

An excerpt from...

Amelia Earhart

The Legend of the Lost Aviator

By Shelley Tanaka

The Last Flight

After Amelia completed her solo flight across the Atlantic, one ocean led to another. In 1935 she became the first woman to fly from California to Hawaii.

What would come next?

A trip around the world. Others had done it, but she would be the first woman, and the first to fly at the equator-the world's waistline.

Amelia had the plane for the job- a twin-engine all-metal Lockheed Electra. The cabin was filled with extra gas tanks to carry the plane long distances. It was equipped with an autopilot, two-way voice communication, and a radio direction finder that could point the way to a selected station within its range.

Amelia often said preparation was two-thirds of any venture, and that was certainly true now. Organizing her world flight took more than a year. This wasn't like driving across the country, where you could just set off and ask directions at the next gas station. She had to decide in advance at which airports she would land and learn about weather conditions during the times she would be in each place. She had to mark possible spots for emergency landings all along the way. Fuel and spare parts had to be shipped ahead to each airfield and several backup spots besides, and good mechanics had to be available to service the plane at every stop.

As she sat on her porch in California, studying maps & charts, her knowledge of geography grew from week to week while she planned her route from Oakland to Hawaii, and from there to Australia, Africa, Brazil, and back home. She tracked monsoon patterns in India and studied takeoff conditions in Africa. Planning the trip was such an adventure that she decided that one day she would write about "the fun of voyaging with maps-without ever leaving home."

"Why are you attempting this around-the-world flight?" people asked her again and again.

"Because I want to," she replied. But it was more than that. She wanted "shining adventure . . . new experiences." She wanted to learn more about flying, about people-and about herself. She believed that women should "do for themselves" what men had done, and even what they had not done.

On March 17, 1937, Amelia, along with two navigators and a technical adviser, took off from Oakland, California, in the late afternoon. San Francisco's brand-new Golden Gate Bridge glistened in the sunlight, looking like a shining thread of steel "speckled with "tiny beetles crawling home." It seemed like a very good omen.

Amelia flew the Electra west, chasing the setting sun. She passed a passenger plane. She saw the planet Venus setting. She smelled coffee coming from the navigators' cabin as she flew through the night.

Daylight broke, and word came from the navigators that it was time to start down. It was a great relief to see the island of Oahu when she broke through the clouds. Hawaii is a small scattering of islands in the middle of the Pacific. She knew how easily should have flown right past it.

They were delayed in Hawaii for two days, but Amelia didn't care. There were always delays in flying. Besides, this flight was not about speed. One day, she knew, people would fly around the globe so quickly it would take her breath away.

On March 20, as dawn crept over the hills above Pearl Harbor, Amelia began the second leg of their flight. The runway was wet from a light rain that had fallen overnight, and the plane was heavy with fuel, but it moved down the runway so easily that she thought she'd actually taken off.

Suddenly, she felt the plane pull to the right. She pulled back on the left throttle to reduce power on the left engine and managed to swing the Electra around to the left. For a moment she thought she would be able to regain control & straighten, but the load was too heavy, and the plane just kept skidding around until it keeled over.

The landing gear was wiped off and one wing was damaged. Gas sprayed, but, to everyone's amazement, there was no fire.

"Of course, now you'll give up the trip?" someone asked after Amelia climbed out of the cockpit.

Amelia shook her head. "I think not," she said.

She would go back to the beginning. And start all over again.