

Women in Aviation

By Kelli Gant

Today, women pilots fly for the airlines, fly in the military and in space, fly air races, command helicopter mercy flights, haul freight, stock high mountain lakes with fish, seed clouds, patrol pipelines, teach students to fly, maintain jet engines, and transport corporate officers.

Women have made a significant contribution to aviation since the Wright Brothers' first 12-second flight in 1903. Blanche Scott was the first women pilot, in 1910, when the plane that she was allowed to taxi mysteriously became airborne. In 1911, Harriet Quimby became the first licensed woman pilot. And later in 1912, Harriet became the first woman to fly across the English Channel.

In 1921, Bessie Coleman became the first African-American woman pilot. Because of the discrimination in the United States towards women as pilots and Bessie's race, Bessie moved to France and learned to fly at the most famous flight school in France — the *Ecole d'Aviation de Freres Caudron*. Bessie returned to the United States and pursued a barnstorming career until 1926.

On March 16, 1929, Louise Thaden made her bid for the women's endurance record from Oakland Municipal Airport, CA, in a Travel Air, and succeeded with a flight of 22 hours, 3 minutes. The record was broken a month later by Elinor Smith with 26 hours, 21 minutes over Roosevelt Field, New York.

Other firsts followed, Katherine Cheung, in 1931 in Los Angeles, CA was the first woman of Chinese ancestry to earn a license. Anne Morrow Lindbergh, wife of Charles Lindbergh, was the first U.S. woman glider pilot and first woman recipient of the National Geographic Society's *Hubbad Award*. And, Phoebe Fairgrave Omelie was the first woman transport pilot. Phoebe, considered to be one of America's top women pilots in the 1920s and 1930s, developed a program for training women flight instructors and was appointed as Special Assistant for Air Intelligence of the *National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics* (the forerunner of the NASA), and was active in the *National Air Marking and Mapping Program* to paint airport identification symbols on airports or nearby buildings.

Air racing was a way for women to demonstrate their

abilities, and of course, the prize money was an incentive. All-women's air races were soon organized, the biggest being the *National Women's Air Derby* in 1929. The race was from Santa Monica, CA to Cleveland, OH and flown in eight days. The idea of letting women race airplanes was not accepted by many people. During the air race there were threats of sabotage and headlines that read "**RACE SHOULD BE STOPPED.**" However, the Derby drew twenty women from across the country and gave them the chance to meet face-to-face for the first time.

After the race, these women kept in contact with each other and talked about forming a women pilots organization. Clara Trenckman, who worked in the Women's Department of the *Curtiss Flying Service* at Valley Stream, Long Island, convinced two Curtiss executives to invite licensed women to meet in Valley Stream to form such an organization. Responding to the invitation, 26 licensed women pilots met in a hanger at Curtiss Field on November 2, 1929 to formally create the **99s CLUB**. Later, after many rejected names, the organization chose its name "The Ninety-Nines" because 99 of the 117 licensed American women pilots in the United States at that time signed up as charter members.



Pictured: Willa Brown, the first African-American woman officer in the Civil Air Patrol.⁸

Willa Brown was the first African-American commercial pilot and first African-American woman officer in the Civil Air Patrol. In her hometown of Chicago, IL, she taught aviation courses in high schools and founded a flight school at Harlem Airport. In 1939, Willa helped form the National Airmen's Association of America whose purpose was to get African-Americans into the U.S. Armed Forces as aviation cadets. Willa also was the coordinator of war-training service for the *Civil Aeronautics Authority* (CAA), and more importantly, was the director of the Coffey School of Aeronautics. The school was selected by the Army and CAA to "conduct the experiments" that resulted in the admission of African-Americans into the Army Air Forces. Later, Coffey became a feeder school for the Army Air Forces' program for African-American aviators at Tuskegee Institute.

By 1930 there were 200 women pilots, by 1935, there were between 700 and 800 licensed women pilots. A major breakthrough in aviation was allowing women to air race against men. In 1936, Louise Thaden and Blanche Noyes won the prestigious Bendix Trophy Race. Women have competed against men ever since.

Most women who learned to fly during World War II, got instruction through the CAA's Civil Pilot Training

(Continued, Next Page)

Women in Aviation

(Continued From Previous Page)

Program. More than 935 women gained their licenses by 1941 with 43 serving as CAA-qualified instructors. Mills College in Oakland, CA was one of the participating training colleges for women.

As World War II progressed, women were able to break into many aspects of the aviation world. They served as ferry and test pilots, mechanics, flight controllers, instructors, and aircraft production line workers. At the beginning of 1943, 31.3 percent of the aviation work force were women. World War II was very beneficial to the movement of women into aviation fields. The history of aviation during these years is immense.

The *Women's Auxiliary Ferry Squadron* (WAFS), founded by Nancy Harkness Love, and the *Women's Flying Training Detachment* (WFTD), founded by Jacqueline Cochran, were fused together by President Roosevelt to become the *Women's Airforce Service Pilots* (WASP). The new organization was a vital part of the history of women in military aviation. Although these women were civilians and outnumbered by women in the regular military service of World War II, their experiences present a paradigm for the service of WWII military women. Unfortunately, the WASPs were not recognized as military personnel until the Senate passed a resolution in November 1977 and it was signed into law by President Carter.

The years since World War II have brought down many more barriers for women pilots and records continue to be broken. Jackie Cochran went on to be the first woman pilot to break the sound barrier, with Chuck Yeager acting as her chase pilot, on May 20, 1953. And, Marion Hart flew the Atlantic in 1954 at the age of 62.

Women got their first step closer to space in 1959, when Geraldine Cobb, a talented young pilot, became the first woman to undergo the Mercury astronaut physiological tests. "Jerrie" was 28 years old, had 7,000 hours of flight time, and held three world records. She was a pilot and manager for *Aero Design and Engineering Company*, which made the Aero Commander aircraft, and was one of the few women executives in aviation. Cobb successfully completed all three stages of the physical and psychological tests that were used to select the original seven Mercury astronauts. Although thirteen women finished this first

round of testing, NASA refused to authorize the completion of the tests for fear that such action might be taken as approval of female astronauts.

Not even the Soviet Union's launch of Valentina Tereshkova into space in 1963, nor the 1964 Civil Rights Act broke ground for women in space. It was not until June 17, 1983, that Dr. Sally Kristen Ride, NASA astronaut and a South Central Section 99, made history as the first U.S. woman in space, serving as a specialist for STS-7 on the six-day flight of the orbiter Challenger.

By the 1960s there were 12,400 licensed women pilots in the United States (3.6 percent of all pilots.) This number doubled by the end of the decade to nearly 30,000 women, but still only 4.3 percent of the total pilots. Today, women comprise about 6 percent of pilots in the United States.



Geraldine Mock became the first woman to fly around the world in 1964 in a single-engine Cessna 180 called the Spirit of Columbus. That flight stirred up more interest in air races. The new *All Women's International Air Race* soon became known as the "Angel Derby" and the *All-Woman Transcontinental Air Race* was popularly called the "Powder Puff Derby." Other races that The Ninety-Nines have originated, developed and flown in are *Formula 1*, the *Kachina Doll Air Race* in Arizona, the *Indiana Fairladies Air Races*, the ever-popular *Palms to Pines Air Race*, and likely the largest and oldest proficiency race, the *Michigan Small Race*. Dozens of others, like the *New England Air Race*, have drawn competitors from many states and from Canada.

And the firsts continued... In 1974 Mary Barr became the first woman pilot with the Forest Service; Ensign Mary Crawford became the U.S. Navy's first woman naval Flight Officer in June 1981; Charlotte Larson became the first woman smoke jumper aircraft captain in 1983 and Deanne Schulman was the first qualified woman smoke jumper; in 1984, Captain Beverly Burns was the first woman to captain a 747 cross-country and Captain Lynn Rippelmeyer was the first woman to captain a 747 on a transatlantic flight. In 1995, the first woman pilot in the U.S. Space Shuttle program was Lt. Col. Eileen Marie Collins.

People become pilots for the same reasons. First, they love flying, and they love using their talents and being respected for them. And mostly, they love the feeling of belonging to this strong family called aviation.

Source: <http://www.ninety-nines.org/wia.html>