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Amelia Earhart: A Legend in Flight



Written by Julie Mertenburg

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Introduction

The tiny red airplane bounced among the clouds, 12,000 feet (3,658 m) above the water. Below, icebergs jugged out of the cold waves. Giant black storm clouds lay ahead.

The year was 1932. The airplane carried Amelia Earhart, one of the most famous pilots in the United States. She had been the first woman to ride in an airplane over the Atlantic, although a man 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 dangerous. Airplanes in the 1930s were small, 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.



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

The black clouds ahead were too large to fly around, so Amelia pointed the little plane right into them. The rain soon turned to ice. The plane's controls froze, sending it into a tailspin. As the plane plummeted toward the water, Amelia struggled to get control. Finally, the warmer air below the clouds melted the ice. Amelia was able to pull the plane out of its spin.



Reporters surround Amelia after her Atlantic flight.

Many hours later, Amelia set the plane down in Londonderry, Ireland. She had done it. She had crossed the Atlantic Ocean in an airplane she flew herself. Before this flight, she had already been famous. Now, she would be a legend. But Amelia Earhart would be most remembered for her biggest failure. While trying to fly her plane around the world, she disappeared.

Winged Machines

The world's first flight occurred in 1903, when Amelia was six years old. Two brothers, Wilbur and Orville Wright, had built a winged machine out of wood. They launched it successfully into the air at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina.



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. They did not fly well in bad weather, and many pilots died in crashes.

By 1937, airplanes had improved a lot. The first airlines had begun carrying passengers on short routes, mostly over land. 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 born in Atchison, Kansas, on July 24, 1897. She spent most of her time at her 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. 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 and ride and climb just as the boys did. At that time, most girls were not allowed to be so active, but Amelia was determined.



Amelia and her sister Muriel

Amelia's happy childhood came to an end when she was eleven. Her parents took Amelia and Muriel to live in Iowa, but her father couldn't find a job. The family moved several more times. Amelia made very few new friends. 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. She knew she wanted to fly.

With her parents' help, Amelia took piloting lessons and saved enough money to buy an airplane. Before long, the young woman was flying in air shows herself.



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



Amelia's work often involved helping children.

Time to Fly

When she wasn't flying, Amelia moved to Boston and found a job at Denison House. It was a place where poor people, especially children, could receive help. She loved her work 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 trying to find a woman to be the first to ride in an airplane over the Atlantic. It was a dangerous idea. Three women had died trying to cross the Atlantic the previous year.

Only men had ever crossed the Atlantic in an airplane. Anyone who would try it had to be tough as nails in order to withstand the danger 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

Amelia was just a passenger on that 1928 flight. She called herself “a sack of potatoes,” because she felt like she had no purpose. Still, her life would never be the same.

The first woman to cross the Atlantic made headlines around the world. After the flight, she was very famous and very busy writing books and giving speeches about flying. She had no time to go back to work at



Amelia in Southampton, England, after the 1928 Atlantic flight

Denison House. She also designed clothing and luggage for active women like herself and even helped launch two airlines. Eventually she married George Putnam. She also continued to fly. She tested new aircraft on cross-country flights, flew in contests, and set records for long-distance flights.



Amelia during one of her many public speeches

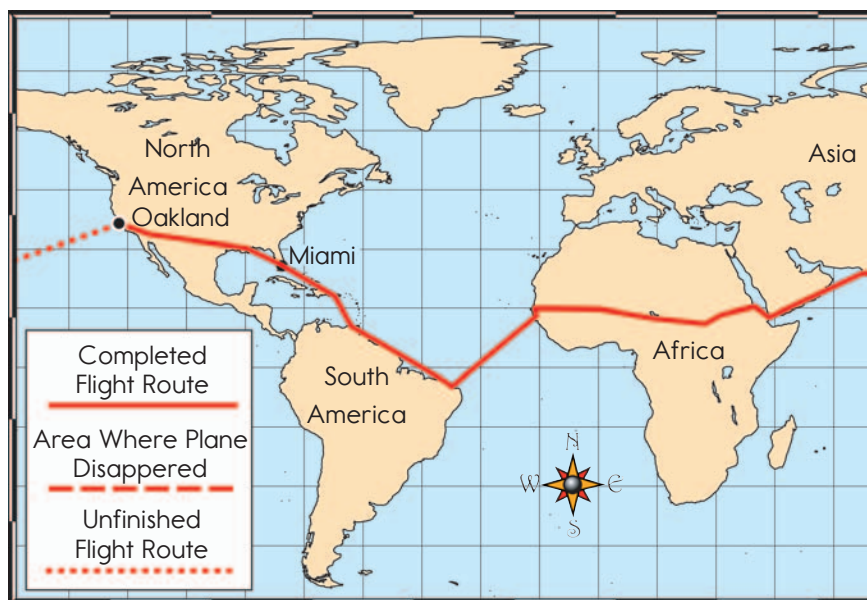
By the time she was thirty-nine years old, Amelia had made every major flight there was, except for one. She wanted a new challenge. The greatest challenge left was to fly around the world.

Only one pilot, a man, had ever flown around the world, several years before. But he had not followed the equator, the longest and most difficult route. This was the route Amelia would fly. Would she make it?

By this time, no one doubted Amelia Earhart's flying skill. 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.



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



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

Last Flight

Amelia and Fred first stopped the Electra in Miami, Florida. The new plane had crossed the entire North American continent, passing its first test. They started the route around the equator that George Putnam, Amelia's husband, had carefully planned.

Each stop was uneventful. They flew to South America, Africa, India, Asia, and Australia. It appeared that Amelia Earhart would once again pull off a historic flight without a hitch.



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



On June 29, 1937, they stopped 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 and checked their maps. They sent telegrams back to the United States. When they took off from Lae, there was no hint of any trouble to come.



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* waited offshore to receive the *Electra*'s radio signals and help it find the island. Those radio signals were patchy and strange. 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, Amelia's voice said, "We're running north and south." She was never heard from again.

What Happened to Amelia?

This question still haunts people today.

The *Itasca*, along with the U.S. Navy, began searching for Amelia's plane immediately. The Navy thought she may have gone down in a storm to the northwest of Howland Island. The search continued for weeks. No sign of the plane, Amelia, or Fred was ever 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. 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 landed the plane, but 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. They believe the most likely answer is that the plane landed 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. She showed everyone that women didn't have to live with limits. She showed people that anyone could fly. She changed the world. She was a legend.



Amelia doing what she loved best: flying

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

Back cover: Amelia in 1937

Title page: A studio portrait of Amelia Earhart

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Amelia Earhart: A Legend in Flight

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Word Count: 1,507



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