

TWO AVIATION PIONEERS

KATHERINE STINSON AND AMELIA EARHART

Amelia Earhart has been in the news recently and, a few years ago, a movie was made of her flying exploits. However, Katherine Stinson, who preceded her and equaled or surpassed Amelia's accomplishments, has remained virtually unknown with no noteworthy recognition. So, let us jump back into the golden age of aviation. The old Lone Ranger Radio show called it "the thrilling days of yesteryear." Then, every flight slipping the surly bonds of earth and dancing among the clouds was a thrilling adventure. Katherine Stinson (1891-1977) was the fourth woman in the U.S. to gain a pilot's license in 1912, at the age of 21. Amelia Earhart (1897-1937) gained her pilot's license in 1922, when she was 25, the 16th woman to receive a pilot's license.

Female aviators were a novelty in 1913. The three aviatrixes who preceded Katherine Stinson had either died or retired leaving her as the only woman still flying. Katherine and her mother formed the Stinson Aviation Company in 1913. Her brother, Eddie Stinson, headed the company and the Stinson Flying School where Katherine was an instructor. Stinson Aviation produced many general aviation single- and multiple-engine aircraft used in commercial and airline service. Many Stinson aircraft set records. The Stinson Municipal Airport in San Antonio, Texas, is the second oldest general aviation airport in the U.S. and was named for the family.

Katherine was known as "the flying school girl." She had many firsts and set many records. She was the first woman to carry U.S. Mail nationally and internationally. She was the first pilot to fly at night. She toured and "barnstormed" in Canada in 1916, performing for the Canadian military. Her favorite stunt was the "nosedive." In 1915, she became the first woman to perform the "looped the loop" in a plane she built herself. She performed this feat 500 times without an accident.

She toured the Orient in 1916 flying in Tokyo and in China including a private exhibition for the head of state. She volunteered to fly for the Army during WWI but was rejected twice. She made a 9 hour and 10 minute, 610 mile nonstop flight from San Diego to San Francisco in 1917, setting a record.

Amelia Earhart was six years younger than Stinson. She first flew in 1920; and by 1927, she had accumulated nearly 500 hours of solo flying without a serious incident. She was known as Lady Lindy after Charles Lindberg. As a student pilot in 1922, she climbed to 14,000 feet, setting a world record for female pilots. In 1928, she became the first woman to co-pilot a plane on a trans-Atlantic flight.

Amelia Earhart was one of the first aviators to promote commercial air travel and she was the first woman to fly solo across the North American continent and back. In 1931, flying an autogyro, she set a world altitude record of 18,415 feet. In 1932, she became the first woman to fly non-stop across the Atlantic. She received many honors and awards. In 1935, she became the first person to fly solo from Hawaii to California and set a record in a non-stop flight from Mexico City to New York. Her famous 1937, around-the-world flight attempt ended in a tragedy which is still unexplained today.

Both Katherine Stinson and Amelia Earhart were aviation pioneers and celebrities in their time who set a number of aviation milestones and records separated only by a decade and the rapid advancement in aviation technology during the golden age of flight. Both originally wanted to pursue music and both fell in love with flying. Katherine, the “flying school girl,” blazed the trail; and Amelia followed in her flight path.

– ***Gary Ellis*** –