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## Sky is the limit – women who conquered the clouds

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All she had at the beginning was a passion to conquer the skies that had until then been limited mostly to men – she was Amelia Earhart, the first woman to have piloted a plane to worldwide fame. With her 100th birth anniversary approaching, Earhart is once again in the news with a new expedition that set out in the hope of discovering what really happened to the world's most widely known female aviator, who flew her Lockheed Electra into the Pacific and was never seen again.

### **'Female' skills**

There were women before Earhart who felt – and conquered the skies as one of the last bastions of male domination. In 1911, Harriet Quimby became the first American female licensed pilot. She also became the first woman pilot to fly at night and the first woman to pilot her own aircraft across the English Channel. These women were true pioneers and set the stage for women to become airline and combat pilots, aviators who shone alongside their male counterparts for their talent, skill and commitment.

Today, women regard flying as just another career open to them – there are many women serving in the senior and junior ranks of most international airlines. As Sri Lankans, we are proud to have women as

Captains flying aircraft of the national carrier. As challenging as the skies are, women have confidently been able to develop the outstanding skills required of an aviator. Some are of the view that women specific talents such as being multi-skilled are the very set of skills airlines are in search of.

Europe's largest pilot training organisation, The Oxford Aviation Academy is on record to say that the right mix of personality airlines want in their pilots, is to be found among today's women. Anthony Petteford of the Academy has been quoted as saying that today's girls are perfectly equipped to deal with the latest generation of flight decks which have different dynamics than the traditional 'clockwork' cockpits. The new flight decks require what they call 'female' skills.

Experts are of the view that women are naturally more apt at multi-tasking – one vital skill required in the cockpit of today. Team work, concentration and communication have been identified as areas in which women excel. Developing relationships, bonding and practicing listening skills, watching out for non-verbal clues and the varying degrees of emotional intelligence are also considered key areas vital for developing 'the right stuff', as far as successful aviator skills go.

## **Women aviators**

Yet, for every woman pilot today, whether she is flying commercial aircraft, captaining jumbo jets or commanding a fighter squadron, many have paved the way for her to get there by choosing to be the pioneers. Just as women everywhere who have had to conquer one bastion after another, the pioneer female aviators have had to break through obstacles and find opportunities that allowed them to show that they were truly steel under grace.

In 1913, Alys McKey Bryant became the first woman pilot in Canada, while in 1916, American Ruth Law set two records flying from Chicago to New York. She was also the first woman to fly air mail into the Philippines. Bessie Coleman was the first African American woman to earn a pilot's license and the first African American to do so.

Spurred on by the free spirited determination of Earhart, many women turned to flying and later went on to earn their pilots' laurels with ease. In 1929, Amelia Earhart became the first President of the Ninety-Nines, the world's first organisation of female pilots. Katherine Cheung was the first Chinese woman to earn her

wings in 1931, followed by Ruthy Tu who became the first female pilot in the Chinese armed forces in 1932.

Also during the 30s, when women's rights were taking centre stage like never before, Louise Thaden and Blance Noyes beat male pilots in the Bendis Trophy Race, becoming the first female aviators to win a contest open to both sexes.

## **Flying legends**

It was during the 30s that Central Airlines became the first airline to hire a female pilot, a trail that set the way for many women to follow in her path. In 1938, Hanna Reitsch became the first woman helicopter pilot and one year later, Willa Brown became the first African American woman officer of the Civil Air Patrol in the USA; she was also the first African American woman to become a commercial airline pilot.

Jackie Cochran became the first female pilot to break the sound barrier in 1953 – yet it was only in 1973 that the US Navy opened its ranks in pilot training for women. One year later, Sally Murphy became the first woman to qualify as an aviator with the US Army. The International Society of Women Pilots was formed in 1978 and in 1980, Lyn Rippelmeyer emerged as the first woman to pilot a Boeing 747.

In 1994 Jackie Parker became the first woman to qualify to fly an F-16 combat plane and in 2001, Polly Vacher earned the title of being the first woman to fly around the world in a small plane - she flew from England back to England on a route that included Australia.

The sky has never been a limit for exceptional women who have always felt the call to command the skies. As mothers, wives and daughters, women have excelled since time immemorial at skills that help and empower them master whatever it is that they do – be it in being a mother and a wife to the family, a pilot who steers a jumbo jet safely across the skies, a combat pilot flying dangerous missions or the smiling stewardess who, like the Singapore Girl, has become a legend in flying.

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