

## *Introduction*

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**I**N 1926, THERE were countless ways to die in an airplane. Propeller blades snapped and broke, and planes went down. Wings failed, folding backward or tearing away completely. Control sticks got stuck, sending airships hurtling toward crowds or hangars. And all too often, engines just stopped in midflight, forcing pilots to scan the ground below for a farmer's field or a cow pasture—anyplace where they might land in a hurry. "In such a crisis, there is no time to think," said one early pilot. "You either automatically do the right thing or you die."

In clear skies, pilots often made the wrong choice. In bad weather, they had even fewer options. Storms, squalls, rain, snow, and fog made flying almost impossible. In open-cockpit planes, raindrops felt to pilots like little bullets hurled at their faces at a hundred miles an hour. Goggles fogged up, paper maps blew away in the wind, and aviators became disoriented. A pilot, in moments like these, was instructed to find railroad tracks on the ground—"the only discriminable object in an absolute gray of land and sky"—and follow them. By doing so, a lost flier could find the nearest town. But flying at a hundred and twenty miles an hour just fifty feet off the tracks was treacherous too. In one such case, a pilot plowed his plane into a mountainside when the railroad entered a tunnel. Worse still, pilots could do everything right—navigate through the fog, dodge the mountains, survive emergency landings—and still lose, for reasons out of their control. In the

1920s, plane builders typically used wood to construct their machines, then stretched linen over the wings, like pillowcases, and pulled the thin fabric tight around the spruce spars. These lightweight materials, covered in a protective lacquer, helped make flying possible. But the wood could rot and the fabric could tear, dooming even the best fliers. As one aviation manual pointed out, “Many pilots have been killed in wood fuselage ships.”

Crashes in 1926 killed or injured 240 people—a small but significant number, given that the vast majority of Americans never flew and that the government couldn’t be sure that it was counting every accident. Federal agents gathered their figures not from official calculations but, often, from newspaper reports. Plane manufacturers had no required regulations—and instructors, no required training. Flying, one pilot noted, “is no place for slovenly methods or ideas.” And yet, more than two decades after the Wright brothers first flew at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, the slovenly climbed into cockpits every day, frightening the public and, at times, even themselves. “Would you ride in a lot of planes you know or with some of the pilots you know?” one man asked his fellow pilots at the time. “You know you would not.” It was too dangerous. Even the so-called aviation experts were often unable to explain what caused planes to crash. Investigator: “Plane went into ground, nose first, causing complete wreck, so that it is hard to really tell what happened.” Investigator: “The reason for failure is hard to ascertain.” Investigator: “Completely destroyed by fire.”

By the mid-1920s, the fledgling aircraft industry, eager to prove planes were safe, latched on to one idea capable of creating positive news coverage, marketable heroes, and excitement all at once: plane racing. Small affairs at first, the events quickly grew until pilots were competing against one another for headlines, fame, and the equivalent today of millions of dollars in what became known as the National Air Races. Soon, air-minded Americans weren’t just reading about their favorite pilots darting across the ocean; they were watching them whip their planes around fifty-foot-tall pylons at these races or hearing them scream across the country in one race in particular: the greatest test of speed, strength, and skill financed by important men with large egos, the Bendix Trophy race. “It has become,” one pilot said of the Bendix, “one of our national institutions, like the World Series.”

These races were often fatal for pilots. Too risky for discerning men

and, according to many men and the media, no place at all for women. In the late 1920s, newspapers and magazines routinely published articles questioning whether a woman should be allowed to fly anywhere, much less in these races. That such questions could be posed—and taken seriously—might strike us today as outlandish. But they were all too typical of the age. American women had earned the right to vote only a few years earlier and laws still forbade them to serve on juries, drive taxicabs, or work night shifts. It is not surprising, then, that the few women who dared to enter the elite, male-dominated aviation fraternity endured a storm of criticism and insults. They weren't aviators, as far as the men were concerned. They were petticoat pilots, ladybirds, flying flappers, and sweethearts of the air. They were just "girl fliers"—the most common term for female pilots at the time.

But in 1926, a new generation of female pilots was emerging, and they refused to be pigeonholed, mocked, or excluded. Instead, they united to fight the men in a singular moment in American history, when air races in open-cockpit planes attracted bigger crowds than Opening Day at Yankee Stadium and an entire Sunday of NFL games—combined. These were no "sweethearts," no "ladybirds." If the women aviators had to have a name, they were fly girls—a term used in the 1920s to describe female pilots and, more broadly, young women who refused to live by the old rules, appearing bold and almost dangerous as a result. As one newspaper put it in the mid-1920s, "The people are exhorted to swat the fly, but it is safer to keep your hands off the fly girl."

It's a story that plays out over one tumultuous decade when gender roles were shifting, cultural norms were evolving, and the Great Depression had people questioning almost everything in America. At the beginning, in 1927, even independent women interested in aviation would think of themselves as mere cargo to be ferried from point to point. At the end, just a few years later, women would compete head to head against men in that great transcontinental race for the Bendix Trophy. A woman, many believed, could never beat a man in such a competition. But in 1936, one woman did, in a stunning upset that finally proved women not only belonged in the air—they could rule.

Among them were wives and mothers, divorcées and heiresses, teachers and bankers, daredevils and starlets. And five women in particular: Ruth Elder, a charming wife from Alabama who paid the price

for going first; Amelia Earhart, a lost soul living with her mother on the outskirts of Boston and desperate for a way out; Ruth Nichols, a daughter of Wall Street wealth in New York, hungry to make a name of her own; Louise McPhetridge Thaden, a small-town dreamer from rural Arkansas who wanted it all—a job, a family, fame—but in the end would have to make a difficult choice; and Florence Klingensmith, a young pilot from the northern plains whose great gamble in the sky would alter history on the ground.

In the decades to follow, only one of these five women would be remembered. But for a few years, before each of the women went missing in her own way, these female pilots captivated a nation, racing across the ocean or across the country, hoping to beat one another and longing to beat the men. At times, a hundred thousand people swarmed dusty airfields to watch them compete, darting through the sky in their colorful planes of robin's-egg blue and pale orchid, scarlet red and gleaming white, purple and cream and cobalt and silver, and racing—an impossible tale playing out in a deadly sky in an unforgiving time.

It began on the Kansas prairie, with a hard wind blowing.