II

“Machinery Knows No Sex”: Ruth Law, the Stinson Sisters, and the Legacy of World War I

The third annual Boston Aviation Meet, held 29 June to 7 July 1912, was a watershed moment for American women’s aviation. It not surprisingly featured several of the most notable male celebrities of the day: Lincoln Beachey, who would be the first American to loop the loop (execute a vertical circle in midair, returning to the original direction of flight) in 1915, Arch Hoxsey, who had given former president Theodore Roosevelt his first airplane ride in 1910, designer-racer Glenn L. Martin, and others. Its reach, however, extended to the country’s only two performing women pilots as well. Harriet Quimby was there, fresh from her record-setting flight over the English Channel in April, and Blanche Stuart Scott, unlicensed but widely known as “The Tomboy of the Air” for her air show performances with the Curtiss troupe. Matilde Moisant, the only other woman air show flier of the time, had retired in April following a fiery crash in Wichita Falls, Texas, leaving Quimby and Scott the only professional women pilots flying. Their presence attested to their newsworthiness.

When the meet closed, the picture had changed. Quimby was dead, falling spectacularly to her death before a shocked audience. Scott, who had witnessed Quimby’s fall from the air while flying in the same airspace, began to wind down her career, continuing to perform, but retiring in 1916 because, she said, she was repelled by the ghoulishness of audiences who attended air shows hoping for a crash. The old order was changing, as was the technology. The time was ripe for a new generation of women pilots, and the women were ready. One, Ruth Law (1887–1970), an as yet untrained flying enthusiast, was present at the Boston Aviation Meet when Quimby died. She began flying lessons the same week and was licensed in August 1912, the sixth American woman to earn a license. Another, Katherine Stinson (1891–1977), was in the midst
of her training at Max Lillie’s flying school in Chicago. She would become the fourth American woman to earn a pilot’s license and would immediately enter the air show circuit; her sister, Marjorie (1895–1975), would become the eighth in 1914.

The three were the public face of women’s aviation in the United States until well after the end of World War I. Unlike Quimby, whose reputation was national but whose performances were limited to the East Coast, they performed at air shows throughout the nation and internationally, showing women’s skills at flight from coast to coast and abroad. They recorded notable accomplishments, as well. Law and Katherine Stinson established records for distance flight, Katherine became the first woman to loop the loop, and Marjorie became the first woman to operate and instruct at a flying school. Her students would include some of the earliest American and Canadian pilots to enter World War I.

They were, moreover, independent women in their own right, earning their living in the air. None openly allied herself with any of the organized feminist societies, but they spoke as one when it came to matters of gender ability. They used their prominence as women fliers to become equally prominent voices of progressivism, they argued for a greater women’s presence in the developing military effort, they made evident their support for the burgeoning women’s rights movement, and they repeatedly demonstrated—and commented upon—their belief that airplanes and aviation posed no problem for women.

Law and the Stinsons took up professional flying at a turbulent time in the nation’s history, and their careers span an era of significant cultural and technological evolution. The coming of World War I, the growing activism among women’s groups, and the steady course of technological change inevitably upset the status quo. The changes brought new perspectives on the United States’ place in the larger world, a heightened challenge to conventional views of women’s roles and abilities, and a new—and sometimes baffling—consciousness of the impact of technology in general (and aviation technology in particular) upon the national culture. Whereas Americans as a culture might cling to the national myth of the nation as a frontier-shaped society close to nature and its benefits, the United States was in fact inexorably becoming urbanized and mechanized. The changes were significant.

The women’s movement, a prominent part of the American scene since the Seneca Falls conference of 1848, was gaining new prominence as it worked toward the passing and subsequent ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920. Its energy was increasingly being expressed in urban parades and all-female demonstrations outside the White House. Meanwhile, in August 1914, barely two years after Quimby’s death, German military forces invaded Belgium. World War I had begun and the American public, by and large, wanted none of it. The United States, popularly and officially, held that the conflict was a strictly European one and saw no reason for American
involvement. Even so, the American aeronautical world felt its effects. The war would have a significant impact on aviation technology, the development of civil as well as military aviation, and the feminist movement.

Women’s battles for suffrage were relatively bloodless ones, fought largely in the streets and caucus rooms of the United States; the battles of World War I were startlingly bloody and fought in the fields and cities of Europe. Strategically and tactically, it was a new kind of ground war, far removed from wars of the past. It was a war of attrition fought by infantry and artillery, the combatants using machine guns, tanks, and other advanced weaponry. It saw the coming of the first weapon of mass destruction, poison gas, as well. After the Germans released free chlorine gas at the Second Battle of Ypres (22 April 1915), the other combatants quickly followed suit with new and even more toxic agents. The new technologies had their effect. Casualties, even by the standards of the twenty-first century, were appalling; by the standards of 1914–1918, they were staggering. In the First Battle of the Somme (1 July to 13 November 1916), British losses came to 420,000 combatants, French losses to 204,000, and German losses to an estimated 450,000 to 650,000. The United States, by comparison, which entered the war in April of 1917, lost approximately 112,000 troops from all causes during the eighteen months of its participation in the fighting.

This new kind of war was increasingly appearing to the public as one of “collective annihilation,” a “mechanical slaughter” fought in the mud and the trenches of the modern battlefield. In the generalized public vision, the combat soldier was little more than an anonymous statistic in the daily rolls of losses. By its immensity and facelessness, the ground war was making it “impossible [for the civilian public] to imagine . . . the numbers of soldiers involved, [or] the romantic image of warfare conducted along Napoleonic example.” It was warfare that, in its anonymity, effectively forestalled “a positive emotional identification. . . . with the war.” If the civilian public was to support the war, leaders of both sides recognized, that emotional identification had to come from somewhere else.

The airplane provided the answer. In late 1915, the German military leadership, seeking to build public morale, began to publicize the feats of combat pilots, presenting them as stalwart, romantic heroes. The publicity given these pilots by the news media of both sides created a new kind of public idol, the “fighter ace.” This figure, whose individuality and derring-do in man-to-man combat was conveyed through journalistic accounts, quickly came to dominate public perceptions of the air war. The “ace,” technically, was simply “a fighting pilot who has brought down five enemy airplanes.” The term, however, quickly became a universally recognized honorific, and the victories of individual pilots made a telling corrective to the anonymity of the ground war. War in the air, at least in the public mind, became a romantic affair.
For the emerging United States Army Air Service, however, the reality was something else. When the war opened in August 1914, Germany possessed 232 battle-ready airplanes; France had 162; Great Britain fielded “somewhere between 50 and 100.” The United States lagged dramatically; when the country entered the war three years later, its aerial forces numbered twenty-three trained pilots and fifty-five obsolescent training aircraft. Despite well-publicized claims that “the air is the one field in which the United States can make an immediate and effective contribution” and that the U.S. would soon supply “a thousand aviators a month for overseas service,” government and military leaders quickly had to face reality. Its aircraft overall, as Ruth Law was to point out in April of 1917, were not equal to those of any of the combatants.8

The United States would contribute no new aircraft designs to the war, and its existing designs could not compete with the Nieuports, Sopwiths, and Fokkers of the other combatants. The only nominally American aircraft to come out of the war was the Curtiss JN-4 “Jenny,” and it was derived from a design first used by the Avro firm in England. Instead, American manufacturers quietly took up the building of British-designed de Havilland and Handley Page bombers. The Air Service, however, did not lack for men. Though they were flying European-designed (and largely European-built) aircraft, six American pursuit squadrons, six observation squadrons, and one bomber squadron were operating at the front by June 1918. The United States was sharing in the appeal of the aerial war.9

The romance of the air notwithstanding, women, as a group, did not flock to aviation. The activity’s heavily male-oriented aura and the inability of women to enter the military without doubt acted as inhibitors, and by war’s end in November 1918, only eleven American women had earned pilot’s licenses. Two (Harriet Quimby and Julia Clark) were dead; Matilde Moisant had retired; five flew solely for recreation. Only three, Ruth Law and the Stinson sisters, were actively flying in public, and by early 1918 they were being cited as the “only three prominent women aviators in the United States.” Each found ways to continue flying even after federal restrictions on civil aviation were imposed in March 1918, and each took it upon herself to speak out for women’s role in aviation.10

Law and the Stisons were motivated by their enthusiasm for flight and abetted by their skills, but there were difficulties, and, if the three had not already been sensitized to the concerns of the women’s movement, their experiences stirred their awareness. The earliest days of aviation, as Ruth Law observed, reflected little gender-based discrimination among fliers. “There was a feeling of closeness,” she remarked, and “there seemed to be no difference in their feelings towards me because of my being a woman. . . . I was just one of the group.” That openness soon began to change, and as the cult of the ace accentuated male domination of the field, news of women fliers
In Their Own Words was pushed still further into the background. All three found ways to confront this diminution.

The Boston Aviation Meet of 1912 catalyzed matters for Ruth Law. Born in Lynn, Massachusetts, and a resident of Boston, she was moved to learn to fly by the sight of the flying machines and their maneuvers. Before the end of the meet, she and her new husband, Charles Oliver, traveled to Dayton, Ohio, and bought a Wright Model B aircraft at the Wright factory. Orville Wright reluctantly sold them the airplane but flatly refused to admit Law to the company’s flying school, saying he “wouldn’t be responsible for trying to teach a woman to fly.” Law returned to the Burgess Flying School in Boston and, after a brief spell of instruction, soloed; she was licensed in November and quickly embarked upon a career in aviation.

Charles Oliver took on the role of her manager, and opportunities began to accumulate. Her first extended work came in Florida, where from 1913 until 1915 she flew under contract to a popular hotel, showing off her flying skills and giving rides to the hotel’s guests. By 1914 she was well-known enough in Florida that a local newspaper called her “the world’s most famous aviatrix” when she announced plans to take part in a projected round-the-world air race. Subsequent bookings came from outside Florida, including her substituting for Katherine Stinson in Ohio and flying at the 1915 Illinois State Fair.
Law won national acclaim late in 1916, when she broke the distance record set by Victor Carlstrom. Carlstrom, a seasoned military pilot, had flown from Chicago to Hammondsport, New York, a distance of 452 miles, on 2 November 1916. He flew with the sponsorship of the *New York Times*, using a custom-built biplane from the Curtiss works in Hammondsport. Law decided to challenge his record, flying the same route in the Curtiss pusher that she had begun using in her air show appearances. Her purpose, she said, was “to break the present American non-stop flight records and second, to establish the practicality of women aviators in war time.”

She was, already, linking women’s concerns and aeronautical accomplishments.

The aircraft she intended to use had been built to her order by the Curtiss firm in 1915, but it was in most respects a largely unmodified example of the Curtiss D-III Headless Pusher biplane. “Headless” pertained to its having no forward-projecting pylon carrying the elevators, as the original Wright and Curtiss craft had possessed. With a single engine mounted behind the pilot and powering a rear-facing propeller, the machine had a wingspan of thirty-eight feet and a length of twenty-five feet. It was a handy, agile craft well-suited for Law’s airshow performances, but it was not the best choice for a cross-country flight in mid-winter. It had neither an enclosed cockpit nor a windshield and the pilot’s seat projected from the front—providing excellent visibility but no protection from the elements. Even by the standards of 1916, the aircraft was obsolescent, if not actually obsolete; nonetheless, Law was comfortable with the ship and confident of her ability to handle it whatever conditions she might encounter. She mounted a small aluminum shield in front to cover her feet, bundled herself in fur-lined trousers and leather outer garments, and set out.

Leaving Chicago early on the morning of 19 November, she flew nonstop to Hornell, New York, a record-setting 590 miles, stopping short of New York City only because fighting an unexpected headwind forced her ship to consume fuel faster than she had planned. She completed the flight a day later, arriving at Governor’s Island, New York, mid-morning on 21 November, having set a new American cross-country distance record and broken all existing women’s records for distance flying. Her comments following the flight were modest but pointed: “I have made the longest flight a woman ever made. . . . It was the only distance flight I ever tried and I did better than the man who tried it. But I don’t mean that the fact that I am a woman makes any difference to speak of.” For her, her achievement as a flier who happened to be female overshadowed any contribution she might make as a “woman flier.”

Her flight made her an instant celebrity, her fame reflected in the praise given her in national publications, popular as well as technical. An editorial in the *New York Times* observed that Law’s flight “puts her in the rank of the great aviators” and remarked to those who wanted to label her an “aviatrix” that her command of the qualities demanded by aviation leaves “no necessity, and hardly an excuse, for giving her a name
that emphasizes the fact, *professionally irrelevant, of sex.*” *Aerial Age Weekly,* a leading aviation journal, opened its 27 November 1916 issue by proclaiming, “Miss Ruth Law Now Holds American Non-Stop Cross-Country Record, and World Cross-Country Record for Women,” then, in a later issue, quoted a *New York Globe* editorial hailing her as “the practical sort of feminist that is going to do more for women than a decade of front parlor and lecture room talk on ’sex barriers’ will ever do.”

In its own recognition of her achievement, the Aero Club of America, the national entity certifying flying skills before the government began official licensing, gave a dinner in her honor at the Hotel Astor, seating her at the head table between the famed polar explorers Rear Admiral Robert E. Peary and Captain Roald Amundsen. Peary was acclaimed for reaching the North Pole in 1909; Amundsen, after crossing from the Atlantic to the Pacific via the Northwest Passage in 1909, had reached the South Pole in 1911. Other women were present at the occasion, including playwright and women’s activist Eleanor Gates. Their remarks dubbed Law “the emancipator of women,” and Gates later told an interviewer that “Ruth Law is the fourth superwoman,” going on to add that “Ruth Law’s flight wasn’t feminine, it wasn’t masculine. It was super-human.”

Law’s seating between Amundsen and Peary tacitly equated her accomplishment with those of the men, implying that she, like them, had overcome significant odds to explore mysterious areas of the world to expand human knowledge—a notable concession for the predominantly male Aero Club. In toasting her success, Admiral Peary bluntly stated that “she had accomplished more toward the advancement of aviation than any man could have done,” while the *Literary Digest* dubbed her “A New-Crowned Queen of the Air” and reprinted extensive excerpts from accounts in the *New York Times.* Her regional fame had spread nationwide, and she was, for all practical purposes, the personification of women in aviation.

Law turned her celebrity to good purpose in the years following 1916, with the 1917–1918 period representing perhaps the most visible part of her career. Early in January 1917 she signed a contract with Pulitzer’s *New York World* to travel to France, evaluate and buy a military-grade airplane, and undertake a coast-to-coast flight within the United States. Neither the airplane nor the coast-to-coast flight materialized, but the European trip gave her occasion to comment on the inferiority of American aircraft and to agitate for the admission of women to the Army Air Service. Her efforts to enlist women were not entirely quixotic. The United States Navy and the Marine Corps began to enlist women for clerical work in 1917, giving them the rank of “Yeoman (F)” and full benefits for their rank. (Army nurses, who were formally enlisted members of the army and often posted perilously near the front lines, were denied military rank.)

Meanwhile, in early January 1917 the aeronautical engineer Lawrence Sperry, with the endorsement of Major General Leonard Wood, proposed a plan “for probationary
enrollment of women aviators in the Army Aviation Reserve Corps.” The head of the Aviation Section of the Army Signal Corps, Lieutenant Colonel George O. Squier, expressed interest, saying that Law’s recent flight proved that “there are thousands of women in this country that could successfully operate aeroplanes, in case of necessity.” Given opportunity and incentive, American women could—and would—rise to the occasion. Squier’s comment, like Sperry’s proposal, ignored there being only eight licensed women pilots in the country; he was making a more general assessment of women’s abilities that was remarkably progressive for his rank and the times. 22

The proposal from Sperry and comment from Squier were all Law needed. In the aftermath of her Chicago-New York flight, she had already spoken of an interest in establishing a role for women as military pilots. Now she had her opportunity, and, returning to the United States in April 1917, she made repeated efforts to enlist. She petitioned officials in Chicago and Washington, D.C., but was rejected each time. She did, however, win one concession. Law was admitted into the military recruiting service and authorized to wear “the smart khaki uniform of a United States officer . . . as an assistant recruiting officer of the United States army—her territory being . . . ‘the United States map and the atmosphere.’” Her charge was to recruit men for the armed forces generally, but she made it her mission to give “special attention to aviators.” 23

She took her duties seriously, flying in recruitment and Liberty Bond drives across the country, dropping paper “bombs” emblazoned with “You Buy a Liberty Bond or the Next Bomb Dropped on You May Be a German Bomb” and arguing in the principal aeronautical magazines for the enlistment of both men and women. She never achieved her goal of formal enlistment in the Air Service, but she established herself as an articulate advocate speaking and writing on women and aviation throughout the duration of her work. Immediately after the Armistice, she made a six-month exhibition trip to the Philippines, China, and Japan, then returned to the United States to plan for a nonstop transatlantic flight. 24 Her plan came to naught, however, when John Alcock and Arthur W. Brown flew from Newfoundland to Ireland on 14 June 1919 in a modified British bomber, making the flight in somewhat more than sixteen hours.

She continued her exhibition flying, creating the three-airplane “Ruth Law’s Flying Circus” and touring the country with her troupe, but her success was short-lived. Although the airplanes involved in this enterprise were mechanically superior to those of the prewar exhibitions, the flying itself was becoming increasingly dangerous. Postwar audiences were no longer satisfied with the mere sight of a flying machine. Their memories of the stories told of the wartime aces still fresh, they expected “new and more daring exploits” from the fliers. Law met the demand with wing-walking, transferring from an airplane to a speeding automobile, and standing on the upper wing of a Curtiss JN-4 while its pilot looped the loop. (A harness of steel wires, imperceptible
from the ground, kept her firmly attached.) Though she herself experienced no accidents, the risks by 1922 compelled her husband to insist upon her retirement, and she left the profession.

The duality reflected in Law’s apparently ready submission to her husband is one found frequently in feminists’ firsthand accounts of their lives involving a range of undertakings. Doris Rich, commenting on Matilde Moisant’s activities of a decade before, observed: “Like most of them [women of her generation], she maintained a careful balance between a strong belief in her own ability and a public acquiescence to a patriarchal society.” These women, like Law, were progressive in their pressing for advances of all sorts, yet they also, in varying degrees, made accommodations to familial and societal expectations. That Law acceded to her husband’s wishes does not so much diminish her as an activist as it dramatizes the tensions faced by progressive women with families. In later years reporters occasionally sought her opinion on matters aeronautical; she took pride in her achievements but acknowledged that her days in the public eye were past.

Mississippi-born Katherine Stinson, for her part, came to flying only indirectly. Her primary ambition was to become a pianist and music teacher; as she said later, “It wasn’t that I particularly wanted to be an aviator. What I wanted was to be a music teacher! But aviation seemed the only means to that end.” The appeal of flying and its financial returns, however, quickly overshadowed the attractions of music and she turned to professional demonstration flying. Her first national attention came in 1912, when she was twenty-one and less than a month after she had received her license. A brief mention in *Aerial Age* magazine, which hailed her as part of “the modern movement of woman to free herself of silly traditions,” accentuated her progressivism more than her aeronautical skills.

She entered the exhibition circuit almost immediately, initially flying a secondhand Wright Model B at Cincinnati, Ohio, in late July and Columbus, Indiana, in August. Major acclaim, however, came in July 1915, when she became the first woman to loop the loop. Adolphe Pégoud had managed the allegedly impossible feat in France in September 1913, and Lincoln Beachey repeated it in the United States in November of that year. From 1915 on Stinson made the loop a regular part of her performances, then, in 1916, added an even more daring loop at night. Her only comment on the achievement was, “When I looped-the-loop in Chicago last July... it was a bitter pill for the male loopers to swallow.” Stinson’s accomplishment placed her at the forefront of American fliers, and she was well-started on her professional career.

For four years, from late 1913 until early 1917, Stinson took part in air shows throughout the United States. Her bookings were handled by William H. Pickens, a promoter who also handled Andre Houpert (who had taught Harriet Quimby), a half dozen other male fliers, and, eventually, Katherine’s younger sister, Marjorie. He capitalized
shamelessly on Katherine’s gender and youth. She was at the time in her mid-twenties, but Pickens, with Katherine’s complicity, trimmed years from her age and billed her as “a frail, little school girl.” He did, though, make a crucial point to his potential customers, speaking to them as “PROGRESSIVE” men and adding, “THIS IS A WOMAN’S AGE—THE WOMEN ARE VITALLY INTERESTED in the achievements of women.” Pickens’s success in booking her into fairs, football games, and local festivals throughout the country won her the exposure she needed.  

Katherine Stinson took to exhibition flying with enthusiasm, using her appearances to publicize—and finance—the flying school the family had begun in San Antonio, Texas. When her schedule permitted she joined Marjorie in teaching at the school, but she devoted most of her time to the exhibition circuit. In both endeavors, however, she held to her intent to publicize and popularize aviation. Part of her work at the Stinson School of Flying involved giving flying lessons and demonstrations to students in the San Antonio schools; she was, she told a local reporter, “conducting these exhibitions in the interest of aviation . . . on the theory that the more people interested in it, the more progress towards perfection in the science will be accomplished.”

Following a five-month tour of China and Japan, where she was the first woman to fly in either country, Stinson returned in May 1917 to the United States and a nation at war. In a public statement she offered her services to the American military. Contending that since “women fliers have demonstrated that we can do as much, and do it as well, as can the male aviators,” she told an Ohio reporter that she saw “no reason why we, who are capable of helping the Government in this respect, should not be allowed to perform a task for which we are as well fitted as are the noble women who do nursing and other heroic work at the front for the duties to which they have been assigned.”

She reconfirmed her views a week later in Indiana, telling a reporter that she wanted to be “sent to France as a member of the aerial army,” for she “would be glad to have an opportunity to show what she could do should her services be required by the government.” Unlike Law, she made no mention of combat flying. She did, however, insist that women pilots could carry out military duties as well as men, and that they constituted a significant and unutilized resource.

Like Law, Stinson was denied outright military service, but she was booked to make several flights in support of Red Cross and Liberty Loan fundraising drives. That work led her to set two records, one personal, the other national. In June 1917, flying as part of a Red Cross fund drive, she made a two-day cross-country flight from Buffalo, New York, to Washington, D.C. Although broken into segments, it covered a distance of 670 miles and became the longest flight she had so far made. Then, in December 1917, she flew nonstop from San Diego to San Francisco, a seven-hour flight covering a distance of 610 miles that handily broke Ruth Law’s record set in 1916. Her only comment on the latter achievement was a tacit twitting of the prevailing masculinity
of the aero world: “I’m happy, and I’ll bet Ruth Law is glad a girl and not a man broke her record.” Other writers were less restrained. A wire service story circulated nationally quoted her as saying that “I am happy to have accomplished a feat which elevates the world’s opinion regarding my sex,” and went on to comment that her flight was “today being hailed [sic] by American women as breaking down the final barrier against the working-world equality of the sexes.” As in her earlier quip about “a girl and not a man,” she made clear her sympathy for the suffrage movement.

Difficulties arose in early 1918, when heightened government restrictions on civil aviation put an end to the exhibition circuit and forced the Stinsons to close their school. Looking for other ways to use her expertise, Katherine turned to the mails. After a concerted effort in mid-1918 to join the United States Air Mail Service as a full-fledged mail pilot, she was accepted, but made only four flights. She found the government restrictions placed on her because of her gender to be unduly confining and resigned before year’s end. Her airmail aspirations dashed, Stinson sought other forms of national service. Joining the Red Cross, she went to France in the fall of 1918, driving an ambulance in the rear areas of the combat zone. After contracting Spanish influenza and being sent home as an invalid, she developed tuberculosis and permanently retired from flying. She moved to New Mexico in search of improved health, married Miguel A. Otero, a state official, and, in her later days, made a name for herself as an architect in Santa Fe.

Like her sister and Ruth Law before her, Marjorie Stinson turned to the exhibition circuit to exercise her flying skills. She had had occasional flying lessons from Katherine during lulls at the Stinson School but took her formal training at the Wright Flying School in Dayton, Ohio, Orville Wright having overcome his earlier objections to training women pilots. Completing her training in less than six weeks, she received license number 303 in August 1914 at the age of nineteen, supplanting Katherine as the youngest licensed woman pilot in the country. She was the only woman in her class.

Her brief exhibition career began almost immediately; she joined Katherine at an air show in Kansas City, Missouri, then went on to appearances in Texas and the Midwest. Katherine’s manager, William Pickens, took over her bookings as well, billing the twenty-one-year-old Marjorie variously as “the kindergarten aviatrice” and the “High School Flier.” Despite her unquestioned abilities, she could not escape the shadow of her older sister. Pickens seems to have treated her as a second-rank surrogate for Katherine, remarking in one advertisement, “She flies just as well as most of the male aviators. . . . If you cannot afford Miss Katherine’s services let me send you Miss Marjorie.” At no point did Marjorie comment openly on the discrepancy between her fees and Katherine’s, but she has to have felt the discrimination.

Perhaps in reaction to her subordination to Katherine as an exhibition flier, Marjorie increasingly turned from the popular circuit to teaching in the Stinson School of
Flying. She was from the outset the principal—and at times only—instructor, “teaching big brawny fellows the art of flying and converting them into enthusiastic airmen.” Her expertise quickly caught the attention of Canadian authorities, who were enlisting pilots for the Canadian armed forces. Wanting more flying time than they could gain in Dayton, four Canadian military officers followed her from the Wright School. When word of their enrollment spread, they were joined by others, until Marjorie was teaching classes of ten or more. Her teaching continued from late 1915 until the cessation of all civilian flying in 1918 forced the closing of the school.37

The high point of her teaching came in late 1917, when the Stinson School undertook the training of a corps of volunteer civilian pilots. Marjorie had in 1915 joined the United States Aviation Reserve Corps, an organization that, with the endorsement of the Aero Club of America, was meant to “promote American military use and development of the airplane.” She also at times used her exhibition flying to show off the airplane’s “possibilities as a medium for destruction in times of war,” including in her performance demonstrations of aerial bombing.38 She plainly felt that women fliers could contribute substantially to the national defense, and, when the United States entered World War I in April 1917, took steps to do her part in making that contribution.

What resulted was the Texas Escadrille, a group of twenty-three men to whom Marjorie taught the basics of flying and aerobatics. The undertaking was her creation, intended to supply “men who will be thoroughly trained in the branch of service which the government most needs at this time,” and was distinctive enough that a local feature writer noted that “in suggesting and training the Esquadrille [sic], Miss Stinson is accomplishing something which few women would attempt.” The enterprise continued until the Stinson School was closed in 1918 and constituted her last work as an instructor. Although she effectively stopped flying in 1919, the trade magazine Southern Aviation recognized her as late as 1930 as being “among the vanguard of the stout-hearted women . . . to whose efforts aeronautics today owes much for its steady and progressive development.”39

The war played its part in shaping the Stinsons and their activities. They both felt compelled to establish their public patriotism, volunteering their services to the government as war seemed more likely. In mid-1915 Marjorie proposed going to the Texas-Mexico border and flying scouting missions, “actuated by the news that General [Frederick] Funston had need of an aviator to assist in the border patrol work.” The following year Katherine “offered her services to the Government as an army aviator in keeping with the preparedness program of others of her own sex” in connection with the Villa Punitive Expedition of 1916. This foray, led by Brigadier General John J. Pershing, crossed into Mexico in pursuit of the revolutionary Pancho Villa and was accompanied by eight Curtiss JN-3 airplanes, a large part of the army’s air-ready
equipment. She repeated the offer throughout 1917, saying finally that she “offered her services to the country on condition that she be sent to France as a member of the aerial army Uncle Sam will send to the other side.” She evinced no doubt that she could hold her own among the male fliers.

As the most visible—and, in fact, the only—women professionally at the controls of aircraft between 1913 and 1918, Law and the Stinsons found themselves celebrities of a new and somewhat unusual sort. They rose to prominence at a fortunate time, for they began to fly at a time when publicity was becoming more professionalized. Press agents and publicists were becoming as gifted at creating news as they were at communicating it. Celebrity, as Andrea M. McDonnell has noted, “is a complicated chimera, a blend of fact and fiction, reality and performance,” and the comment applies handily to the work of Law and the Stinsons. No matter how genuinely accomplished the three were in the realm of flight, they unquestionably benefitted from the associated publicity. Indeed, William H. Pickens, manager for the Stinsons, was by 1917 being hailed as the “de luxe impresario of dare-devils and king of press agents, the land over,” in an article that went on to speak of Katherine, “the greatest of all girl aviators.” Even in a secondhand report, the power of publicity elevated her.

Capitalizing upon that celebrity, all three used their prominence to speak and write thoughtfully and deliberately of the war and America’s place in it; the general status of women, both in aviation and in more general life; and the ongoing development of aircraft and aviation. The extent to which the Stinsons’ offers were sincere and to what extent quixotic is open to debate. Certainly they were skilled enough to fly reconnaissance missions, were the opportunity to arise. They were, however, still practicing exhibition fliers, and the publicity garnered from their offers could only help their bookings. No such ambiguity followed Ruth Law. The most outspoken of the three, she repeatedly called for the greater utilization of women in military flying and expressed more than a little resentment at being denied the opportunity simply because of her gender. A gifted flier she was, but she understood the power of publicity.

Law early on took the position that the military would benefit from women’s skills, telling a reporter in late 1916, “Should this country get into war, you would find a great number of women capable and willing to manipulate battleplanes for Uncle Sam.” America’s impending entrance into the war caused her to intensify her argument; in mid-1917 she asserted, “I am at the service of my country,” and “above all things I’d like to go to the front in France if America sends any soldiers over there. If we have a woman congressman, why can’t we have a woman fighting aviator?” Then, in 1917, came a syndicated article, “Go Get the Kaiser,” published over her name as “The World’s Greatest Aviatrix.” Here she maintained that her ambition was “to fly a battle plane on the Allied western front—a dueling airplane.” (Her “dueling airplane” reference suggests she was in part responding to journalistic glorification of the ace and positing
her skills as the equal of theirs.) Once commissioned, she continued, she was certain that she “could drive an airplane into battle and perform the destructive work of bombing the Teuton batteries and barracks without any feeling of remorse,” clearly implying that women pilots could overcome their “softer” feelings and fly as effectively as their male counterparts.41

Shortly after she published her threats to the Kaiser, Law began her flying for the Liberty Bond campaign and her work to build up army recruitment. Her first engagement took her on a ten-day, 2,500-mile flight throughout the Midwest, where she preached the importance of keeping the United States from “the same horrors that war had brought to all Europe.” She spoke most extensively, though, in support of recruiting, using a series of articles in the aviation press to stress the national need for a strong air force. Her first essay, published in late 1917, stated bluntly that “the war will be decided, and liberty preserved, in the air. Our aircraft must be more numerous
than the flies that hover over the German trenches.” She ended it with a pointed dig at government obstinacy: “Give them a shot for me, boys! I can’t go because I ain’t a man.”

She returned to her theme in early 1918, when Air Travel magazine paired her essay “Let Women Fly!” with a companion piece, “Yes—Let Women Fly,” by Representative Murray Hulbert (D-NY). Hulbert, she said, supported her contention, introducing a bill in the House to allow the enlistment of women. The bill failed because of “red tape and precedent—bugbears of ambition,” but Law herself spoke out emphatically: “Why should not women be permitted to fight, if they want to and have had any training or experience that could be utilized in warfare?” The same month she used the well-regarded trade magazine Flying to make her case one final time: “Although I have helped many young men to enlist their services for their country, I am unable to enlist myself in the U.S. Flying Corps. They all agree that I can fly, but they can’t understand in Washington why a woman should want to go to France and fight in an aeroplane. They can’t understand that a woman may have the same desire to serve her country as a man and that perhaps flying is the very work that she can do best.”

The Stinsons’ and Law’s desire to volunteer and their support for women in the military ranged from tepid to vehement, but two themes consistently ran throughout their statements. One was the argument that aviation was to play a significant role in the war, and the United States Army would do well to make use of all the resources at its disposal. The other was the contention that women were wholly capable of playing a part in a male-dominated undertaking and very likely would prove to be the equal, if not the superior, of men. They were to speak still more fully on both topics.

The endorsement the three gave to the presence of women in the military only reinforced their more general premise that women as individuals were capable of any deed they might put their minds to—or be permitted to do by a condescending culture. They were in no way militants. They made no mention of Carrie Chapman Catt or Emmeline Pankhurst, of woman’s suffrage parades or demonstrations outside the White House. They did, though, hold definite opinions concerning women’s rights, and these opinions came through clearly in both their press coverage and their individual statements.

The three benefitted from frequent favorable mentions in the press. Marjorie Stinson was recognized in an article in the “About People” department of Woman’s Home Companion in 1915, where she was paired with Hélène Dutrieu as foreshadowing a time when the nation would hear “Aéroplanes for women’ as often as the famous suffrage slogan.” Following Law’s 1916 flight from Chicago to New York, an editorial in the Baltimore Sun (reprinted in the Newark, Ohio, Daily Advocate) remarked, “Having beaten man at everything on earth that is worth doing, woman now shows him his inferiority in the sky.”

A demonstration flight by Katherine Stinson in Texas led the Brownwood Daily Bulletin to observe that “along with the agitation of equal suffrage rights and other
matters of a similar nature, the women of America are daily demonstrating their skill
to cope with men in any kind of endeavor.” Her San Diego to San Francisco flight of
1917 prompted a syndicated editorial writer to comment that her “remarkable achieve-
ment in the field which has provided man’s most serious tests of daring and endurance
is today being hailed by American women as breaking down the final barrier against
the working-world equality of the sexes.”46

The three themselves took every opportunity to speak out for women. When
Marjorie Stinson reprinted the diary of her experiences at the Wright School in 1914 in
the trade journal Aero Digest, she said flatly that she wanted “to show some of the other
girls how easily one of them can learn the A B C’s of flying. Flying, you know, never
was intended exclusively for mere man anyway.” Katherine used the occasion of her
mastering the loop the loop at night to maintain: “Now that I have equaled the great-
est efforts of the male flyers I am going to go ahead and evolve a new stunt or two that
will put woman ahead of man at the most difficult of all sciences.” She tipped her hat to
Ruth Law after beating Law’s distance record in 1917, then, in a commissioned column
for an Indiana newspaper, went on to say: “What I have done other girls can do. They
can use an airplane to carry them to their heart’s desire, or as a permanent livelihood.”
She reinforced her comments in an article in American Magazine in 1919, stating her
conviction that “there is nothing about flying that makes it unsuited to a woman.”47

Ruth Law was equally outspoken, taking advantage of the publishing opportunities
offered her to call repeatedly for a reevaluation of women’s status. She wrote that her
Chicago to New York flight of 1916 surpassed Victor Carlstrom’s record, then added,
“I suppose I ought to say that I am in favor of woman suffrage—but what has that got
to do with it?” In a later statement on the same accomplishment, she held that “man
can do nothing with an aeroplane that women cannot do equally as well. . . . As to
woman’s part in the future of aviation, they will master the heavier-than-air machine
as they have mastered the automobile. . . . Sex will be forgotten, or at least ignored,
henceforth when aviation is discussed. . . . Machinery knows no sex.”48

Law also used the prospect of military service to advance her larger views about
women. In her army uniform on her recruiting trips, she had a unique opportunity to
speak out for an expanded women’s role in the war. “Trained women can serve in an
air navy quite as capably as men. . . . Women’s work in this war proves there are very
few exclusive occupations,” she wrote in 1917. Though she conceded in “Go Get the
Kaiser” that not all women were suited for combat flying, she held that “where women
might fly to advantage would be in supply and messenger work. . . . As the business of
flying becomes more and more stabilized . . . I have not the slightest doubt but that it
will become first a fad and then a practical thing with women.”49

More generally, however, she recognized that society rather than biology was at the
heart of women’s being pushed to the side. In a comment anticipating Amelia Earhart’s
views of two decades later, she wrote: “It was a question of training and experience, rather than of sex, and that the world was at its old game of...disregarding, passing over and wasting its woman power. There is the world-old controversy that crops up again whenever women attempt to enter a new field: Is woman fitted for this or that work? It would seem that a woman’s success in any particular line would prove her fitness for that work, without regard to theories to the contrary.”

Law, like the Stinson sisters, believed in women’s ability to deal with the world as it was, and she did not hesitate to speak her mind in challenging traditional ways of treating women.

Katherine Stinson handily encapsulated the views of all three on women in a short column of 1918, ruminating thoughtfully upon women and American aviation. She noted that she, Marjorie, and Law were the only women flying professionally in the United States. And this, she said, needed correction. “Instead of three I should like to see hundreds of girls skimming the clouds. We’re awfully lonely up here and not at all jealous of our distinction. Come on up, girls—the air is fine!” American women would not get the vote for another two years, but, to Stinson (and, by extension, to Law and Marjorie Stinson), there was nothing to keep them from the air but their own reluctance to act.

For all the authoritativeness the three gained in their roles as women pilots, they faced overt condescension as they made their way. Publicity announcements routinely billed the two Stinsons as “schoolgirl” and “kindergarten” pilots, although both were in their twenties, just as the thirty-year-old Law was regularly called a “girl.” Accounts of their activities repeatedly described the three as “girls,” using the term even in newspaper headlines. Yet, condescension and tacit masculine resistance notwithstanding, they made a place for themselves in aviation, through aviation. In many respects they anticipate Susan Ware’s conclusions concerning the more widely known women pilots of the 1930s. These women, Ware observes, “dealt with the ongoing discrimination and double standard by a combination of two tactics: ignoring it and just going about their business, or trying to use their own examples of individual success as a way of breaking down prejudices and stereotypes.” Law and the Stinsons were, after all, essentially contemporaries of Harriet Quimby, yet they had to deal with a shifting, advancing milieu of technology and social attitudes that Quimby never had to face. They confronted their world directly.

Behind the support of women’s concerns in military and in civil life that the Stinsons and Law offered was a still more compelling matter: their sense of the larger role and place of aviation in American life. They accepted the airplane’s military significance yet openly believed aviation was to have as powerful a role in the peaceful advancement of national progress as it did in furthering military might. Flight was an enterprise that would in time blend seamlessly with American society and bring about a new way of
life. Early on Katherine Stinson made the point, telling a reporter that although she was indeed making her living through exhibition flying, what she truly wanted was for “aviation to become commonplace, an everyday affair.” The novelty of flight was a transient quality, she believed, and she was striving to encourage in the public a general embracing of flight and an understanding of its potential.

All three, in addition, publicized the evolving technology of flight—a process accelerated by the rapid development of aircraft during the war. They made the move from clumsy pusher aircraft, with the engine and propeller behind the pilot and the pilot seated in the open, to the more maneuverable tractor ships, with engine and propeller in front and the pilot sitting in a cockpit. They accepted the transition from wing-warping for turning, as used by the Wrights, to the independent ailerons promoted by Glenn Curtiss. And they adjusted to the shift from the clumsy two-stick control system of the Wrights to the single-wheel system developed by Curtiss—turn the wheel for yaw and roll, push the stick to control elevator and pitch.

Ruth Law, the oldest and most experienced of the three, looked ahead to the time when aircraft would reach new levels of reliability and accessibility. Flying, she wrote, is “in the same stage as motoring was ten years ago.” For it to grow, airfields, maintenance facilities, and guide mechanisms will have to be put into place. But, she continues, “All this will come, and come soon,” just as improved service facilities and better roads followed the automobile. Aviation will become a central component of “commercial transportation, both for passengers and for merchandise,” and airplanes will become a wholly integrated part of commercial and individual life. Katherine Stinson, for her part, spoke readily of technical matters in a testimonial for the oil she used in her San Diego to San Francisco flight; it permitted, she said, “one of the severest tests an aeroplane engine has ever been put to in this country.” She had, the article took care to point out, used products she had to pay for, rather than adopting some other brands that the manufacturers would have supplied free “for the sake of the advertising her trip would have given them.”

The receptivity of the three to the changes taking place in aviation confirms their belief in the steady (and healthy) progress of aviation. Behind their receptivity, however, was a still greater conviction: the belief that, as aviation and the airplane developed, so, too, would society. As they shifted their vision from the benefits the individual might garner from aviation to those that would accrue to the larger society, they did their part in communicating flight’s emotional appeals. In their accomplishments and in their prominence, they gave the American public still another glimpse of all that flight might offer.

Air-minded thinkers in the post-World War I era held that the integrated life that Law anticipated would in time evolve into a wholly new “winged age,” and women fliers like Law and the Stinsons would contribute to its creation. As Joseph Corn contends
In Their Own Words

in *The Winged Gospel* (1983), women fliers of the later 1920s and the decade of the 1930s widely considered themselves “evangelists of aviation,” preaching the enterprise’s virtues to all who would listen. Earlier fliers, however, like Law and the Stinsons, also saw aviation as symbolizing “the freedom and power which was lacking in their daily lives” in the years prior to the Nineteenth Amendment. Indeed, it was the “giddy sense of liberation they found in the sky which prompted so many women to predict that the new field of aviation promised great opportunities to their sex in the future.”

The expectations of a heightened future that Corn attributes to these early fliers resonate throughout the statements of Law and the Stinson sisters. They were practical fliers well-versed in the military and commercial applications of the airplane, yet behind this commonsense awareness lay the dream of an aeronautically shaped future. Thus, when Katherine Stinson proclaims that “women should and will have a big, responsible part in the winged age,” she is looking toward an assimilation of aviation into American culture that will uniquely benefit the nation’s commerce, technology, and, more than anything else, individual citizens. She envisions a future imbued with aviation and rich in opportunities for women, but one that benefits the society as a whole.

A second element unifies the responses of all three to flight. Each speaks in an intensely personal voice, relating the sensations and emotions that are happening to her. Thus, their first responses are of their individual, personal impressions of the world and their effects upon them. Only later in a flight—and often only after having returned to earth—do they begin to extend these impressions and effects to the larger scene. It is here that they resume their roles as members of the prevalent culture and begin to reflect upon the consequences of that culture’s wholehearted embrace of flight.

Aviation’s benefits, therefore, come in great part from what Katherine Stinson, in a 1915 interview, described as a “sense of being apart from the world; the further up you go, the greater the pleasure.” Ruth Law concurs, remarking that thanks to aviation, she, “a woman . . . , had looked at [the nation] from the same point of view as an eagle, and had admired it, understood it, and gloried in it!” And that glorification is only enhanced by the freedom bestowed by flight for, she says, “it is a wonderful sensation, flying before a strong wind, slipping past one town after another at such a tremendous speed. . . . One can almost fancy himself a leaf sailing away before an autumn gale.” Distinctiveness, empowerment, and freedom are inseparably associated with flying.

Reminiscing somewhat later in “Why I Am Not Afraid to Fly,” Katherine Stinson noted that “flying is not like anything else in the world. The problems are different, and so are the sensations.” And from those new sensations comes a wholly new vision of society and the world. “When you leave the ground,” she muses, “it does not seem as if you are going up, but as if the earth were sinking away from you. . . . When you fly upside down you don’t feel as if you had turned over. . . . The earth goes around you.” Like Ruth Law before her, she changes her perspective, giving the airborne human
centrality and presenting nature and society alike as subordinate to the flier. “As you go higher,” moreover, “everything on the ground flattens out. The hills sink until they look like little mounds. A big building dwindles until it is like a spool of thread standing on a table.” Even the populace shrinks to nothing: “At a thousand feet, boys and men look alike. At two thousand feet, you can’t tell any of these apart. Finally they become mere moving specks.” Yet, while the hills sink to flatness and mankind shrinks to a mass of faceless specks, the woman pilot’s vision remains. She and she alone is the mistress of existence, and she and she alone stands, exalted, glorified, above all that is beneath her.

The careers of Ruth Law and the Stinsons provide a new perspective on the parallels between the quest for women’s rights and the early days of aviation. The three were conscious that they were distinctive examples of the independent woman who happily chanced to be in the public eye. From the outset of their careers they took pride in meeting or surpassing male achievements in flight. Their pride did not go unrecognized. Rixola Greeley-Smith, a nationally known celebrity journalist and the principal woman reporter for the *New York World*, quoted playwright Eleanor Gates (one of the two women sharing the head table with Law at the Aero Club gala) as dubbing Law a “superwoman” whose accomplishment would stimulate more women “to feel that being a woman is not a handicap; that, after all, a woman can do anything.” The story relating Marjorie Stinson’s work with the Texas Escadrille spoke of the male student pilots’ ambition to “be rising above the clouds like the daring young woman who was piloting the machine in the air,” omitting any mention of a stigma that might be attached to a woman pilot or instructor. J. P. M’Evoy noted in *American Magazine* that Katherine Stinson, who had “duplicated every stunt in the air that a man has ever done,” was “one of the most remarkable aviators in the world!”

Each of these commentators, in his or her way, spoke almost exclusively of the deeds of the three as women pilots. Their emphasis was on the capability of the individuals and the ease with which they matched—or even surpassed—men’s achievements in the field. But they were outsiders, lacking the firsthand exhilaration that Law and the Stinsons found in flight. Thus, they looked only at the individual person; it remained for the women actively engaged in flying to express the larger, more far-reaching social and spiritual benefits to come from flight. If the members of this group did not extensively articulate a coherent vision of the future, they nonetheless laid the foundations for such a vision. They (and their less publicized contemporaries) were the apostles of flight.

Perhaps the most notable recognition of their part in advancing the cause of aviation came in 1918, as polar explorer Rear Admiral Robert E. Peary mused on “The Future of the Airplane” for readers of *National Geographic* magazine. He noted that “utilization of the atmosphere for commerce and transportation presents possibilities far beyond anything that we can now imagine,” and called upon the United States to
become “the first air power in the world” in the “stupendous era” of aviation that was dawning. Not surprisingly, he remarked that “the young men who are training for fliers in war service will have an important and useful role to play in the commercial, industrial, and scientific growth of aviation.” But then he went even farther in his predictions, echoing his praise of Law in 1916 but widening the scope of his views: “In considering the air personnel resources of America, the patriotism, intrepidity of spirit, and energy of the young women who are anxious to fly must not be overlooked. That women can become skilful aviatrices has been splendidly demonstrated by the brilliant achievements of Miss Ruth Law and Miss Katherine Stinson.”

Accompanying the article was a full-page picture of Law chatting with Major General Leonard Wood in Chicago following her record-setting flight.

In their projection of an aeronautically shaped future, fueled by technological advance, national pride, and the growing presence of the airplane, Peary’s remarks make an appropriate conclusion to the early days of flight. In his view, as in those of numerous other enthusiasts, aviation was going to be a vehicle for American ascendency in the world, whether the world of social culture, the world of politics, the world of commerce, or the world of science and technology. Women were going to assist in that ascendency. The careers of Ruth Law and the Stinson sisters confirmed his beliefs, but they go on to establish a still larger point—that aviation progress was to be accompanied by women’s progress. The decades of the 1920s and after would add still greater substance to their implications.