



Flying Solo

20th May this year marks the 77th anniversary of the first historic solo flight across the Atlantic by a female pilot. Amelia Earhart – pilot, author and adventurer extraordinaire – serves as an inspiration for all of us.

Text: Teri Glass | **Images:** © Gallo Images / Getty Images

It wasn't love at first sight. In fact, she was rather unimpressed by the first plane she saw when she was 10, referring to it as "a thing of rusty wire and wood." It was only after Amelia Earhart attended a stunt-flying exhibition, almost 10 years later, that she took an interest in the world of aviation.

From a young age, Earhart was a tomboy who defied conventional feminine behaviour. Yet, she also kept a scrapbook filled with clippings about successful women in predominantly male-oriented disciplines.

After school, Earhart worked as a nurse's aide during WWI. She began her first flying lesson on 3rd January, 1921,

with fellow female pilot Neta Snook. By that July she had saved enough money to buy her first plane – a bright yellow two-seater biplane that she named *Canary*. It was in this plane that she set her first women's record by rising to an altitude of 4,267.20 m (14,000 ft) in 1922.

In June 1928, she accompanied Wilmer Stultz and Lou Gordon on a landmark transatlantic flight, becoming the first woman to fly over the Atlantic. Around this time she also befriended publicist George Putnam, whom she later married.

Her record breaking didn't stop there. On 20th May 1932, Earhart became the first woman to fly solo across the →

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Atlantic from Newfoundland to Paris. Although forced to land in Ireland due to poor weather conditions, she was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross – the first ever to a woman – as well as a gold medal from the National Geographic Society.

Amelia didn't only achieve success while flying. During the course of her life, she wrote two books. *20 Hours, 40 Mins* – a journal of her experiences as the first woman on a transatlantic flight, and *For the Fun of It* – a memoir about her experiences and women in aviation. She also wrote articles and columns for *Cosmopolitan* magazine, aimed at increasing awareness about women in aviation.

In the years that followed, Earhart continued to break records. In 1935, she became the first person to fly solo across the Pacific from Honolulu to California, and the first person to fly non-stop from Los Angeles to Mexico City. Later that year, she became the first person to fly solo from Mexico City to Newark.

Never satisfied with the status quo, Earhart was determined to be the first woman to fly 46,670.90 km (29,000 mi) around the world. On 1st June 1937, Earhart and navigator Fred Noonan departed from Miami to do just that. On 29th June, they landed in New Guinea

with 11,265.40 km (7,000 mi) left to complete. On 2nd July they headed off to their last destination, tiny Howland Island, but never made it. They were in regular contact with the US Coast Guard until dawn, when Earhart failed to make contact at the scheduled time. At around 07h42 the Coast Guard picked up a message from Earhart saying that she couldn't see the island and fuel was running low. The last message was heard at around 08h45 when Earhart reported that they were running north and south, but couldn't see the island.

A \$4 million comprehensive search and rescue operation was commenced, but the government reluctantly called it off on 19th July 1937 after finding nothing. What happened to Earhart and Noonan is still unknown.

Amelia Earhart was instrumental in shaping the aviation industry as we know it. Her spirit is evident in a letter she wrote to her husband (in the event that she didn't return from a flight) saying, "I want to do it because I want to do it. Women must try to do things as men have tried. When they fail, their failure must be but a challenge to others." She broke the glass ceiling in a predominantly masculine industry and paved the way for other women to follow suit. ✈️



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