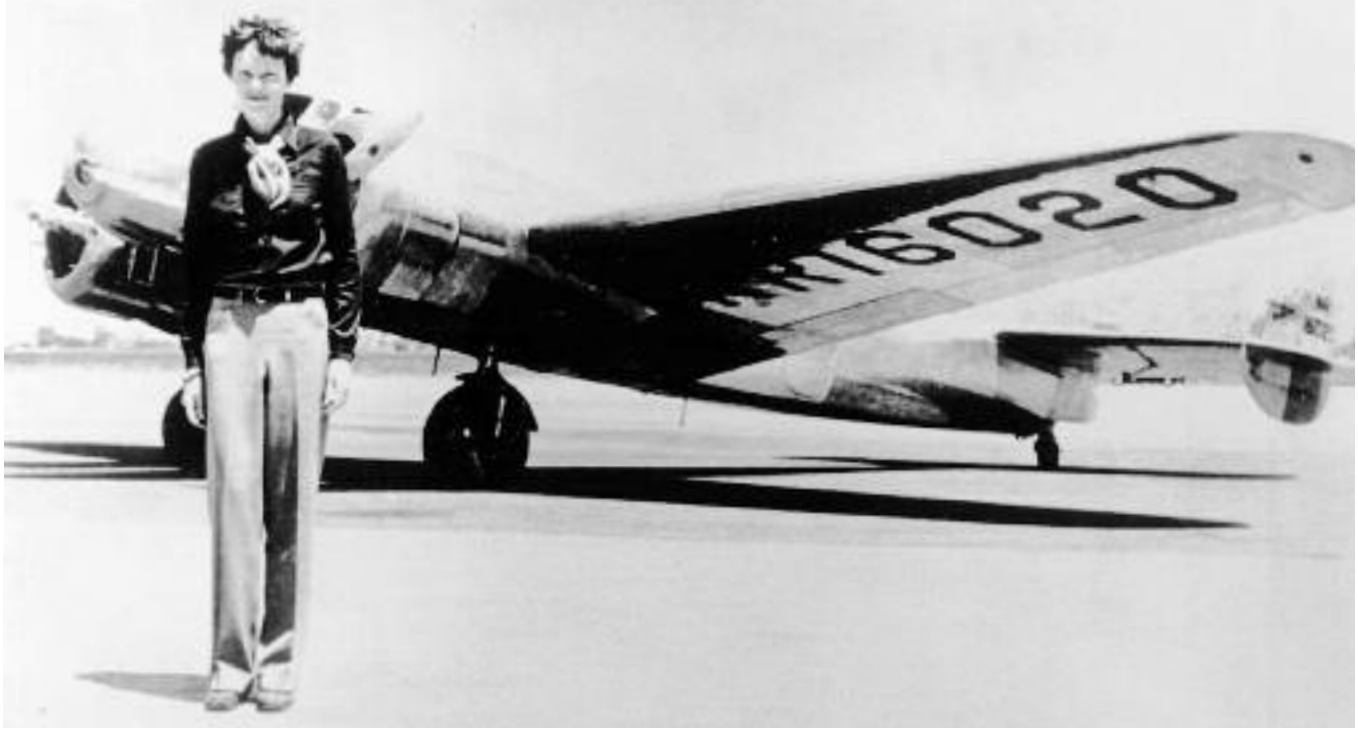

Amelia Earhart stands in front of the Lockheed Electra in which she disappeared in July 1937.

Flying High

Amelia Earhart is remembered for her fateful flight, but her life was filled with accomplishments—both in the skies and on the ground

By Sarah Achenbach

"It was a thing of rusty wire and wood and looked not at all interesting." Such was Amelia Earhart's recollection of the first time she laid eyes, at age 10, on an airplane at the 1908 Iowa State Fair. Her passion for aviation and her feats as one of its greatest pioneers would capture—and continue to hold—the world's attention long after Earhart's mysterious disappearance on July 2, 1937, during her attempt to become the first person to fly around the world.

With an adventurous spirit both born and bred—her mother, Amy Earhart, was the first woman to scale Colorado's Pikes Peak, and young Amelia's tomboy exploits in Kansas included building a homemade roller coaster and shooting rats with a .22-caliber rifle—Earhart was not afraid to break the molds that early 19th-century society set for women. After graduating from high school in Chicago in 1915, she served as a civilian nurse's aide during World War I in Toronto, where she, once again, saw an airplane up close. This time, she was impressed. "When the snow blown back by the propellers stung my face, I felt a first urge to fly," she wrote. In 1921, Earhart began flying lessons, and bought her first plane a year later: a used, bright yellow Kinner Airster.

Though she took classes at Columbia University and worked as a social worker in Boston, flying quickly became a consuming passion. On Oct. 22, 1922, she broke the women's altitude record, flying to 14,000 feet, and by age 30, Earhart was among a handful of licensed female pilots in the United States. Known for her courage, competency, compassion and engaging demeanor, she was selected to be the first woman crew member and captain on a 1927 trans-Atlantic flight, one year after Charles Lindbergh's famous flight. Only the men aboard were allowed to pilot the craft and receive payment, but the 20-hour, 40-minute trek made her internationally famous. The publicist for the expedition, George Putnam, helped her publish a book about the flight, and in 1931, he became her husband.

Over the next six years, Earhart lectured, wrote, co-founded an airline, designed a line of aviation clothes and active wear for women and set three aviation speed records. Her "firsts" include being the first woman to reach 18,415 feet in an autogiro (a precursor to the helicopter), the first woman to fly solo across the Atlantic (for which Congress awarded her the Distinguished Flying Cross), the first woman to fly nonstop coast to coast, and the first person to fly solo from Honolulu to Oakland, Los Angeles to Mexico City and solo nonstop from Mexico City to Newark. In 1935, Purdue University asked her to join its staff as a visiting faculty member, and Earhart enjoyed lecturing on career opportunities for women.

Earhart believed the pinnacle of her career as a long-distance "stunt" flier, though, would be completing the never-before-attempted flight around the world. "I have a feeling that there is just about one more good flight left in my system, and I hope this trip is it," she wrote of the 29,000-mile trip in her Lockheed Electra 10E aircraft.

On May 21, 1937, Earhart and former Pan American Airways navigator Fred Noonan flew the first leg from Oakland to Miami, with millions around the globe following the historic flight. On July 2, 1937, they began the final and most dangerous leg: crossing 2,500 miles of the open Pacific Ocean in search of the tiny, 2-mile-long Howland Island. Neither pilot nor navigator had much experience using the aircraft's two-way radio or knew Morse code well, but the U.S. Coast Guard cutter *Itasca* was stationed at Howland Island to help guide the plane via radio. Earhart knew well the risk of the 18-hour flight from Lae, New Guinea, to Howland Island, stating, "I shall be glad when we have the hazards of its navigation behind us."

At 6:45 a.m. on July 2 (Earhart had flown over the International Date Line), the radio crackled aboard the *Itasca*. Earhart's voice asked for a bearing. Her message nearly an hour later informed the ship's crew that the plane was low on fuel and that they could not locate the island. The *Itasca* crew responded to each of Earhart's four messages, but Earhart did not stay on the radio long enough for the ship's crew to get a bearing on the plane. Her final message came at 8:45 a.m. with news that she was "running the line 157-337." Then there was silence. Two hours later, the largest U.S. military search to date ensued with nine ships and more than 60 planes searching the South Pacific for two weeks with the full backing of President (and Earhart's friend) Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Earhart, Noonan and the plane were never found.

Just what happened remains a mystery. Some researchers claim she was a U.S. spy and was captured and tortured to death in a Japanese prison. Another has her plane landing in the Marshall Islands with the crew released by the Japanese and Earhart returning to the States to live an assumed identity in New Jersey. Others, such as The International Group for Historic Aircraft Recovery, believe she crash-landed on a small island and died in the jungle. Searches have produced tantalizing artifacts (bones, a woman's shoe, plane parts), though all theories remain inconclusive. Earhart's only sibling, Muriel Earhart, believed her sister's plane crashed into the ocean and was submerged within minutes.

The hold Amelia Earhart continues to have on the world nearly a century after she took to the skies is less about her final hours and more about a life filled with risk, courage and sheer joy of following her passion. "The most difficult thing is the decision to act, the rest is merely tenacity," she once said. "You can act to change and control your life; and the procedure, the process, is its own reward."