

“Broken Wings”

An unconscious girl slumped in the cockpit of a tiny monoplane as it soared five miles above Lindbergh Field was believed today to have achieved a new altitude record for women.

--Associated Press, July 12, 1930

New feats in aviation were treasured news stories in the early 20th century. In San Diego, the self-proclaimed “Air Capitol of the West,” aviation heroes were followed eagerly—and few more closely than a young aviator named Ruth Alexander.

Born in Irving, Kansas in 1905, Ruth Blaney Alexander was the only child of a hardware store dealer and a school teacher. She grew up playing with tools, building kites, and dreaming of flying. At age seven she shocked her mother one day by jumping from the top of a barn, holding an umbrella as a parachute. The experiment failed but Ruth was unhurt.

She got her first chance to fly when she was twenty. A barnstorming plane touched down in a hay field near her town on the Fourth of July. After short \$5 flight in a “baling wire wonder” Ruth was determined to pursue a career as an aviator.

Four years later, with money saved from working in a beauty parlor in Olathe, Kansas, she abandoned a brief marriage to one Mac Alexander and headed for California, hitching a ride with a family that needed help driving the car. Five days later, she ended up Coronado. Living in a rented room, Alexander found a job as a beautician and worked nights at a soda fountain in San Diego.

She entered a “Queen of the Air” contest that offered flying lessons sponsored by the *San Diego Sun*. She failed to win but still caught the eye of Earl Prudden of the Ryan School of Aviation. Recognizing rare talent in the 24-year-old girl, he offered her a spot in his flying school.

On September 9, 1929, Alexander began Prudden’s twenty-lesson course in flying. Recording the experience in her diary, she wrote: “Whee! I was in the air today. Don’t know whether I was alright or not but I was happy. I know I’ll be able to learn.”

Alexander learned quickly and soloed for the first time on October 25. Earning her pilot’s license only weeks later, she became the 65th licensed female pilot in the U.S. She celebrated her new credential by flying a 90-horsepower Great Lakes biplane to 15,500 feet over San Diego. The altitude was a record height for women in light planes.

“I was all over the newspapers,” Alexander recalled. “People looked at me like I was something in a zoo.” Surprised executives at the Great Lakes Company of Cleveland, Ohio sent the rising star a check for \$100.

Her days were spent flying whenever the weather was good. “Happier and happier as I learn more and more,” she recorded in her diary. “I love acrobatics, my Russell parachute seems good to me each time I start a spin.”

Determined to set more records but still struggling financially, she moved into a room at the Maryland Hotel on F Street to be closer to the airfield. And she got financial backing for a new plane: a low-winged, Barling monoplane.

On July 4, 1930—exactly fifteen years after her first experience in the air--she attempted to break her own altitude record. Several hundred spectators at Lindbergh Field squinted skyward as Alexander circled above in her monoplane. When her altimeter reached 20,000 feet, the needle froze. After flying for two hours the aviator landed, believing she had topped 21,000 feet.

One week later, she tried again, this time carrying a sealed barograph in addition to her altimeter. Dressed warmly for the open cockpit and breathing oxygen from a tube, Alexander soared above her old record but as she rose above 26,000 feet her oxygen failed and she passed out, apparently for several minutes. When she regained consciousness the plane was at 18,000 feet “in a gentle left bank, slowly settling.”

“It didn’t feel so good, without any oxygen, she told reporters later, “so I dove down to about 7000 feet, and then came down more slowly.” The sealed barograph—forwarded that night by air mail to the National Aeronautical Association in Washington, D.C.—would show 26,600 feet, a new light plane record for both men and women.

The feat made national news with the near disastrous oxygen failure providing the headlines. “UNCONSCIOUS GIRL RISES 26,000 FEET” read the Washington, D.C. *Evening Star*. “SETS ALTITUDE MARK BUT LOSES HER SENSES,” headlined the *New York Times*.

For her next exploit, Alexander secured sponsorship from the Agua Caliente resort in Tijuana to attempt a three-country flight along the Pacific coast. On August 28, Alexander set off from Vancouver, British Columbia and headed south. Burning 117 gallons of fuel she averaged 91 mph on her sixteen-hour, non-stop trip. When Alexander landed at Agua Caliente she was the first female aviator to traverse the Pacific Coast of the U.S. without touching it.

A one-stop flight to the East Coast was next on Alexander’s agenda. Now with a national following, financial backing had become easier. She planned to fly to historic Roosevelt Field, Long Island—the site of Lindbergh’s transatlantic start--with only a stop in Wichita, Kansas en route.

Alexander took off from Lindbergh Field at 3:28 a.m. on September 18. Once again carrying a heavy fuel load of 117 gallons, the plane climbed slowly and disappeared in heavy fog. Friends had warned her not to bank the plane east until it gained altitude. “I know,” she replied, “and I won’t do it.”

Only minutes later, Alexander crashed on a hillside in Point Loma. The remains of the plane were scattered over 400 feet in Plumosa Park. The body of Ruth Alexander was found pinned among mangled braces and struts of the twisted fuselage.

National headlines carried the news of the tragedy. But the exact cause of the accident would be a mystery. Officially, San Diego’s Board of Air Control decided the “heavily, overloaded” plane had fallen into a spin and struck the ground in a vertical position “with the motor full on.”



Ruth Alexander. Photo courtesy *San Diego Air & Space Museum*.

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