

# PIREPS



## UNO Aviation Institute Celebrates 35 Years with Inspiring Durham Lecture Featuring Aerobatic Legend Debby Rihn-Harvey

On Thursday, November 20, 2025, the University of Nebraska at Omaha Aviation Institute hosted the 2025 Charles W. Durham Distinguished Lecture Series. The Durham Lecture is the Aviation Institutes Premier event of the year. Names in honor of Mr. Charles Durham, one of the visionary leaders that co-founded the Aviation Institute in 1990. This series reflects the belief that Omaha deserved a premier professional aviation program.

The fall 2025 semester marked the start of the Aviation Institute celebrating its 35th anniversary. Over the past three and a half decades, the Aviation Institute has become a leader in aviation education, research, and workforce development. The Institute also continues to shape the next generation of aviation professionals who will lead, innovate, and elevate the aviation industry.

This year's Durham Lecturer was Omaha's own Ms. Debby Rihn-Harvey. Known as the First Lady of Aerobatics, Debby is a 3-time U.S. National Aerobatic Champion, and 13-time Top-Ranked U.S. Women's Aerobatic Competitor.

Debby is a third-generation aviator whose love of flying began at North Omaha Airport. Her grandfather (Roy Furstenberg), who was a barnstormer and owned a trade school for mechanics in the 1920's, would take her to weekend fly-ins. Debby's father, Jack Furstenberg, taught her to fly, and she would solo at age 16 at Eppler Airfield.

A graduate of Omaha Burke High School, she would attend Hastings College and initially worked as a medical technologist. During high school and college Debby earned her commercial pilot certificate with instrument and multi-engine ratings along with her flight instructor certificates. She would move to Texas in 1974 and eventually take up aviation as her career.

Debby discovered aerobatics as a young pilot and in 1983 qualified for the US Unlimited Aerobatic Team. Debby spent more than three decades competing at the highest level. Over 33 years, she became the longest serving member of the US Unlimited Aerobatic Team, representing our country in 15 World Aerobatic Championships.

### PIREPS

December 2025  
Vol 78, Issue 12

Published monthly by  
**Nebraska Dept. of Transportation**  
Aeronautics Division  
1600 Nebraska Parkway  
Lincoln NE 68502  
402-471-2371

[dot.nebraska.gov/aeronautics](http://dot.nebraska.gov/aeronautics)

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Circulation: 3320



UNO Aviation Institute hosted the 2025 Charles W. Durham Distinguished Lecture Series in November. Pictured l to r: Scott Vlassek, Debby Rihn-Harvey, Bill Shea, Alison Adams.

Debby has been inducted into the Texas Aviation, EAA Sport Aviation Hall of Fame, and the Nebraska Aviation Hall of Fame, 20023, 2007, and 2015, respectively. In 2012 she received the International Ninety Nine's Award of Achievement for Contributions to Aviation. Ultimately Debby would become the most successful aerobatic competitor in history.

In 1979, Debby was hired by United Airlines and flew the Boeing 737. She flew for United for 10 years. In 1989 Debby would make the switch to Southwest Airlines. At Southwest she would be the 11th female pilot hired. When she was hired Southwest at 811 pilots. She describes her time at Southwest Airlines as the good old days. Being a part of the growth of Southwest and watching Herb Kelleher develop and expand the airline in the post deregulation environment.

Debby would upgrade to Captain in 1994 and continue her career until 2016. Debby had a full-circle moment in 1995. Southwest Airlines would begin service in Omaha, NE in 1995. When Debby found this out, she went to the chief pilot and asked to make one of the inaugural flights. On March 4, 1995, at the airport she soloed at, she would make the first official flight for Southwest Airlines out of Omaha. When Debby retired in 2016, she had logged more than 34,000 flight hours.

For over four decades Debby has owned and operated Harvey & Rihn Aviation at the La Porte Municipal Airport in Texas. A renowned flight school specializing in upset recovery, tailwheel, and aerobatic training. Debby is also a Designated Pilot Examiner. Debby has shaped the aviation world in ways that will be felt for generations.

As part of the evening Debby was also awarded the William F. Shea Distinguished Service Award, recognizing her outstanding contributions to aviation and celebrating the remarkable giving spirit that defines her. William "Bill" Shea is the founding director of the Aviation Institute and former Associate Administrator for Airports at the Federal

Aviation Administration during the Regan Administration. Bill was able to join the Aviation Institute in honoring and presenting the award to Debby.

The Durham Lecture has hosted local, regional, national and international speakers since its founding. Originally called Aviation 2000, the first speaker was A. Scott Crosfield. Over the years the Aviation Instituter has brought in former astronauts, military aces, and airline executives. The Institute is proud to recognize alumni like Steve McCoy, Madeline Sullivan, Sideny Due, and Jennifer McIntyre. Finally, there have been several influential Nebraskan's that have been part of the Lecture Series including Donald Smithely, Robert Duncan, Shane Osborn, and Jamie Walker.

Debby Rihn Harvey shared her story, her wisdom, and her generosity with the students of the Aviation Institute, the faculty and staff, and the Omaha community. She reminded everyone that aviation is more than an industry, it is a passion. Her accomplishments have inspired pilots around the world, and it all started in the local skies over Omaha, NE and it led her to the top of both the aerobatic and airline worlds. ■



L to r: Debby Rihn-Harvey and Bill Shea.



Front row l to r: Izzy Vasek, Chloe Schrick, Victoria Dannelly, Shay Sinnard, Debby Rihn-Harvey, Samantha Stojanov, Calla Behney, Talia Meyer, Izzie Peetz. Second row l to r: Aubrea Velner, Shoichi Yasui, Tyler Thiemann, Alex Duman, Trevor Denker, Thomas Reid.



## CALENDAR OF EVENTS

### Recurring Monthly Events

**3rd Thursday** | Third Thursday Pilot Lunch | 88 Tactical, 15350 Shepard St., Suite 1, Omaha | 11am | Open to the public

**3rd Saturday (April-October)** | EAA 569 Fly-In Breakfast | Wahoo Municipal Airport (AHQ) | 8-10am | suggested donation: \$10/ adults; \$5/kids

**Last Saturday (March-October)** | Nebraska Chapter of the Antique Airplane Association Hamburger fly-In lunch at Hastings Municipal Airport (KHSI) | 11:30am-1pm (free-will donation)

**Last Saturday** | Burgers & Brats | Wayne Municipal Airport (LCG) | 5-8pm

### Monthly Aircraft Association Chapter Meetings

• **EAA 80** | 2nd Monday | 7pm | EAA ABLE ACE Facility, Oakview Mall, Omaha (October-May) and Oracle Aviation, Millard Airport (June-August) | [www.eaa80.org/](http://www.eaa80.org/)

• **EAA 80 IMC Club** | 2nd Tuesday (October-May) | 6:30pm | EAA ABLE ACE Facility, Oakview Mall, Omaha

• **EAA 80 VMC Club** | 2nd Tuesday (October-May) | 6:30 pm | Revv Aviation, Council Bluffs Municipal Airport

• **EAA 291** | 1st Saturday | 8:30am | Wayne Municipal Airport | [chapters.eaa.org/eea291](http://chapters.eaa.org/eea291)

• **EAA 544** | Last Monday | 7pm | Hastings Municipal Airport | [chapters.eaa.org/eea544](http://chapters.eaa.org/eea544)

• **EAA 562** | 3rd Saturday | 1pm | Hershey Airport

• **EAA 569 and IAC 80** | 1st Tuesday | 7pm | Duncan Aviation, Hangar H, Darlene Christianson Room, 3833 N Park Rd., Lincoln Airport | [www.eaa569.org](http://www.eaa569.org)

• **EAA 608** | 3rd Saturday | 8am | Robbins Aviation, Western Nebraska Regional Airport, Scottsbluff | [chapters.eaa.org/eea608](http://chapters.eaa.org/eea608)

• **EAA 804** | 2nd Sunday | 2pm | O'Neill Municipal Airport Terminal Building

• **EAA 918** | 2nd Tuesday | 6pm | Norfolk Regional Airport FBO | [chapters.eaa.org/eea918](http://chapters.eaa.org/eea918)

• **EAA 1055** | 1st Tuesday | 7pm | York Municipal Airport | [chapters.eaa.org/eea1055](http://chapters.eaa.org/eea1055)

• **EAA 1091** | 2nd Tuesday | 6:30pm | Airport Managers Office | Kearney Regional Airport | [chapters.eaa.org/eea1091](http://chapters.eaa.org/eea1091)

• **EAA 1571** | 2nd Saturday | 12pm | Central City Municipal Airport | [www.1571.eaachapter.org/](http://www.1571.eaachapter.org/)

### Monthly Women in Aviation International Chapter Meetings

• **WAI Cornhusker Chapter** | 1st Thursday | 4pm | Meeting rotates between LNK Terminal and Duncan Aviation

• **WAI Platte River Chapter** | 3rd Tuesday | 6:30pm | North Platte Regional Airport (LBF) Conf. Rm.

Can you identify the following Nebraska public airport based on the following aerial snippet? North is up. (Answer at bottom of this page)



## Upcoming Deadlines:

[Airport of the Year](#) nominations due 12/31/2025

[Project of the Year](#) nominations due 12/31/2025

[Aviation Art Contest](#) submissions due 1/16/2026

(Visit the links for details)

## 2026 State Fly-In



### Saturday, June 20, 2026 Fremont Municipal Airport

For more information, please contact:  
Cari Hoffart, Fremont Airport Manager  
402-727-2691

Sponsored by: Nebraska Aviation Council