

To Dance on Aircraft Wings

The roaring twenties witnesses myriad aviation developments as new planes and technologies entered service and pilots, male and female, pushed one another to set, then break, a host of aviation records for speed, altitude, duration, and aerobatics. Early pilots such as Charles Lindberg and Amelia Earhart became household names as they demonstrated their aviation feats. Despite post-World War I technical developments, aviation remained a dangerous business – the realm of daredevils.

Although lesser known than her contemporaries, Phoebe Fairgrave Omlie became one of the few women who had a long and successful career in aviation. She succeeded as a barnstormer and aerial acrobat, set a number of aviation records, became the first woman to hold a U.S. federal pilot license, and, with her husband, owned her own fixed-based operation. She also was the first female pilot to work for the federal government in an aviation position, both for NASA's and FAA's predecessor organizations.

Born in 1902, the year before the Wright Brothers made their famous flight, Phoebe Jane Fairgrave, grew up in an aviation crazed nation. The day before she graduated high school, she witnessed her first air show and instantly knew she had to fly. She begged pilots at the local airfield, operated by the Curtiss Northwest Flying Company, to take her for a ride. Growing tired of her persistent questions, pilot Ray Miller took her for a ride intending to scare the petite girl away. He made a few loops and a nosedive or two in an attempt to get her sick and to finally get her to leave him alone. The plan backfired as the ride only succeeded in making the seventeen year old more determined to learn to fly.



Gaining an inheritance from her grandfather when she turned 18, Phoebe bought a Curtiss JN-4D. To help pay for her passion, she convinced the Fox Moving Picture Company to hire her to do aviation stunts for the Saturday matinee serial, *The Perils of Pauline*. She hired World War I aviation instructor Vernon Omlie as her pilot. The two subsequently married and worked on the flying circus circuit. With Vernon as pilot, Phoebe learned to walk wings, dance the Charleston on the wing of their plane, hang by her teeth below the plane, and parachute from the plane. She wowed spectators with her own invention – a double parachute drop. In that move, she would jump from the plane's wings and once clear of the plane cut her parachute lines for a free fall. She would then pull the cord on a second parachute for a safe landing. In 1921, she broke the world record in the parachute jump for women – jumping from a height of 15,200 feet. She also pioneered a move in which she moved from one plane to another while in flight. She became the first woman to own a flying circus when she opened the Phoebe Fairgrave Flying Circus.

By the late 1920s, Vernon and Phoebe settle in Memphis, TN, where Phoebe finally learned how to fly. She and Vernon offered flying lessons and eventually opened a fixed-based and charter operation, Mid-South Airways, at the new Memphis Municipal Airport. In 1927, Phoebe became the first woman to receive a U.S. federal transport pilot's license (#199) and later, in 1933, became the first woman to receive an airplane mechanics license (#422). In 1929, the Mono Aircraft Company hired her to provide publicity by flying their planes. In the summer of 1928, she flew her 65-hp Monocoupe to 25,400 feet, setting a new altitude record. That same year, she was the only woman competitor in the National Reliability Air Tour. During the race, she became the first female pilot to cross the Rockies in a light aircraft.

She entered the first Women's Air Derby in 1929. The press called the race the Powder Puff Derby and its contestants petticoat pilots, flying flappers, and ladybirds. Phoebe won the light plane division in her Monocoupe, as well as the closed course beat-the-clock event. That same year, she became a founding member of the Ninety-Nines. She went on to win the 1930 Dixie Derby and the 1931 Transcontinental Handicap Air Derby.

Asked by Eleanor Roosevelt to help campaign for her husband in the presidential race, Phoebe took to the air in support of Franklin D. Roosevelt. In 1933, the new president appointed Phoebe special advisor for air intelligence to the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics (NASA's predecessor) where she served as a liaison between NACA and the Bureau of Air Commerce (FAA's predecessor). She, thus, became the first woman to hold an official federal post connected to aviation. While at NACA she initiated an air marking program to paint 12-foot black and orange letters on the roofs of barns, factories, warehouses, and water tanks to identify the locale and the direction of the nearest airport. She hired female pilots to administer the program in each state. She held the position until 1936.



When a commercial flight that Vernon had passage on crashed and killed all passengers, Phoebe quit her job at NACA and returned home to Memphis. In 1937, she co-authored Tennessee's aviation act and helped establish a system of state supported schools for training civilian pilots. Her training program subsequently became the model for the CAA's Civilian Training Program. In 1941, Phoebe returned to Washington, DC, as senior flying specialists for the CAA, to coordinate aviation activities for the CAA, Works Progress Administration, the National Defense Commission, and the Department of Education. In her first year with the agency, she established 66 pilot training programs in 46 states, including one in

Tuskegee, Alabama, to train black pilots. In 1942, on loan from the CAA, she returned to Tennessee to help establish a rigorous program to train female pilot instructors for the military. Her school graduated 10 women who went on to train 500 military pilots.

Back with the CAA, she conducted aviation research. She, for example, analyzed flight training methods and installed photographic and sound-recording devices in training planes to record the stresses of student pilots. She also worked on plans to coordinate federal, state, and local aviation activities and standardize air search and rescue practices. She resigned from the CAA in 1952 believing that increasing government regulations were inhibiting aviation's growth.

After leaving CAA, Omlie tried her hand at cattle ranching and running a café and hotel. She failed at both enterprises. She did some public speaking, making her last appearance in 1970. She moved to Indianapolis, IN, where she remained until her death in 1975. She suffered from alcoholism and lung cancer.