



Early Aviators

This article is the beginning of a series of articles written on people of color and female Aviators in the early development of aviation. This author thinks that this is a necessary and appropriate undertaking due to the absence of significant coverage in recorded aviation history of many deserving individuals who took to the air in search of adventure and the fun of flying.

In order to give deserving credit to the first pilots to take to the air, it is necessary to go back to France in the late 1700's. In this group of early aviators, there were women who took to the sky almost immediately after men had started to fly balloons.

Ballooning started in France with the Montgolfier Brothers during the late 1700's. Prior to their flights, men had dreamed of taking to the air. During that time, the dominant theory among most would-be aviators was the theory that in order to fly you had to duplicate the flight of "birds." Unfortunately, this theory never produced any positive or productive results.

Nevertheless, it was the Montgolfier Brothers who found the way for human beings to become airborne for the first time. They were paper makers and they used paper to make balloons that were filled with hot air, which caused the device to rise from the surface of the earth when unrestrained.

The theory is that hot air inside of the balloon is lighter than the colder air outside and that the hot air will rise, giving lift to the balloon and basket attached.

The two brothers performed several test flights before they added human passengers to the basket attached to the balloon... their first passengers were a sheep, duck and chicken.

On November 23, 1783, they had two human passengers on-board their balloon when it ascended into the air over Paris. After this initial flight, balloon flying in France became popular and was engaged in by both male and female balloon pilots.

The first of the female pilots was Sophie Blanchard, who became the first woman to work as a professional balloonist. Unfortunately, she was also the first female to die in an aviation related accident when her balloon caught fire and she landed on top of a house and fell to her death.

The family of Andre-Jacques Garnerin (which included his wife, daughter and niece) were balloonists who regularly performed over the skies of France.

It eventually took one hundred and twenty years after the Montgolfier Brothers first historical flight for the Wright Brothers to make significant progress in the field of Aviation. On December 17, 1903, The Wright Brothers of Dayton, Ohio performed the first power-controlled flight. Almost immediately after that flight, women and Aviators of color were involved in power-controlled flight as pilots.

One of the early female aviators was Harriet Quimby, who earned her pilot's certificate from the Aero Club of America in 1911, just seven years after the Wright Brothers had demonstrated controlled flight. Harriet became the first woman to fly the English Channel in 1912.