

No sooner had the first intrepid male aviators safely returned to Earth than it seemed that women, too, had been smitten by an urge to fly.

From mere spectators, they became willing passengers and finally pilots in their own right, plotting their skills and daring line against the hazards of the air and the skepticism of their male counterparts.

In doing so they enlarged the traditional bounds of a women's world, won for their sex a new sense of competence and achievement, and contributed handsomely to the progress of aviation.

But recognition of their abilities did not come easily.

"Men do not believe us capable." the famed aviator Amelia Earhart once remarked to a friend.

"Because we are women, seldom are we trusted to do an efficient job.

" Indeed old attitudes died hard: when Charles Lindbergh visited the Soviet Union in 1938 with his wife, Anne-herself a pilot and gifted proponent of aviation - he was astonished to discover both men and women flying in the Soviet Air Force.

Such conventional wisdom made it difficult for women to raise money for the up - to - date equipment they needed to compete on an equal basis with men.

Yet they did compete, and often they triumphed finally despite the odds.

Ruth Law, whose 590 - mile flight from Chicago to Hornell, New York, set a new nonstop distance record in 1916, exemplified the resourcefulness and grit demanded of any woman who wanted to fly.

And when she addressed the Aero Club of America after completing her historic journey, her plainspoken words testified to a universal human motivation that was unaffected by gender: "My flight was done with no expectation of reward," she declared, "just purely for the love of accomplishment."

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