

This Day in History... April 16, 1912

First Woman to Fly Across the English Channel

On April 16, 1912, Harriet Quimby became the first woman to fly across the English Channel. She had a brief, but significant aviation career, becoming a pioneer and inspiration for countless female flyers.

Quimby was born in Arcadia, Michigan on May 11, 1875. Her family moved to California in the early 1900s, after which she became a journalist. In 1903 she moved to New York City to take a job as a theater critic for *Leslie's Illustrated Weekly*. During her nine-year career with the magazine, she reviewed plays, the circus, comedians, and the new form of entertainment – moving pictures. Traveling to Europe, Mexico, Cuba, and Egypt, she published over 250 articles.

In 1910, Quimby became interested in aviation after attending the Belmont Park International Aviation Tournament in Long Island, New York. It was there that she met John and Alfred Moisant, who ran a flying school. She began taking flying lessons and wrote about the experience for *Leslie's*. The following year, on August 1, 1911, she took her pilot's test and became the first American woman to earn an Aero Club of America aviator's certificate. She was only the second woman in the world to receive a pilot's license.

That same year, Quimby wrote five screenplays that were made into short films by D.W. Griffith for Biograph studios. Quimby even had a small role in one of the films.



Quimby wrote at least five screenplays directed by Griffith.

Quimby soon became well known as a pilot and started touring the US and Mexico as an exhibition flyer. She personally designed her purple flying uniform, making her stand out among female pilots that largely wore adapted versions of men's clothes. Quimby then became the spokesperson Vin Fiz grape soda, adorning the company's advertising in her signature purple uniform.

By late 1911, Quimby decided that she wanted to become the first woman to fly across the English Channel. Another woman had already flown across as a passenger, but Quimby worried another might make the flight as a pilot before she got the chance. To prevent others from realizing it was her goal, Quimby secretly sailed to England in March 1912. Once she arrived, Quimby borrowed a 50 horsepower monoplane from Louis Bleriot, the first man to fly across the Channel in 1909.

Quimby embarked on her record flight on April 16, 1912. She took a similar route as Bleriot, but in reverse. She left Dover, England at dawn, amid overcast skies that forced her to rely on compass alone. About an hour later, Quimby landed near Calais, France, about 30 miles from her intended landing spot. Though she succeeded, Quimby didn't get the recognition she deserved, because the sinking of the *Titanic* days before was the main focus of all the world's newspapers.

Quimby wasn't deterred, and returned to exhibition flying. That summer, she took part in the Third Annual Boston Aviation Meet. On July 1, she took to the skies with the event's organizer William Willard and circled the Boston Lighthouse. As they flew, the plane suddenly began to lurch. Moments later, Willard fell out of the plane to his death, followed shortly after by Quimby, who also died from the fall. It's still unknown just what caused the plane to lurch as it did, but the accident was then touted as an example on the importance of seat belts aboard airplanes.

Though her aviation career lasted just 11 months, Quimby was a major influence for generations of female pilots, including Amelia Earhart.



Quimby is one of few women honored on US Airmail stamps.

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