

Portrait by Alexandru Darida (2014)

Conquering the Upper Strata: The Remarkable Story of Romanian Skydiver Smaranda Braescu's Record Jump near Sacramento, May 19, 1932.

A Talk Presented by Gary F. Kerutz, California State Library



Gary F. Kerutz

On May 19, 1932, L.O. Laughlin, a startled merchant from the rural town of Tudor in Sutter County, rushed out to a wheat field having spotted a parachutist hitting the ground after barely missing a power line. When he got to this aerial dare devil he pulled the person from the folds of the chute and helped the disoriented aeronaut stand up. Much to his astonishment, he quickly discovered that this skydiver was an attractive young woman and that she barely spoke any English. The man from Tudor then assisted her in removing her heavy, protective leather jump suit and discovered another leather suit underneath. Freezing cold and suffering from nausea, Laughlin gently loaded her into his car and escorted the breathless woman over to the Marysville airfield. Drinking some water and taking some deep breaths, she regained her composure and was able to communicate to a *Marysville Appeal Democrat* reporter by means of hand writing that she had broken the world's record for parachute jumping having dropped nearly five miles or 24,000 feet. No man or woman had ever jumped that far in a parachute. Moreover, she had drifted over forty miles in her flight. Her pilot, now many miles away, would later prove it with his barometer and altimeter. According to the local press, she was all smiles. She had done it. She was the new champion of the air.

Two other accounts written on the same day for the Oakland Tribune and San Francisco Chronicle give a different version of events. Rather than being helped by Laughlin, this parachute jumper confidently strode into a general store in the town of Tudor by herself without having any idea where she was. Wearing an aviation suit and speaking with a heavy foreign accent, she told George Mortell, the store's proprietor, "I just broke the women's parachute record. Pointing to the sky, she further told the thunderstruck storeowner, "I left my pilot 24,000 feet up there.' Mortell, in turn, called Mather field in Sacramento to alert authorities of this heavenly arrival.

The first Romanian woman pilot and skydiver

Who was this modern-day Icarus who had flown over the Sacramento Valley after leaping out of an airplane nearly five miles high? On that historic day, the name of Smaranda Braescu became famous in the Sacramento Valley and offered hope to all women who entered a domain traditionally held by men.



Smaranda Braescu wearing a Romanian traditional costume

Born in Buciumeni, Romania on May 21, 1897, Smaranda was a woman who would not be denied. Seemingly, she was born with a burning desire to conquer the heaven. In 1912, the teenager saw her first airplane fly over her village, and in 1918, she climbed aboard a Farman monoplane, a French aircraft, piloted by Captain Dumitru Naidinescu. Exhilarated by that flight, this young woman had found her calling. Told by her government that women could not fly or enter the military and laughed at by Romanian pilots, she said, "I will show you."

Undaunted, she took her ambition and her daring to Germany in 1928 and there learned to skydive and to fly. With money borrowed from a teacher, she purchased her first parachute. It was made by the highly respected engineer Otto Heinecke. Bravely, Smaranda made her first jump on July 5, 1928, dropping from a height of 600 meters or about 2,000 feet. No doubt filled with self-confidence and a love of this death-defying aerial sport, she made several more jumps before becoming badly injured from a hard landing on August 17, 1930. [She remained bedridden for six months]. Not deterred and completely healed, she resumed jumping, and on October 2, 1931, set a women's world record by free falling from a height of 6,000 meters or 20,700 feet. In so doing, this thirty-four year-old stuntwoman became the first Romanian world's record holder in aviation. She beamed with pride and no doubt her chauvinistic male counterparts were embarrassed. This intrepid queen of the sky became a national hero and King Carol, the reigning monarch, decorated her for her astounding aerial feat. Smaranda, however, had even loftier goals.

Possessed with a singular desire to conquer the upper strata, Smaranda learned to fly, became an accomplished pilot, and even owned two biplanes. She became the first Romanian woman to fly. In 1932, in her Miles Hawk monoplane, this bold Romanian aviatrix established a speed record by crossing the Mediterranean between Rome and Tripoli in six hours and ten minutes. There was no holding back.

Now a national celebrity, a Romanian newspaper, *The Universal (Universul)*, agreed to finance a trip to the United States where she could demonstrate her skill as a skydiver. Breaking the world's record for both sexes was her goal. As she later recalled, "It was succeed or die." And that was literally the truth. At the international air races in Miami she vowed spectators with a 20,000-foot jump. However, several other attempts to break the world's record ended in failure. At the time, the world's record for skydiving was held by an American with a jump of 21,733 feet. While in the eastern U.S., she attended aviation school and obtained American pilot's license.



Smaranda Braescu near her Miles Hawk monoplane (1932).

Smaranda then came to the San Francisco Bay Area with the hope of achieving her ultimate goal. To accomplish this historic feat, she made arrangements with noted East Bay Flyer Harry Bosshardt to take her aloft. Perhaps with the translation assistance from the Romanian Society of San Francisco, she communicated to the pilot her desire to break the world's skydiving record. One can only imagine Bosshardt's reaction when he heard of this ambitious plan. Seemingly, her pilot was more than willing as this represented a chance to make history. On May 19, 1932, at 11 o'clock in the morning, they climbed into his powerful Cessna monoplane and took off from the Curtis-Wright Field of Alameda. Knowing of the tremendous altitude they would have to reach, Smaranda wore a double leather flight suit with a leather helmet and goggles. Both had a sixty-pound oxygen tank strapped to their backs.

Because the story is so dramatic, I would like to share with the readers the interview that Smaranda gave to the *Oakland Tribune* of May 18, with the assistance of John Peterson, the president of the Romanian Society of San Francisco. Peterson acted as her interpreter as Smaranda could read and write English but understandably could not easily converse in the language. I also like this interview because it occurred so soon after the event. Smaranda recounted her heroic feat as follows:

"We flew towards Sacramento for half an hour, climbing rapidly all the way. When we got up to 18,000 feet altitude, both the pilot and myself put on our oxygen masks because it was getting difficult to breathe.

"For three quarters of an hour we fought to gain higher altitude – another five or six thousand feet was our goal. All the way up I had my eyes glued to the altimeter. At last it showed 23,500 feet and I was ready to jump.

"I signaled to the pilot but he motioned to me to wait, that he thought we could get just a little higher. We did, another 500 feet, which brought [us] to the 24,000-foot mark.

[In later interview, she recalled, the pilot yelled, "I can go no higher. My oxygen is gone. Jump!"]

"Then I took the oxygen mask from my face, took one last big breath from it and jumped.

"I shot downward with the speed of a bullet, 3000 feet a minute I learned later. Before I had time to realize what was happening I got deathly sick. I couldn't breathe, the air was so thin. And the last big breath of oxygen I had taken didn't last me very long. I didn't wear oxygen equipment because of its weight, but I would have given anything to have had it on then.

[I might add here that in an interview done six months later, for the *Brooklyn Eagle*, she recalled another incident during the first seconds of her jump. The journalist wrote, "Goggles which she wore over her eyes were clouded with ice the moment she jumped and as quickly as she caught her breath she tore them off. Then the knife-like cold stabbed at her face."]



Smaranda Braescu
Sacramento (1932)

"Just when I thought I was going to faint, I reached an altitude of about 18,000 feet and began to feel a little better. I wasn't very cold in the air – because I had been so frozen before jumping from the plane that I couldn't get any colder.

"Then I lost my gloves coming down and my hands turned numb. I could hear the plane circling overhead but I couldn't see it because it was directly over the open parachute.

"The wind kept carrying me northeast. Then my parachute began to whirl in the wind currents and I got dizzy. I was spinning around like a top.

"As I drifted nearer the ground I sighted a river and seemed to be heading straight for it. I feared drowning if I landed in the river. [She may have glided over the Feather River.]

"At an altitude of about 1000 feet I pulled the rip cord of my emergency parachute, hoping to slow down my speed and avoid landing in the water. I shuddered.

"The next thing I knew I had floated over the river, my feet almost dangling in the water, and landed in an open field." [She also had to dodge some power lines.]

Commenting on the failure of her chute, Smaranda told the *Marysville Appeal-Democrat* reporter that, "*American parachutes is not good, German good*."

By way of emphasis, Smaranda yanked a crumpled mass of silk from the seat of the automobile in which she rode to the Marysville airport, and hurled it from her. Then she held a similar appearing chute aloft, indicating the words, "Heinecke, Germany." She was referring to German engineer Otto Heinecke. She explained that the American made 'chute had failed to open when she pulled the ripcord. Dropping like a lead weight, she tugged at the ring of the German 'chute and thankfully, it responded.

Between this, the lack of oxygen, freezing face and hands, and dizziness, it is amazing that she had any control at all and did not die upon impact.

On terra firma, Smaranda Braescu no doubt wondered what happened to her pilot. Conversely, her pilot thought she had jumped to her death. According to an interview that

appeared in the *Oakland Post Enquirer* for May 20, 1932, Bosshart recalled, "I couldn't see her parachute open after signaling her to jump when my altimeter registered 24,000 feet. I watched for her shoot down with terrific speed for the first 8,000 feet. Then I lost sight of her. I returned to Mather Field at Sacramento to replenish my fuel and sought aid to search for her body."

A frantic search was conducted both in the air and on the ground for her remains. Keep in mind that Smaranda had drifted over forty miles. Happily, George Mortell, the owner of the aforementioned Tudor store, notified Mather Field that Smaranda had safely landed. No doubt, Bosshardt was simultaneously relieved and thrilled that she had survived. He then knew she had set the record.

"Two altimeters in the ship recorded more than 24,000 feet when she jumped," Bosshardt said. "The barograph will show at least that altitude." Most importantly, these instruments would make the record official. Gassed up, Bosshardt then took off for the Marysville airfield to pick up this record-setting Romanian champion skydiver. The two then flew back in triumph to the Alameda Aviation Field. Being a proper lady, the *Oakland Tribune* reporter wrote that "the first thing she did was powder her nose in modern feminine fashion." Several of the papers also commented about her beauty and that she wore her hair in long braids. With her broad and attractive smile, she charmed the press. A reporter from *San Francisco Chronicle* asked her if she were afraid. Not surprisingly, she replied, "Afraid? Of course not."

It is interesting though to find both the *Sacramento Bee* and *Sacramento Union* gave scant attention to this death-defying feat. The Oakland and San Francisco papers gave fuller coverage but her remarkable jump did not make headlines. One paper put her record leap on page 3. Why? Looking at the front pages of these newspapers reveal that other aerial events attracted more attention. On the same day, the USS Akron, the great Navy dirigible, flew over downtown Sacramento, and on the east Coast on the morning of May 20th, Amelia Earhart took off from Harbour Grace, Newfoundland, on her heroic non-stop solo trans-Atlantic flight.

What became of Smaranda Braescu after this heart-stopping skydive of 24,000 feet? She spent several months in America, made herself available for newspaper interviews, and had the pleasure of meeting Amelia Earhart. This Romanian airwoman was also invited to a Canadian air show and thirty airplanes escorted her. By the way, she piloted her own airplane to the event. *The Brooklyn Eagle* observed that this fearless aviatrix did not even have a press agent and was not boastful about her record. Unlike today, no one thought of lining her up for commercial endorsements or putting her face on a box of Wheaties. However, if we have learned anything about our "air-devil", she was competitive. Smaranda did tell a reporter that of anyone broke her record she would immediately take the skies and jump even higher. For her, it was a cause célèbre. One wonders, too, if she thought of her male counterparts in Romania who earlier laughed at her and called her silly for thinking that she could fly and skydive. She certainly had showed them.

Now an international hero, Smaranda returned to Romania and received another medal from King Carol. Within a few years, however, political darkness descended over Europe in the late 1930s and 1940s in the form of World War II, the Nazis, and the Communist subjugation of her homeland. During the war, she flew many missions. [During 1944-1945 period she was part of the 13th squadron, fighting against Germans in Transylvania, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia]. Although a decorated warrior, Smaranda ran afoul of the Soviet puppet regime installed in Romania by Stalin following the collapse of the Nazi terror. She protested the legality of the 1946 elections to the United Nations that made her country a Russian satellite. Consequently, this war hero had to go underground and she joined a resistance movement against the

communist dictatorship. Because of her brave opposition and escaping a prison sentence, she fled to Transylvania and took an assumed name, Maria Popescu.

Sadly, at the young age of fifty-one, our skydiving wonder died of cancer in 1948 and was buried under her assumed name. Amazingly, those who helped her in the resistance and the doctors who ministered to her in her battle against cancer were hounded and jailed by the Soviets. One account has it that the communists desecrated her grave some twenty years later.



However, her memory lives on. This hero of the air and World War II is not forgotten. A street in Bucharest honors her aerial legacy and service to her country. Now, she has been enshrined in the Aerospace Museum of California here in Sacramento.

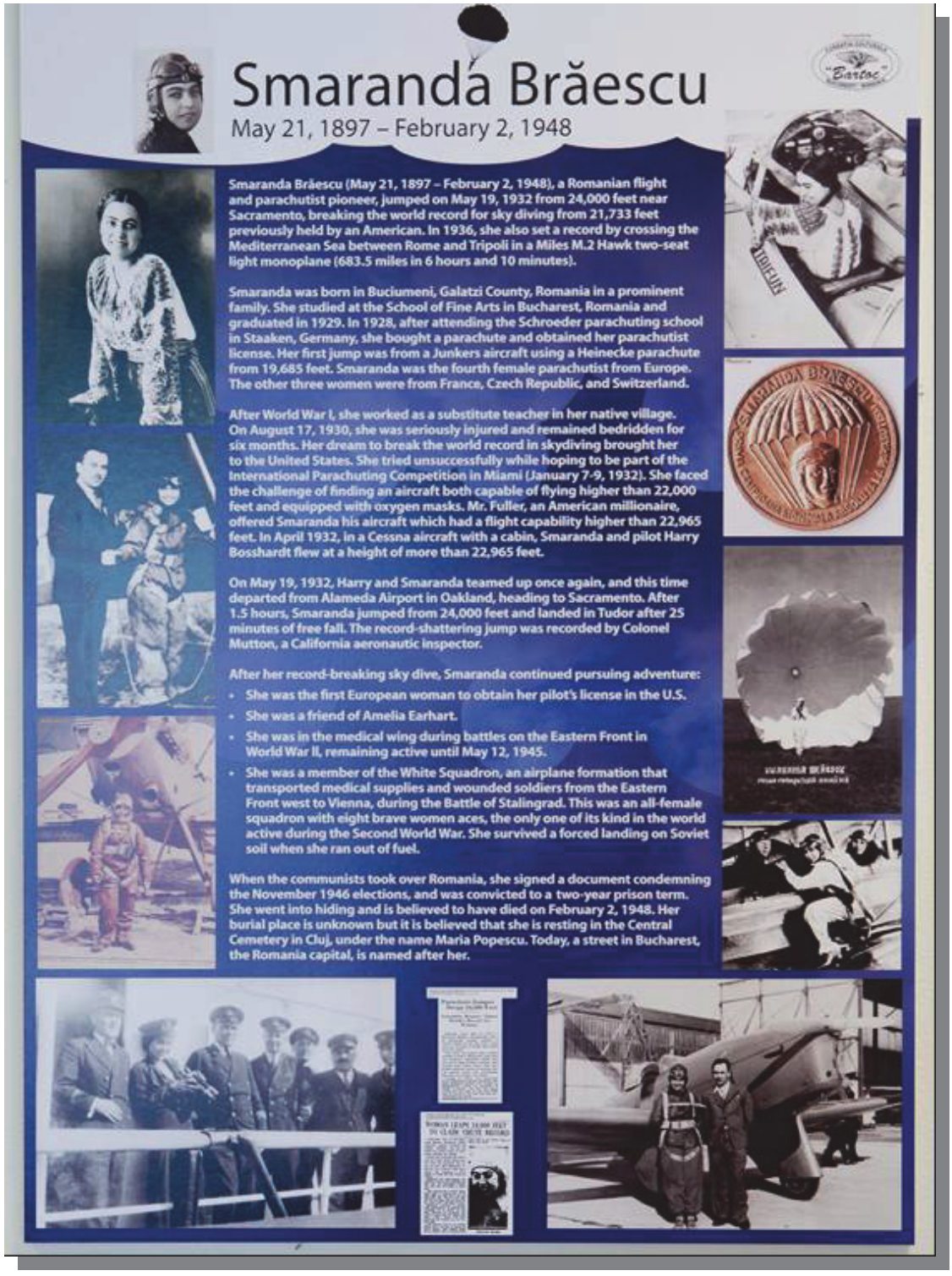
The next time I see a parachute, I will forever think of our record setting Romanian skydiver. I especially want to thank Joanna Groza for introducing me to Smaranda Braescu. It has been a truly precious gift. And, I have no doubt that if Smaranda were alive today she would have gone after Felix Baumgartner's 24-mile jump space in 2012.

A Note on Sources

In preparing this presentation given at the Aerospace Museum of California on May 20, 2013, I read newspaper accounts of Smaranda's jump in the may 20, 1932 of the following newspapers: *Alameda Times-Star*, *Marysville Appeal-Democrat*, *Oakland Post-Inquirer*, *Oakland Transcript*, *Oakland Tribune*, *Sacramento Bee*, *Sacramento Union*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, and *Washington Post*. The January 29, 1933 issue of the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* gave a later account of her historic jump and her time in America.

It is interesting that the American newspapers gave Smaranda's age as twenty-six when she set the record. However, two biographies of her state that she was born on May 21, 1897, which would have made her thirty-five. Profiles of her appear on the Internet. Also useful is the following: Extract from Biography from E-Book Anthology: "Blouse Roumaine – the Unsung Voices of Romanian Women. Collected and edited by Constatin Roman", published by the Centre for Romanain Studies.

Smaranda Braescu poster displayed at the Aerospace Museum of California



Photos from the event held on May 20, 2013 in the honor of the inclusion of Smaranda in the Aerospace Museum of California (AMC) organized by the Romanian Community Center of Sacramento.



From left to right: Alexandru Bartoc (Sponsor), Abigaila Budac and Ioana Groza.



Roxanne Yonn, Executive Director AMC



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