

# The Literary Digest

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## THE AMERICAN SUPER-GIRL AND HER CRITICS

CRAWLING out on the plane's tail, when its wings had become dangerously weighted with ice, Ruth Elder risked sudden death to restore the equilibrium of the *American Girl* until the lucky moment when she and her pilot, George Halde- man, could alight on the ocean within reach of rescuing hands. How they did eventually alight and were hauled aboard the Dutch tanker *Barendrecht*, was chronicled in every daily paper, and now we present additional details of that exciting episode, together with fresh impressions of the vivacious young avia- trix's personality, and a flood of comment which seems to establish her as one of the most scolded and most ob- served young women of her time. While the world heaved a sigh of relief at her rescue, and paid due tribute to her incomparable daring, the edi- torial attitude of protest con- tinues to be manifest both in this country and abroad. "A woman had no business to attempt such a flight," de- clares Joseph Devlin's news- paper, *The Irish News* (Bel- fast), adding that it was "perfectly ridiculous to read of this young person's chatter, of her preparations for the event—her vanity bag, Chinese ring, knickers, black-and-red four-in-hand tie, and pastel-shaded band over dark brown hair— and to remember that she was going to risk her life just to gratify her stupid vanity." Re- minding its readers that Ruth Elder is a married woman, *The News* adds: "Her husband wisely remained at home. If Ruth has any sense left she will join him now and keep house for him." Turning to the report that other women are planning the transat- lantic flight, this critic suggests that they be taken home by their relatives, and ungal- lantly advocates the disci- plinary use of "a slight rod to tame their ardent spirits," concluding:

"Men in the summer may strive to equal Lindbergh. Women should stay at home."

In cheery contrast to these misogynistic views



"FELIX THE CAT" ALSO FLEW  
Miss Elder's cherished mascot is here seen in her arms, prior to the *American Girl's* take-off.

is the acknowledgment of the New York *Sun* that Ruth elder "ought to be happy," because, "having had the luck of Harry Hawker, she was picked up at sea"; and now—

She has to her credit the longest flight made entirely over water, beating the Pacific flyers by about 200 miles. Evidently it was due to no fault of hers as a pilot that the *American Girl* was forced down. She will rank with the most daring flyers of this year of aerial wonders.

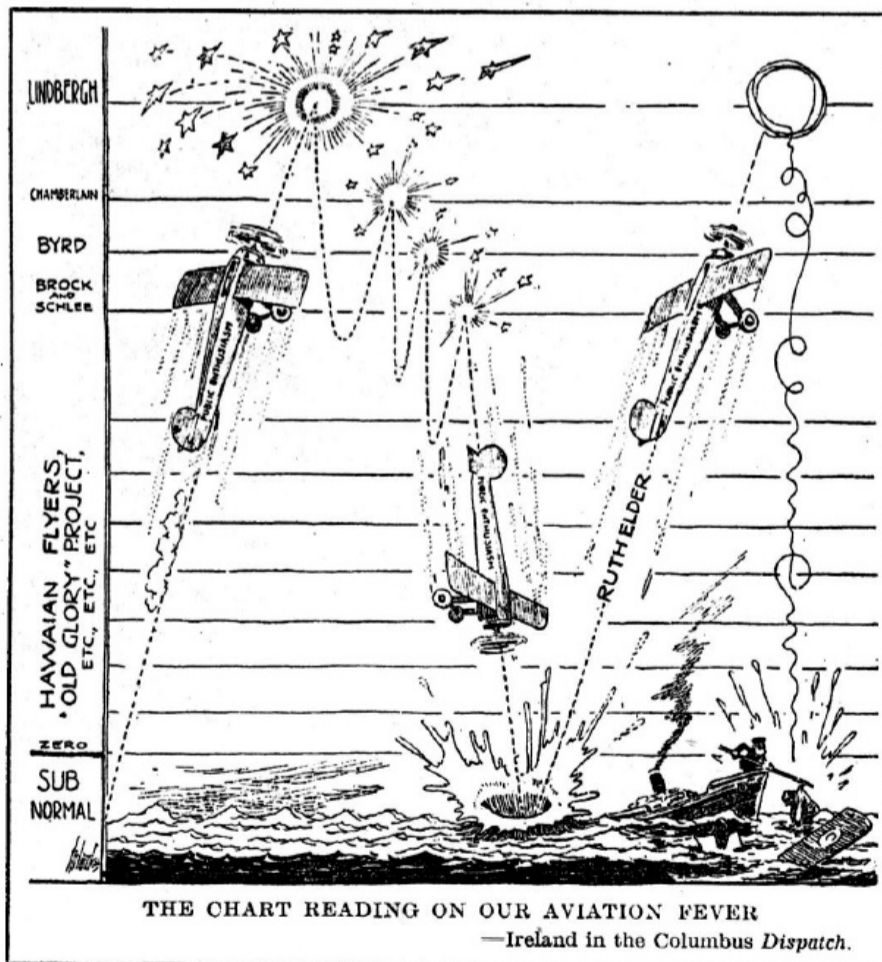
Gleaning in the sky field behind Lindbergh, Chamberlin, Byrd, and other heroes, this Ruth has gathered enough to satisfy any reasonable person. Some Boaz may well say to her: "Go not to glean in another field, neither go from hence, but abide here fast by my maidens." In other words, the public admiration for ocean hoppers is badly shot with apprehension. We have had enough tragedy in the ocean flights of 1927. Let this comedy of Ruth close the season.

The sprightly heroine, who vows that she "likes to live"— and who wants everybody to know it—saved her famous lipstick, we learn from a New York *World* correspondent at Horta, Island of Fayal, Azores,

but "lost her powder puff in the excitement." Reading on: "Naturally we're disappointed at our failure to make Paris," she said, "and at the loss of our plane, but we really thought we had every chance of suc- ceeding until the oiling system went wrong. You can imagine our relief when we sighted the *Barendrecht*, and the engine kept running until we reached her and knew she had sighted us."

Captain Goos of the *Barendrecht*, whose braided cap Miss Elder was wearing jauntily on her brown curls in lieu of the helmet she had lost at the beginning of the flight, gave a terse but thrilling account of the rescue at sea as soon as he could tear himself away from a mob of photographers, who swarmed all over the boat, demanding pose after pose of him and the flyers.

"It was 7:45 Thurs- day morning," he said, "that we sighted the *American Girl*. She came rapidly up to us and flying over the ship threw down two mes- sages. One fell in the sea, but the other landed on deck. 'How far are



## PERSONAL GLIMPSES

Continued

we from land and which way?' it asked. There was a dash and the name Ruth Elder.

"After a quick check on our position as 43.21 north latitude and 21.39 west longitude we painted on the deck while the plane circled about us 'True South 40, West, 360 miles from Terceira, Azores.'

"This was understood by the aviators, and after a few more circles, their plane, underneath the wings and on the tail of which we had seen the markings NX-1384, began to descend and landed alongside our ship. Miss Elder and her companion climbed out on top of the wing.

"A boat was put overside and rushed to their aid. It stood alongside the foundering plane until the two aviators, by means of ropes thrown to them, managed to get aboard and were brought safely to the *Barendrecht*.

"On learning their position, Miss Elder and Captain Haldeman had decided it was impossible to continue their flight because their oil pressure had dropt to five pounds [normal pressure for the Wright Whirlwind motor is about fifty to sixty pounds, according to the manufacturers] two hours before and they had expected it to stop at any time. At their request arrangements were made to hoist the airplane on deck.

"Lines had hardly been made fast when there were two explosions in the submerged cabin of the plane which sent a geyser of burning gasoline to the surface. In a moment the whole machine was on fire and we were obliged to cut the ropes and cast off, abandoning all hope of saving the plane lest we lose our own ship.

"We then changed our course and made for Horta to land the flyers. Both seemed pretty well in spite of the ordeal through which they had passed, but they were glad to get a good sleep." [Miss Elder was given Captain Goos's cabin on the *Barendrecht*.]

Both the makers of Miss Elder's motor and the Stinson monoplane which carried them on their 2,600-mile overwater flight, were at a loss to account for the explosions which set the *American Girl* on fire, adds *The World* in a local note, which continues:

The opinion was exprest yesterday, however, by Hector Alexander, mechanic in charge of the Fokker monoplane *Old Glory* until she started her ill-starred flight to Rome, that the plane was destroyed by the carbid flares carried by Haldeman as a means of determining drift at sea.

Similar aids to navigation were included in the equipment of the *Old Glory* and were tested by her crew before they started. The carbid flares are thrown overboard in flight and burst into flames immediately on striking the water, being visible by day or night. It is Alexander's belief that one of the flares generated an explosive gas in the submerged cabin, and that the detonations followed, rupturing the gas-tanks and setting the plane on fire.

Supplementing the Dutch skipper's account of the rescue, we read in a New York *Herald Tribune* dispatch:

The crew of the *Barendrecht*—typically phlegmatic Dutch sailors who seemed unaware of the world-wide interest in the rescue in which they had participated—had

learned, however, that lipsticks were in no wise incompatible with heroism. The story they told in their matter-of-fact way was one of a girl who could face the icy waters of the Atlantic and at the same time plead that her companion be rescued before she was saved.

When the plane, a land craft with no provisions for landing on water, came down on the ocean near the *Barendrecht*, Miss Elder and Haldeman scrambled out on the two wings. Miss Elder had had time to don her non-sinkable suit, but Haldeman still wore only his flying togs. The crew shouted to them, asking if they could swim. They replied that they could not. The crew prepared to throw out a line.

Miss Elder, seeing them, shouted a demand that the first line go to Haldeman, explaining that her suit would keep her afloat, while he would go down. The sailors immediately threw out two lines and brought them aboard simultaneously.

The momentous news that Miss Elder has refused a hair-cut and intends to let her bob grow is conveyed in a later Associated Press dispatch, which further gives this account of the young woman's debated exploit in crawling to the tail of the plane:

The flyers had been driving their plane, even then slowed down by a defective oil line, through a sleet storm. The tail of the plane, on which a heavy coating of sleet had formed, became too heavy for the machine to be kept on even keel.

Something had to be done to right this. There was some gasoline stored in the tail of the plane—a reserve supply to be used in an emergency. Haldeman and Miss Elder consulted each other regarding what should be done. They decided the reserve supply of gasoline would have to be jettisoned. They then took turns at the stick while one or the other crawled along the icy fuselage of the plane and threw overboard some of the reserve supply.

Miss Elder took her turn at crawling along the fuselage without a tremor, it was related, and, this chore accomplished, returned to do her shift at the stick.

The French, after preparing a luxurious boudoir for Miss Elder's reception at Le Bourget airport, suddenly lost interest in her adventures, according to a Paris cable of the A. P., when they read reports of preparations to exploit her fame for tempting profits in the publishing and cinema fields. An A. P. correspondent in Berlin cables:

Ruth Elder's exploit, however plucky, finds but grudging favor in a portion of the German press. Thus *Zwoelf Uhr Blatt* has an article emptying its vials of wrath upon this type of "American super-girl" who "in overweening presumptuousness imagines all the world and powers of nature are hers to command."

Miss Elder's course is also described as mere foolhardiness and "crazy sensationalism" and her purpose as not to advance the science of aviation, but to pose as "the pluckiest girl in the world," who knows no restraint and compels success in everything she undertakes.

"She has done her share to confirm her countrymen in the idea—if that were possible—that the *American Girl* is the supreme effort of creation," the article says sarcastically in conclusion.

Such flights should not be attempted at this stage of aviation, says the New York

World, "without compelling reason or without the most thorough preparation." Concerning the commercial feature of the affair, the *New York Morning Telegraph* remarks:

The world loves real sportsmanship, and especially does it applaud when those of the feminine family are victorious. But when they plan a feat, risking human lives, and then seek to make of it a money-getting scheme, the public grows suspicious and ridicules the so-called heroism.

Miss Elder is a charming and worthy American girl. She did what few girls of her tender years would attempt, and she is deserving of the rewards that usually are paid heroes and heroines by an appreciative public. The "business" part of her flight, however, has not added to her valor.

"I like to live" is Ruth Elder's own summing-up of her attitude toward aerial adventure, according to a *New York Evening World* writer, who tells us further:

Her aviation laurels were bright when she took off for Paris. First, Ruth Elder had learned to fly and to fly well. Aviators have been unstinting in her praise in this respect. Indeed, it was because she was a splendid pilot that she was accorded the honor of being the only American girl elected to membership in the Quiet Birdmen, the secret order of flying men to which all aviators aspire. The only other woman "Q. B." is Thea Rasche, the spectacular German stunt-flyer.

Miss Elder took her flying lessons in Florida from George W. Haldeman, the same man who shared the cockpit with her on the long hop to Europe.

In order to be accredited as copilot of the *American Girl* it was necessary for Miss Elder to pass a pilot's test and obtain a license. She met all the requirements and then gave an exhibition over Curtiss Field which won the admiration of all who saw it.

Little was known of Ruth Elder when she arrived a few weeks ago.

"I'm going to fly across the Atlantic just as soon as the weather is right," she said. "What difference does it make whether people think I'm going to try it or not? I know I am."

In those days of skepticism, Miss Elder did not like to talk about herself. She was willing to tell the essential facts. She was twenty-three, born in Anniston, Alabama, where her mother, Mrs. Sarah Elder, still resides. She had an average education and attended a business college, and was an assistant in a dentist's office in Lakeland, Florida, "on her own."

She had come as Ruth Elder, and at first she insisted she was single. Then she admitted her marriage, but said she wished to use her maiden name.

"There really isn't much to tell," she said, with a pleasant smile, when asked to talk about herself. "You know, I'm just like any other girl of twenty-three. I like to live, and I like fun, and one day when I saw a plane flying over Lakeland I thought to myself, 'that's living; that's fun.' So I made up my mind I wanted to learn to fly.

"Then I met George (George Haldeman), and after some persuasion I induced him to teach me to fly. I was thrilled by

aviation from the first moment that I stepped in a plane.

"When Lindbergh reached Paris, I thought it was great, and I made up my mind that I would be the first woman to make the trip. I knew I couldn't do it alone, but I was determined to go as a copilot, not as a passenger.

"Some business men of Wheeling, West Virginia, whom I met through friends, became interested in my project and they agreed to back me. It was all for the glory of Wheeling. George and I looked around and we decided that the Stinson-Detroiter plane was the best we could get, with a Wright Whirlwind motor, so we ordered an ordinary Stinson-Detroiter, only specifying that they put in a big gas-tank in place of a passenger compartment. That's the story."

One friend, who was in her confidence, asked her one day why she was determined to fly to Europe. The reply, which she gave in a serious way, left no doubt of the thought behind her words, and is an indication of character somewhat at variance with Miss Elder's flair for flashy flying costumes, orange rouge and carmined lips. In appearance she is a typical flapper. In her answer to the question she was a shrewd and thoughtful woman.

"I know that it is a long chance," she said. "But think of what I'll have if I get there! I'll have everything. I'll be made. And think what I'll get away from (the routine of a dentist's office). I think it is worth the chance. If I win, then I'm on top. If I lose—well (with a shrug of her shoulders), I have lived, and that's that."

