

Amelia Earhart's Transatlantic Adventure

Themes: Bravery; Courage; Achievement

What is your favorite thing to do? Do you love to play outside with your friends, read a book with your family, or paint a new picture to display in your room? Or, do you love to learn about scientific discoveries in school, how to play a new song on an instrument, or the perfect way to bake a delicious dessert? You may love to do many of these things and enjoy multiple interests and activities.

Amelia Earhart had many interests and accomplishments throughout her life – from writing books to creating her own fashion line, to designing lightweight suitcases and serving as a visiting professor at Purdue University – but she had one passion for which she is most remembered: flying.¹ However, Amelia wasn't always fascinated with aviation (which is another way of saying "flying airplanes").

Amelia Earhart was born on July 24, 1897, in Atchison, Kansas, six years before Wilbur and Orville Wright flew their powered airplane in North Carolina.² As a little girl, she loved wandering around outside, climbing trees, sledding, hunting, and riding imaginary horses. It wasn't until she was 11 years old that she saw her first airplane when she went to the Iowa State Fair with her parents in 1908. The young Amelia wasn't impressed with what she saw and later recalled, "It was a thing of rusty wire and wood and looked not at all interesting."³

Keep in mind that airplanes were still new and developing. This was only five years after the famous Wright Flyer flight of 1903, and airline travel in big planes like we know today had not been developed. Most planes only carried the pilot.⁴ Have you seen a plane flying in the sky? What did it look like?

Amelia was a remarkable student and excelled in her studies, particularly science. In 1916, she graduated from Hyde Park High School in Chicago and then attended a finishing school, the Ogontz School, near Philadelphia. She left school before graduating to volunteer as a nurse's aid with the Red Cross for wounded World War I soldiers at a military hospital in Toronto. While there, Amelia went to a flying exposition that would chart the course for the rest of her life. A stunt pilot flew a plane close to Amelia, but she did not flee in fear. Amelia recalled, "I am sure he said to himself, 'watch me make them scamper.'" However, this event stuck with her, as Amelia later recollected, "I did not understand it at the time, but I believe that little red airplane said something to me as it whished by."⁵



After enrolling in a pre-med program for one year at Columbia University, she moved to Los Angeles to be closer to her parents. On December 28, 1920, she went to an air show with her dad and rode in an airplane for the first time. "By the time I had got two or three hundred feet off the ground, I knew I had to fly," she said.

To fund her pursuit of her newfound aviation passion, Amelia worked as a truck driver, photographer, and stenographer. In 1921, Amelia took her first flying lesson with Neta Snook and bought her first plane. She called the yellow Kinner Airster the "Canary."⁶

The year after she started flying, Amelia set an unofficial altitude record for female pilots in the Canary (reaching 14,000 feet). She then became the 16th woman to get an international pilot's license from the Fédération Aéronautique Internationale (the governing body of sports aviation) in 1923.⁷

But as her pursuits as a pilot began to take off, her parents divorced in 1924, so she moved with her mom and her sister to the east coast, where she worked as a teacher and social worker. But her love for flying remained, and she continued to fly in air shows.

In 1927, she became a champion and advocate for aviation and women pilots as a member of the Boston Chapter of the National Aeronautic Association. (In between setting numerous aviation records, advocacy was important to Amelia throughout her life. She lectured about aviation and careers for women across America, became the first woman Vice President of the National Aeronautic Association, wrote magazine articles, and helped found the Ninety-Nines, a women's flying organization.)⁸

Amelia was approached by publisher George Putman and asked to be the first female passenger to fly across the Atlantic Ocean in 1928 (one year after Charles Lindbergh's transcontinental flight). Though Amelia didn't touch the pilot controls on the June 17, 1928, trip from Newfoundland to Wales, she became a sensation. The flight (with pilot Wilmer Stultz and co-pilot Lou Gordon) lasted for 20 hours and 40 minutes. Amelia showed what opportunities were available for women and what they could accomplish. Though Amelia was greeted by cheering crowds, amazed by her achievement, she didn't think she deserved any credit. She was particularly disappointed because she had been promised a turn to fly, but she only got to hop behind the controls on the last leg of the trip – from Wales to Southampton, England, after the transatlantic feat had been accomplished.⁹

"Stultz did all the flying – had to. I was just baggage, like a sack of potatoes," she said, and added, "Maybe someday I'll try it alone."¹⁰

Little did Amelia know, her opportunity would come sooner than later: on May 20, 1932...

... Five years after Charles Lindbergh made the historic first solo transcontinental flight, Amelia Earhart became the second aviator and the first woman to fly nonstop across the Atlantic Ocean alone. (She also was the first person to fly across the Atlantic two times.)¹¹

In a red Lockheed 5B Vega, Amelia departed Harbor Grace, Newfoundland, Canada, on the evening of May 20. But success was by no means guaranteed. Amelia had to face and calmly deal with many challenges throughout her flight.

Shortly after embarking on the more than 2,000-mile nonstop flight, she encountered bad weather. Amelia also had to overcome "fatigue and nausea, a leaky fuel tank, and a cracked manifold weld that spewed flames out of the side of the engine cowling. Ice formed on the Vega's wings, causing an unstoppable 3,000-foot descent to just above the waves. When she sighted land, she came down into a farmer's field and asked, 'Where am I?'"¹²

Amelia had arrived in Culmore, close to Londonderry in Northern Ireland. She had accomplished her goal and shown the world what she could do as a talented, brave, and capable pilot. In recognition of her historic transatlantic flight, Amelia was awarded the National Geographic Society's gold medal from President Herbert Hoover, and the Distinguished Flying Cross from Congress.¹³

At the time, her remarkable achievement was celebrated internationally and is revered today as a milestone in aviation. Though Amelia had many interests, she courageously sought to complete a daring and brave mission to cross the Atlantic by herself! She shared her passion with others both in her advocacy efforts and by her example. She is remembered not only for what she did, but for the love of flying she shared with others.

Footnotes

1. <https://airandspace.si.edu/stories/editorial/five-things-you-may-not-know-about-amelia-earhart>
2. [https://airandspace.si.edu/collection-objects/1903-wright-flyer/nasm_A19610048000#:~:text=After%20building%20and%20testing%20three,852%20ft\)%20in%2059%20seconds](https://airandspace.si.edu/collection-objects/1903-wright-flyer/nasm_A19610048000#:~:text=After%20building%20and%20testing%20three,852%20ft)%20in%2059%20seconds)
3. <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/earhart-timeline/>
4. <https://airandspace.si.edu/explore/stories/evolution-commercial-flying-experience>
5. <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/earhart-timeline/>
6. <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/earhart-timeline/>
7. <https://npg.si.edu/exhibit/earhart/pop-ups/02.html>
8. <https://airandspace.si.edu/stories/editorial/amelia-earhart-viva-la-vega>
9. <https://airandspace.si.edu/explore/stories/amelia-earhart>
10. <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/earhart-timeline/>
11. <https://airandspace.si.edu/explore/stories/amelia-earhart>
12. <https://airandspace.si.edu/stories/editorial/amelia-earhart-viva-la-vega>
13. <https://www.ameliaearhart.com/achievements/>

Additional Resources

- <https://airandspace.si.edu/stories/editorial/five-things-you-may-not-know-about-amelia-earhart>
- [https://airandspace.si.edu/collection-objects/1903-wright-flyer/nasm_A19610048000#:~:text=After%20building%20and%20testing%20three,852%20ft\)%20in%2059%20seconds](https://airandspace.si.edu/collection-objects/1903-wright-flyer/nasm_A19610048000#:~:text=After%20building%20and%20testing%20three,852%20ft)%20in%2059%20seconds).
- <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/earhart-timeline/>
- <https://airandspace.si.edu/explore/stories/evolution-commercial-flying-experience>
- <https://npg.si.edu/exhibit/earhart/pop-ups/02.html>
- <https://airandspace.si.edu/stories/editorial/amelia-earhart-viva-la-vega>
- <https://airandspace.si.edu/explore/stories/amelia-earhart>
- <https://www.ameliaearhart.com/achievements/>