

# Let's hear it for the girls!

This year marks a hundred years since the first woman was issued with a pilot's licence. By **Allie Dunnington**

**S**ome of the first balloonists and early aviators were women! This year celebrates the centenary of Madame Elise Raymonde de Laroche becoming the first woman to receive a pilot's licence (no. 36 issued by the Federation Aeronautique Internationale, or FAI).

Elise (pictured right) was the daughter of a plumber and earned her first money by working as an actress. She was already an experienced balloonist when, in October 1909, aviator Charles Voisin suggested she could learn to fly a fixed-wing aircraft.



In June 1919 she set two women's fixed wing records, one for altitude at 15,700ft and a distance record for 201 miles. She was a talented engineer and hoped to become the first professional woman test pilot. Sadly, just a month after setting her two records, she died in a crash on her first test flight.

By that time, women had been flying balloons for more than 100 years. On June 4, 1784 – even before America had

its first president – Elisabeth Thible ascended as a passenger in the balloon La Gustave in Lyons, France. This was only eight months after the very first manned balloon flight, which had caused enormous excitement across France and indeed the world. Thible's flight lasted 45 minutes but she twisted her ankle on landing. However, the pilot, Monsieur Fleurant, said she exhibited remarkable courage and fed the balloon's fire-box during the flight.

The following year, Letitia Sage was the first Englishwoman to be a passenger in a gas balloon, which flew from London to Harrow.

The first woman to fly a balloon alone was Frenchwoman Jeanne Labrosse, who went on to be the first female to make a parachute jump.

Other famous lady aviators included Marie Madeleine Sophie Blanchard, the first professional female balloon pilot, who later was appointed Chief Air Minister of Ballooning under Napoleon in 1804 and managed to hold on to that position under King Louis XVIII in 1814. She made a living from ballooning, touring Europe and attracting huge crowds to view her



Mme Blanchard was the first professional female balloonist

challenging stunts.

Her husband, Jean-Pierre, died on a flight in 1809 and she continued her daring stunts alone for a further ten years. But in 1819 she undertook a tethered display in the Tivoli Gardens in Paris, using fireworks in the basket below the hydrogen-filled envelope. The gas caught light and the balloon fell, hitting a roof and killing her. In this way she became the first woman to die in an aviation accident.



Letitia Sage with George Biggin and Vincenzo Lunardi ascending from St George's Fields, London





Another famous pilot was Wilhelmine Reichard (pictured above). She conducted 17 balloon flights, the last one at the famous Oktoberfest in Munich in 1820. On one of her flights she rose so high that she became unconscious due to oxygen deficiency. The balloon exploded and crashed, but was caught in some young pine trees. Reichard survived with just minor injuries. She and her husband contributed a lot to scientific research done from balloons including weather observations and temperature measurements.

Mary Myers of Frankford, New York, was one of the first American female balloonists. She was the wife of Carl Myers, a meteorologist who began experimenting with balloons in 1880. Mary (pictured left) became known as Carlotta, Queen of the Air, and set an altitude record in 1886, rising four miles without oxygen.

Harriet Quimby was the first woman in the United States to get her fixed wing licence in 1911, and the first woman to fly a plane across the English Channel.

An Englishwoman, Hilda Hewlett, also earned her fixed wing licence in 1911, becoming the first Englishwoman to hold one. The daughter of a vicar, she was married to a romantic novelist and had two children. An adventurous soul, she had already demonstrated an interest in the early motorcars and had learnt to drive but when she attended a flying meeting in Blackpool in 1909, she fell in love with aeroplanes.



Harriet Quimby, below, and Hilda Hewlett, above, were pioneers in the field of fixed wing aviation

Calling herself Mrs Grace Bird, she went to study aeronautics in France and met Gustave Blondeau, with whom she went into business. They set up a flying school at Brooklands, Surrey, in 1910 and as war approached, they began a manufacturing business in Leagrave, Luton, which made ten types of aircraft. Hilda Hewlett's fixation with planes caused the breakdown of her marriage in 1914. Her husband said: "Women will never be as successful in aviation as men. They have not the right kind of nerve."

The resistance to female pilots throughout was profound. Many struggled to be recognised as aviators and were denied access to commercial flying operations or professional training. Arguments against female pilots were that they were physically too weak to control an aircraft, they couldn't cope with the thinner air and that they were prone to panic and thus temperamentally unfit to fly.



COMPILED BY MISS HARRIET QUIMBY

Many early female pilots therefore had to gain attention by performing dangerous manoeuvres and record-breaking exercises that often cost their lives. Those accidents unfortunately just reinforced men's attitude and discrimination and made female integration and acceptance even more difficult.

Now this is not to say that in today's ballooning world I have yet encountered much discrimination – but having said that, on the commercial level, female pilots are still having a hard time being recognised and accepted as equal. You only have to look at the commercial airliners, the armed forces (the Red Arrows only last year appointed their first ever female pilot) or even commercial balloon operations. Whether the very low figures in those fields just show that women don't aspire to those positions or whether there is still an underlying resistance against them, is open to question.

In writing these lines I would like to encourage women in their endeavours, raise general awareness and understanding and stimulate further discussions on the subject. For all of you who are interested, there will be various events during the course of this year for women pilots (and their male partners!) including the Women's Meet at Heythrop Park near Oxford or the Women's Balloon Championships in Lithuania. Also check out the following interesting weblink, where all female pilots are encouraged to introduce other women into aviation: [www.centennialofwomenpilots.com](http://www.centennialofwomenpilots.com)

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