

An Aeronautical Memory

It was late afternoon, July 1, 1912, at Dorchester Bay near Boston. The occasion was the Harvard-Boston Flying Meet. A white Bleriot, a French military monoplane, was in the air at 1,000 feet preparing to land. When suddenly it turned nose down and the passenger and pilot were thrown from the airplane. Falling end over end, both bodies landed in the offshore mud flat to the astonishment of 5,000 spectators. There was no thought of using safety belts in those days. The passenger was William A.P. Willard, organizer of the meet, and the first licensed female pilot in this country, the vivacious Harriet Quimby. Also observing this tragedy was another young female about to take her first flying lesson—Ruth Law.

Stunned but not discouraged, Ms. Law was resolute in her pursuit of a flying career. She received her pilot's license, Number 188, November 12, 1912. She immediately contracted to a Florida hotel to make daily exhibition flights and carry passengers in her Wright *Flyer*. Ms. Law did the same at other resorts the following year. On November 6, 1913, she became the first woman to fly at night during a trip around Staten Island.

She bought a 100-hp Curtiss Model D and had it modified replacing the wheel control with Wright 'levers'. She learned to fly using a Wright machine and was more familiar with the lever control method. On January 17, 1915, Ms. Law gave her first public demonstration of looping and aerobatics flying in Florida.

The American flight distance record of 452 miles was held at the time by Vic



HEROINE ALOFT: RUTH LAW

by Richard A. Morley

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Carlstrom. Intent on breaking this record, Ms. Law took off from Chicago early in the morning of November 19, 1916. She landed at Hornell, New York, arriving there at 2:00 in the afternoon. In her statement to the *New York Times* she said, "I calculated that the gasoline I had when I left Chicago would just carry me to Hornell. But I counted some on a wind which wasn't there to help me. I ran out of gasoline two miles from Hornell and I glided to a landing at a race track just outside the city."

The record-breaking nonstop distance covered was 590 miles in 5 hours, 45 minutes for an average speed of 102 mph.

After a spark plug change by Army Lieutenant 'Hap' Arnold and refueling, she then flew to Binghamton reaching there at 4:20 P.M.

The next morning she flew to New York City where her final destination was Governor's Island. It was ironic in that she did not refuel at Binghamton and by the time she reached New York City her engine was cutting out from fuel starvation. She banked the Curtiss pusher to get fuel to the engine so she could make it to Governor's Island where she landed 'dead stick' as she did at Hornell. Ms. Law established three new flying records: American nonstop cross-country dis-

Ms. Law in flying togs and helmet with her Curtiss, circa 1916.

Ruth Law performing aerobatics at night here completing a triple loop. Flares were attached to each upper wing tip so she could be seen.

Ruth Law being welcomed by Major General Leonard Wood at Governor's Island, November 20, 1916.

A very feminine and attractive Ruth Bancroft Law (1888-1970), circa 1916.

Ruth Law with her 100-hp Curtiss Model D at Daytona Beach, Florida, January 17, 1915. Clearly shown are the 'Wright levers' and she always wore a safety belt.



tance, world's nonstop cross-country distance for women and second for the world's nonstop distance record. The only aviator who had flown further was Lieutenant A. Marchal of France. He flew from Nancy, France, to Chelm, Poland, a distance of 822.5 miles on June 20 and 21, 1916.

Ms. Law's Curtiss airplane was modified for the record-breaking nonstop flight. The fuel capacity was increased from 48 to 53 gallons. A shield was provided to keep her feet from freezing and she devised a 'roller map' similar to a camera film winder. She could hold one of the flight levers with her knee and turn the 'roller map' with her right hand. Her altitude during the flight ranged from 200 to 6,000 feet. It's not hard to imagine the effects of sitting out in the open at more than 100 mph in the winter fighting the exposure problem.

Ms. Law was the guest of honor at several large banquets hosted by dignitaries such as noted explorers Admiral Robert Peary and Roald Amundsen. She was feted by the Aero Club of America and President and Mrs. Woodrow Wilson.

After her flight from Chicago to New York she earned as much as \$9,000 a week for her exhibitions.

In September 1917, she made a trip to Europe to observe aviation progress there. When the United States entered the war, she volunteered to fly in the military. However, Secretary of War Newton Baker refused and stated flatly, "We don't want women in the Army!" After being denied permission to fly in combat she participated in recruiting



tours for the Army and Navy. She gave aerial exhibitions to raise money for the Red Cross and Liberty Bond drives. It was during one of these exhibitions that she set a new women's altitude record of 14,700 feet.

She flew the first airmail into Manila while making a tour of the Far East after the war. Ruth Law helped to establish women as unalterable participants in the growing field of aviation. However, many people in the industry had a latent attitude against women. She later abandoned flying feeling there was no room for her in commercial or military aviation. Ms. Law declared, "I suppose I ought to say I'm in favor of woman suffrage but what has that got to do with it?" □

