

# African-American trailblazer Bessie Coleman certainly had the Wright stuff

By Al Jazeera, adapted by Newsela staff on 01.31.17

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Bessie Coleman pictured with her plane in 1922. Wikimedia Commons

Bessie Coleman was the first African-American female to become a licensed pilot, in 1921. She faced prejudice because of her race and as a woman. The then 29-year-old became a symbol for millions of women of color at a time when African-Americans were still battling segregation and fighting for equal rights across the country.

Segregation is the practice of segregating, or separating, African-American people from white people in many places.

On January 26 of this year, Coleman would have been 125 years old. To mark her birthday, Google paid respect to her with a Doodle on its homepage.

Born January 26, 1892, in Atlanta, Texas, Coleman grew up inspired by World War I stories and the famous Wright brothers, credited with building and flying the world's first airplane.

**Overcoming The Odds**

Despite the obvious barriers at the time, Coleman was determined to fly.

After completing high school, she was admitted to the Oklahoma Colored Agricultural and Normal University, now known as Langston University. She spent a year there before heading to Chicago, Illinois, in 1915.

Coleman was rejected from American aviation schools because of the color of her skin and her sex. She was told to attend an international aviation school in France, so she spent her savings learning French and headed to Paris in 1920.

"I knew we had no aviators, neither men nor women, and I knew the race needed to be represented along this most important line, so I thought it my duty to risk my life to learn aviation and to encourage flying among men and women of our race, who are so far behind the white race in this modern study," she said.

In Paris, Coleman spent about seven months learning how to fly. She was rewarded with an international pilot's license in 1921 by the Federation Aeronautique Internationale.

### **She Coined A Famous Phrase**

Upon her return to the United States, Coleman became known for her extraordinary flying stunts and was dubbed "Queen Bess." She continued to face restrictions in the United States and spoke of the difficulties, coining the phrase, "The air is the only place free from prejudices."

She died April 30, 1926, in an accident during a rehearsal for a show. She was 34 years old.

During the 1960s, more American women were able to enter areas that had until then been for men. In 1960, one in every 21,417 women was a pilot. In 1980, the number was one in 4,220 women. In 2010, it was one in 5,623 women.

### **Mostly Male And White**

While gender remains one layer of discrimination, African-American men and women face another level of prejudice. More than 90 percent of pilots in the U.S. are white and more than 90 percent are male.

In late 2016, a group of 18 African-American pilots claimed a pattern of racism at United Airlines. The pilots said the company had an "utter lack of diversity at the management level" and systematically kept black employees from entering the managerial ranks.

Worldwide, the aviation industry remains overwhelmingly male and in most part white.

In South Africa, the system of segregation known as apartheid ended in 1994. However, only 4 percent of the 17,252 pilots in the country are black, and only 241 are black women.

1 Read the sentence from the section "Overcoming The Odds."

*Despite the obvious barriers at the time, Coleman was determined to fly.*

Which of the following phrases would BEST replace the phrase "obvious barriers" in the above sentence?

- (A) substantial challenges
- (B) undeniable hurdles
- (C) considerable obstacles
- (D) overwhelming difficulties

2 Read the sentence from the section "Mostly Male And White."

*The pilots said the company had an "utter lack of diversity at the management level" and systematically kept black employees from entering the managerial ranks.*

The author uses the word "systematically" to mean:

- (A) clearly and unintentionally
- (B) casually and randomly
- (C) consistently and purposefully
- (D) occasionally and carefully

3 Which of the following paragraphs from the article represents a major shift or transition in the article's development?

- (A) After completing high school, she was admitted to the Oklahoma Colored Agricultural and Normal University, now known as Langston University. She spent a year there before heading to Chicago, Illinois, in 1915.
- (B) "I knew we had no aviators, neither men nor women, and I knew the race needed to be represented along this most important line, so I thought it my duty to risk my life to learn aviation and to encourage flying among men and women of our race, who are so far behind the white race in this modern study," she said.
- (C) Upon her return to the United States, Coleman became known for her extraordinary flying stunts and was dubbed "Queen Bess." She continued to face restrictions in the United States and spoke of the difficulties, coining the phrase, "The air is the only place free from prejudices."
- (D) During the 1960s, more American women were able to enter areas that had until then been for men. In 1960, one in every 21,417 women was a pilot. In 1980, the number was one in 4,220 women. In 2010, it was one in 5,623 women.

4 Which paragraph in the section "Overcoming The Odds" provides a concrete example of the barriers that Coleman faced?