



Louise Thaden -- A Profile in Courage

by Henry M. Holden

Harmon Trophy winner, Louise Thaden, was one of the courageous aviators who helped create the "Golden Age of Aviation." The 1930s was an age when records were made and broken, sometimes within weeks. Thaden set the first official woman's altitude record of 20,260 feet on December 7, 1928. On April 29, 1929 she set an endurance record of 22 hours, 3 minutes. But a month later, 17 year-old Elinor Smith set a new record with a 26 hour, 21 minute flight. Record fever was high, and would heat up, fueled by women's desire to be accepted as equals to men in aviation.

Thaden was determined to change the public's perception of women pilots. She and Frances Marsalis set an eight-day endurance record together in 1932. In commenting on their new record, Thaden said, "I see this question of a woman's ability to fly developing into the battle of the sexes. Women can never hope to compete with men in the actual flying of airplanes. Not that a woman can't handle a plane as well as a man. She can, and many of them do the job a lot better. But the public doesn't have the confidence in women fliers. That is, not enough confidence to ride with us to any great extent."

Thaden was pessimistic when she spelled out the future for women pilots. "This attitude on the part of John Public, and he'll never get over it, means that all women are forever barred from careers as transport pilots on regular passenger lines. Promotion and advertising, that's the field for women." Thaden was disturbingly accurate, at least for the next four decades.

Her pessimism, however, did not stop her from breaking conventional paradigms. The transcontinental Bendix Air Race that began in 1931 was closed to women on an equal basis until 1935. Race officials assumed women would not compete successfully with men in the grueling race, so they set aside a special \$2,500 prize for the first woman to finish the race. It sounded like a consolation prize to the women. In 1936, Louise Thaden, along with Blanche

Noyes, flew to first place in the Bendix Air Race in 14 hours, 55 minutes. Since Thaden and Noyes finished first, they walked away with the \$4,500 top prize and the \$2,500 "woman's" prize. The men had met their equals, and most did not like the feeling.

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Louise Thaden had a pragmatic view of the dangerous life of an aviator. "If your time has come," she said, "it is a glorious way to pass over. The smell of burning oil, the feel of strength and power beneath your hands, so quick has been the transition between life and death there still must linger in your mind's eye the everlasting beauty and joy of flight. Women pilots were blazing a new trail. Each pioneering effort must bow to death. There has never been, nor will there ever be, progress without sacrifice of human life."

Forty years later, Louise Thaden described women in aviation in the 1930s. "It was the first time women began to be accepted on their own merits as pilots. It was a time of growth and exploration, when all "firsts" were really firsts. It was a time when camaraderie existed because words were not always necessary between fellow pilots, a time of instant friends and a spirit of cooperation, and a sense of something shared."

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