

**AFEHRI File 19-10**

**Research Materials/Source Documents  
ENLISTED FIRSTS**

**FILE TITLE: 1st Woman allowed to Wear NCO Uniform and Early Female Aviator -  
Ruth Law**

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## Ruth Law

Ruth Law, who enjoyed one of the longest and most colorful flying careers of her day, probably became interested in flying because of her brother, Rodman Law, the "Human Fly." He once climbed a tall building in New York and then was shot out of a cannon wearing a parachute.

Ms. Law enrolled in the Burgess Flying School in Boston in late June 1912. On her first plane ride, on 1 July, she saw Harriet Quimby fall to her death. Undaunted, however, she made her first solo flight on 1 August. She also received hydroaeroplane instruction and flew in her first exhibition in September.

After she received her license on 12 November, she contracted to fly for the Clarendon Hotel at Sea Breeze, Florida, for the winter. There she made daily exhibition flights and carried passengers. During the summer of 1913 she did the same at a Newport, Rhode Island, resort. By this time she had bought her own Wright airplane. On 6 November 1913, on Staten Island, Ms. Law made a twenty-minute moonlit flight, becoming the first woman to fly at night. Throughout 1914 and 1915 Ms. Law made exhibition flights at resorts and meets throughout the East. She sold her Wright aircraft in 1915 and bought a "loop model" Curtiss pusher, which had the Curtiss wheel controls. She had it fitted with Wright lever controls because she was more familiar with them. On 17 January 1915, she gave her first public exhibition of looping and aerobatic flying at Daytona Beach.

On 19-20 November 1916 Ms. Law made the greatest flight of her career, setting three new records: the American nonstop cross-country record, the world nonstop cross-country record for women, and the second best world nonstop cross-country record. She left Chicago at 8:25 A.M. and flew nonstop to Hornell, New York, where she landed at 2:10 P.M. This distance of 590 miles broke the American nonstop cross-country record of 452 miles set by Victor Carlstrom on 2 November.

Ms. Law left Hornell an hour later, after the spark plugs in her plane had been changed by a young Army lieutenant, "Hap" Arnold, and flew on to Binghamton, where she spent the night. The next morning she flew on to New York City, where she landed at Governor's Island and was greeted by officials of the U.S. Army and the Aero Club of America. The end of the flight was perhaps the



FIGURE 43.—Ruth Law with her brother, Rodman, a trick parachutist and daredevil performer. (SI photo A5251)

most eventful part. Ms. Law had not refueled at Binghamton, and by the time she was over Manhattan, her engine began to cut out. To reach Governor's Island, she had to bank the airplane several times to get the fuel from the tank to the carburetors.

Ms. Law used her open Curtiss pusher for the flight with a small crude shield around her feet to protect them from the cold. She had designed a supplementary fuel system for the flight, increasing her aircraft's capacity from eight to fifty-three gallons by use of auxiliary tanks. She also had improvised a device that enabled her to read maps without relinquishing the controls. She designed a special map case in which she inserted a scroll of appropriate strips from Geodetic Survey maps; she could keep her left hand on the vertical control while holding the right control with her knee long enough to turn the map case knobs with her right hand.

Ms. Law was the guest of honor at two large dinners in New York several weeks after her historic cross-country flight. On 2 December, President and Mrs. Wilson, several cabinet mem-

pl 19-10 Smithsonian Studies in  
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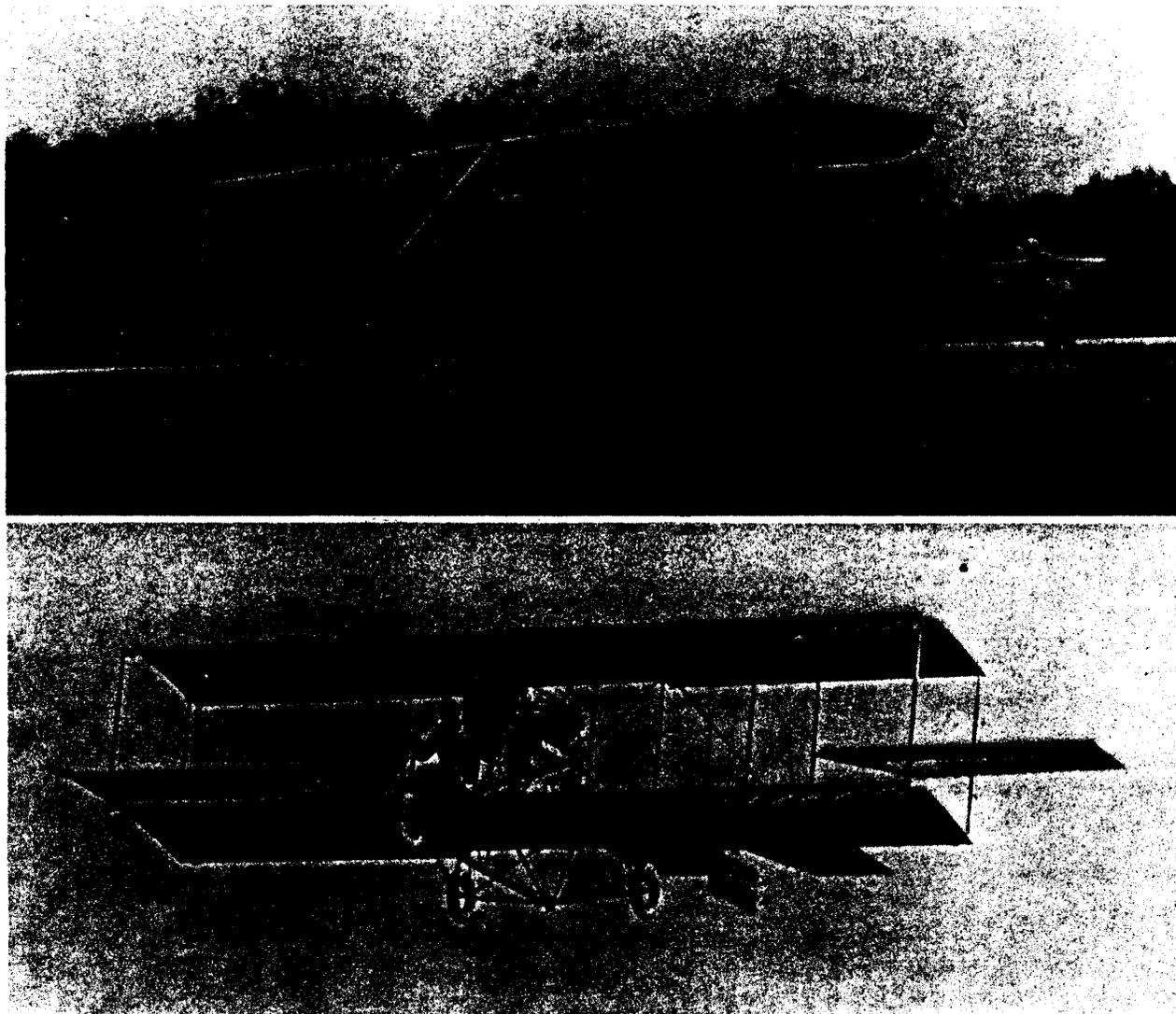


FIGURE 44.—Airplanes owned by Ruth Law: *top*, the Wright plane in which she performed at resorts and air meets throughout the country; *bottom*, the Curtiss pusher modified with Wright-type controls that she used for her exhibition flights. (SI photo A44433; courtesy of Rare Birds, Inc.)

bers, and many aviation dignitaries attended a dinner for her at the Hotel Waldorf. During that same week the Statute of Liberty was spotlighted at night for the first time, and Ms. Law gave a spectacular performance around it with the illuminated word "Liberty" on the bottom of her aircraft. She also gave an aerial salute to the president in his yacht, spinning down toward it and then pulling up about two hundred feet above it.

On 18 December the Aero Club of America and the New York Civic Forum feted her at the Hotel

Astor. The toastmaster was Adm. Robert E. Peary. Also attending was the famous explorer Roald Amundsen. Ms. Law was presented with a \$2500 check, and Miss Eleanor Gates, one of the speakers, summed up the evening: "It is easy to get a dinner if you are a man. You get one if you are a such-and-such degree Mason, or a naughty Elk, or just because it's time to have another dinner. But for a woman to sit in glory at the Hotel Astor she must do something superhuman" (author unknown, 1917:497).



FIGURE 45.—One of Ruth Law's spectacular night-time performances when she looped with flares attached to her aircraft; *inset*, the aviatrix, Ruth Law. (SI photo 77-706)

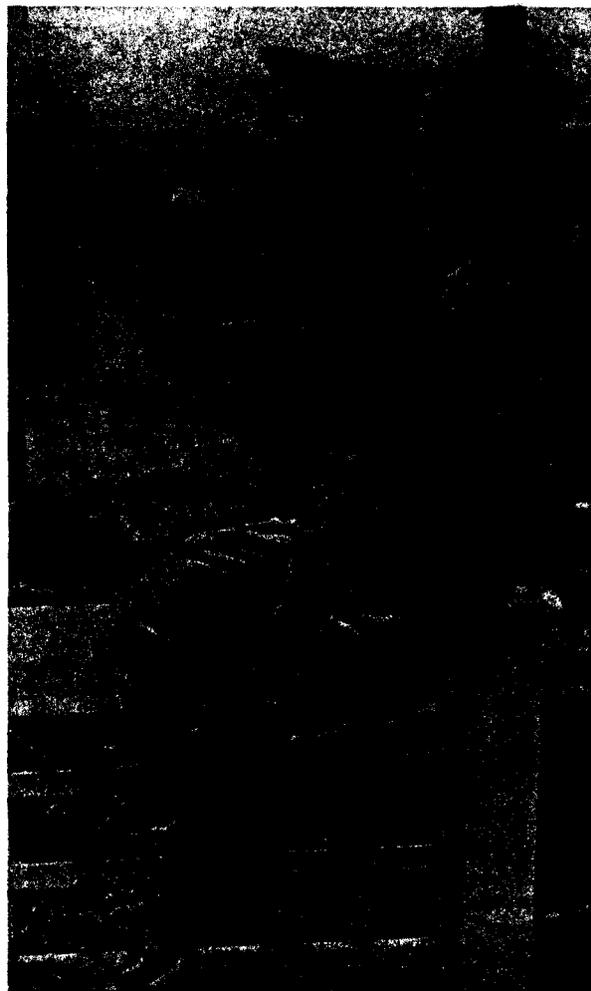
In January 1917 Ms. Law sailed for Europe to observe aviation advances there. Since her Chicago to New York flight, she had been able to earn as much as \$9000 a week for her exhibition flights.

Although she, like the other U.S. female pilots, was refused permission to fly in combat in World War I, she was, however, the first woman allowed to wear a noncommissioned Army officer's uniform, and she participated in recruiting tours for the Army and Navy. She also gave exhibition flights to help raise money for the Red Cross and Liberty Loan drives. During one of these flights, on 28 September 1917, she set a new women's altitude record of 14,700 feet.

After the war she made a tour of Japan, China, and the Philippines, and in April 1919 carried the first airmail to Manila.

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FIGURE 46.—A pose of Ruth Law, the first woman in the United States authorized to wear a noncommissioned officer's uniform, photographed at the Hotel McAlpin in New York, 30 June 1917, during a recruiting drive for the Army and the Navy. (SI photo 77-708)



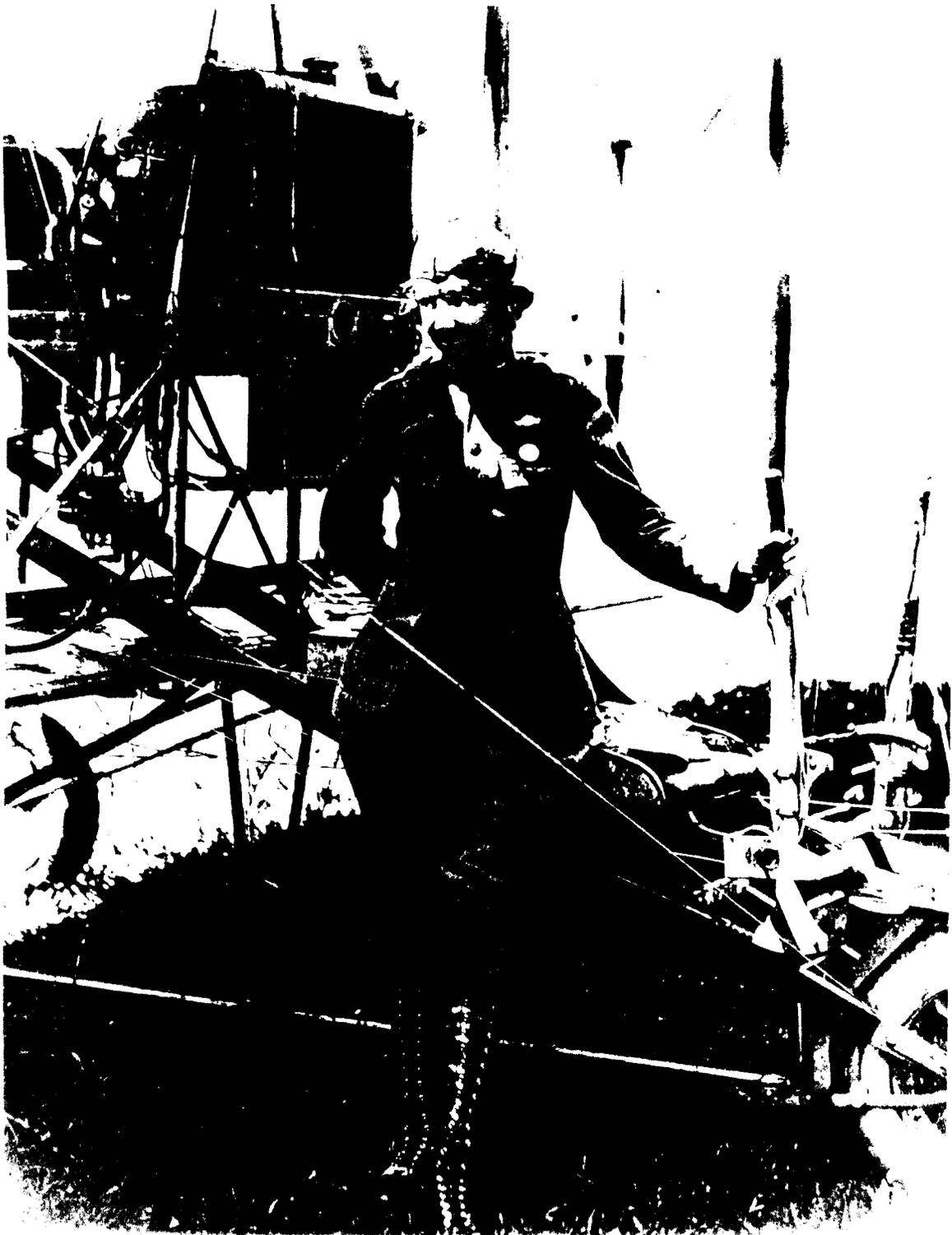


FIGURE 47. The uniform and Curtiss plane, trademarks of Ruth Law's contributions to recruiting and to Red Cross and Liberty Loan drives. (SI photo A5532)