphic it begs the question "how did you know all that if you've never done it?"

Well, being a sim instructor, by its very nature, presents many potential scenarios and a day's work can be wonderfully inspiring. "Full motion simulators are the most amazing tools for training pilots. We can simulate just about every failure possible in an aircraft, and that allows crews to manage the emergency in real time all the way through to a successful conclusion. During a training exercise, the simulator was 'landed' off-field and collapsed one of the main landing gear." There's your answer.

A little part of Helene says she'd have enjoyed flying real Coast Watch operations, though the drawback is that she'd have had to sign a confidentiality clause, and not been allowed to write about it. The generosity of past and present Coast Watch pilots has enabled her to check details for accuracy and reality.

A cyclone scene however, is drawn from personal experience. "I'm amazed at how well defined the bands of clouds are which spin around one of those weather systems" she said. Ironically, Wings of Fear was released the day before Cyclone Yasi hit her home from where she tweeted, "Can smell the ripped vegetation now as each gust gets a little stronger. Roofing iron rattling up the street."

Now aged 40-something, the young Aussie cook at the lunatic asylum has come a long way. She credits the support of her husband, as well as her own very stubborn personality, for her career success. Helene also found inspiration in many of the people she taught to fly. "I had a female student who threw up every time she went for a flying lesson, yet she loved it so much she never gave up. She's now an airline captain and I think we're living proof it's never too late, nor too difficult to start."

Helene's third book is due for release next year, and while she says her aviation career has to date been largely uneventful, her imagination in the writing world is a very different story. ■



Extract from Wings of Fear. Keeping the aviation terminology down to a dull roar so it's palatable for the general public, Helene describes the two women landing a disabled aircraft, shot up by terrorists.

'Fifty, twenty, ten...' Lauren counted down on the radar altimeter. As she got to ten Morgan closed the throttles and pulled back on the column to flare the aircraft. The moment of truth, she thought, and barely a word had been spoken.

The left wheel dug into the soft sand, dragging the aircraft around and lifting the opposite side high. Morgan struggled to hold the nose up, preventing a cartwheel. Water sprayed from the wheels as they ran over damp sand. The still-turning prop sucked the spray even higher in a chaotic whirl and the edge of the narrow beach seemed to rush towards them. Then they ran out of airspeed.



Helene's second book, Shattered Sky, is another aviation based romantic suspense novel that takes the reader on a thrilling ride through far north Queensland. Her third book is due for release next year.