

An excerpt from...

Amelia Earhart

The Legend of the Lost Aviator

By Shelley Tanaka

Going Solo

Amelia was famous for being a passenger on the *Friendship*. Now she wanted to try to fly across the Atlantic herself. In her own plane. Alone.

No one had flown the Atlantic solo since Charles Lindberg in 1927. Two women pilots had tried to make the crossing and failed. Amelia reckoned her chances of succeeding were one in ten.

It was dangerous. But she wanted to prove to herself, and to anyone else who was interested, that an experienced woman pilot could do it.

So she set about getting her new plane- a bright red Lockheed Vega- ready to go. The plane's wooden fuselage was strengthened, and a 500 horsepower engine was installed. Instruments were added, including three new compasses. Additional tanks were put in the wings and cabin to hold extra fuel-more than enough to get her across the Atlantic, if she flew in a straight line.

The cockpit was a cozy cubbyhole with everything within reach, from her thermos of hot chocolate to extra fuses. On her left were two pump handles that allowed her to change fuel from one set of tanks to another. If the motor-driven pump failed, she would have to pump by hand.

Whenever she could, she took the Vega up in the air. She practiced blind flying- flying without looking out the cockpit window and using only her instruments- to get used to the black, foggy, and stormy conditions she might meet over the Atlantic.

By the third week of May 1932, the plane was ready to go. Amelia began to watch the weather closely. She remembered all too well the long delay at Trepassey during the *Friendship* flight. She knew that bad weather in the eastern Atlantic could hang around for many days.

On the morning of May 20, the phone rang at the hangar in New Jersey. The weather in Newfoundland was perfect. She should leave right away.

After an overnight stop in New Brunswick, she reached Harbour Grace, Newfoundland. The weather was no longer quite perfect, but she could leave that evening. She read a final message from George before shaking hands with her mechanics and climbing into the cockpit. The wind was blowing right into the face of the plane- perfect for takeoff. Amelia pushed the throttle forward to make the airplane go faster. She could feel the tail come up and the plane get lighter and lighter on the wheels. The Vega gathered speed and rose into the air easily despite the heavy load.

For several hours, everything was fine. The weather was fair as she flew with the sunset at her back. The moon came up, and that was a comfort. The moon and the stars were always friendly beacons to a pilot flying through the night.

Suddenly, something happened that had never occurred in all her years of flying. Her altimeter- the instrument that measures height above the ground- stopped working. The hands flopped uselessly around the dial.

Then the moon disappeared behind the clouds. And then the storm came- heavy rain speared by lightning. For more than an hour she tried to hold her course as the little Vega was bounced around, but she had never flown through skies so rough.

"If anyone finds the wreck," she wrote in her log, "know that the nonsuccess was caused by my getting lost in a storm for an hour."

She decided to pull up above the storm clouds. But after a half hour of climbing, the plane began to slow. There was slush on the window. Ice. It was clinging to the plane, making it too heavy.

She knew she had to get into warmer air, so she headed down.

But with her broken altimeter, she had no idea how far she was above the sea, until she saw whitecaps breaking right beneath her. If the sea had been smooth, she might never have realized she was about to hit water.

Then there were flames. They were licking through a broken weld in the engine exhaust. Would the fire burn slowly and harmlessly until she could land, or would it flare up and spread? Amelia couldn't help wondering whether it would be better to drown or burn to death. At least, she thought, when daylight came, the flames wouldn't look so bright.

At last, dawn broke. But there was not land in sight. Amelia had been flying for thirteen hours on nothing but a few swallows of tomato juice. The plane was vibrating badly. A fuel gauge was leaking. She knew she had strayed off course, But where was she?

Finally, she spotted land. It was the coast of Ireland. She followed a railroad track thinking it would lead to a town and an airfield, but no landing strip appeared. In the end, she came down in a long sloping meadow, scattering cows across the field.

She had done it.