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AMERICA'S FIRST LADIES OF FLIGHT:
A HISTORY OF FEMINISM IN FLYING

HISTORY 489: RESEARCH SEMINAR

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ABSTRACT

The early twentieth century saw the proliferation of modern feminist values that challenged the notion that women were incapable of working outside the home, especially in careers involving math, science, and risk taking. Women pilots who flew during the Golden Age of Aviation, from the mid to late 1910s to early 1940s, exemplify the dueling gender ideals of the era. Female flyers faced a dilemma of having to choose between dual gender expectations. It was only acceptable to either lead a life of domesticity or the life of the “modern” working woman – not both. Through analysis of the lives and accomplishments of four women aviation pioneers, Neta Snook, Pancho Barnes, Amelia Earhart, and Jackie Cochran, a *herstory* of women’s liberation emerges. Their triumphs and struggles as females in a male dominated industry showcase the fearless determination that allowed women in the early twentieth century to have their families and live their dreams too.

INTRODUCTION

They have been called ladybirds, angels, sweethearts of the air, and aviatrixes, but rarely have they just been called pilots. Technological innovations of the twentieth century opened up new careers for many, but opportunities in these fields have tended to be available to males only. The relatively young technology of aviation was no different, but a new kind of “modern woman” dared to fly. Few can name more than a handful of women pilots of the early twentieth century, but in fact, by 1935, there were between 700 and 800 licensed female pilots and unrecorded numbers of unlicensed others in the United States.¹

Female pilots were most numerous during the Golden Age of Aviation which took place during the interwar period roughly from 1919 to 1942. It was a time of great economic fluctuation, but it was also the beginning of great social change, especially with regard to the women’s movement. With the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920, opinions about what women should and could do started to shift. Women encountered a new set of paradoxical gender roles and were caught between the “true woman” of the domestic sphere and the “modern woman” of the machine age. Ironically, society idealized both the traditional conception of how women ought to be and the evolving conception of the modern woman, thus prohibiting women from truly attaining either ideal without facing social consequences from some group.

America’s first female pilots provide examples of this dilemma women faced by being caught between a man’s world and the life of domesticity. Four women especially, Neta Snook, Pancho Barnes, Amelia Earhart, and Jackie Cochran embody the triumphs and struggles women faced in overcoming the paradox as America transitioned from first wave feminism to second

¹ Julie Wosk, *Women and the Machine: Representations from the Spinning Wheel to the Electronic Age*, The John Hopkins University Press (2001): 149.

wave feminism. Their stories will help explain what happened after suffrage in 1920 and before the tumultuous fight for gender equality beginning in the 1960s.

Women became pilots so they could experience the exhilaration of taking to the skies for adventure, civic duty, profit, and challenge, but unknowingly, they also became feminist pioneers by courageously testing the cultural gender expectations and roles of their day. By navigating this dilemma that all women faced, America's first ladies of flight ultimately advanced the women's movement and became feminist pioneers.

Specifically, this paper will be focusing on the gender discrimination that Snook, Barnes, Earhart, and Cochran faced in the male dominated industry of aviation, how that discrimination was reflective of societal sexism and dueling gender expectations for females, what circumstances and characteristics enabled these women to live dual roles, and how their contributions set the groundwork for modern feminism.

HISTORIOGRAPHY

So much of the history that has been written about women in aviation has been limited to biographies and stories of the colorful characters who participated in flying during its heyday in the 1930s. These women have been written about often in biographies because they were considered heroines and celebrities of their time. The vast majority of the literature revolves around Amelia Earhart who, because of her tragic and mysterious disappearance, has become the fascination of conspiracy theorists. Few scholars have really examined women's roles in aviation in the context of the greater movement of feminism in the United States. Too many biographies focus on the triumphs of female pilots, but do not acknowledge the gender barriers they faced.

Susan Ware, a professor at New York University, however, did not follow that formula with her historical research. Her book, *Still Missing: Amelia Earhart and the Search for Modern Feminism*, tells the life story of Amelia Earhart in a way no one else ever has. Instead of focusing just on the life of Earhart, Ware shows that Earhart was symbolic of the development of modern feminism within the context of American history. Ware also discusses the gender and societal stereotypes Earhart was up against, how Earhart was able to overcome those demanding gender expectations, and how Earhart became a voice for gender equality.

Inspired by Ware, this paper will attempt to contextualize the stories of not one, but four unique women pilots in the broader history of aviation and American women's history. Unlike Ware's work, this paper incorporates more aviation history into the story by including some lesser-known women from different sub fields of aviation in addition to Earhart. Ultimately the difference between Ware's work and this paper is that while Ware argues Earhart was *the* symbol of modern feminism, this paper takes the position that *many* women's stories can help us to understand the complex "dueling duality" of gender expectations in history.

METHODOLOGY

One of the fortunate things for any aviation historian is that the public in the early twentieth century was "air-minded," meaning that they were fascinated by and had a ravenous appetite for stories about the pioneers who piloted the new technology of incredible flying machines. Aviation was written about in magazines and newspapers, talked about on the radio, seen in popular films, and was always the main attraction at fairs and other events. Sport aviation records were highly publicized and were as popular, in some circles, as horse racing or auto racing. Better still for the historian is the fact that women who took part in winged travel

also wrote and spoke extensively about their experiences. The public could not get enough of their adventure tales and were captivated by the idea that women could take to the skies as naturally as men could. These women pilot authors wrote about what it was like to fly, and more specifically, what it was like to be a female in an occupation in which it was assumed only men had the capability and bravery for. In order to better understand the history of America's first ladies of flight, the research for this paper has included examination of these women's own words and stories documented in their autobiographies and the popular media of the time. Through examining multiple perspectives of women in aviation in their own words, themes have emerged that will help depict the female experience in the 1920s through the 1940s.

AVIATION DEFINED

In order to fully appreciate the accomplishments of female aviation pioneers, some general aviation terminology must first be defined. There are two main classifications of flight within the field of aviation: civil aviation and military aviation. First, civil aviation includes a wide array of activities such as barnstorming, sport aviation, the transport of goods and passengers, aerial advertising, aerial photography, flight instruction, sightseeing, and any other activity by a private individual or company for profit. These are all civilian activities, but military aviation, the other category, is only made up of aviation activities associated with government functions. Some military aviation activities include flight for warfare, transport of military supplies, and aircraft testing. The difference between the two is that civil aviation consists of activities done for profit or pure enjoyment by everyday citizens whereas military aviation consists of non-profit activities to carry out government duties.

For the purposes of this research paper, the discussion of the female pilots has been categorized into four different “genres” of flight activities stemming from the two classifications of civil and military flight. These activities will be called: commercial aviation (civil), barnstorming (civil), sport aviation (civil), and military aviation (military). Each of these four activities was historically significant for the advancement of women in the field and one woman will represent her own category.

The most familiar commercial activity has always been the passenger airlines which cater to the public. But before passenger airlines were a prevalent means of travel, any pilot with the proper license could be hired for transport. One exemplary female commercial aviator was Neta Snook who is representative of this genre. Though not very well-known, she participated in a variety of occupations involving transport during the earliest period of aviation so her story is quite unique.

The second aviator that will be examined is Pancho Barnes who participated in what was called barnstorming. Barnstorming was like a “flying circus” and was a prominent and profitable form of entertainment during the 1920s. Barnstorming got its name because pilots would travel the country and land in rural farming communities and in effect would “storm the barn.” They would perform a show and would offer joy rides for the amusement of spectators and paying customers. Many famous pilots during the Golden Age of Aviation got their start as barnstormers.² Barnstorming was popular throughout the entire period, but was most prevalent during the 1910s and 1920s when aviation was much more of a novelty.

The name “barnstormer” refers to either stunt pilots who performed difficult acrobatics and dangerous maneuvers with the aircraft or aerialists who performed the death-defying wing-

² U.S. Centennial of Flight Commission, “Barnstormers,” *Born of Dreams – Inspired by Freedom*, (December, 2003) <http://www.centennialofflight.gov/index2.cfm> (accessed 3 March, 2008).

walking, stunt parachuting, and midair plane transfers. Both are called barnstormers, but this paper will only discuss pilots. Pancho Barnes' story provides an unusual perspective about what it was like to be a female pilot.

Barnstorming gave rise to sport aviation as stunt pilots began challenging themselves to break records. Sport aviation is just what the name implies – flying for sport. Pilots who flew for sport often participated in air races (sometimes called derbies) and tried to break land, speed, altitude and other kinds of records.³ Often, prize money would be offered to any pilot who could break a record or win a race, but just like many other sports, it had as much to do with the challenge as the financial reward. The late 1920s and 1930s saw the height of this activity and women pilots were numerous. It is from this genre of flying that heroines like Amelia Earhart, to be discussed in this paper, gained their fame.

Military aviation is any type of flying intended to carry out the duties of the government in either warfare or for defense. Jackie Cochran, the final woman this paper focuses on, was not technically a member of the military. At the time when she flew for the military during World War II, she was considered a civilian because women were not permitted to hold status as members of the military. Women indeed did participate as pilots in military activities (beginning during WWII) and continue to do so today, although they now hold military status. Cochran and other women like her will be referred to as military aviators in this paper for simplicity.

It is important to note that these activities are more fluid than fixed. Many women who flew as barnstormers also became sport aviators and those who flew for sport were often also involved in commercial aviation as flight instructors, etc. This paper divides the women into four genres only to add another dimension of historical analysis to the stories of women pilots.

³ *To differentiate: a land record is when a pilot flies a measured distance which has never been flown before. A speed record refers to the fastest time at which a pilot can fly a measured distance. An altitude record is how high a pilot can fly with an aircraft or how high a pilot can perform a certain maneuver.

In doing so, one can start to see that each activity attracted different “crowds” of flyers who had different motivations, interests, abilities, and lifestyles. The women that were chosen to represent each activity were picked because of how prominent each was in that particular type of flying in addition to how well each represented each the collective experiences of female pilots.

DUELING DUALITIES

It is a commonly held view by historians that first wave feminism ended with the Nineteenth Amendment and second wave feminism didn't start until the 1960s. But what happened in between waves? According to Ware, “women of the 1920s and 1930s have gotten a bum rap from historians. Compared with the towering figures of Progressive-era reform and suffragism, they seem pale, self-centered, drifting, and uninterested in women's issues.”⁴ This was just not the case because instead of continuing their mother's struggle against de jure gender discrimination, women of the twenties and thirties had to take on the task of challenging de facto discrimination which permeated American culture. As Eleanor Roosevelt once remarked, “Fundamentally, the purpose of Feminism is that a woman should have an equal opportunity and Equal Rights with any other citizen of the country.” This view was representative of the liberal feminism of the era, which Ware defines as a philosophy “in which the emphasis was on individual achievement, equal opportunity, striving for political and legal equality...[with the] goal of integrating women into the mainstream of the dominant culture.”⁵ Women of the 1920s and 1930s do not deserve the “bum rap” they have been given because they too faced sexism, but dealt with it in a very different way.

⁴ Susan Ware, *Still Missing: Amelia Earhart and the Search for Modern Feminism*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 141).

⁵ *Ibid*, 118.

Women pilots of the era embodied this liberal feminist philosophy in that they strove to find a place in the public sphere through their passion for flight, however, they battled oppression every day in order to live their dreams. As feminist Marilyn Frye eloquently describes,

The root of the word ‘oppression’ is the element ‘press.’ Presses are used to mold things or flatten them or reduce them in bulk, sometimes to reduce them by squeezing out the gases or liquids in them. Something pressed is something caught between or among forces and barriers which are so related to each other that jointly they restrain, restrict or prevent the thing’s motion or mobility.⁶

Frye uses this symbolic language to express the nature of sexism and how women are “pressed” between dual forces that “Mold. Immobilize. Reduce.”⁷

The era of female fliers also marked the beginnings of the “machine age” with the new technologies of the automobile and airplane gaining popularity as the “modern” way of living. Women faced dual forces of oppression due to the rise of this technology. On the one hand, women were shut out of technology for the same stereotypical “justifications” that females have always faced whenever they made an effort to gain access to the public sphere. The major argument against women participating in technology, and therefore the workplace, was that it just was not in the “nature” of females to possess the capacity to learn the skills and know-how needed to operate machines. In an essay written in 1929 entitled, “Milady Takes the Air,” pilot Bruce Gould summarized the cultural climate of skepticism at the time. In it he wrote, “women by nature are impulsive and scatter-brained,” they “don’t like to mess around with machinery,” and that women were “all right in the rear cockpit, or the upholstered cabin; anywhere, in fact, except in the pilot’s seat.”⁸ Additionally, women were ridiculed and stereotyped further when

⁶ Marilyn Frye, “Oppression,” *The Politics of Reality: Essays in the Feminist Theory*, (Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1983).

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Wosk, 155.

they attempted to use technology “belonging” to men. As Amelia Earhart wrote in her book *The Fun of It*, women “are considered guilty of incompetence until proven otherwise.”⁹

Conversely, women were facing pressure *to use* modern technology. In fact, the culture idealized women who embraced certain kinds of technology and had done so from the time of the Industrial Revolution. Women were encouraged to mechanize their lives by embracing the efficiency and usefulness of things like the sewing machine, iron, typewriter, vacuum cleaner, and other various household appliances. All of these kinds of machines only “added to women’s household duties, especially since standards of cleanliness were also raised.”¹⁰ Technology marketed to females may have been an “improvement” to their lives, but in reality, it upheld strict gender roles of the institution of sexism by restricting females to domesticity. So while women were encouraged to use technology to “improve” their lives by changing the nature of household work, they were discouraged from technology that could be used for empowerment. This was the dual and dueling nature of oppression: women could not win either way.

This dichotomy is why America’s first ladies of flight can be considered feminist pioneers. Not only did they challenge the duality by embracing technology that had been limited to males, they worked to make it culturally acceptable for women to do so. Some female pilots knew they held feminist ideas and became active proponents of feminism, but many others did not consider themselves as such. However, they truly were feminists without even knowing it because they actually *lived* feminism. Through the act of becoming a pilot and then accomplishing astounding things in “the man’s world,” they effectively overcame the structure of duality intended to uphold oppression. They were able to lead fulfilling lives that *flew* in the face of male dominance.

⁹ Amelia Earhart, *The Fun of It*, *The Fun of It*, Chicago: Academy Chicago Publishers, 1932, 179.

¹⁰ Wosk, 27.

COMMERICAL PILOT NETA SNOOK



Neta Snook posing with her Canuck airplane at Kinner Field in 1921
Public Domain Image¹¹

Commercial aviation is a diverse subfield of aviation in that there are many different kinds of flying that fit this category. Neta Snook was a representative of female commercial aviators because her career consisted of being a student at a flight school, testing aircraft and other aviation technology for the British government, barnstorming, transport, aerial advertising, managing an airfield, and becoming a flight instructor. In all of her occupations, Snook's experience illustrates the difficulty for women trying to gain a foothold in the newly blossoming aviation industry in the early years from the late 1910's to the early 1920s.

Anita "Neta" Snook will probably almost always be remembered for being the woman who taught Amelia Earhart to fly, but her career and life was just as interesting as other female

¹¹ Photo donated by Karsten Smedal and available as a public domain image. Accessed May 12, 2008. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Neta_kinner_field_1921_s.jpg>.

aviation pioneers. Born in 1896, Snook grew up in the Midwest. Unlike other female pilots of the Golden Age, she began her career in aviation much earlier.¹² Snook had always had a fascination with technology and machines and some of her earliest memories included learning about automobile maintenance and repair through working on a Stanley Steamer automobile with her father.¹³ This exposure to the “man’s world” of technology at such an early age no doubt influenced her choices later in life.

In 1915, the year Snook graduated from high school, her family moved to Ames, Iowa where Snook enrolled at Iowa State College. She was required to take seventeen hours of home economics courses before she was allowed to take the courses she really wanted, “mechanical drawing, combustion engines, and a course in the repair, maintenance and the overhaul of farm tractors.”¹⁴ Not only was it uncommon for rural people to attend college, it was even more rare that a woman attended college and took those sort of classes that Snook loved.

During college, Snook spent her time in the library studying aviation and researching flight schools. Without telling her parents, she applied to a school founded by Glenn Curtis in Newport News, Virginia. She promptly received a letter stating, “No females allowed.” The next year, she applied to the Davenport Aviation School in Iowa and was accepted as the only female student. When she first met the “boys,” as she called the other students at her school in her autobiography, they told her that they were going to treat her like their “kid sister.” Right from the start, they gave her the task of sewing wing covers for the airplane they were building and would eventually be learning to fly in.¹⁵ Snook soon earned the boys’ respect though when she proved she knew a lot more about aviation than they had expected when she pointed out how

¹² Patti Marshall, “Neta Snook,” *Aviation History* 17 (January, 2007): 21.

¹³ Neta Snook Southern, *I Taught Amelia to Fly*, (New York: Vantage Press, 1974), 5-6.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 16.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 19-25.

the blueprints for the plane were riddled with errors.¹⁶ For women pilots, it was quite difficult to earn the respect as professionals because of the gender stereotype that females could not comprehend technical or complicated machinery. Women have often been portrayed as technological buffoons when it came to operating things like automobiles or airplanes. This was a common perception of Americans during this time which still lingers today.

After being at the school for some time and finally getting to take her first flight, Snook wrote home to her mother to share her excitement. Snook remembered her mother being reluctant to tell her relatives of her new schooling because she thought they would have considered her a “disgrace to the family.” Much to Snook’s surprise, when her grandfather found out, he was so pleased to hear that his grandchild was learning to fly one of those “contraptions” that he paid her a visit at school and even took a ride in the newly built airplane.¹⁷

In the fall of 1917, the school closed because the school’s president died in a crash while flying the only operating airplane. The male students went on to the Curtis Flying School in Newport News to finish their instruction and promised Snook that they would lobby to get her admitted too. She was eventually admitted, but soon after in 1917, all civilian flying in the United States was prohibited by order of President Wilson for the war’s duration. During this time, Snook took up a job with the British Air Ministry testing and inspecting aircraft materials. After the war, she returned to Ames with her very own airplane.¹⁸ There she took more college classes and worked on rebuilding her Canuck in her backyard. When it was finished, she made her first solo flight and began flying all over the Midwest offering rides for fifteen dollars for fifteen minutes in the air.¹⁹ After earning her pilot’s license, she wanted to continue contracting

¹⁶ Ibid, 27.

¹⁷ Ibid, 34.

¹⁸ Marshall, 22.

¹⁹ Snook, 80-83.

passenger flights, but her license specified that the number of passengers she could carry were “none” presumably because the licensing agency could not entrust the safety of passengers to a woman. Instead of giving up and moving on, she boldly erased the “n” and continued flying.

Since the Iowa winters made it difficult to fly, she moved to Los Angeles and opened up her own pilot’s business at the Kinner Field in Los Angeles to fly passengers, do aerial advertising, and to teach flying.²⁰ The Kinner Field was the first commercial air field to be supervised by a woman.²¹ It was there that Snook met Amelia Earhart.

Snook and Earhart first met when Earhart inquired about flying lessons. They agreed that Snook would teach her to fly for one dollar per one minute in the air. Earhart paid in Liberty bonds and Snook accepted the payment. The two women soon found much in common and became fast friends. Both were born in the Midwest and were only a year apart in age, each had been to college, each had spent time working in photographic studios, and of course both had a passion for flight.²² Not only did the two women fly together, they also spent time on the ground together going on double dates, luncheons, to adventures in Chinatown, and to concerts together. They often spent time at one another’s homes playing cards and they talked about books, men, and planes. Amelia, with the help of her mother, soon purchased a Kinner Airster airplane and Snook stopped charging her for lessons.

In 1922, Snook married Bill Southern and soon became pregnant. It was then that she vowed, “If I could just have a healthy baby, I would give up flying forever.” And that is exactly what Snook did; she sold her plane for \$500 in Liberty bonds and flying lessons. She never flew again. She moved back to Iowa with her husband; and two years later in 1924, she returned to

²⁰ Marshall, 22.

²¹ Ames Historical Society, “Neta Snook,” <http://www.ameshistoricalsociety.org/index.html> (accessed 20 March, 2008).

²² Snook, 101-105.

California to dispose of her property and to visit her old flying buddies. It was the last time she saw Amelia, but remembered that Earhart was bewildered as to how a person like Snook could ever give up flying.²³ Considering Snook's circumstances, it is not so unbelievable that someone so passionate about flight could give it up so easily. She was in her mid-twenties by the time she met Bill Southern and she had grown up in a society that continually pressured women to marry and have children. Aviation for her had always just been a hobby and an occupation to pass the time before starting a life.

When Earhart organized the Ninety-Nines, a group for women fliers, she invited Snook to be a charter member, but Snook declined saying that she and her husband did not want to "foster any aviation interests in [their] son". William Jr. would not learn of his mother's aviation past until Amelia disappeared in 1937.²⁴ Afterward, Snook became a public speaker, wrote an autobiography in 1974, and lived out her life on a ranch in California raising plants and animals. She died in 1991 at the age of 95.²⁵

For Snook, the pull of domesticity was too great, but her story helps explain the difficulty of balancing both traditional gender roles and modern gender roles.

²³ Ibid, 157.

²⁴ Ibid, 162.

²⁵ Ames Historical Society.

BARNSTORMER PANCHO BARNES



Pancho Barnes, (1930s) in a photograph taken by famed Hollywood Photographer George Hurrell
Courtesy of the Pancho Barnes Trust Estate Archive²⁶

As a group, barnstormers were characteristically bold adventure seekers. They had to be in order to risk their lives performing extremely technical and incredibly risky maneuvers. Fatalities were common, but stunt pilots thrived on the adrenaline of evading death every single day they went to work. For some, it was about the money, but for others like Pancho Barnes, it was about living and enjoying every minute of it.

Accounts of the adventures of Pancho (Florence Lowe) Barnes make her sound like an action star in a movie instead of a real person. Few outside of the aviation circles of the day knew about this woman who was one of the most vibrant and outrageous personalities of the early twentieth century. She was a privileged child with an odd lifestyle who once performed ballet with Anna Pavlova and often rode horses with her neighbor George Patton! As an adult, she was the first woman to be a stunt pilot in a Hollywood film and she even was a screenwriter and author of over sixty songs some of which can be heard in popular films. Later in life she

²⁶ Pancho Barnes Trust Estate. Accessed April 18, 2008. <<http://www.panchobarnes.com/>>.

owned a guest ranch which catered to the likes of aviation celebrities such as General Jimmy Doolittle, A. Scott Crossfield, H. H. Arnold, Pete Everest, Bob Hoover, Jack Ridley, and Chuck Yeager.²⁷ On top of all that, she held many aviation records and was considered one of the best stunt pilots in the industry.²⁸ It may sound unbelievable, but all that and more is true.

Pancho Barnes was not the first eccentric flyer in the family; her grandfather was Thaddeus Sobieski Constantine Lowe who had been a “Civil War hero, pioneering balloonist, renowned inventor, promoter, and showman.” Born Florence Leontine Lowe on July 22, 1902 her family had been hoping for a boy, but even though her gender came as a disappointment, from day one, they allowed her the same privileges they would have given a boy.²⁹ She was born into a wealthy family; and as a child, she lived in a thirty-five room mansion in Pasadena, California complete with servants, tennis courts, stables, and a pool. She did not have a close relationship with her mother or other females in the family and preferred mud to lace. At eight years old she started attending school where she was the only girl, but she quickly became known as “one of the boys.” Her parents were so concerned about her trouble-making that they sent her to an all girls private school. Soon after, Florence, now in her teens, was getting failing grades and was experimenting with drinking and smoking. Her parents sent her to an even stricter Catholic Boarding School and after her second year, she escaped on horseback to Tijuana only to return and be sent to yet another strict boarding school.³⁰

After graduating from her last boarding school, Florence had aspirations to be a veterinarian, but her mother disdained such an occupation and sent her to the Stickney School of

²⁷ Chuck Yeager was a famous WWII ace and test pilot who was the first person to fly faster than the speed of sound.

²⁸ Pancho Barnes Enterprises, Inc., “Who is Pancho?” *The Pancho Barnes Trust Estate Archive*, 2008. (Accessed 20 March, 2008). <<http://www.panchobarnes.com/>>.

²⁹ Lauren Kessler, *The Happy Bottom Riding Club: The Life and Times of Pancho Barnes*, (NY: Random House, 2000). 3.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 14-21.

Art. Being a female in 1920 left Florence with few viable options because she was still dependent on her parents. She did what her mother told her and this included marrying an Episcopalian Reverend named Calvin Rankin Barnes a man ten years her senior. The marriage was mainly for convenience and was very awkward. The only time the couple was ever intimate was on their honeymoon and much to Florence's disappointment, she became pregnant. She gave birth to a boy, but instead of happiness, she only felt obligation.³¹

Florence Barnes hated her role as minister's wife so she acted out by intentionally telling lewdly obscene stories to other female church members. She also bribed her Sunday school students with pocket knives so that they would learn the catechism so she would not have to spend much time teaching them.³² Her deliberate defiance of her assigned role indicates that Barnes was not at all concerned with the social consequences of her actions. The rebellion against her gender and upper class roles ultimately enabled her to live the free lifestyle she so desired since she was a child.

Barnes had connections; she knew people in Hollywood and started working in film by doing scenes with horses. Soon she was meeting people her own age and was beginning to enjoy freedom from obligation again. She got involved in an affair, adopted a short hairstyle and men's clothing, took an extended cruise to South America, toured various Latin American countries, lived in Greenwich Village for a time, became a sailor on a Mexican boat that was running guns to revolutionaries, and finally took a trip by burro across Mexico which earned her the nick-name Pancho.³³ These experiences whet her appetite for adventure and led her to try aviation.

³¹ Ibid, 24-28.

³² Ibid, 30.

³³ Ibid, 35-45.

Inspired by her cousin's enthusiasm for flight, Pancho went to the airfield one day in 1928 and asked flight instructor Ben Caitlin if he would give her lessons. According to her biographer, Lauren Kessler, Caitlin did not like teaching women to fly because he thought they were too timid to enjoy such a risky and thrilling activity. This was a common perception among male flight instructors who had given lessons to women. Their perception probably stemmed from the fact that girls were not socialized to be interested in technology and therefore did not have a good knowledge base when they began flying lessons. This was perhaps very frustrating to flight instructors who may have had to explain operations they deemed "self-explanatory".

On Barnes' second day out, Caitlin's desire not to teach her led him to attempting to scare her out of wanting lessons by performing sharp banking techniques, a long upside-down loop, and a stall into a nosedive maneuver. When he asked her if she still wanted to learn how to fly, expecting the answer to be no, she shocked him with a resounding response in the affirmative: "Hell yes I want to learn how to fly!" In another attempt to discourage this brash woman, he warned her by saying, "I've had thirty-three women students and not a single one of them has ever soloed."³⁴ Barnes however was scared of no man and no obstacle.

Barnes was not discouraged and proved herself a quick study. Soon she was completely comfortable behind the controls. She purchased her own airplane and after only six hours of flight instruction, she was desperate to solo. Caitlin refused, saying she did not yet have enough experience. But Barnes would not take no for an answer. So one day on a whim, she and her cousin "kidnapped" her brand new Travel Air biplane and went field to field trying to get authorized to solo. No one would permit it, and when Caitlin found out, he was furious. He refused to give her any more lessons, but eventually gave in and said that if she could do six perfect landings, he would authorize a solo flight. Of course she did it without pause and soon

³⁴ Ibid, 48-50.

she was flying on her own. Barnes was hooked; when asked about flying, she often told people, “Flying makes me feel like a sex maniac in a whorehouse.”³⁵ She was not one to censor her opinions in the lady-like fashion.

Soon, she had her own barnstorming show called the Pancho Barnes Flying Mystery Circus of the Air and became so skilled in flying acrobatics that Lockheed, one of the most celebrated Aircraft manufacturing companies of the day, asked her to test fly its newest aircraft. Lockheed’s motivation for hiring Barnes came from not just wanting a good pilot to test their planes, but wanting a female pilot to test their planes. The company reasoned that by having a woman fly the aircraft, potential buyers would see how “easy” the planes were to fly. Lockheed thought its planes would be more marketable if a woman could fly the planes without difficulty or danger.³⁶ Barnes did not care about being manipulated in this way, she just wanted to fly and be paid for it.

Always looking for the next big adventure, Pancho Barnes became interested in racing. In 1929, she entered the Women’s Air Derby, later dubbed the “Powder Puff Derby” by Will Rogers, but ended up having to withdraw due to mechanical problems with her plane. Barnes was determined to win something so when she saw the newest, fastest, and most envied airplane at an air show, the Travel Air Mystery Ship, she immediately purchased it and set out to break Amelia Earhart’s speed record of 184.6 miles per hour.³⁷ On August 4, 1930, she broke the record on her second attempt by averaging 196.19 mph.³⁸

Earlier that same year, Pancho made her big break in Hollywood by stunt flying in Howard Hughes’s *Hells Angels*, a film that cost a total of \$3.8 million dollars to make. Through

³⁵ Ibid, 52-55.

³⁶ Ibid, 65.

³⁷ Ibid, 70-76.

³⁸ Women’s Speed Mark Set: Florence Barnes Flies 196.19 Miles an Hour on Coast, *New York Times*, Aug. 5, 1930.

the connections she made during that movie, Barnes earned more Hollywood jobs working on other films such as *The Aviator*, *Young Eagles*, *Air Mail Pilot*, *The Lost Squadron*, *The Flying Fleet*, *The Dawn Patrol*, and *The Flying Fool*.³⁹ But then, the Great Depression hit and Barnes, who had always spent her fortune carelessly, started to feel the strain. Times became difficult and she was forced to sell her beloved *Mystery Ship*. She did not let that stop her from participating in aviation though. In the fall of 1931, she founded the Women's Air Reserve, an organization for women fliers to help aid in disasters in which it was only possible to retrieve victims by plane. Her main motivation for starting the organization was because earlier that year, the National Air Races in Cleveland barred women from entrance and she wanted to prove that women were capable fliers. The organization had no affiliation with the military, but General Pancho Barnes ran it like the military. The organization never really took hold, but its purpose and existence set the groundwork for the now famous group of women pilots, the WASPs.⁴⁰

By 1935, Barnes did not have much left to keep her in Los Angeles. She was out of money and desperate to start over. She moved north to the Mojave Desert where she started a new life adjacent to the Edwards Air Force Base. There she built a ranch and flying school from the ground up.

Barnes and her husband had been separated for more than ten years, but legally, they were still married. The couple could not divorce because of social pressures. He was a prominent minister and would likely have lost his position had they divorced. Moreover, with her scandalous lifestyle, she needed his respectable reputation to keep her popularity. Their son Billy, who had been at boarding school in New Jersey, was now a teenager, but they decided that

³⁹ Kessler, 82.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 100-101.

he should live on the ranch and experience more of the world. Pancho found it much easier to connect with her son now that he had interests in adventure and the two finally built a parent-child relationship. Soon Barnes was doing well for herself through her ranching operations, which included farming and raising hogs. Pancho, who had always been generous and the host of great parties, soon developed her ranch into the aviation hotspot where supersonic test pilots and Hollywood movie stars liked to hang out. But, never good with her finances, the rest of her life was spent in and out of money making ventures and lawsuits with the US government over the rights to her land. Barnes never cared much about money though; what truly mattered to her was living life with zest, having fun, and not caring what other people thought. As she often said, “When you have a choice, choose happy!”⁴¹

Barnes is significant to the history of women in aviation because her boldness as a pilot and flamboyance as a personality made her a unique figure in the struggle for gender equality. For most of her life, she was the only woman in the “boy’s club” and she was respected as a pilot first and a unique woman second.

⁴¹ Pancho Barnes Enterprises, “Happy Bottom Riding Club,” *The Pancho Barnes Trust Estate Archive*, 2008. (Accessed 20 March, 2008). <<http://www.panchobarnes.com/>>.

SPORT PILOT AMELIA EARHART



Amelia Earhart c.1926 wearing an aviator cap with goggles, flight suit, and a strand of pearls.
Cropped image reproduced with permission of
Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University⁴²

Probably the best known female aviator of all time is Amelia Earhart. She is remembered for many things such as her confident adventurousness, her countless aviation records, her celebrity charm, her feminist politics, but most of all, her unsolved disappearance over the Pacific in 1937.

With a stroke of luck for being in the right place at the right time, followed by a series of good public relations decisions, Earhart was able to capture the heart of a nation during a time when America needed heroes the most. In a way, Earhart's "the sky's the limit" attitude helped inspire a generation of women to overcome economic obstacles and gender barriers.

⁴² The Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College. Amelia Mary Earhart Papers. Folder: AE: 1926-31, alone, or with GPP or others. HOLLIS collection level record 000604906. RLG collection level record MHVW85-A147. Accessed through the VIA Record Database, Harvard University Library April 18, 2008. <http://via.lib.harvard.edu/via/deliver/advancedsearch?_collection=via>.

Her life can be summarized in one word: leadership. She was a woman of many firsts; she was the first woman to fly across the Atlantic, first woman to solo across the Atlantic, first woman to fly coast to coast nonstop, first president of the Ninety-Nines organization, first person to solo from Hawaii to the mainland, first person to solo from LA to Mexico City, first person to fly solo nonstop from Mexico City to Newark, New Jersey, first person to fly from the Red Sea to India, and the first pilot to gain attention for speaking out against the marginalization of women in the industry and in society in general.⁴³

Amelia Earhart was born in Atchison, Kansas in 1897 to an educated, wealthy, Victorian family.⁴⁴ In one of her books, *The Fun of It*, she wrote that her “girlhood was much like that of many [sic] other American girl.”⁴⁵ She went on to concede, though, that there was something different about her childhood. She wrote that she was fascinated by “new people and new places,” she liked and was not afraid to try any kind of game or sport that was considered “being only for boys,” and she “just liked to try new things.”⁴⁶ Her childhood was not spent in just one place; her family liked to travel and she never lived in one location for more than four years and by the time she graduated high school she had attended at least six different high schools. It was in her many schools that she found a constant love for the sciences. This unique upbringing contributed to her adventurous attitude about life which helped her to accomplish so much.

After high school she entered the Ogontz School in Pennsylvania in 1916. During the Christmas vacation of her senior year, she went to Toronto to visit her sister and felt compelled to stay and work as a nurse’s aide to help returning soldiers wounded in WWI. It was then,

⁴³ Keri Rumerman, “Amelia Earhart,” *Centennial of Flight Commission*: (December, 2003) <http://www.centennialofflight.gov/essay/Explorers_Record_Setters_and_Daredevils/earhart/EX29.htm> (accessed 3 March, 2008).

⁴⁴ Doris L. Rich, *Amelia Earhart: A Biography*, Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1989, 4.

⁴⁵ Earhart, *The Fun of It*, 3.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 3-4.

during the winter of 1918, that she had the opportunity to see airplanes up close. She would hang around the air fields in her spare time and really began to take interest in flying. After the Armistice, she went to New York and enrolled at Columbia with hope of becoming a physician.⁴⁷ She soon realized that doctoring was not a profession she wanted to pursue and she decided to move back in with her parents who had recently resettled in California. She was still interested in airplanes and would go to the air circus whenever she could. The first time she went up in an airplane, she knew she had to fly and she told her parents that night. They initially expressed support and a few days later she had signed up for lessons. When she told her father however he looked at her in surprise and asked if she was serious. He refused to pay for the costly lessons, but Earhart remained determined.

She got her first job at a telephone company and worked relentlessly, spending her only free time at the airport. She adopted the appearance of an aviator by wearing breeks and a leather coat. She slowly but surely adopted a “modern” hairstyle too, by secretly snipping off inches of her hair at a time hoping that her mother would not notice. But she remembers she did not want to seem too eccentric, “for in 1920 it was very odd indeed for a woman to fly, and I had tried to remain as normal as possible in looks, in order to offset the usual criticism of my behavior.”⁴⁸

After a year of taking lessons with her instructor Neta Snook, Earhart held a license and owned her own secondhand plane, a Kinner Airster. She established her very first flying record in that plane by achieving the highest altitude for women in 1922 of 14,000 feet.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Ibid, 19-23.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 24-26.

⁴⁹ Pamela O'Brien, “Amelia Earhart – A Timeline,” *The Ninety-Nines Organization*, <<http://www.ninety-nines.org/earhart.html>> (accessed 22 March, 2008).

During the next few years, Earhart experimented with different career choices back east where she moved with her sister and mother. In 1932 she wrote of those years

I've had twenty-eight different jobs in my life, and I hope I'll have two hundred and twenty-eight more. Experiment! Meet new people. That's better than any college education. You will find the unexpected everywhere as you go through life. By adventuring about, you become accustomed to the unexpected. The unexpected then becomes what it really is – the inevitable.⁵⁰

Earhart would be a three-time college drop-out due to her ever changing interests and her continually thinning pocketbook.

Earhart desperately wanted a career and the financial freedom it would bring. She even kept a scrapbook of clippings and notes about women who had earned prestigious and high paying jobs such as attorneys, veterinarians, and automobile testers for inspiration.

A man named Sam Chapman, who had been courting her for some time and who had proposed twice, kept pursuing her even though she thought marriage was “living the life of a domestic robot.” She told one of her friends, “I don't want to marry him, I don't want to marry anyone.”⁵¹ She associated marriage with not being able to pursue her dreams. Her very feminist perspective was evident in the advice she gave Neta Snook when Snook asked what she thought about her future husband Bill Southern. Earhart replied, “I think he has the mating instinct. Are you sure you're ready to give up your career?” Then when Snook asked why Earhart thought that, she responded, “Because you will. He's the kind who will insist on being boss.”⁵² Earhart was not the kind of person who needed a boss; she was used to taking her own initiative and she could just not imagine being forced to choose between the life of a “robot” and the life of an adventurer.

⁵⁰ George Palmer Putnam, *Soaring Wings: A Biography of Amelia Earhart*, New York: Harcourt Brace and Co, 1939, 46-47. GPP was a publisher and Amelia's husband, he wrote this book after her disappearance.

⁵¹ Rich, 42.

⁵² Ibid, 30.

Eventually, Earhart found a part-time job working at a settlement house in Boston called the Denison House. Her experience with her previous jobs paid off because after taking the initiative to perform necessary nursing, teaching, secretarial, and fund-raising activities, she was offered a full time position, provided with living quarters, and was elected secretary of the board. On her time off from Denison House, mostly weekends, she devoted herself to her passionate hobby of flying. She took on flying related activities including being a sales representative and demonstrator of aircraft, a job that Bert Kinner, a good friend and airplane designer, had offered her.

Then things really started to fall into place for Amelia. She got a call in early 1928 from a Captain Hilton H. Railey who inquired as to whether or not Earhart would be interested in flying the Atlantic. Of course she was! Even though she suspected some sort of publicity stunt, she agreed to an interview anyway.

The entire event was masterminded by George Palmer Putnam, a grandson of the well known publishing company founder G.P. Putnam. Putnam was behind Lindbergh's recently published book about the first trans-Atlantic flight and Richard Byrd's account of his flight over the North Pole. Putnam was looking for the next best sensation so he set out to find, "the right sort of girl." Putnam and his backers were impressed with "Her resemblance to Colonel Lindbergh...by the poise of her boyish figure," and the way she represented American women.⁵³ Earhart agreed to captain the flight, which meant she would do little flying and any money from royalties or advertising would belong to the sponsors. The flight was dangerous, but Earhart agreed anyway stating, "When an adventure's offered you – you don't refuse it, that's all."⁵⁴

⁵³ Ibid, 46-47.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 48-51.

Putnam was in the business of making heroes, and this time he was sure he had a heroine, but others were competing for the title of first woman to fly across the Atlantic too. The operation had to be kept secret; Amelia did not tell her family, only her good friend Marion Perkins and Sam Chapman knew about the venture. She instructed Chapman to inform her family once she left Boston for Newfoundland where the team of flyers would take off. She even prepared her will and became increasingly worried and anxious as she realized the dangers of the flight. Especially troubling was the fact that Bill Stultz, the main pilot, was an alcoholic.⁵⁵

On the morning of June 17, 1928 the three person crew of the *Friendship*, Pilot Bill Stultz, mechanic Louis “Slim” Gordon, and Captain Amelia Earhart, took off from Trepassey, Newfoundland. Earhart was responsible for keeping the logbook, but never took the controls. Twenty hours and forty minutes later, the plane touched down in Burry Port, Wales and Amelia Earhart was a star.⁵⁶ The press started calling her “Lady Lindy” and the naturally modest Earhart started to feel annoyed by all the comparisons and publicity, especially since it was focused on her gender. She said that she felt “a little resentful that the mere fact that I am a woman apparently overshadows the tremendous feat of flying Bill Stultz has just accomplished.”⁵⁷ The public idolized her because of this “amazing” feat, but Earhart never thought it was so amazing, all she did was keep the logbook and rode as a passenger. She truly believed that women could and should do everything that men did. She always resented the underlying connotations of her fame that said because she was a woman, she was incapable, and therefore it was miraculous that she was able to accomplish anything.

From 1928 through 1932, she was no longer front page news, but she did get some publicity for the 1929 Women’s Air Derby (the Powder Puff Derby). The National Aeronautics

⁵⁵ Ibid, 53-59.

⁵⁶ Ware, *Still Missing*, 42.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 43.

Association (NAA) committee had proposed some restrictions on the first women's air race including a shortened, "safer" route or having the women each be accompanied by a male navigator. Earhart was insulted and strongly protested the suggestions of the all male NAA committee by threatening not to participate. They finally conceded that there should be no restrictions on female racers so Earhart took part in the race and placed third.⁵⁸

The only other publicity Earhart received during these years revolved around rumors of marriage between her and Putnam which kept newspaper readers gossiping.⁵⁹ The gossip was founded in truth, however, and in 1931 she consented to marry the recently divorced Putnam. But, Amelia didn't just give in to the "cage" of marriage without having a voice in the matter. In what is now a famous feminist document, Earhart made the following egalitarian demands just days before her wedding in a letter to Putnam:

On our life together I want you to understand I shall not hold you to any medieval code of faithfulness to me, nor shall I consider myself bound to you similarly. If we can be honest I think the difficulties which arise may best be avoided should you or I become interested deeply (or in passing) with anyone else.

Please let us not interfere with the other's work or play, nor let the world see our private joys or disagreements. In this connection I may have to keep some place where I can go to be myself now and then, for I cannot guarantee to endure at all times the confinement of even an attractive cage.

I must exact a cruel promise, and that is you will let me go in a year if we find no happiness together.⁶⁰

According to Susan Ware, Earhart was not thrilled with the idea of marriage, but perhaps decided to marry Putnam because, by this time, she was already 33, still unmarried, and tired of the criticism. Earhart did admit later that she at first only saw Putnam as a friend, but then friendship grew into love. In comparison to Chapman, Putnam had very modern feminist attitudes and the marriage reflected this because even though Amelia adored children, the couple

⁵⁸ Rich, 81-94.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 46-47.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 50-51.

decided not to have any.⁶¹ As Ware notes, “Perhaps the best way to understand this marriage is on their own terms: as a mutually beneficial relationship between two hardworking, almost workaholic individuals. Theirs was as much a business partnership as a love match, but it suited them just fine.”⁶² It was a marriage that allowed Earhart to continue flying and doing what she wanted to do so she was able to accept it.

Earhart became the first president of the Ninety-Nines Organization in 1931 – an organization which she proposed in 1927 and helped organize in 1929 after competing in the Women’s Air Derby. This organization is still in existence today.⁶³

In 1932, in an effort to feel deserving of her accomplishment, Earhart attempted the first female solo over the Atlantic and was the first person since Lindbergh to do so successfully. This accomplishment was celebrated even more than the first Atlantic flight and Earhart accepted numerous awards including the Gold Medal of the National Geographic Society – she was the first woman to receive one. After this accomplishment, Earhart harnessed her celebrity status to promote her feminist politics. In the course of the last five years before she disappeared, she always transmitted the same message to the public:

Then, too, there was my belief that now and then women should do for themselves what men have already done -- occasionally what men have not done -- thereby establishing themselves as persons, and perhaps encouraging other women toward greater independence of thought and action. Some such consideration was a contributing reason for my wanting to do what I so much wanted to do.⁶⁴

By this time, Earhart was most clearly a feminist because she had joined the National Women’s Party, had lobbied for the passage of the Lucretia Mott Amendment, had appealed for

⁶¹ Ware writes in her book that AE publicly supported birth control and she and GPP were most likely practicing it.

⁶² Ibid, 52-54.

⁶³ O’Brien.

⁶⁴ Susan Butler, *East to the Dawn: The Life of Amelia Earhart*, De Capo Press (1999): 354.

more equal rights in the aviation industry, and had supported the draft for women as a controversial pacifist solution.⁶⁵ Earhart reasoned that,

We are citizens, paying taxes – which are too largely spent for armaments. So why should we not participate in a military system we help support? ... To kill, to suffer, to be maimed, wasted, paralyzed, impoverished to lose mental and physical vigor, to shovel under the dead and to die oneself – ‘gloriously’. There is no logic in disqualifying women from such privileges.

Additionally, she concluded, “If women go to war, along with their men, the men are just going to hate it! ... I have a feeling men would rather vacate the arena of war altogether than share it with women.”⁶⁶

She filled the next few years with lectures and other record first flights such as her flight from Hawaii to Oakland in 1935. That year she also became the first woman to compete in the National Air Races in Cleveland. By 1936 she was starting to plan her round the world⁶⁷ flight which would lead to her tragic vanishing in 1937.⁶⁸ As her biographer Rich wrote, “[she] had been famous... by vanishing, she became legendary.”⁶⁹ The consensus among her friends, family, colleagues and historians is that she lost her way on the leg from New Guinea to Howland Island, probably ran out of fuel, and fatally crash landed at sea.⁷⁰ What really happened we may never know, but as Ware argues in her book, Earhart should not be remembered just for her last unfortunate flight, she should be remembered for the rich life she lived, for her “message of aspiration, individual fulfillment, and breaking down barriers,” and as a person who championed true equality. Even though Amelia held feminist views bordering on what was considered radical at the time, she still was able to embody the duality.

⁶⁵ Rich, 159-163.

⁶⁶ Ware, 120-121.

⁶⁷ *Round the world flight meant by route of following the equator which had never been attempted before.

⁶⁸ O’Brien.

⁶⁹ Rich, 271.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 273.

MILITARY PILOT JACKIE COCHRAN



Jacqueline Cochran in the cockpit of a P-40 fighter plane circa 1942-1945.
Public Domain Image: US Air Force.⁷¹

Jacqueline Cochran, better known as Jackie, was a unique female pilot in that her story is one of the most remarkable. She was different from other female aviation pioneers in that she never had high ambitions, but she would become a legend to pilots because of her countless flying accomplishments. Both females and males would look up to her because she was not only a great pilot, but she also had a drive unmatched by anyone, to be the best. Cochran's accomplishments would help initiate greater acceptance of women in the military and even the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA). Though she was never recognized as having military status until three years before her death, she will forever be remembered as one of America's first and most accomplished females in the military.

The circumstances of Jackie's birth are unknown to biographers and historians, but it is thought she was born sometime between 1905 and 1913.⁷² Throughout her life, Jackie claimed

⁷¹ Photo taken by the US Air Force and available as a public domain image. Accessed April 18, 2008. <
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Jacqueline_Cochran_in_P-40.jpg>.

to have been an orphan, but others have contested this assertion. Her claim may very well have been a fabrication because Jackie also thought she had a photographic memory and told many people, Amelia Earhart included, that she had psychic abilities.⁷³

What is certain, however, is that she grew up completely destitute in the panhandle of Florida in what she called “Sawdust Road” which she compared to *Tobacco Road*.⁷⁴ Additionally, it is widely agreed that her given name was Bessie Pittman.⁷⁵ In her autobiographies, she took care to differentiate herself from the people of her squalid and impoverished upbringing by explaining how she just knew she was living with “foster parents” because she acted and thought differently than those around her. One of her stories was about how, at age six, she felt “resentment” for how little effort her parents (she refers to them as foster parents) put into providing for the children. She also wrote about how she tried to get away from Sawdust Road by asking the circus to take her and by wandering into gypsy camps because she “had been warned that gypsies would steal children if given a chance.”⁷⁶ She cited her greatest influence of her childhood as her teacher, Miss Bostwick, who taught her how to read, about “cleanliness,” “good and evil,” and was able to lift her horizons and give her ambition.⁷⁷ She only had less than two years of formal schooling in her lifetime and at eight years of age, she said “good bye to childhood” and started work at a cotton mill doing the “twelve hour night

⁷² David H. Onkst, “Jacqueline “Jackie” Cochran,” Centennial of Flight Commission, <http://www.centennialofflight.gov/essay/Explorers_Record_Setters_and_Daredevils/cochran/EX25.htm> (accessed 20 April, 2008).

⁷³ Rich, 231.

⁷⁴ Jacqueline Cochran and Maryann Bucknum Brinley, Jackie Cochran: The Autobiography of the Greatest Woman Pilot in Aviation History, Toronto: Bantam Books, 1987. (This book was written seven years after Cochran’s death and was constructed of over 50 years of documents and miscellaneous writings by Cochran herself (according to Brinley, Cochran was a “classic pack rat”) in addition to oral interviews with friends, family, and the woman herself.

⁷⁵ “Jacqueline Cochran and the Women’s Airforce Service Pilots (WASPs),” Dwight D. Presidential Library and Museum, <http://www.eisenhower.archives.gov/dl/Jacqueline_Cochran/JackieCochran.html> (accessed 21 April, 2008).

⁷⁶ Jacqueline Cochran, *The Stars at Noon*, Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1954, 15.

⁷⁷ *Ibid*, 18.

shift.” She wrote that, “I had no shoes, but I had dreams...and I was supremely happy.”⁷⁸

Cochran’s mother took away her pay, but Jackie soon learned to give her mother some, but secretly keep a part of it for herself. Some of the first things she purchased were a pair of high heeled shoes, a “georgette blouse with a colored corset cover, and a black wool skirt.”⁷⁹ These purchases could be considered quite vain for a woman who complained of “always being hungry” as a child, but her story indicates what kinds of values she held. Many remember her as a person who took great pride in her appearance and this personality trait would later contribute to many of her career choices.

When she was in her early teens, there was a strike at the factory and Jackie decided to inquire about working in a beauty shop. She got a job and was able to live with the family of the woman who owned the shop. At thirteen years of age, an inspector came to the shop to investigate possible child labor. The owner vouched for Jackie saying she was sixteen and claimed she was her legal guardian. Jackie saw an opportunity and blackmailed the woman and demanded more pay and better job responsibilities. The woman gave in and in less than a year Jackie had saved several hundred dollars. At about fourteen, she left for Montgomery, Alabama and worked in the beauty shop of a department store where she worked on commission. Jackie had exceptional “people skills” and was able to foster bonds with important people. With the help and influence of a Mrs. Lerton, a prominent woman and salon patron in the city, Cochran was able to start nurses training. With all her new earnings as a nurse and a beautician, she purchased a Model T and was soon doing work as a traveling saleswoman and various other

⁷⁸ Ibid, 22.

⁷⁹ Ibid, 24.

beauty related jobs throughout the southern states. Eventually she had had enough of the South and she decided to go to New York.⁸⁰

It was 1929 and she easily got a job at an upscale Saks Fifth Avenue beauty salon called Antoine's.⁸¹ She became quite popular with clients and even traveled with them. In 1932, she met Floyd Bostwick Odlum who was a millionaire and was quite attractive physically and financially to Cochran.⁸² Before she had even spoken to him she remembered feeling sure that she "had met up with [her] destiny." They hit it off right away and Cochran was soon telling Odlum of her dreams to have her own cosmetics line. Then Odlum suggested something Cochran had never dreamed of – getting a pilot's license so she could sell products more widely; it was the Great Depression after all and getting into any kind of business venture was risky. Soon, the couple was dating. As Cochran commented about their relationship, "There weren't night and day differences between Floyd Odlum and me. Temperamentally we may have been miles apart, but when it came to knowing what we wanted out of life – security, power, and a certain kind of fame – we were very much alike. And work. Hard work was always a tie that bound us together. When it came to schemes and dreams, Floyd had as many as I did."⁸³

Since the time Odlum mentioned flying to Cochran she was determined to make that dream a reality. She began flight school at the Roosevelt Flying School in New York. The tuition was \$495 for twenty hours of flight, but they could neither guarantee a license nor a solo and estimated that it would take around two or three months, "if you're lucky". According to Cochran, the instructor thought she was "just another wide-eyed woman" and had even lower

⁸⁰ Ibid, 29-37.

⁸¹ Onkst.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Cochran and Brinley, 69.

expectations for her than what the average (male) student could accomplish. Odlum bet Cochran \$495 that she could not get her license in six weeks. She did it in three.⁸⁴

In 1933, after some extremely risky flying (Cochran didn't even know how to use a compass or read charts on a flight from New York to Montreal), she decided to head to California where the skies were always blue to get additional training. After about six months, she earned her commercial pilot's license and received the highest rating in addition to an instructor's rating.⁸⁵ Cochran was not yet satisfied. She wanted to learn the art of "flying blind," or flying using only instrumentation so that a pilot could fly without any visibility at night and through inclement weather. In the meantime, Jackie caught word of some upcoming races, the London –to-Melbourne race and the Bendix transcontinental race of 1935. The races took over her thoughts so she entered both and was the only woman to fly in the London to Melbourne race. Unfortunately, due to mechanical issues, she had to drop out of both, which came as a great disappointment. The same year as the Bendix race, however, she was able to successfully launch her own cosmetics company which would later earn her the title of Businesswoman of the Year for 1953 and 1954.⁸⁶

In 1935, Odlum divorced his first wife and in 1936 he and Cochran secretly got married. Most of their friends didn't find out until it was in the newspapers. According to Cochran's ranch housekeeper Vi Strauss Pistell, "Jackie was so happy about being married. She wouldn't talk about the ceremony itself, but she was sure proud to be a wife. You could see it. And she would say so."⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Ibid, 70-71, 75.

⁸⁵ Ibid, 84.

⁸⁶ Ibid, 120.

⁸⁷ Ibid, 126.

According to General Curtis Lemay, “Jackie Cochran was obsessed with the idea of breaking records. And that’s okay. Every year she was after something else.”⁸⁸ She was determined to race the Bendix still so in 1937 she entered and was the only woman competitor. She placed third and in 1938 she entered again, this time taking first, but she didn’t stop there. She continued flying from the finish point at Cleveland to New York and established a new women’s west to east transcontinental speed record. That year, she won the first of fifteen Clifford Harmon Trophies, for most outstanding female pilot of the year.⁸⁹ Still she was not satisfied. In 1939, she entered the Bendix again with her heart set on achieving the first consecutive win. She was forced to withdraw because of landing gear problems that caused delay. Nonetheless, however, she conquered other aviation records including a women’s national altitude record, an international women’s speed record, and the first blind landing made by a female pilot.⁹⁰

These accomplishments were only the beginning for Cochran, but “Red tape and sexist institutions stood mountainously” in her way. In 1941, she got the opportunity to ferry a bomber to Great Britain, but the military administration was not amused and accused her of only seeking publicity. She wrote in her autobiography, “Those men wanted me there like they wanted the archangel Gabriel sitting on their shoulders.”⁹¹ To finally get clearance to make the historic flight, Cochran enlisted the help of the British Minister of Supply, Lord Beaverbrook, and General “Hap” Arnold, but male ferry pilots were in strong opposition. A compromise was made: Cochran would pilot the bomber across the Atlantic, but only a male pilot was permitted to takeoff and land. They could not entrust the safety of such an expensive piece of equipment to

⁸⁸ Ibid, 133.

⁸⁹ Ibid, 150.

⁹⁰ Claudia M. Oakes, *United States Women in Aviation: 1930-1939*, Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991, 35-38.

⁹¹ Ibid, 170.

a woman. On June 14, 1941, she made the flight successfully, but many in the industry and the military still viewed Cochran as being the advocate for “stealing aviation jobs from men”.⁹² This was a common perception of American men during the war, especially to those who had suffered during the Great Depression. It was believed that jobs should be reserved for men because men are the biological “breadwinners”. Additionally, if women were to enter the workforce, people feared that the institution of the family would disintegrate.

Cochran never saw it that way and in August of 1941, she began her campaign to establish a fleet of women aviators who would fly support missions and general operations so that more men would be available for combat and other aviation needs overseas. In 1942, General Hap Arnold finally permitted her to organize the Women’s Flying Training Detachment (WFTD) and the following year she received an appointment to help organize the WASPs or Women’s Air Force Service Pilots which would combine her former WFTD group with the WAFS or Women's Auxiliary Ferry Squadron. The WASPs grew to over 1,000 members and proved invaluable to the military because of their various duties including transport and the testing of aircraft. In 1944 however, Congress disbanded the WASPs because men were complaining of being left jobless. In October, Cochran wrote a letter thanking the women of the WASPs and said

I am proud too, of the outstanding record you have made for yourselves in a field untried and in which few placed sufficient confidence in your ability. I felt sure that when this organization was in its infancy that, given an opportunity, women could prove themselves capable in any situation they might be called upon to face, and you girls have corroborated my statement many times over.”⁹³

For outstanding leadership in her role as Director of the WASPs, Cochran was the first civilian woman ever awarded the U.S. Distinguished Service Medal. After WWII, Cochran

⁹² Ibid, 173-175.

⁹³ Letter, Jacqueline Cochran to WASPs regarding disbandment, October 12, 1944 Dwight D. Eisenhower Library

continued pursuing records and over the next twenty or so years would amass over 200 awards and trophies and set more speed and altitude records than any other pilot either male or female. In 1953, she was the first woman to break the sound barrier and later that decade, she and thirteen other women lobbied to become astronauts, but were denied. She continued flying, less frequently, until her death in 1980.⁹⁴

CONCLUSION

These four women are significant to the history of aviation and women because each represents the determination it took to establish respect and equal status in a society that has always oppressed women. Aviation was one of the few technical and dangerous jobs that women could actually take part in, though these careers were not without their hardships as these women's stories tell us. It took a tremendous effort for women to prove one's capability in an industry built around risk, adventure, and courage - traits that had never been associated with female identity.

Several themes have emerged in the lives of the female pilots that provide explanation for why these women accomplished so much: the ways they dealt with gender discrimination in their career, the ways they dealt with discrimination in society, their individual characteristics and circumstances that shaped their realities, and their eagerness to change the status quo of inequality.

First, the gender discrimination these women faced in the male dominated industry of aviation was reflected in several aspects of their careers in aviation.

Their experiences of learning how to fly each contained gender discrimination in varying formats. Snook was assigned certain tasks because of her gender. Barnes' instructor did not like teaching female students and thought he could frighten her out of wanting lessons. Similarly,

⁹⁴ Onkst.

Cochran had an instructor who had doubts about her abilities because he viewed women as too fearful to fly. Earhart's father initially thought his daughter was joking about flying lessons, and when he found out she was not, he refused to pay for her instruction.

Additionally, each had to earn the respect as professionals from their male counterparts in the industry. Snook did not start earning equal treatment from her peers at flying school until she impressed them with her extensive knowledge of aircraft design. Barnes was hired by Lockheed to showcase the company's aircraft with the motive of proving how safe and easy their planes were to fly even though Barnes had already been established as one of the best stunt pilots in the business. Earhart championed equal flying regulations for the 1929 Women's Air Derby when the NAA wanted to impose so-called safety measures by forcing the women pilots to fly with a male navigator or to fly a shorter, less hazardous route. Finally, Cochran advocated for women in the military when male government officials protested and successfully disbanded the WASPs.

The stories also tell us how the discrimination they encountered in pursuing a piloting career was reflective of societal sexism and dueling gender expectations for females. They faced stereotypes that were not specific to the industry, but society in general. These stereotypes were the result of deeply held beliefs about gender roles and very separate and strict definitions of how men and women should act. Many times, the women's very identities and motives were questioned regarding their sexuality and femininity. Neta Snook had a difficult time in deciding to be a mother or be a pilot. She did not want to miss out on being a mother and felt compelled to give up flying as a sacrifice for her child. Pancho Barnes's story is a good example of this inherent ideology of sexism too. She did not act like the "typical" female. Her language was colorful and crude, she led a very free sexual lifestyle and had numerous affairs, and she was

never interested in vanity or fashion and preferred a masculine wardrobe. Earhart was concerned about her appearance and even though she desperately wanted short hair like the flappers of her day, she had to resort to cutting little by little off at a time to avoid her mother's scorn. Finally, Cochran faced societal sexism on an institutional scale. She was restricted to low paying jobs until she had met a man who financially enabled her to start her own cosmetics company.

An additional theme that emerged was the similarity of the circumstances and characteristics that enabled these women to live dual roles. The women had comparable upbringings which influenced their adult attitudes about their own abilities and about women's abilities in general. With the exception of Cochran, the women came from wealthy and prominent families who also had access to good educations. Snook and Earhart even attended college which was quite unusual for women of their era. These backgrounds enabled these women as young girls to have more childhood opportunities. Snook worked on automobiles as a child and Earhart and Barnes were the neighborhood tomboys who got to play sports. Their parents may have discouraged this kind of behavior, but they did not prevent it.

Even though Cochran had adult responsibilities as a child laborer, she did have the same independent spirit and thirst for adventure as the others did. This character trait may have made it easier to go against the feminine ideals of society because the women had fewer concerns about how they should act and more about how they wanted to act. They had a passion for flight and would never have let others prohibit them from doing something they loved so much.

Finally, their contributions set the groundwork for modern feminism because of their voices and actions that inspired women everywhere. While Earhart was the most outspoken about advancing the rights of women, the others contributed just as much. Neta Snook was the first woman to run an air field and was able to teach others about women's abilities with

technology. Even later in life on the speaking circuit, she would discuss how daring it had been to be a female pilot in that era. Earhart was publicly open about advancing women's opportunities and responsibilities. She often commented how women should not let their sex bar them from doing anything. Barnes lived feminism too by supporting women in aviation through her Women's Air Reserve organization and constant defiance of her gender role. Finally, Cochran was able to successfully run a military program with all women participants. She lobbied to get more women involved in military jobs and inspired women to join NASA.

These were just the stories of four women during the Golden Age of Aviation, but there were many more women pilots who had comparable experiences. Some of those women such as Harriet Quimby, Bessie Coleman, Anne Morrow Lindbergh, and Ruth Law have been recognized as contributors to the progress of women - though they are still less well-known than Amelia Earhart. Countless other daring female pilots, though, will remain anonymous. They too lived feminism through their actions, if not their words as well. They may not be remembered like Amelia Earhart, but without their efforts to change gender norms, many women today would not be flying and would not be living their dreams.

APPENDIX

TIMELINE:

NOTABLE WOMEN IN AVIATION AND THEIR ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- 1784** - Elisabeth Thible becomes the first woman to fly - in a hot air balloon
- 1798** - Jeanne Labrosse is the first woman to solo in a balloon
- 1809** - Marie Madeleine Sophie Blanchard becomes the first woman to lose her life while flying - she was watching fireworks in her hydrogen balloon
- 1880** - July 4 - Mary Myers is the first American woman to solo in a balloon
- 1896** - Neta Snook is born.
- 1897** - Amelia Earhart is born.
- 1902** - Pancho Barnes is born.
- 1905 (possibly as late as 1912)** - Jackie Cochran is born.
- 1906** - E. Lillian Todd is the first woman to design and build an airplane, though it never flew
- 1908** - Madame Therese Peltier is the first woman to fly an airplane solo
- 1910** - Baroness Raymonde de Laroche obtains a license from the Aero Club of France, the first woman licensed in the world
- 1910** - September 2 - Blanche Stuart Scott, without permission or knowledge of Glenn Curtiss, the airplane's owner and builder, removes a small wood wedge and is able to get the airplane airborne -- without any flying lessons -- thus becoming the first American woman to pilot an airplane
- 1910** - October 13 - Bessie Raiche's flight qualifies her, for some, as the first woman pilot in America -- because some discount the flight of Scott as accidental and therefore deny her this credit
- 1911** - August 11 - Harriet Quimby becomes the first American woman licensed pilot
- 1911** - September 4 - Harriet Quimby becomes the first woman to fly at night
- 1912** - April 16 - Harriet Quimby becomes the first woman to pilot her own aircraft across the English Channel
- 1916** - Ruth Law sets two American records flying from Chicago to New York
- 1918** - The US postmaster general approves the appointment of Marjorie Stinson as the first female airmail pilot
- 1921** - Bessie Coleman becomes the first African American, male or female, to earn a pilot's license
- 1922** - Lillian Gatlin is the first woman to fly across America as a passenger
- 1928** - June 17 - Amelia Earhart is the first woman to fly across the Atlantic -- Louis Gordon and Wilmer Stultz did most of the flying
- 1929** - August - first Women's Air Derby is held (Powder Puff Derby), and Louise Thaden wins, Gladys O'Donnell takes second place and Amelia Earhart takes third
- 1929** - Florence Lowe Barnes - Pancho Barnes - becomes the first woman stunt pilot in motion pictures (in *Hell's Angels*)
- 1929** - Amelia Earhart becomes the first president of the Ninety-Nines, an organization of women pilots named for its 99 charter members.
- 1930** - Anne Morrow Lindbergh becomes the first woman to earn a glider pilot license
- 1932** - May 20-21 - Amelia Earhart is the first woman to fly solo across the Atlantic
- 1934** - Helen Richey becomes the first woman pilot hired by a regularly schedule airline, Central Airlines
- 1935** - January 11-23 - Amelia Earhart is the first person to fly solo from Hawaii to the American mainland
- 1936** - Beryl Markham becomes the first woman to fly across the Atlantic east to west
- 1936** - Louise Thaden and Blanche Noyes beat male pilots also entered in the Bendix Trophy Race, the first victory of women over men in a race in which both men and women could enter
- 1937** - July 2 - Amelia Earhart lost over Pacific
- 1938** - Hanna Reitsch becomes the first woman to fly a helicopter and the first woman to be licensed as a helicopter pilot
- 1939** - Willa Brown, first African American commercial pilot and first African American woman officer in the Civil Air Patrol, helps form the National Airmen's Association of America to help open up the U.S. Armed Forces to African American men
- 1939** - September 15 - Jacqueline Cochran sets an international speed record; the same year, she is the first woman to make a blind landing
- 1941** - July 1 - Jacqueline Cochran is the first woman to ferry a bomber across the Atlantic

- 1942** - Nancy Harkness Love and Jackie Cochran organize women flying units and training detachment
- 1943** - Women make up more than 30% of the work force in the aviation industry (but not as pilots – most worked in factories manufacturing parts or worked as stewardesses on commercial planes)
- 1943** - Love's and Cochran's units are merged into the Women Airforce Service Pilots and Jackie Cochran becomes the Director of Women Pilots -- WASPs flew more than 60 million miles before the program ended in December 1944 with only 38 lives lost of 1830 volunteers and 1074 graduates -- *these pilots were seen as civilians and weren't recognized as military personnel in 1977*
- 1953** - Jackie Cochran becomes first woman to break the sound barrier
- 1964** - March 19 - Geraldine (Jerrie) Mock is the first woman to pilot a plane around the world
- 1973** - January 29 - Emily Howell Warner is the first woman working as a pilot for a commercial airline (Frontier Airlines)
- 1973** - U.S. Navy announces pilot training for women
- 1974** - June 4 - Sally Murphy is the first woman to qualify as an aviator with the U.S. Army
- 1977** - November - Congress passes a bill recognizing WASP pilots of World War II as military personnel, and President Jimmy Carter signs the bill into law
- 1978** - International Society of Women Airline pilots formed
- 1994** - Vicki Van Meter is the youngest pilot (to that date) to fly across the Atlantic in a Cessna 210 - she is 12 years old at the time of the flight
- 1994** - April 21 - Jackie Parker becomes the first woman to qualify to fly an F-16 combat plane
- 1995** - Beverly Burns becomes the first woman to captain a 747 cross country, and Lynn Rippelmeyer becomes the first woman to captain a 747 across the Atlantic
- 2001** - Polly Vacher becomes the first woman to fly around the world in a small plane - she flies from England to England on a route that includes Australia ⁹⁵

⁹⁵ Jone Johnson Lewis, "Women in Aviation – Timeline," Accessed 4 December, 2007.
 <http://womenshistory.about.com/od/aviationpilots/a/av_timeline.htm> Much of this information was compiled by Lewis with some additions by the author of this paper.

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