



## Obscure Objects: Ruth Law's World War I Liberty Bond Leaflet

No one could say Ruth Law was a novice. She had been flying since 1912. She was the first woman to fly at night, in a biplane purchased from Orville Wright. She was the first woman to make a living as a professional pilot, ferrying guests to and from the Clarendon Hotel near Daytona, Florida, and she thrilled crowds flying in exhibitions. In 1915, she bought a Curtiss pusher "loop" model, and became the first woman to perform a "loop the loop" aerobatic maneuver, not once but twice in a row. In 1916, she joined the ranks of the great early aviators – male and female – when she set the American non-stop flight record by flying 950 kilometers (590 miles) in a Curtiss pusher biplane that everyone thought was too small and outdated for such a flight. She became a national sensation, was honored and feted by luminaries, and was an inspiration to an entire nation of admirers young and old. Her popularity and flying skills made it possible for her to earn as much as \$9,000 a week for exhibition flights, a fortune in those days.



Ruth Law standing in front of her Wright Model B biplane at the New York State Fair, Yonkers, 1913. Photographer: Underwood & Underwood, Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum (NASM 80-453)



Pilot Ruth Law (center, in heavy flying clothing with full-face mask) poses in front of her Curtiss pusher biplane on the ground at Hornell, New York, November 19, 1916, during her record-breaking distance flight. Others in the photo are unidentified. Image: Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum (NASM 2007-8692)

So when the United States entered World War I in 1917, Law saw no reason why she shouldn't serve her country like male pilots, fighting battles in the sky. As she saw it, "Women have qualities which make them good aviators, too. They are courageous, self-possessed, clear-visioned, quick to decide in an emergency, and usually they make wise decisions."

Law tried to volunteer for the military, but was turned down. "We don't want women in the Army," Secretary of War Newton Diehl Baker said. Law persisted, pushing for some official role for women in the war. Eventually, she succeeded in part by becoming the first woman permitted to wear a noncommissioned Army officer's uniform. She wore the uniform when serving her country by flying recruiting trips. She also gave exhibition flights to help raise money for the Red Cross and Liberty Loan drives.

On her Liberty Loan promotional flights, Law dropped "bombshell" leaflets like the one below, which is in our [Archives](#). Made to look like a smoking bomb, on one side it reads, "You buy a liberty bond

or the next bomb dropped on you may be a German bomb. I've bought my liberty bond, will you buy yours today? Ruth Law." On the other side is a photo of Law in her uniform, with words around the edge that say, "I have volunteered to do my bit above the trenches, will you do your bit with your money?"



Both sides of the bombshell leaflet dropped by Ruth Law from her airplane during World War I. Bomb leaflet front (with portrait): Ruth Law Collection, Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum (NASM 9A01635) Back of leaflet: Ruth Law Collection, Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum (NASM 9A01636)

However, this limited role of service to the war effort did not stop Law from voicing her chagrin at being turned down for combat. For instance, the July 22, 1917 issue of the *Chicago Sunday Herald* published an article on the front page written by Law. The headline read, "If the president said to me 'go get the Kaiser!' I would fly through the foe's guarding planes to his headquarters and try to bomb him, says Ruth Law, and prove that the usefulness of women is not a myth." The article is accompanied by an illustration of President Woodrow Wilson with finger outstretched toward Law in flying gear, with an inset of Law in her military uniform. She also wrote an article titled "Let Women Fly!" in the magazine *Air Travel*.

After the war, Law picked up where she left off, as popular as ever. She formed “Ruth Law’s Flying Circus” which featured airplanes racing against cars and flying through fireworks. In 1919, she became the first person to deliver air mail to the Philippines.



Ruth Law, in a military uniform, poses beside her Curtiss Model D Headless. Image: National Air Museum Photography Collection, Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum (NASM A-5532)

Then, in 1922, Ruth did something that would make modern-day feminists cringe: she quit flying at the request of her husband, Charlie Oliver. Although he had been serving faithfully as her manager, he just couldn't take the stress of seeing her performing risky maneuvers in the air any more. Law

explained, "It's my husband's turn now, I've been in the limelight long enough, I'm going to let him run things hereafter and me, too. Why? Because I'm a normal woman and want a home, a baby, and everything else that goes with married life. Why, I've been married almost 10 years to Charlie Oliver, the man who has managed my exhibitions, and scarcely anyone knew who he was. And the poor boy was so worried about me all that time that every time I went up he lost a pound. It was a matter of choosing between love and profession. Of course, I'm just crazy about flying, but one's husband is more important!"

They retired in California, and she remained interested in aviation but kept her promise to never fly again. Law died on December 1, 1970, at age 83.

The [Museum's Archives](#) has a scrapbook containing items from Ruth Law's life: photos, news clippings, correspondence, articles, programs, and ribbons. The materials are available to researchers.

[Watch a very brief film of Ruth Law taking off in a Curtiss pusher.](#)