

WIA-E Rome Local Group

Online Webinar: “From STEM to Stars” with Donatella Ricci

16th of July 2020

1. Introduction

Why this webinar? The WIA-E Rome Local Group (LG) started in July 2020 a series of online webinars titled “From STEM to Stars” to provide different examples of female and male role models within the International Aerospace sector and to offer the participants the chance to interact with them. This webinar series, of the duration of one hour, is structured in two main parts: during the first part (of about 30 minutes), the main speaker shares her/his experience and passion to inspire the audience; the second part offers the attendees the chance to share thoughts and ask questions. The moderators of this webinars’ series are chosen among the members of the WIA-E Rome Local Group.

For the 1st online event of the “From STEM to Stars” series – held on the 16th of July 2020 from 19:00 to 20:00 (CET) – WIA-E Rome invited Donatella Ricci, Program Manager at Leonardo Helicopters and Altitude Guinness World Record holder, achieved with a gyroplane Magni M16, in 2015 (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Flyer of the “From STEM to Stars” with Donatella Ricci online webinar

The webinar was moderated by Alessia Gloder (from Dresden, Germany, where she lives) who is Project Manager and Researcher at Technische Universität Dresden and a member of the WIA-E Rome LG Committee. The official language of the event was English, to allow all WIA-E members to participate. The audience of the event consisted in 18 participants, connected from different countries in Europe.

2. The webinar

To start, Donatella Ricci presented her experience and shared with the audience information about her career and achievements within the Aeronautical field.

Donatella was born and raised in Rome, in the 1960s. She believes that the environment in which a person grows up really tells a story about the attitude he/she assumes later on. In her case, she was raised in a very different society in comparison to the modern one, and from a middle-class male dominated family, with two older sisters and two younger brothers. Since she was a child, she could experience in first person the different treatment among females and males, and what being a woman in a male dominated environment felt like. She started challenging this system from the early years, to follow her dreams and to find her way in the world. Despite her father’s opinion, she chose scientific studies over classical ones and she cultivated her strong passion for the sky. “At the age of 18, I asked for my birthday a telescope, which was a totally unusual present for a girl at the time. Back then, I already knew I wanted to follow a road that was not pre-defined by my father. I was fascinated about things that were not known to me”, she explained. This passion for the stars led her to study astrophysics, field that she deepened also

during her doctoral studies, which focused on black holes. Her outstanding work was also awarded with an internship at NASA Goddard Space Flight Center in California, USA. This decision was a real breakthrough for her and her family: going abroad to study in an epoch without internet and real-time connections was a brave and not common decision, especially for a woman.

Donatella shared: “the passion for sky and aeronautics was there with me since the beginning. What came later was the passion for flight. During the PhD I started to have the first aeronautical experiences and many doors opened for me since then. I chose the industrial career instead of the academic one, since I thought it would be the best choice for me and my ambitions”. Indeed, Donatella started exploring her passion for flight once back in Italy, and this decision led her to embrace a new career path relevant to the aviation industry. What initially she did just for fun, it turned out to be a job and a list of outstanding achievements: she first started her endeavor in the flight field as a hot air balloon judge during competitions. Later on, she decided that she had to fly “her own balloon”, so she pursued the license. Donatella recalls also this as a long and tiring process, especially because not many women owned a hot air balloon license at the time. After this she went a step further, becoming the first female President of the Italian Hot-Air Balloon Federation, position that she held until 2006. Afterwards, she discovered the world of powered aircrafts and decided to learn more about it. She is now a helicopter pilot and an ultra-light aircrafts instructor at Flight School Club "Papere Vagabonde" in Venice, Italy (Figure 2).

“What characterizes me is that, if there is something unknown that I want to discover, I like to start from the beginning, gathering information. I don’t go fast nor take shortcuts, I want to understand. I believe that if you want to achieve something, you have to go straight down your path and achieve your final goal step by step. Like this you can reach whatever you want”, she said. This attitude almost made her an astronaut in 2000,

where she arrived among the 5 female finalists for the first call to be an Italian astronaut inside the European Community.

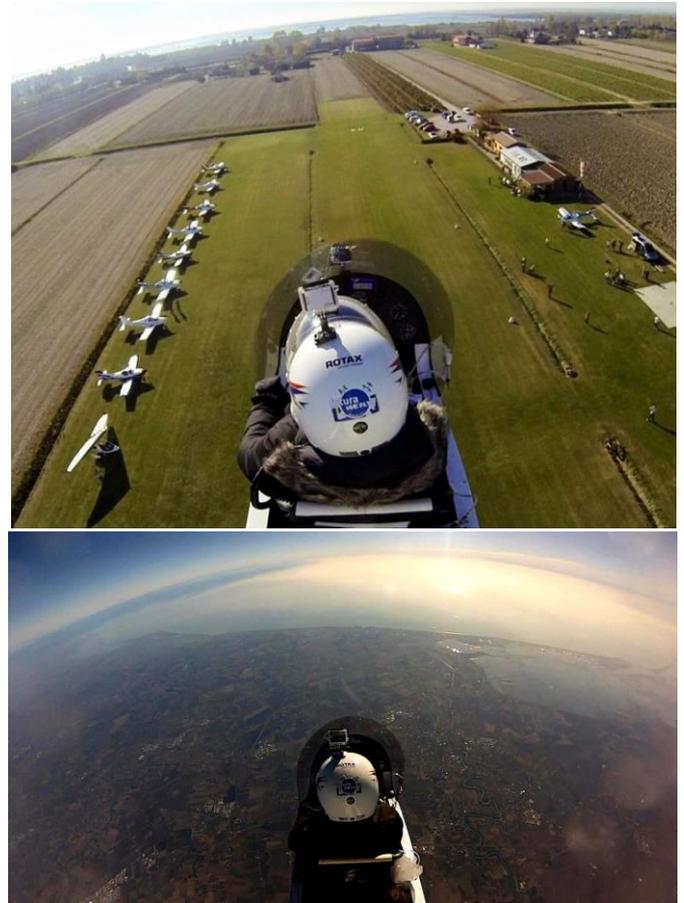


Figure 2: Donatella flying over the Flight School Club “Papere Vagabonde”, where she works as flight instructor (above), and over the Venice lagoon, with the feeling of being “on top of the world” (below).

Despite the long and exhausting selection, all women were discarded in the end for “healthy” reasons. In her opinion, this showed once more how the Italian society, and especially the aeronautical one, was not yet ready for a woman to be an astronaut at that time. Even though the outcome was hard to accept for her, it also made her realize that “you can lose some battles sometimes, but it doesn’t mean that you lost your time. Maybe you can focus on something else.” And she did focus on something else, as in the following years she specialized in flying with the gyroplane (Figure 3), the type of aircraft she used for the solo flight during

which she achieved the World Altitude Record in 2015, of 27.556 ft / 8.399 m.



Figure 3: Donatella during the solo flight with the gyroplane Magni M16 during which she achieved the World Altitude Record.

Everything started for Donatella during a normal flight. It was 2015 and she was flying with her gyroplane during one of the first flights of the year, with other members from her flight club. It was a very windy day, and since the gyro is a small machine, very sensitive to wind perturbations compared to others, she was flying slower than the other pilots were. Not to fall behind, she decided to increase her flying altitude. It was only after a while that she realized that she reached a very high height. Donatella recalled that “It felt so normal to me! Once back, the other people made jokes on my desire to reach space and be an astronaut like my astronaut friend Samantha Cristoforetti. After that day, the idea stacked in my mind. I wrote Samantha about my idea to try a female record and she replied “why a female record, try a male one. Try a world record!”, and she was right! I started training on February 2015 and I spent 6 months reading and preparing for the moment. I had to train not only physically, considering that I was exposing myself to very low temperatures and lots of stress, but also psychologically. I had to proceed step by step reading about which was the record to beat and what was needed to beat it, about the level of oxygen necessary at such high temperatures, the rules imposed by the challenge, etc. It was not easy to manage all this amount of information together with my normal life (job for 8 hrs, flights, lessons to

students, and family), but I decided to reach my scope at my own peace”. After 6 months, everything was more or less ready for Donatella. After a first attempt, in which she had to stop after achieving the female world record, but not the world one, she finally made it on the 8th of November 2015. “At the end, it was an unbelievable result. Not only for me, but also because I was the real demonstration that if you want something enough and if you believe in it, you can do it. Just take your time, be aware of your capabilities, and you can do it”.

As a woman in the aeronautical world, Donatella often had to face challenges and fought to be accepted. Not all the people in fact respected her role because of her gender. “I always tried to be like I am, doing the things that also the others were doing. I focused my attention on myself, my capacities and luckily some bosses were accepting me and helping me as well. In the aeronautical field, many men still do not want to share their environment and knowledge with women, even though, incredibly, I had the major problems with other female bosses. I think many things changed since when I started and now the situation is better, even though there are still males thinking that women should stay in a corner. During my attempt for the record I received many “indications and comments” on what I was doing. I just went straight on my way”, she added. Donatella believes that many things have changed since some decades ago, but that there is still a lot to do. Women need to increase awareness on gender equality in the aerospace field and the previous generation can lead by example, sharing the information that women can do whatever they want. Role models have changed and are changing so much because all the women are contributing and doing something for it since years. Donatella is positive for the future: “I think the world will adapt. And even though another generation is probably needed, we are making the change.”

Donatella is also active within several associations and she is the founder of FlyDonna (Figure 4), an international women’s aeronautical

meeting held in Italy and open to all the women who fly, for passion or for work, but also to those who work in the world of flight and who, in very different ways, share the same passion for the sky and for the air. More information can be found at <http://www.flydonna.it/eng/>.



Figure 4: Donatella during a FlyDonna event in 2018.

Donatella really believes that part of her mission is to connect and help women to meet and exchange, since she strongly believes that together women can do great things and achieve more. This is an idea that she brings also to associations like Zonta (<https://www.zontabz.org/it/>) and ADA (<https://www.donnedellaria.it/>), serving the purpose to motivate and support young women.

During the Q&A session Donatella further stressed how passion for her is the driver to achieve everything, and that without passion she surely would not have achieved her goals. As a woman in the aeronautical field, she has fought a lot to affirm her position, but she also believes that women need to keep fighting. Her generation needs to support the younger one, to start from what has been achieved in last decades and to improve it. “There is still a lot of “space” before reaching equality, but things are changing”, she said. By joining associations like WIA-E, FlyDonna, ADA, etc. young women can understand that they are not alone, that they are supported in their choices and that there are other women sharing the same passions, interests and experiences. Her book “World Record For A Gyroplane 27,556 feet above

the ground” (Figure 5) is a collection of all the things she learned and prepared while aiming at the World Record, as well as her dreams and the difficulties she faced. According to Donatella, the book is a “simple story about that fact that you can do more than what you think, you just have to trust in the power you have and you can do it. We can handle whatever we want and I wanted to write down this story to remind you of this”.



Figure 5: Donatella’s book “World Record For A Gyroplane 27,556 feet above the ground”.

Donatella concluded by leaving a message for the younger generations: “Once you discover what your passion is, just go. And try to pursue it in any case, always, don’t be afraid. If you fail in the process, just try a different way. Don’t forget your dream, follow your passion and fight for it. The most important part of you is yourself”.

More information about Donatella Ricci can be found in her website at <http://www.gyrodona.com/>.



“Space makes you dream and we dream of a modern society with gender equality and inclusion”

