

Marie Marvingt (20 February 1875 – 14 December 1963)

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was a French athlete, mountaineer, aviator, and journalist, who won numerous prizes for her sporting achievement. She was a record-breaking balloonist, an aviator, and during World War I she became the first female combat pilot. She was also a qualified surgical nurse, was the first trained and certified flight nurse in the world, and worked for the establishment of air ambulance services throughout the world. In 1903 M. Château de Thierry de Beaumanoir named her the "fiancée of danger", which newspapers used to describe her for the rest of her life. It is also included on the commemorative plaque on the façade of the house where she lived at 8 Place de la Carrière, Nancy.

### Early life

She was born on 20 February 1875 in Aurillac. Her parents married in Metz in 1861. Before Marie was born, the couple lost three sons in infancy. The family, including younger brother, lived in Metz, at that time part of Germany, from 1880 to 1889. When Marie's mother died in 1889, the fourteen-year-old found herself in charge of the **household** (foyer), and the family moved to Nancy, where she remained for the rest of her life.

Her father was a local billiards and swimming champion, and a dedicated sports fan. With his only son in fragile health, he shared his love of sports with Marie. By the age of four, she could swim 4 kilometers. She grew to also enjoy many other sports: mountaineering, **riflery** (tir à la carbine), gymnastics, horseriding, **fencing** (escrime), tennis, skiing, luge, ice skating, boxing, martial arts, golf, hockey, and football. In 1890, at the age of 15, she canoed over 400 kilometers from Nancy to Koblenz, Germany. She had also learned a number of circus skills, and obtained a driver's license by 1899.

### Sporting successes

Marvingt became a world-class athlete who won numerous prizes. She was also a skilled mountaineer and between 1903 and 1910 she became the first woman to climb most of the peaks in the French and Swiss Alps. In 1905 she became the first Frenchwoman to swim the length of the Seine through Paris. The newspapers **nicknamed** (surnommer) her "the red amphibian" from the color of her swimming costume.

In 1907 she won an international military shooting competition and became the only woman ever awarded the *palms du Premier Tireur* by a French Minister of War. She dominated the 1908 to 1910 winter sports seasons where she achieved first place on more than 20 occasions. On 26 January 1910, she won the Léon Auscher Cup in the women's bobsledding world championship. She enjoyed cycling but in 1908 she was refused permission to participate in the Tour de France because the race was open only to men. Marvingt chose to cycle the course anyway, riding some distance behind the entrants. She successfully completed the **grueling** (épuisant) ride, a feat which only 36 of 114 male riders had managed that year. On 15 March 1910 the French Academy of Sports awarded her a gold medal "for all sports," the only multi-sport medal they have ever awarded.

### Achievements in early aviation Ballooning (montgolfière)

Marie Marvingt ascended as a passenger in a free-flight balloon for the first time in 1901. In July 1907, she piloted one. On 24 September 1909, she made her first solo flight as a balloon pilot, and on 26 October 1909, she became the first woman to pilot a balloon across the North Sea from Europe to England. She won several prizes for ballooning. On 18 July 1914, competing in the 10th Grand Prix of the French Air Club, she became the first woman to cross the English Channel in a balloon.

### Fixed-wing powered flight (Vol propulsé à voilure fixe)

She received a pilot's license from the Aero Club of France on 8 November 1910. Licensed No. 281, she was the third Frenchwoman to be registered after Raymonde de Laroche (No. 36) and Marthe Niel (No. 226). In her first 900 flights she never "**broke wood**" (= to make many mistakes) in a crash, a record unequalled at that time.

Marie flew in a number of air meets, she was the only woman to hold four pilot's licenses simultaneously: balloon, airplane, hydroplane, helicopter (in her 80s, Marie flew a jet-engined helicopter, and renewed her pilot's license).

### Femina Cup

On 27 November 1910, Marie Marvingt set the world's first aviation records for women in time **aloft** (en altitude) and distance flown. Until that time, women's activities had not been recorded. Marie insisted that this flight be officially timed, measured, and verified -- first, to establish the need to include women in the record books and, second, because she was competing for the Femina Cup. Recently offered by Pierre Lafitte, owner of the women's magazine Femina, the Femina Cup was to be awarded to the Frenchwoman, duly licensed by the French Air Club, who by

the end of 1910 had flown the longest distance in a nonstop flight. Although Marie made another flight bettering her own record, on 21 December 1910, Hélène Dutrieu, cycling champion and fourth woman in the world to obtain a pilot's license, flew even farther. Marie made a last attempt to win the Cup on 30 December 1910 but mechanical failure forced her to land short of her goal. Hélène Dutrieu won the cup. The importance of the Femina Cup lay in initiating recordkeeping for women and in introducing women in the air to the world; international interest had surrounded women competing for the Cup.

### **Air ambulances**

Marie Marvingt proposed the development of fixed-wing aircraft as air ambulances to the French government as early as 1910. She devoted the remainder of her long life to the concept of aeromedical evacuation, giving more than 3,000 conferences and seminars on the subject on at least four continents. She was co-founder of the French organization *Les Amies De L'Aviation Sanitaire* and was also one of the organizers behind the success of the First International Congress on Medical Aviation in 1929.

In 1931 she created the *Challenge Capitaine-Écheman*, which awarded a prize for the best civil aircraft transformable into an air ambulance. In 1934 she established a civil air ambulance service in Morocco and was subsequently awarded the *Médaille de la Paix du Maroc*. In the same year she developed training courses for the *Infirmières de l'Air* and in 1935 became the first person certified as a Flight Nurse. In 1934 and 1935 she wrote, directed and appeared in two documentary films about the history, development and use of air ambulances: *Les Ailes qui Sauvent* and *Sauvés par la Colombe*.

The Flying Ambulance Corps, operated by women pilots and staffed by doctors and trained nurses, was intended to rescue the **wounded** (les blessés) on the battlefield using aircraft, landing at designated ground stations with **crews** (équipes) of nurses, **stretcher-bearers** (brancardiers), and effective medical aid. By 1939, it appeared vital again and Marie Marvingt had been working on this and similar schemes for nearly thirty years. While organizing "L'Aviation Sanitaire," recruiting women pilots and nurses, she made several visits to the United States to confer with government officials. In France itself, she had been supported by authorities including Marshals Foch and Joffre. More than five hundred nurses with at least ten hours' flying experience joined a new corps of flying nurses, some of whom were also parachutists. On 30 January 1955, she received the *Deutsch de la Meurthe (famille française mécène)* grand prize from the *Fédération Nationale d'Aéronautique* at the Sorbonne for her work in aviation medicine.

### **War activities**

During World War I, she disguised herself as a man and, with the connivance of a French infantry lieutenant, served on the front lines as a *Chasseur 2ième Classe* in the 42nd Battalion of Foot Soldiers. She was discovered and sent home but later participated in military operations with the Italian 3rd Regiment of Alpine Troops in the Italian Dolomites at the direct request of Marshal Foch. She also served as a Red Cross surgical nurse, as a war correspondent on the Italian front, and as a probable gatherer of information for military authorities.

In 1915 Marvingt became the first woman in the world to fly combat missions when she became a volunteer pilot flying bombing missions over German-held territory and she received the Military Cross for her aerial bombing of a German military base in Metz. Between the two World Wars she worked as a journalist, war correspondent, and medical officer with French Forces in North Africa. While in Morocco she came up with the idea of using metal skis for air ambulances so that they could land on desert sand. She also ran a ski school in the desert, teaching people to ski on sand dunes.

In World War II, she resumed work as a Red Cross nurse with the rank of corporal, she continued her promotion of the ambulance-airplane, and she founded and maintained a home for wounded aviators. She also fought in the Resistance, for which she was given a medal with a star (indicating exceptional contributions). A plaque in Saint-Alvère reads: "Marie Marvingt, Resistance Fighter, Is Honored."

### **Death and posthumous recognition**

Marie Marvingt died on 14 December 1963, aged 88, in Laxou, a small commune in the Meurthe-et-Moselle department. She is buried in the Cimetière de Préville, Nancy.

In France, there are streets, gymnasia, schools, flying clubs, scout groups, and an apartment complex named after her. In 1987, she was named to the International Women's Sports Hall of Fame. France issued an airmail stamp in her honor on 29 June 2004. Several annual awards are given in her memory including those of the Soroptimist Club of Aurillac, France, and one sponsored by the French Aviation and Space Medicine Association (SOFRAMAS) through the United States Aerospace Medical Association.