

LEVELED BOOK • W

Amelia Earhart: A Legend in Flight



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Written by Julie Mettenburg

Amelia Earhart: A Legend in Flight



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Focus Question

Who is Amelia Earhart, and why is she a legend?

Words to Know

aviator

manifold

disappeared

navigator

endeavors

perilous

fabrication

pilots

inclement

static

legend

tailspin

Front cover: Amelia after a nineteen-hour flight across the United States

Title page: A studio portrait of Amelia Earhart

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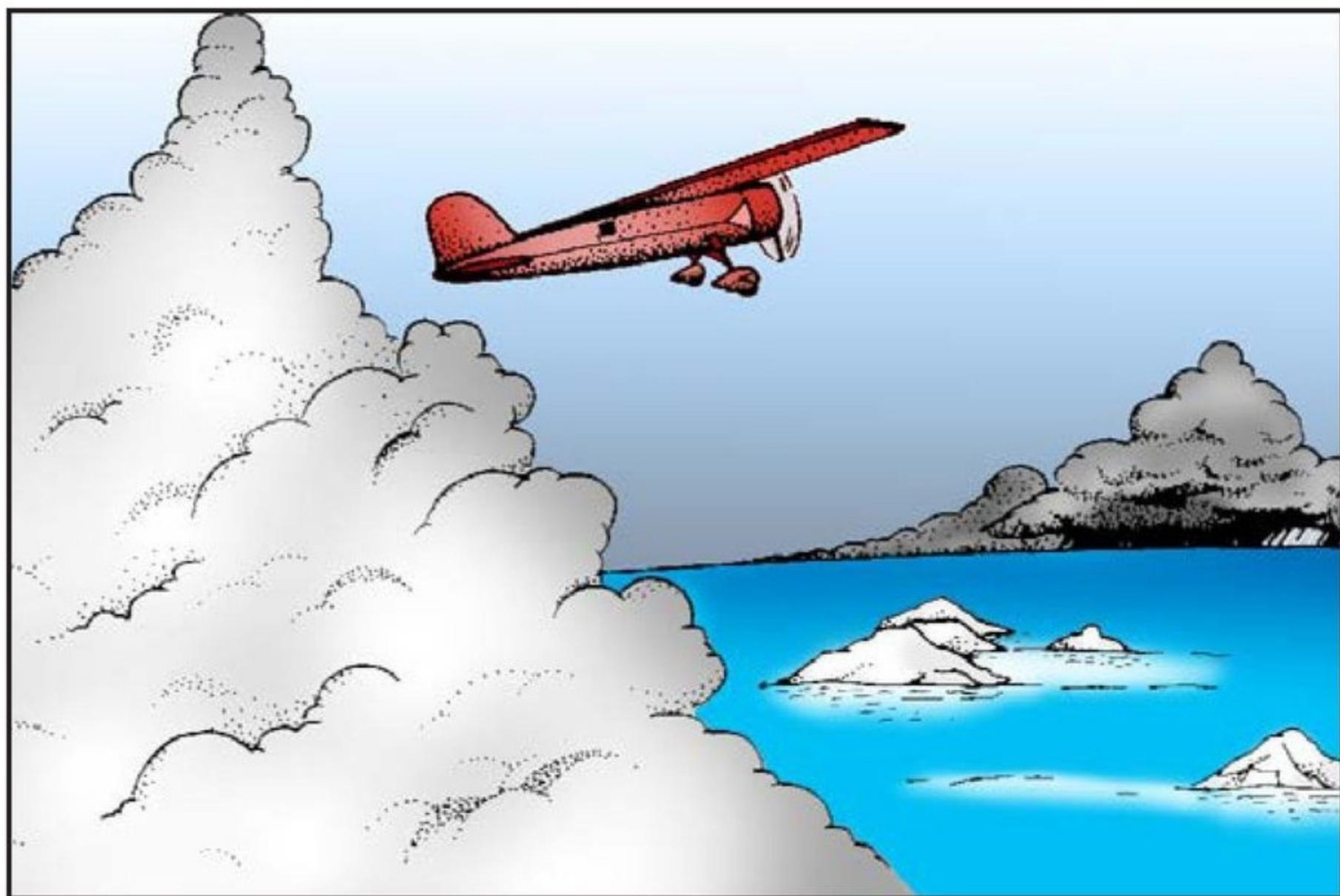
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Amelia in 1937

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Introduction

The tiny red airplane bounced among the clouds 12,000 feet (3,658 m) above the water of the North Atlantic. Giant black storm clouds lay between the plane and the shores of Ireland, and far below, icebergs jutted out of the cold waves.

The date was May 21, 1932. The airplane carried Amelia Earhart, one of the most famous **pilots** in the United States. In 1928, she had been the first woman to ride in an airplane over the Atlantic, although a man named Wilmer Stultz flew the plane. Now, if she made it, she would be the first woman to fly an airplane over the Atlantic herself. And she would be the first person, male or female, to have crossed the Atlantic in an airplane twice.

But first she had to succeed, and there was a reason why so few people had made it. The trip was **perilous** because airplanes in the 1930s were small, most were not pressurized, and they didn't have many of the instruments that today's pilots rely on. A pilot had to go by her sense of sight and how the plane "felt," keeping tight control of the airplane for hours at a time.

The black clouds ahead were too large to fly around, so Amelia pointed the Lockheed Vega right into them.

When the rain turned to ice, the Vega's controls froze, sending it into a **tailspin**.

As the plane plummeted toward the frigid water, Amelia struggled to get control. Finally, the warmer air

below the clouds melted the ice, and Amelia was able to pull the plane out of its spin. Amelia had to fight other problems including fatigue, a leaky fuel tank, and a cracked **manifold** that occasionally spewed flames.



Amelia Earhart poses with her plane in Northern Ireland after her Atlantic flight.



Reporters surround Amelia after her Atlantic flight.

Many hours later, Amelia set the plane down in a pasture in Londonderry, Northern Ireland. She had done it; she had crossed the Atlantic Ocean in an airplane she flew herself. Before this landmark flight, she had already been famous as an **aviator** and an adventurer, and now she would be a **legend**. But Amelia Earhart would be most remembered for what many people think of as her biggest failure. While trying to fly her plane around the world, she **disappeared**.

Winged Machines

The world's first airplane flight occurred when Amelia was six years old. Two brothers, Wilbur and Orville Wright, constructed a winged machine out of spruce and ash. They launched it successfully into the air at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, on December 17, 1903.



The Wright brothers make their first flight.



The Douglas DC-3, one of the first passenger planes, went into service in 1936.

Although many people thought they were crazy, others thought the idea of flying was exciting. It was dangerous, to be sure. Planes were fragile, slow, and low-flying because they were made from wood and canvas. They did not fly well in **inclement** weather, and many pilots died in crashes.

By 1937, airplanes had improved a lot due to advances in **fabrication** techniques and materials. The first airlines had begun carrying passengers on short routes, mostly over land and usually only during the day. Engineers designed better airplanes, and pilots like Amelia had learned to fly them more safely, but accidents still happened.

Kansas Youth

Anyone who knew Amelia as a child could hardly have been surprised by her later accomplishments. She was a determined child born in Atchison, Kansas, on July 24, 1897. She spent the school year at her maternal grandparents' home with her cousins and friends.

They climbed around the banks of the Missouri River. Amelia led expeditions into caves, and she loved to ride horses, go sledding, and climb trees. She made up games for the children to play in her grandfather's barn. She and her sister, Muriel, were such active children that their mother made "bloomers" for them to wear. Unlike dresses, bloomers allowed the girls to run, ride, and climb just as the boys did. At that time, society frowned on girls being so active, but Amelia was determined.



Amelia and her sister, Muriel



Amelia (right) and her first flight instructor, Neta Snook

Amelia's happy childhood came to an end when she was eleven. When her grandmother died, her parents took Amelia and Muriel to live in Iowa. Her father couldn't find a job, causing the family to move several more times in the next few years. When Amelia was twenty-one, her family moved to California. One day she attended an air show. The airplanes dazzled her, flying in loops and doing stunts. After that, Amelia didn't finish college because she knew she wanted to fly.

Working a variety of jobs and with her parents' help, Amelia took piloting lessons and saved enough money to purchase an airplane. After receiving her flying license, the young woman was flying in air shows as an acclaimed female pilot.

Time to Fly

When she wasn't flying, Amelia moved to Boston and taught English to Syrian and Chinese immigrants at Denison House. It was a place where people who were poor, especially children, could receive help. She loved being a teacher and social worker there, and she was good at it. She was making a name for herself, but then the opportunity of a lifetime presented itself.

A publicist in New York named George Putnam was searching for a woman to be the first to ride in an airplane over the Atlantic. It was a dangerous undertaking: three women had died trying to fly across the Atlantic the previous year.



Amelia's work often involved helping children.

Only men had ever crossed the Atlantic in an airplane. Anyone who tried it had to be tough as nails in order to withstand the danger, extreme weather conditions, and fatigue. George thought Amelia Earhart was perfect, and she was eager to go.

Amelia Earhart: Flier and . . . ?

In her lifetime, Amelia worked at many jobs. At that time, it was unusual for women to have jobs at all!

- Nurse
- Magazine editor
- Social worker
- Writer
- Pilot
- Airline executive
- Clothing designer
- Professor

She also helped start the "Ninety-Nines," a group of women pilots that still exists today.



Amelia in her nurse's uniform in 1918

As a mere passenger on that 1928 flight, Amelia referred to herself as “a sack of potatoes,” because she felt like she had no purpose. The first woman to cross the Atlantic made headlines around the world and received a ticker-tape parade. After the flight, she was very famous and very busy writing books and giving speeches about flying.



Amelia in Southampton, England, after the 1928 Atlantic flight

To raise money for her flying **endeavors**, she also designed clothing and luggage for active women like herself. She even helped launch two airlines: Transcontinental Air Transport, which would become Transworld Airlines (TWA), and Northeast Airlines. Eventually, she married George Putnam, and she continued to fly. She tested new aircraft on cross-country flights, flew in contests, and set records for long-distance flights. After only fifteen minutes of instruction, Amelia was the first woman to pilot an autogyro, an aircraft with a powered propeller for forward motion and an unpowered rotor on top that provides lift. She eventually made two cross-country tours in the new vehicle.

By the time she was thirty-nine years old, Amelia had earned fame and recognition doing things that most people thought only men could do. She wanted a new challenge. She had made every major flight there was, except for one. The greatest challenge left was to fly around the world.

Only one pilot, a man named Wiley Post, had ever flown around the world in an airplane. He stayed in the Northern Hemisphere and had not followed the equator, the longest and most difficult route. This was the route Amelia would fly, but would she make it?

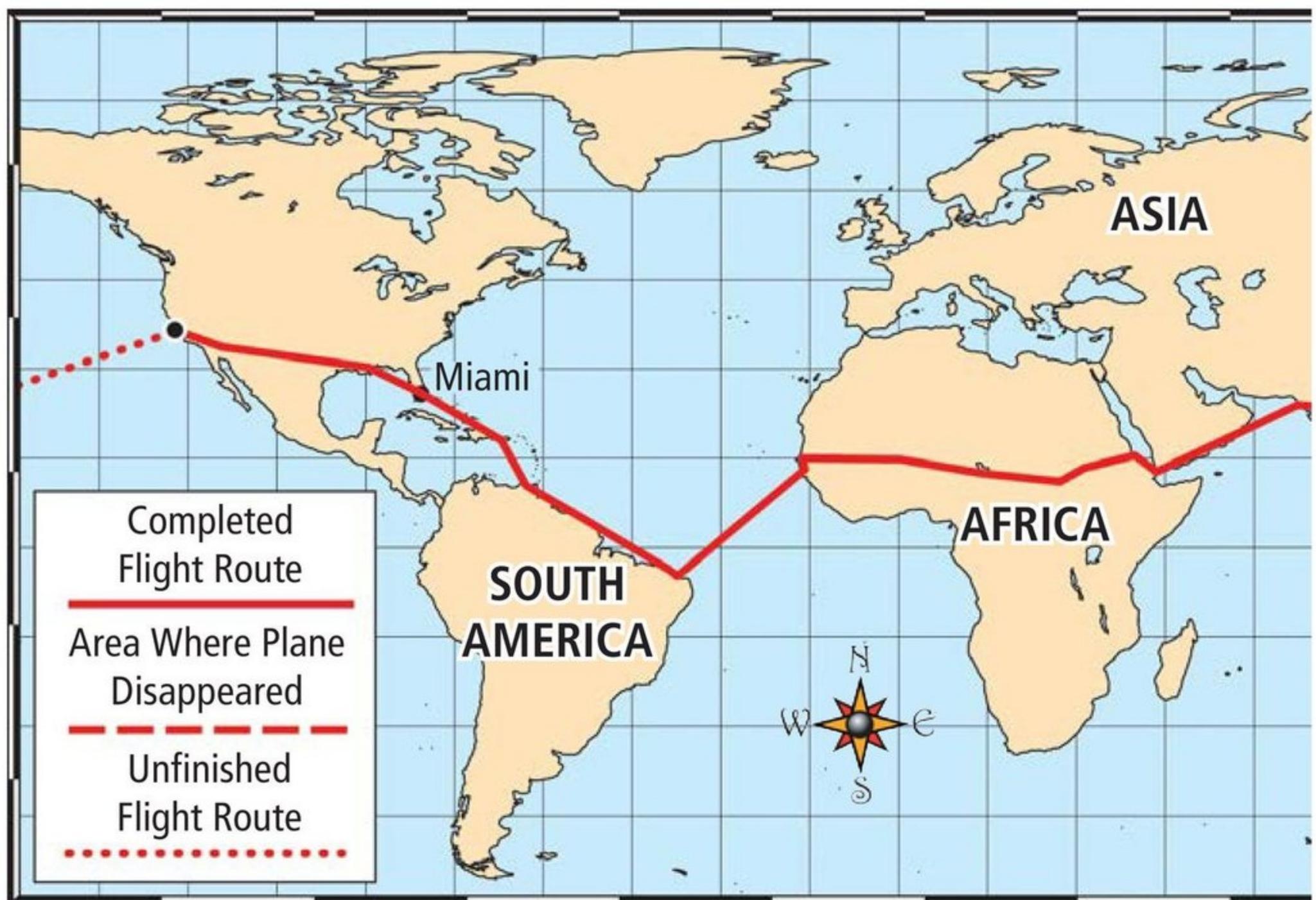


Amelia during one of her many public speeches



Amelia poses on her Lockheed before taking off on her around-the-world flight.

By this time, no one doubted Amelia Earhart's flying skill. Her first attempt was a western route to Hawaii in March 1937. A crash at takeoff severely damaged her plane, convincing her to try a different tactic and fly an eastbound route around the world. On May 21, 1937, she took off with her **navigator**, Fred Noonan. They went from Oakland, California, to Miami, Florida, in a new silver Lockheed Electra. It was the first leg of her flight around the world and included brief landings in Burbank, California; Tucson, Arizona; and New Orleans, Louisiana.

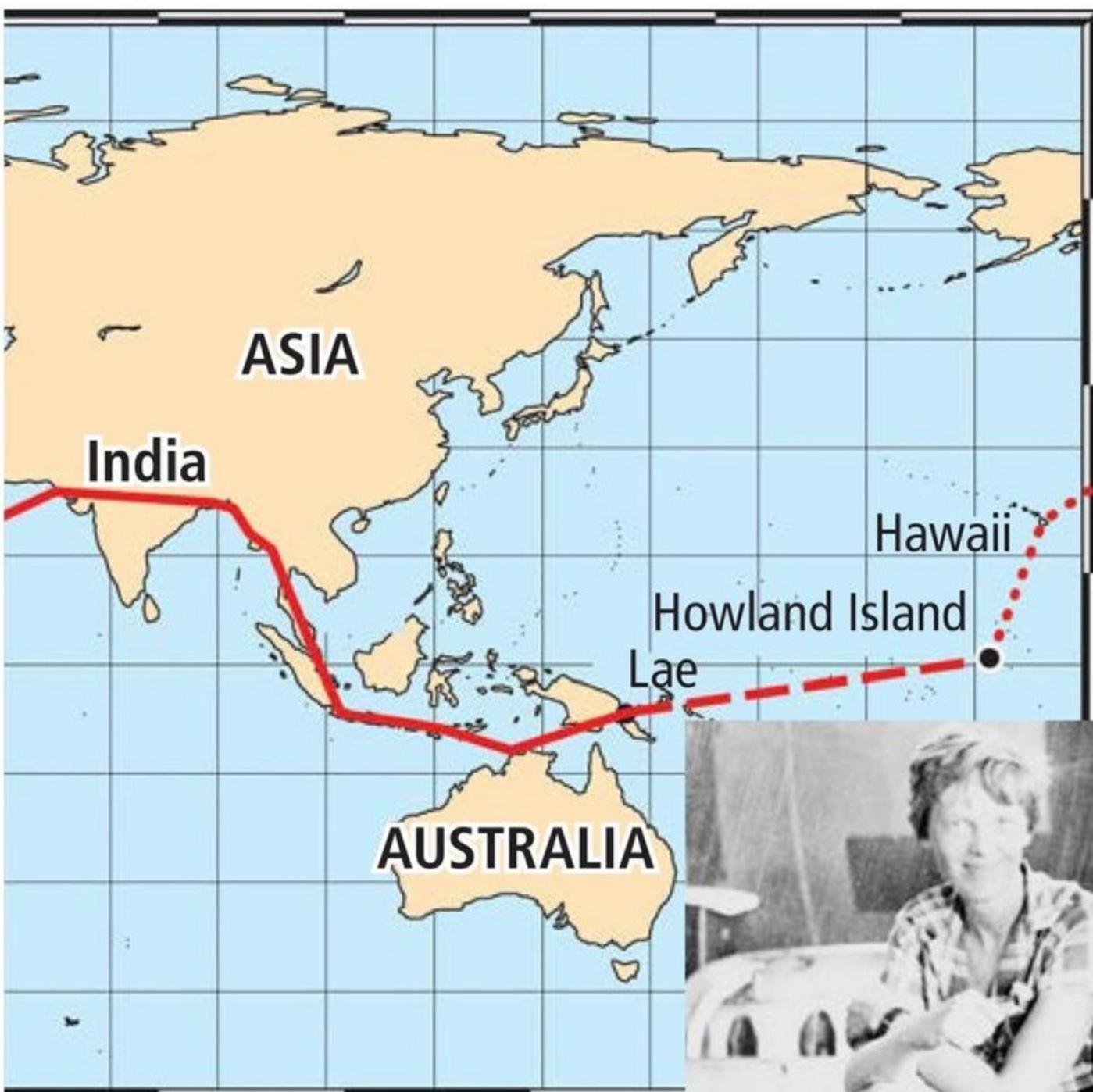


Map of Amelia's 1937 around-the-world flight route

Last Flight

The new plane had crossed the entire North American continent, passing its first test. After a tune-up in Miami, Florida, for the long flights ahead, Amelia and Fred started the route around the equator that George Putnam had carefully planned. Flying close to the equator meant long portions of the journey were over water, and they would have to land on several small Pacific islands.

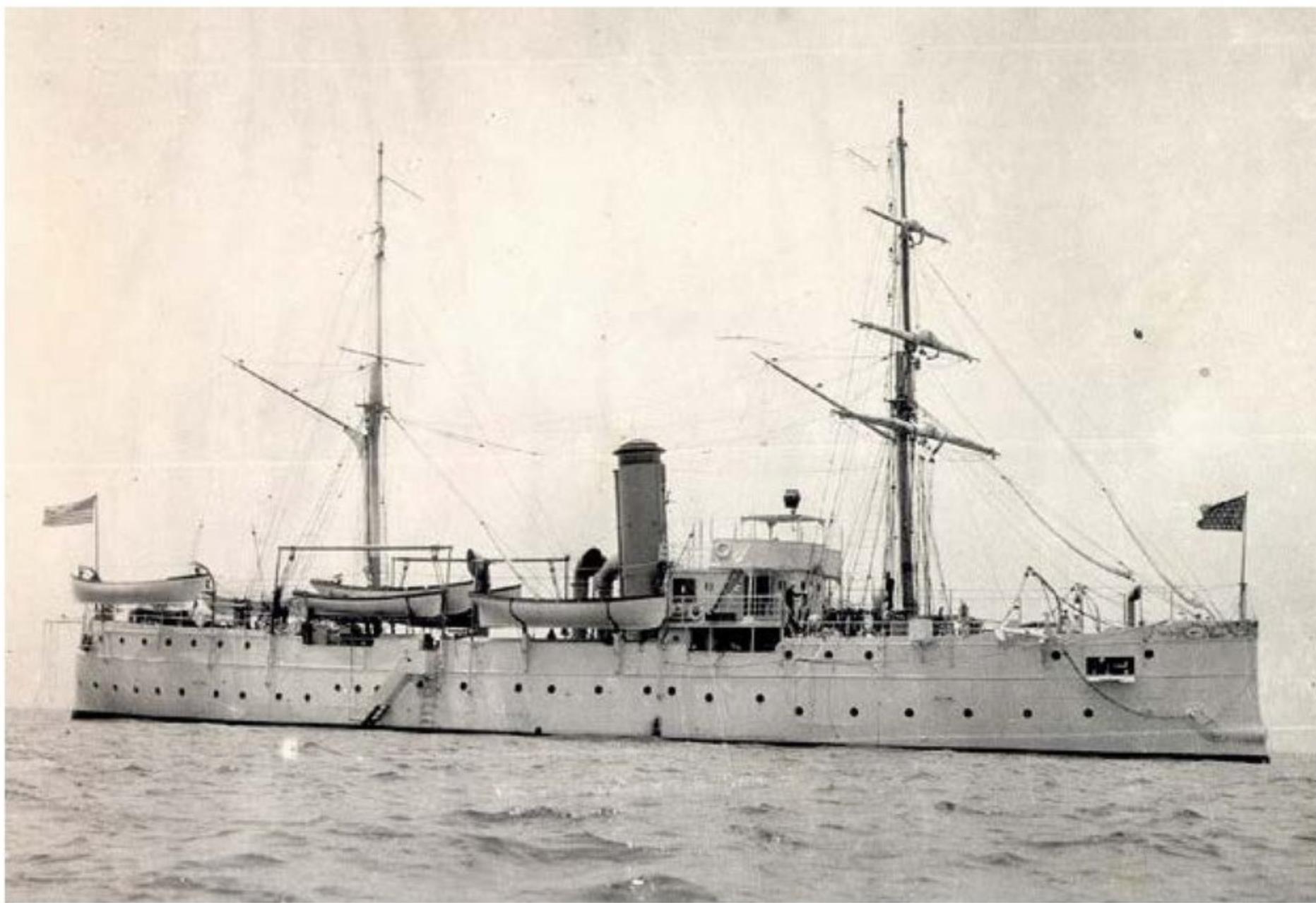
They flew to South America, Africa, India, Asia, and Australia, making stops in Senegal, Khartoum, and Karachi along the way. Some long distance instruments needed repair during a monsoon delay in Bandung, Indonesia; otherwise, the flights were uneventful.



Fred Noonan and Amelia on one of their last stops in Indonesia

It appeared that Amelia Earhart would once again pull off a historic flight without a hitch.

On June 29, 1937, they arrived at Lae, New Guinea, an island in the Pacific just north of Australia. There, Amelia and Fred enjoyed their usual routine. They fueled the airplane, performed maintenance, and checked their maps. They sent telegrams back to the United States. When they took off from Lae on July 2, there was no hint of trouble.



The USCG cutter *Itasca*

As they neared Howland Island, the next stop, their radio messages became odd. The tiny island was to be their last stop before Hawaii and then back to California. The U.S. Coast Guard cutter *Itasca* was stationed offshore to receive the Electra's radio signals. The *Itasca* and two other U.S. ships were ordered to turn on all their lights to light the flight path and help the plane find the island. The radio signals were patchy and often interrupted with **static**. It seemed that Amelia could not hear the *Itasca*'s messages. She spoke of a storm, yet the weather over the island was clear.

More than twenty hours into the flight from Lae, Amelia's voice said, "We're running north and south." After that short message at 8:45 a.m. on July 3, 1937, Amelia was never heard from again.

What Happened to Amelia?

This question still haunts people today.

The *Itasca* immediately joined the U.S. Navy in searching for Amelia's plane. The Navy thought she may have gone down in a storm to the northwest of Howland Island. The search continued for weeks and is to date the most extensive air and sea search in U.S. Naval history. No sign of the plane, Amelia, or Fred was found.

After a year of searching, Amelia's husband, George Putnam, concluded that she had perished at sea. But is that the full story?



The USS *Lexington* was one of eight ships the U.S. Navy sent to search for Amelia.



Some people believe that this piece of an airplane, found on an island near where Amelia disappeared, belonged to Amelia's airplane.

Many people have tried to explain what happened to Amelia. Theories including equipment problems, poor navigation or piloting skills, and imprisonment abound. Some think Amelia and Fred survived an emergency landing and were picked up by a Japanese ship. They were kept as prisoners on a Japanese island and later died of disease. Others think that Amelia and Fred landed the plane at a different island. There, she and Fred were able to live on native foods but eventually died of either disease or old age.

Many think these theories are just made up. No evidence has been found to support either of these ideas, and the most likely answer is that Amelia ditched the plane in the water. It would have quickly broken apart in the fierce waves, over 10 feet (3 m) high. Perhaps before Amelia and Fred could have inflated their life raft, they drowned.

Whatever her fate, there is no doubt that Amelia Earhart is one of the greatest Americans of the 20th century. She died doing what she loved most and showed everyone that women didn't have to live with limits. She showed people that anyone could fly, and she was a legend who changed the world.



Amelia doing what she loved best: flying

Glossary

aviator (<i>n.</i>)	a pilot of an aircraft (p. 6)
disappeared (<i>v.</i>)	stopped existing or being in sight (p. 6)
endeavors (<i>n.</i>)	earnest attempts or efforts (p. 13)
fabrication (<i>n.</i>)	the process of manufacturing a product (p. 8)
inclement (<i>adj.</i>)	cold, windy, and stormy (p. 8)
legend (<i>n.</i>)	a famous person who is known for a special talent or achievement (p. 6)
manifold (<i>n.</i>)	the chamber containing pipes through which gasses and fuel are carried to and from an engine (p. 5)
navigator (<i>n.</i>)	a person who plots a course to arrive at an intended destination (p. 15)
perilous (<i>adj.</i>)	filled with danger (p. 5)
pilots (<i>n.</i>)	people who fly aircraft or spacecraft (p. 4)
static (<i>n.</i>)	crackling electrical noise that makes phone, radio, or television messages hard to hear (p. 18)
tailspin (<i>n.</i>)	the rapid descent of a diving aircraft while turning round and round (p. 5)

Amelia Earhart: A Legend in Flight

A Reading A-Z Level W Leveled Book

Word Count: 1,878

Connections

Writing

Pretend you are Amelia Earhart. Write a journal entry describing one of your first flights. Include details from the book.

Social Studies

Use information from the book and other resources to create a timeline of Amelia Earhart's life including at least ten events. Share your timeline with your class.

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