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Much of what we know about the history of African-American aviators is shrouded in mystery with the exception of the Tuskegee Airman - a 450 all-black male fighter pilot group who, in 1941, joined Europe's Allied forces and became a strong weapon against the Nazi's. To add, aviation enthusiasts and professionals are likely to know about predominately male organizations, such as the Black Pilots of America, the Organization of Black Airline Pilots, or the National Black Coalition of Federal Aviation Employees. But what does the world know about African-American women with wings? Make no mistake, African-American women do fly planes and in growing numbers greater than one might think.

Surprising to many, black women have been earning their wings since 1921 when Bessie Coleman was licensed in Paris from the Federation Aeronautique Internationale (F.A.I.), and subsequently received an international pilot's license to become the first African-American to do so. That includes women and men.

"There are about 86,000 commercial pilots in this country today," explains Lt. Col., Beverly Armstrong, a black female pilot and president and founder of The Bessie Coleman Foundation. "Of those 86,000, approximately 1200 are African Americans, and about 100 of those are female."

Bessie Coleman made her first contribution not just to African-American history, but American history where everyone can benefit from knowing her story. Nikki Knight is the second black female pilot

to graduate from the United States Army pilot school, Sheila Chamberlain is the fifth, and in June of 1986, Beverly Armstrong became the tenth black woman to graduate.

"I was amazed to find out that I was only the tenth woman to graduate from the Army's helicopter school and this was the 80s," says Coleman. "Black women represent less than six percent of all African-American aviators. My hope is to change that and increase those numbers!"

In 1995, Armstrong formed The Bessie Coleman Foundation, Inc., with other African-American female pilots and aviation professionals. "Our mission is to continue Bessie Coleman's legacy, by encouraging African Americans to pursue aviation careers," Coleman says. "We realize only a small percentage of all aviation professionals are African-American or female. We know that of the over half million Americans holding a pilot's license, less than 100 African-American women are employed as military or civilian pilots. Our goal is to do what we can to help those working to acquire the skills, training and education needed to participate in this exciting field."

With an impressive list of black women on the Board of Directors and serving as active members, The Bessie Coleman Foundation boasts a number of first-time women in aviation. To name a few, Vice President Col. Christine "Nickey" Knighton is



Pilot Doreen Branch and her Grumman Cheetah

the first woman to serve as Combat Arms Officer in the United States Army. Secretary Doreen Branch is a private pilot who owns a Grumman Cheetah and is the first African-American female student (taught by an African-American male teacher) to fly out of Washington Executive Field in Maryland; Treasurer, Lt. Col. Norma Ely is one of the first two graduates of Florida Memorial College's Aviation Science Program; Director, Dr. Anne Sulton, Esq., in 1977, became Atlanta's first licensed African-American female pilot.

Among other members include Sheila Chamberlain, who was the United States Army's first African-American female intelligence combat pilot; Major General (Ret.) Dr. Irene Trowell-Harris, who was the first African-American woman in the National Guard's history to become a general officer, and the first woman to have a

Tuskegee Airman Chapter and a mentoring Award named in her honor; and Shirley Tyus, the first officer to fly the Boeing 777 for United Airlines on routes from United States to France. She is also United Airlines' first African-American female pilot.

As a Military Intelligence pilot, President Armstrong took a stint in Korea for a military intelligence mission on the North Korean border, where she was recruited by the Air Force International Guard and became the first African-American woman they ever sent to flight training.

"I don't think that we have put a spotlight on the fact that Bessie Coleman made her contribution actually two years before Amelia Earhardt [American history's note of the first female pilot]," says Armstrong. "Bessie Coleman made her contribution almost 100 years ago and we have less than one woman a year to show

for it!"

There are several tributes on behalf of Bessie Coleman. A number of books have been written about her life, including Queen Bess: Daredevil Aviator by Doris L. Rich (author of Amelia Earhardt); Sandra J. Wayne Campbell, also a member of The Foundation, wrote, produced and performs the award-winning, one-woman play entitled Follow Your Dreams—The Bessie Coleman Story; a commemorative postage stamp was issued by the United States Postal Service in Coleman's honor; a Chicago library is named in her honor; and she is included in the "American Blacks in Aviation" exhibit at the Smithsonian Institution's National Air and Space Museum.

Members of The Bessie Coleman Foundation added to

this commemorative archive and traveled to Chicago to honor Robert S. Abbott, founder and editor of The Chicago Defender newspaper for his sponsorship assistance to Bessie Coleman. About 40 African-American female pilots and other black aviation professionals and enthusiasts traveled to France to participate in a celebration of the 10th anniversary of The Foundation. They discussed ways to increase the number of female pilots and African American female pilots, in particular.

"Never before has a group of African-American female pilots returned to France to acknowledge the contribution of those upon whose shoulders we stand," added Armstrong. "The women aviators attended a press conference and reception, hosted by the Rue Office of Tourism, at Le Musée des Frères Caudron in Ville de Rue, France. We have a deep appreciation for the generous hospitality and flight instruction provided to Bessie Coleman by residents of this and surrounding French villages."

Coleman, a world-renowned aerobatic pilot, skydiver, and air-show performer, was thrown from her plane and killed in 1926 - only five years into her career while practicing for an exhibition to raise money to support her passion of opening an aviation school for African-American students.

If Coleman were alive today, she would continue to exclaim her famous quote, "Fair skies and tailwinds to all!"

Through the aspiring and successful black female and male pilots throughout the world, Bessie Coleman's legacy lives on.



Bessie Coleman