

High Flyers

by Gordon Grimwade

A **biplane** is an airplane with two pairs of fixed wings.

Altitude is the height of something above sea level or the Earth's surface.

In the first decades of the 1900s, women aviators performed for crowds as wing walkers and flew aerobatics. They completed record-setting flights in noisy open-cockpit airplanes. That might sound exciting, but it was not for the faint-hearted.

Take Elinor Smith. She flew solo when she was 15 years old. A couple of years later, in 1928, she flew a **biplane** under all four suspension bridges on the East River in New York City. "I had to dodge a couple of ships near the bridges, but there was plenty of room," she reported later. In 1930, she attempted a world-**altitude** record. She reached 27,419 feet on the first attempt.

Elinor Smith flew under four East River bridges as a stunt.





Bessie Coleman

The following year, she reached 32,576 feet. At that level, however, the cold temperatures froze the fuel line. As the plane started coughing and spluttering, Smith accidentally turned off her oxygen supply. She lost consciousness and the plane started falling. Fortunately, she regained consciousness in time to retake control of the aircraft as it plunged earthwards.

Later that year, Smith's colleagues voted her the best woman pilot in America. She certainly seemed to be the *luckiest* woman pilot after her altitude record flight! By the time she died in 2010 at the age of 98, aviation had made huge advances. Today, flying at more than 40,000 feet above sea level is commonplace. Fuel lines don't freeze, and

pressurized aircraft maintain a steady flow of oxygen pumping through the cabin. Smith experienced those advances for herself in 2000. That's when she became the oldest pilot to complete a simulated space shuttle landing.

Some women pilots in the early days of flying were not as fortunate as Smith. But they matched her fearlessness. Bessie Coleman was born in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1892. She was the first African American and Native American woman to become a licensed pilot. No American flying school would train her, so she headed to France. She earned her license at the Caudron Brothers' School of Aviation in 1921. Returning to America, she took up stunt flying, or barnstorming. In April 1926, Coleman was killed while practicing for a show.



Harriet Quimby



Ruth Elder

A **monoplane** is an airplane with a single pair of wings.

Harriet Quimby was inspired by the Wright brothers and their first flight in 1903. Seven years later, she became the second woman in the world to gain a pilot's license. On April 16, 1912, Quimby flew a borrowed **monoplane** across the English Channel. The open cockpit, timber-and-cloth aircraft flew at around 60 miles per hour (mph). It was a cold and damp 40-minute flight in overcast conditions. When Quimby landed safely on a French beach, she became the first woman to make the perilous crossing. A few months after returning home, she and a passenger fell from their plane during a roll and were killed.

Asian American pilot Katherine Cheung found a career as a pilot. Cheung was born in China in 1904 and moved with her American father to the United States. She took up flying in 1931. She became a commercial pilot and raced in her airplane during the 1930s. When Japan invaded China in 1937 as World War II (1939–1945) was brewing in Europe, she planned to return to China to establish a flying school. Her father persuaded her to give up flying after a friend died in an air crash. The Beijing Air Force Aviation Museum claims her as “China’s Amelia Earhart.”

Charles Lindbergh’s solo nonstop transatlantic crossing in May 1927 started another race. Actor and pilot Ruth Elder and her co-pilot George Halderman decided to make an attempt to cross the Atlantic Ocean, too. Ignoring advice to wait until after the winter, the pair set off from Long Island, New York, for Paris, France, in October 1927. Bad weather forced them to ditch the plane 2,623 miles later. They were only 350 miles from land. A Dutch oil tanker rescued them. As their plane was being hoisted onto the ship, it caught fire and was destroyed.

The story of American women flyers is a fascinating mix of adventurous spirits and mixed luck. They seized opportunity and pursued their dreams. With determination—and a little help from the weather—women pioneer aviators flew into history. ✈️

Gordon Grimwade is an Australian historian and archaeologist who enjoys writing and traveling. He once held a pilot's license but admits he prefers the comfort of modern air travel to an open cockpit.