

Amelia Mary Earhart

(1897- 1939)

"I want to do it (fly) because I want to do it. Women must try to do things as men have tried. When they fail their failure must be but a challenge to others."



Amelia Mary Earhart was born on July 24, 1897 in Atchison, Kansas USA. Her father, Edwin Earhart remained with his law practice in Kansas City during this period.

Amelia (Millie) and her sister Muriel (Pidge) were to know privilege and wealth through

their grandparents....attending private schools and enjoying many of the comforts of life. Alfred was never impressed with who he considered the "ne'er-do-well" son-in-law. Edwin Stanton Earhart failed to measure-up to the Otis standards of providing social status and large income for his family.

After failing in his private practice, Edwin took an executive job in 1905 with the Rock Island Line Railroad in Des Moines, Iowa. He and Amy moving to Des Moines, leaving the girls with their grandparents in Atchison. It was not till 1908 that the girls moved to Des Moines to be with their parents. Amelia was 10 years old when she saw her first airplane at the Iowa State Fair...

"It was a thing of rusty wire and wood and not at all interesting..."

...She was much more interested in a peach basket paper hat purchased at the fair. It would be more than a decade before Amelia's interest in aviation would be awakened..

Edwin was promoted in 1909 and their living standards much improved. "This happy time," Muriel was to later write, "was unfortunately a prelude to a period which saw the loss of our material prosperity and the beginning of the disintegration of the family..."...Edwin had

begun to drink. In her early teens, it became apparent to Amelia that her father was a drunkard...as well as to neighbors and friends around them.

In 1914 Amy and the girls left Edwin after he was fired from The Rock Island RR, and went to live with friends in Chicago. The family's social and financial security had been eroded ...from occupying a leading position in society they had become the subject of local gossip and pity. Amy, having some income from a trust fund, provided for the girls and later sent them to private intermediate schools in



preparation for college.

After visiting her sister in 1917 at a college preparatory school in Canada, Amelia decided to train as a nurses aid in Toronto and served as a Voluntary Aid Detachment nurse at a military hospital until the Armistice in November 1918.

"There for the first time I realized what the World War meant. Instead of new uniforms and brass bands, I saw only the result of four years' desperate struggle; men without arms and legs, men who were paralyzed and men who were blind..."

In the fall of 1919 Amelia enrolled as a pre-med student at Columbia University. Although doing well in her studies, in 1920 she decided to join her mother and father in California. They had recently reunited and were encouraging the sisters to join them.

Several months after her arrival in California Amelia and her father went to an "aerial meet" at Daugherty Field in Long Beach. She had become very interested in flying. The next day, given a helmet and goggles, she boarded the open-cockpit biplane for a 10 minute flight over Los Angeles.

"As soon as we left the ground I knew I myself had to fly!"

Amelia had heard of a woman pilot who gave flying instructions and shortly afterwards began lessons with pioneer aviatrix Anita "Neta" Snook at Kinner Field near Long Beach. Amelia and Neta took to each other on sight, both having similar backgrounds. Neta had restored a "Canuck"...an old Canadian training plane.

In July Amelia purchased a prototype of the Kinner airplane...naming it "The Canary". She had several accidents during this period, but considering the unreliability of planes in the early days of aviation, some could be attributed to unreliable engines and slowness of the planes. Neta Snook had reservations about Amelia's skills as a pilot, a feeling that was later held by many of Amelia's contemporaries.

By October 1922, Amelia began participating in record breaking attempts and set a women's altitude record of 14,000 feet...broken a few weeks later by Ruth Nichols.

Amelia later sold her Kinner airplane and purchased a car...a Kissel that she nicknamed "the yellow peril". She drove her mother, Amy cross-country to Boston. Wherever they stopped people would gather...asking about the roads and other questions. Cross-continental

travel by automobile was still very much a novelty...

"The fact that my roadster was a cheerful canary color may have caused some of the excitement. It had been modest enough in California, but was a little outspoken for Boston, I found."

In Autumn 1925, Amelia took a position at Denison House in Boston as a "novice" social worker and was later employed as a staff member. She joined the Boston Chapter of the National Aeronautic Association, and invested what little money she had in a company that would build an airport and market Kinner airplanes in Boston. During this time she took full advantage of the circumstances to promote flying...especially for women. She regularly became the subject of columns in newspapers. The Boston Globe called her "one of the best women pilots in the United States".

On April 27, 1926 her life was to change forever...a phone call from Captain H.H. Railey asked.."*how would you like to be the first woman to fly across the Atlantic?*"

H.H. Railey had been asked by George Palmer Putnam, a New York publisher, to find the woman to make a trans-atlantic flight. No

woman had so far flown across the Atlantic. Railey, having been struck by Amelia's strong resemblance to Charles Lindbergh, coined the name "Lady Lindy".

A week later, Amelia met with George Putnam in New York. George was said to have been so impressed by her at the meeting that he decided Amelia should be the woman to make the flight. Amelia accepted the offer although she would only be a passenger on the flight.

Since she had no experience of multi-engine or instrument flying. Wilmer Stultz and Louis Gordon would pilot the tri-motor Fokker named the "Friendship" with Amelia having the official title of "commander" of the flight.

On Sunday, June 3, 1928 after waiting several days for the weather to clear, the Friendship left for Halifax, Nova Scotia. Bad weather conditions again delayed the flight out of Halifax till June 18. Flying through dense fog for most of their journey, they landed at Burry Port in South Wales and not in Ireland as had been planned...with little fuel remaining.

"I was a passenger on the journey...just a passenger. Everything that was done to bring us across was done by Wilmer Stultz and Slim Gordon. Any praise I can give them they ought to have...I do not believe that women lack the

stamina to do a solo trip across the Atlantic, but it would be a matter of learning the arts of flying by instruments only, an art which few men pilots know perfectly now..."

Amelia was distressed that Stultz and Gordon were ignored by reporters. It was the woman they had come to see...or rather "the girl" as they insisted on calling her. Even President Coolidge had cabled his personal congratulations to Ameli

On to London, then to the States...to a full calendar of tours...Amelia was in great demand on the lecture circuit and pictured frequently in the newspapers. Behind the scene, George Putnam kept Amelia's name in the forefront of everyone's mind and in the pages of newspapers across the country.



Amelia flew a solo

flight from the Atlantic to the Pacific coast in September 1928 to attend the National Air Races. Returning to New York, she began a

series of lecture tours organized by George to publicize her new book about the Atlantic flight, "20 hours, 40 minutes". Often George accompanied her on these trips.. They had become "close" and found many similar interests in life. This had become reason for some gossip in aviation circles, as George was married at the time.

Aviation was quite a new concept and the industry looked for ways of

improving its image. Amelia was appointed Assistant to the General Traffic Manager at Transcontinental Air Transport (later known as TWA) with a special responsibility of attracting women passengers.

Amelia organized a cross-country air race for women pilots in 1929, the Los Angeles to Cleveland Women's Air Derby. Will Rogers coined the name "The Powder-Puff Derby"...a name that stuck!

The "Ninety-Nines", a now famous women pilots organization, was formed by Amelia Earhart in her hotel room in Cleveland during a meeting with other women pilots. Charter membership included 99 applicants. She was to serve as its first President.

George's close relationship with Amelia had not gone unnoticed. Dorothy Putnam left her husband shortly after Amelia returned from Cleveland and a divorce was granted in Reno, Nevada in December 1929.

"...I was interested in aviation, so was he. We both loved the outdoors, books, sports...We came to depend on each other, yet it was only friendship between us, or so - at least I - thought at first. At least I didn't admit even to myself that I was in love..."

Amelia continued to work for the airline and was writing regular articles for Cosmopolitan and other publications, with speaking engagements in many cities across the country. In 1930 she broke several women's speed records in her Lockheed Vega aircraft. After turning down George's proposal of marriage several times, they finally married on February 7, 1931.

"Would you mind if I flew the Atlantic?"

Amelia and George had talked casually about a solo flight across the Atlantic. She was now ready to make the flight as the pilot rather than a passenger, as was the case in the 1928 flight. At the time, several other women pilots were making preparations for such a flight and George knew that in order to keep Amelia's

name in the forefront she would need to make the trip.

By early 1932 no other person had successfully flown solo across the Atlantic since Lindbergh.



Amelia would not duplicate Lindbergh's course but would fly from Harbour Grace, Newfoundland with the British Isles as her destination.

On May 20, 1932, exactly 5 years after the Lindbergh flight, Amelia's modified Lockheed Vega began the journey. Since she did not drink coffee or tea, she would keep awake by

using smelling salts on long trips. Amelia prided herself on traveling light...a thermos of soup and a can of tomato juice would sustain her.

Somewhat off-course, she landed in an open field near Londonderry in northern Ireland. On climbing from her plane a man approached. She asked:

"Where am I?"...the man replied "in Gallagher's pasture...have you come far?"..."from America", she replied.

She had broken several records on this flight...the first woman to fly the Atlantic solo and only person to fly it twice...the longest non-stop distance flown by a woman...and a record for crossing in the shortest time.



George joined Amelia in London, and after spending several weeks touring Europe they returned to New York to a tickertape parade. President Hoover presented Amelia with the Special Gold Medal from the National Geographic Society. Honors of all kinds

continued to be heaped on Amelia and keys of various cities bestowed. Amelia was voted Outstanding Woman of the Year which she accepted on behalf of "all women". The French press ended an article about Amelia's accomplishment with..."can she bake a cake?" ...Amelia replied...

"So I accept these awards on behalf of the cake bakers and all of those other women who can do some things quite as important, if not more important, than flying, as well as in the name of women flying today."

In the autumn of 1934, Amelia announced to George that her next venture would be a trans-Pacific flight from Hawaii to California...and then on to Washington D.C. Ten pilots had already lost their lives attempting this crossing. Amelia's flight would be the first in which a civilian plane would carry a two-way radio telephone.

She departed Wheeler Field on January 11, 1935 and landed in Oakland, California to a cheering crowd of thousands. President Roosevelt sent his congratulations..."You have scored again...(and) shown even the "doubting Thomases" that aviation is a science which cannot be limited to men only."

In the following months Amelia was on the road almost non-stop with her lecture tours. After meeting the Consul-General of Mexico at a reception, Amelia flew to Mexico City on a goodwill visit. Upon her return, she announced that she had accepted an appointment at Purdue University in Indiana. She would serve as a consultant in the department for the study of careers for women.

Later in 1935, Amelia began to formulate plans for an around-the-world flight. The Lockheed Electra 10E was chosen as the plane for the flight. The flight would be two major firsts...she would be the first woman, and she would travel the longest possible distance, circumnavigating the globe at its waist.

Fredrick Noonan, a former navigator on the PanAmerican Pacific Clipper, was chosen as the navigator because of his familiarity with the Pacific area. The first leg of the journey would be from Oakland to Hawaii on March 17, 1935.

As Amelia was taking off from Luke Field near Pearl Harbor she over compensated for a dropped right wing and the plane swung to the left out of control. The undercarriage collapsed and the aircraft slide along the runway on its belly. Fortunately there was no fire but a great deal of damage was done to the plane.

The Electra was shipped back to California for repairs as Amelia continued to make plans for another attempt at the around-the-world flight.

Amelia decided since the next attempt would be later in the year, that it would be safer to reverse the original flight plan and fly eastwards due to weather conditions in the Caribbean and Africa.

After delivery of the rebuilt Electra, Amelia departed from Los Angeles, California for Florida on May 21, 1937.

"I have a feeling that there is just about one more good flight left in my system and I hope this trip is it. Anyway when I have finished this job, I mean to give up long-distance "stunt" flying."

On June 1, 1937 Amelia and her navigator Fred Noonan departed Miami, Florida bound for California by traveling around the world. The first destination was San Juan, Puerto Rico...from there skirting the northeast edge of South America and then on to Africa and the Red Sea.

The flight to Karachi was another first...no one had previously flown non-stop from the Red Sea to India before. From Karachi the Electra flew to Calcutta on June 17... from there, on to Rangoon, Bangkok, Singapore and Bandoeng.

Monsoon weather prevented departure from Bandoeng for several days. Repairs were made on some of the "long distance" instruments which had given trouble previously. During this time Amelia had become ill with dysentery that lasted for several days.

It was June 27 before Amelia and Noonan were able to leave Bandoeng for Port Darwin, Australia. At Darwin the direction finder was repaired, and the parachutes were packed and shipped home...they would be of no value over the Pacific.

Amelia reached Lae in New Guinea on June 29. At this point they had flown 22,000 miles and there were 7,000 more to go...all over the Pacific. Amelia cabled her last commissioned article to the Herald Tribune. Photos show her looking very tired and ill during her time at Lae.

The U.S. Coast Guard cutter Itasca had been standing off Howland Island for some days to act as a radio contact for Amelia. Radio communications in the area were very poor and the Itasca was overwhelmed with commercial radio traffic that the flight had generated.

Amelia left Lae at precisely 00:00 hours Greenwich Mean Time on July 2. It is believed that the Electra was loaded with 1,000 gallons of fuel, allowing for 20-21 hours of flying.

At 07:20 hours GMT Amelia provided a position report placing the Electra on course at some 20 miles southwest of the Nukumanu Islands. The last weather report Amelia was known to have received was before take-off. The head wind speed had increased by 10-12 mph, but it is not known if she ever received the report.

At 08:00 GMT Amelia made her last radio contact with Lae. She reported being on course for Howland Island at 12,000 feet. There is no real evidence as to the precise track of the aircraft after Nukumanu. No one saw or heard the plane fly over.

Several short transmissions were received by the Itasca with varying signal strengths but they were unable to get a fix on her location because they were too brief. At 19:30 GMT the following transmission was received from the Electra at maximum strength...

"KHAQQ calling Itasca. We must be on you but cannot see you...gas is running low..."

At 20:14 GMT the Itasca received the last voice transmission from Amelia giving

positioning data. The Itasca continued to transmit on all frequencies until 21:30 hours GMT when they determined that Amelia must have ditched at sea and began to implement search procedures.

It has been determined that the plane went down some 35-100 miles off the coast of Howland Island. A life raft was stowed on board but no trace has ever been found the raft. Some experts felt that the empty fuel tanks could keep the plane afloat for a period of time.

President Roosevelt authorized a search of 9 naval ships and 66 aircraft at an estimated cost of over \$4 million. On July 18 the search was abandoned by ships in the Howland area. George continued to seek help in the search, but by October he too abandoned all hope of finding them alive.

Amelia regularly sent letters to George at stops along her route. These were published in the book

"Last Flight". On an endpiece of the book is a note from her to George...

"Please know I am quite aware of the hazards...I want to do it because I want to do it. Women must try to do things as men have tried. When they fail their failure must be but a challenge to others."

Ironically Amelia Earhart has become more famous for disappearing than for her many real aviation achievements. It sparked a whole cottage industry of conspiracy theorists and "researchers." There are

two main themes to these ideas. One, her around-the-world flight was a cover for a spy mission, commissioned by President Roosevelt to determine what the Japanese were up to in the Pacific. Two, she and Fred Noonan weren't simply swallowed up by the vast Pacific Ocean, but were captured by the Japanese. Obviously these two main themes work well in combination.

No evidence has ever been found to support either one of these theories..



The Last Flight

Prepared for Cowra U3A by John Horsefield