Nancy Bird Walton became a pilot when flying was still new in Australia. She used her plane to start a business and so became the first woman in Australia to make a business in **aviation**.

Nancy Bird was born in 1915. When she was 13 she left school to work in her father’s store at Mount George, near Wingham. Her wages were £1 ($2) per week. This was the beginning of the depression and Nancy worked from early in the morning until late at night. She had Sundays off.

In the 1920s many people went to air shows to see the aeroplanes. For £1 they could take a joy-ride. Nancy wanted to learn to fly but the lessons cost £200; her wages for almost two years. So she began to save.
By 1933 Nancy had enough money for the lessons. She moved to Sydney and began to learn how to fly with Charles Kingsford-Smith, the best known aviator in Australia. By 1935 Nancy finished training and had a licence. Her father and her aunt each gave Nancy £200 to buy a light plane. With a friend from the flying school, Peg McKillop, she began giving joy rides at country shows. Nancy toured around New South Wales and at Wagga Wagga she once gave 101 flights in one day.

In those days planes were made from wood and fabric so they were very fragile. There were very few airports and most planes landed in flat paddocks. When on the ground the planes were tied to fences to stop them from being blown away. No-one believed that flying would ever become a means of transport. It was seen as a sport for those who enjoyed danger.

In 1934 Nancy met Reverend Stanley Drummond. His Far West Children’s Health Scheme helped outback children when they needed medical attention. Reverend Drummond started baby health clinics for outback mothers. The clinics were set up in railway carriages at remote railway stations. Then the nursing sisters drove out to see mothers and babies on their properties. The sisters spent days travelling between families. Reverend Drummond thought it would save time if Nancy could fly the sisters to these places. Her plane could also be used as an air ambulance. So, at the age of 20, Nancy became the first woman in Australia to use her plane for business.

Because the money from the Far West Children’s Health Scheme was not enough to support her and her plane, Nancy did other work. Sometimes she flew farmers to inspect stock. The plane had no radios and there were no aerial maps so Nancy had to rely on what she could see. Often she flew low and followed railway lines, telegraph lines or roads. The station owners cleared large rocks and tree stumps from the paddocks for her to land. But Nancy had to watch out for sheep and cattle as well as holes and bumps.

In the 1936 air race from Brisbane to Adelaide to celebrate South Australia’s 100th birthday, Nancy won the Ladies’ Trophy. In 1938 Nancy sold her plane. It had flown more than 112 000 kilometres in just a few years. She visited Europe and the United States to look at modern flying techniques and flew on the first flight of the DC4 aircraft from New York to Washington.

Nancy was awarded the Order of the British Empire in 1966 and the Order of Australia in 1990, for service to the community.