

The Explorers: Amelia Earhart

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A portrait of Amelia Earhart, Photo: Wikimedia Commons/US Library of Congress

Synopsis: Aviator Amelia Earhart was born on July 24, 1897, in Atchison, Kansas. In 1923, she became the 16th woman to be issued a pilot's license. She was the first woman to fly across the Atlantic Ocean, in 1928, as well as the first person to fly over both the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. In 1937, she mysteriously disappeared. Since then, several theories have formed regarding Earhart's last days.

Early Life

Amelia Earhart was born on July 24, 1897, in Atchison, Kansas. Her parents, Edwin Earhart and Amelia "Amy" Otis, eventually separated.

Earhart's mother moved Amelia and her sister to Chicago. There, Earhart excelled in high school chemistry.

After graduation, she volunteered as a nurse's assistant for the Red Cross. Earhart came to know many wounded pilots and developed a strong admiration for them.

Early Career

In 1920, Earhart took a 10-minute plane ride that inspired her to learn to fly. She eventually saved up enough money to take flying lessons. Earhart read everything she could find on flying, and spent much of her time at the airfield. Worried what the older pilots might think of her, she even slept in her new leather flight jacket, in order to give it a more "worn" look.

In the summer of 1921, Earhart purchased a secondhand Kinner Airster biplane painted bright yellow. She nicknamed it "The Canary." On October 22, 1922, she flew her plane to 14,000 feet—the world altitude record for female pilots. On May 15, 1923, Amelia Earhart became the 16th woman to be issued an official pilot's license.

First Transatlantic Flight

Charles Lindbergh flew from New York to Paris in May 1927, making him the first man to fly by himself across the Atlantic Ocean. In April 1928, Earhart received a phone call asking her whether she would like to fly over the Atlantic herself. Soon she was selected to be the first woman on a transatlantic flight — but as a passenger.

The pilot — not Earhart — did all the flying. Most people thought a woman wouldn't be able to fly such a long distance. Earhart later confided that she felt she "was just baggage, like a sack of potatoes."

While Earhart was now famous, she still wanted to become a respected aviator. Shortly after returning from the transatlantic flight, she successfully flew alone across North America. In 1931, she set a world altitude record of 18,415 feet.

In 1931, she married George Putnam, who had helped coordinate her transatlantic flight.

First Solo Flight Across The Atlantic

Sometime before their marriage, Earhart and Putnam worked on secret plans for a solo flight across the Atlantic Ocean. Finally, on the morning of May 20, 1932, she took off from Harbour Grace, Newfoundland, in Canada.

During the flight, she encountered bad flying conditions, which forced her to land in a pasture in Londonderry, Northern Ireland — not as far as Paris, which Lindbergh had flown to previously. Still, Earhart's nearly 15-hour flight made her the first woman to fly solo across the Atlantic. She won awards from countries all over the world.

Not long after, Amelia made a solo trip from Honolulu, Hawaii, to Oakland, California, making her the first person to fly both across the Atlantic and the Pacific oceans. Between 1930 and 1935, Amelia Earhart set seven women's speed and distance aviation records in a variety of aircraft. She was still planning one last stunt: a flight around the world.

Earhart's Final Flight

In 1935, Amelia Earhart managed to buy a Lockheed Electra L-10E plane. While she would not be the first person to circumnavigate, or travel around, the earth, she would be the first to do it around the equator.

After a first, failed attempt, Earhart and navigator Fred Noonan took off from California. After stopping in a few different places, they touched down on June 29, 1937, in Lae, New Guinea, not far from Australia.

The flier's plan was to head to a tiny land mass called Howland Island, between Hawaii and Australia. The island would be hard to find from up above, so Earhart and Noonan decided to navigate by the stars. They also had radio communication with a U.S. Coast Guard vessel stationed off the island, the *Itasca*.

Earhart and Noonan set out from Lae on July 2, 1937. They left their short-range radio equipment behind, presumably to allow more room for fuel. It is also believed that due to foggy conditions, Noonan might have been unable to see the sky, which would have made navigating difficult. Worse, he and Amelia may have been using inaccurate maps.

As Earhart and Noonan reached the supposed position of Howland Island, they looked for signals from the *Itasca*, but radio communication was very poor that day. On the morning of July 3, 1937, at 7:20 am, Amelia reported her position, placing the *Electra* on-course. Earhart's last communication was at 8:43 am.

Disappearance And Theories

Despite an estimated \$4 million rescue effort authorized by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, the fate of the two fliers remained a mystery. The official search ended on July 18th, 1937.

Many theories emerged after the disappearance of Amelia Earhart and Fred Noonan, but there are two that seem most likely. One is that Earhart's plane crashed and the two perished at sea. Investigators concluded that the plane simply ran out of fuel some 35 to 100 miles off the coast of Howland Island.

The second theory emerged after the discovery of physical evidence: that Earhart and Noonan might have landed on the uninhabited island now known as Nikumaroro and died there. Investigations have turned up artifacts such as improvised tools, bits of clothing and what might have been an *Electra* window.

Legacy

Beyond Amelia Earhart's accomplishments as a pilot, she also wanted to make a statement about the role and worth of women. She dedicated much of her life to prove that, like men, women could succeed in their chosen professions.

Quiz

1 According to the article, what did Earhart think about the public's reaction to her first flight across the Atlantic as a passenger?

- (A) She felt outraged at her failure to fly.
- (B) She felt undeserving of her new fame.
- (C) She felt overjoyed about her new fame.
- (D) She felt certain that she could have flown the plane better.

2 Which of the following MOST influenced Earhart's desire to become a pilot?

- (A) A short flight that Earhart took in 1920.
- (B) Her work as a nurse for the Red Cross.
- (C) The leather flight jacket that she slept in at night.
- (D) The money that Earhart spent to get flying lessons.

3 Read the sentence from the section "Early Life."

There, Earhart excelled in high school chemistry.

How does using the word "excelled" affect the tone of the sentence above?

- (A) It conveys a sense that Earhart was destined to become a pilot.
- (B) It conveys a sense that Earhart's abilities in chemistry were unusual.
- (C) It conveys a sense that Earhart did not perform well in other subjects.
- (D) It conveys a sense that Earhart received a strong education during her youth.

Read the paragraph from the section "Earhart's Final Flight."

Earhart and Noonan set out from Lae on July 2, 1937. They left their short-range radio equipment behind, presumably to allow more room for fuel. It is also believed that due to foggy conditions, Noonan might have been unable to see the sky, which would have made navigating difficult. Worse, he and Amelia may have been using inaccurate maps.

Which word from the paragraph helps show that investigators are not certain why the aviators made the choices they did?

- (A) presumably
- (B) conditions
- (C) difficult
- (D) inaccurate

Answer Key

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