

MAGNETIC NORTH

Amelia Earhart was drawn time and again to Canada. Her experiences here set her on a path for a celebrated life – and a tragic death.

by Bill Zuk

IN EVERY LIFE, THERE COMES A TIME WHEN A SINGULAR EVENT changes fortunes or sets a new direction. For Amelia Mary Earhart, a young woman from Kansas, it came during a visit to Toronto in 1917. While walking on King Street with her sister Muriel, she saw four soldiers hobble by. Each was missing a leg, and they were holding each other up.

Shaken, Amelia ducked into a store, unable to watch the disabled men. Although the United States had entered the First World War in early 1917, the conflict had not affected many in her homeland. She later wrote, “four men on crutches ... was a sight which changed the course of existence for me. There for the first time I realized what the World War meant. Instead of new uniforms and brass bands, I saw men without arms and legs, men who were paralyzed and men who were blind.”

During her 1917 Christmas break, Earhart had been visiting her younger sister, who was enrolled at St. Margaret’s College in Toronto. She was due to return to her college preparatory courses at Ogontz School in Rydal, Pennsylvania, a suburb of Philadelphia, in the new year. Instead, the sight

of the wounded returning soldiers made such an impression on Earhart that she decided to stay in Toronto so that she could help the war effort. She completed courses in first aid and home nursing at the St. John Ambulance Brigade, becoming the sole American to enroll in wartime for the VAD (Volunteer Aid Detachment).

This sudden change of course was not unusual for Earhart. She was a gifted student, but flagging family finances resulted in constant upheaval and her being shuffled to six high schools in four years. Abby Sutherland, her headmistress at Ogontz, recognized her student’s unique talents: “Amelia was always pushing into unknown seas in her thinking, her reading and in experiments in science....” Sutherland mused that Amelia might become a scientist, doctor, or engineer.

In Toronto, her patients called her “Sister Amelia.” Her first assignment was at the children’s ward of the Victoria Memorial Hospital in Toronto, where Earhart was present when a child was undergoing a tonsillectomy. She thought she would be upset at the bloody operation. Instead, she found it “interesting.”





Amelia Earhart sits atop the nose of her Lockheed 10-E Electra airplane in 1936.



Above: Nursing sister Amelia Earhart in Toronto circa 1917-18. Right: A First World War veteran, his left leg amputated, sits in a wheelchair at "Wizz-Bang Corner" on Davisville Avenue in Toronto. Scenes like this inspired Earhart to volunteer to care for wounded and injured soldiers.



Her next posting, in April 1918, was at the Spadina Military Convalescent Hospital. The hospital's 233 beds were predominantly occupied by soldiers with poison gas burns, shrapnel in the lungs, tuberculosis, and shell shock. Many had fought in Europe at Vimy Ridge or Passchendaele.

Sister Amelia was well-received by her patients, some of whom called her the "American girl." Working twelve-hour days, six days a week, she emptied bedpans, made beds, served food, delivered medicine, washed patients, and worked in the kitchen. She even used her winnings from penny games to treat her patients to ice cream. Later on, she also worked in the laboratory preparing slides and cultures.

"I spent a great deal of time in the diet kitchen and later in the dispensary, because I knew a little chemistry," she wrote. "Probably the fact that I could be trusted not to drink up the medical supply of whiskey counted more than the chemistry."

At times, Sister Amelia played the role of "merry sunshine," giving back rubs, wheeling her patients out of the hospital, and writing letters home for the soldiers. Earhart, who identified as a pacifist, never forgot the experience.

On days off, she and her sister Muriel, both of them expert riders from childhood, rented horses from a stable. Muriel recollected that her sister conquered one fiery steed called Dynamite with an artful mix of carrots, sugar lumps, and a firm hand on the reins. After this, the stable owner invited Amelia to ride without charge.

While riding Dynamite, Earhart met a Captain Spaulding, a pilot and officer in the Royal Flying Corps. One day, he invited the Earhart sisters to accompany him to Armour Heights, a military airfield outside of Toronto, to watch training planes take off and land. Amelia was close enough to feel the sting of snow kicked up by the aircraft as the pilots gunned their engines.

Earhart tried to get permission to go up but failed, so she did "the next best thing." She got to know the young fliers,

listening to their exciting stories of bad weather and air battles. "My imagination soared . . . as high as their aircraft," she said.

In September 1918, Earhart took a girlfriend to see the air show at the Canadian National Exhibition (CNE) grounds. The pair took up a position at a clearing far from the crowd.

Earhart later recalled, "The [pilot] was bored. He looped and rolled and spun and finished his little bag of tricks and there was nothing left to do but watch the people on the ground running as he swooped close to them. That's when he saw us in the clearing. He dove. I remember the mingled fear and pleasure that surged over me as I watched that small plane at the top of its earthward swoop."

As the plane approached, her friend skittered away; but Earhart stood her ground, transfixed: "I did not understand it at the time but I believe that little red airplane said something to me as it swished by."

She continued her work at the Spadina hospital during the worldwide influenza epidemic in the summer of 1918. "When the influenza epidemic struck town, I was one of the few volunteers permitted to be on night duty," she wrote. "I was transferred to a pneumonia ward and helped to ladle out medicine from buckets in the overcrowded wards of the institution."

Earhart herself contracted pneumonia. More seriously, she was bedridden with a serious pneumococcal bacterial infection of her frontal antrum (sinus). This condition would afflict her throughout her flying career. Changes in air pressure during flights were especially painful. Antibiotics had yet to be invented, so opening and draining her sinus cavities was the only treatment available. These "washings out," as Earhart called them, were agonizing and only partially effective, leaving her, at times, a semi-invalid.

On November 11, 1918, the armistice was signed and jubilant residents of Toronto took to the streets. But Earhart, who was bedridden, was in no mood to celebrate. Her

thoughts were with the battered bodies and twisted minds of her patients, who didn't hear "a serious word of thanksgiving in all that hullabaloo."

In February 1919, Earhart left Toronto for Northampton, Massachusetts, to join Muriel. Her time in Toronto had left her with "a yen for medicine." After enrolling in a pre-medical program at Columbia University in New York City, Earhart prepared for a career as a doctor.

Her plans changed in 1920 when she moved to California to be with her family. Her father, Edwin Earhart, who had temporarily won his battle with alcoholism, asked his wife, Amy, to join him in Los Angeles, where he was practising law. Amelia and her sister arrived during the summer to begin a short-lived family reconciliation.

While in Los Angeles, Earhart and her father attended an air show at nearby Long Beach's Daugherty Field. There she confessed to him that she had always wanted to fly. In response, Edwin paid ten dollars for a ten-minute flight, piloted by well-known aviator Frank Hawks. Hawks cautiously placed a male passenger in the front cockpit with Earhart, fearing that she might panic once in the air. He need not have worried. "By the time I had got two or three hundred feet off the ground [sixty to ninety metres], I knew I had to fly," she said later.

In California, Earhart worked as a photographer, truck driver, and stenographer at the local telephone company. With some help from her mother, she scraped together one thousand dollars for flying lessons with famed female aviator Anita Snook.

On her twenty-fifth birthday, six months after her first flight, Earhart purchased a used Kinner Airster — an open-cockpit, single-engine biplane — that she nicknamed the *Canary*. On October 22, 1922, in an air meet at Rogers Field in Chester, California, Earhart set a world altitude record for women pilots, climbing to fourteen thousand feet without oxygen.

By 1924, however, she was temporarily grounded due to financial hardships caused by her parents' divorce. She sold the *Canary* and, with her mother in tow, relocated from California to Boston, where her sister was a teacher. Amelia took a job as a counsellor at Denison House, a Boston settlement house that served immigrants and the poor. She was able to pursue her flying hobby on weekends, gaining a modest reputation among local aviators.

Life seemed to have settled in to a comfortable pace for Earhart when the world became "Lindy" crazed in 1927. American Charles Lindbergh had flown the Atlantic solo to capture the Ortiz Prize for a flight from New York to Paris. There was now public interest in who would be the first woman to complete a transatlantic flight.

Among those interested in being first was wealthy socialite Amy Phipps Guest. Guest had already purchased a plane, the *Friendship*, a Fokker tri-motor seaplane outfitted with floats and once owned by U.S. Admiral Richard Byrd. Pilot Wilmer "Bill" Stultz and mechanic and co-pilot Louis Edward "Slim" Gordon were lined up to fly the *Friendship*. However, at the last minute Guest had to back out due to her family's objections.



Amelia Earhart in Harbour Grace, Newfoundland, on May 20, 1932, in a scene from a film made to document her groundbreaking transatlantic flight.

ENCOUNTERS WITH EARHART

My sojourn to find the real story of Amelia Earhart is rooted in the arrival of an innocuous package at the Royal Aviation Museum of Western Canada in Winnipeg. Inside was an unlabelled videotape. Nothing special, I recall someone saying. A silent black-and-white image flickered on the screen, and for less than a minute a giant flying boat was seen in a harbour setting. I immediately wrote down, "Dornier Do X" and knew when and where the film was shot: May 19, 1932, in Newfoundland. Just then, the scene shifted to a high-wing monoplane revving up. Spectators were gathered around the mechanics who were at work on the aircraft. Then I saw her.

Amelia Earhart, a lithe thirty-four-year-old, looked much younger in her short hair, silk scarf, and large flight jacket. For a second, she turned to the camera and smiled — a gap-toothed grin that her husband and relentless promoter had coached her to avoid. She quickly turned back to the tasks at hand, moving through a throng of onlookers and picking up a thermos, likely the one she would reportedly fill with tomato juice, her sustenance for a long flight. A newspaper tucked under her arm, Earhart next appeared with the aircraft at the Harbour Grace field, and then the aircraft wheeled around and took to the sky. The screen flickered again and went to black.

That videotape spurred a long odyssey to find Earhart in Canada that took me to Toronto and to Trepassey and Harbour Grace in Newfoundland and Labrador, along with other locations. At Harbour Grace, I presented a copy of the original videotape to the curators of the Conception Bay Museum, and later, I gave a copy to the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C. While at Harbour Grace, I walked the grass strip of the airfield where Earhart had once flown. I thought about her tremendous and ultimately tragic flying career, and I reflected on this line in a poem she wrote at high school: "Courage is the price that life exacts for granting peace." — Bill Zuk



Above left: Amelia Earhart, right, and Anita Snook, her first flight instructor, standing in front of Earhart's first plane, a Kinner Airster she called the *Canary*, in California in July 1921. Above right: Amelia Earhart's first pilot's license and identification photo. Earhart was the sixteenth woman to receive a pilot's license from the Fédération Aéronautique Internationale, the governing body of sports aviation.

The search for a woman to replace Guest fell to George Palmer Putnam, a publisher, writer, and sometime adventurer, and Captain H.H. Railey, who acted as a go-between. Guest had stipulated that the person to whom she would yield must be representative of American women.

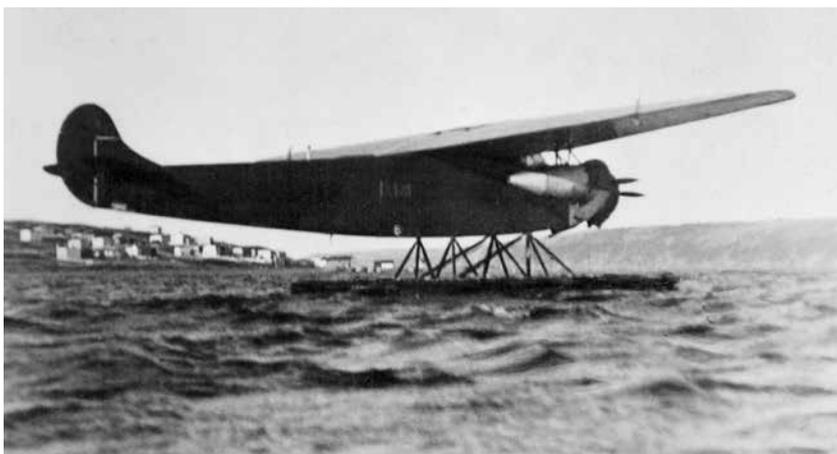
Unbeknownst to Earhart, who had not given the notion a passing thought, her name was at the top of the list. When a phone call interrupted her during rehearsals for a class play at Denison House, her response was, "Ask whoever is calling, to try again later." The caller was persistent, saying, "Hello. You don't know me but my name is Railey . . . Captain H.H. Railey." With that call in April 1928, Earhart's life changed forever.

A few months later, she was in Boston harbour, on board the *Friendship* as both passenger and, nominally, captain. Two attempts to take off failed because of bad weather. The third and final try on June 3, 1928, nearly ended in tragedy, with the cabin door swinging open during takeoff. As a heavy gas can rolled towards the door, Earhart jumped on it to prevent it from falling out but nearly toppled out of the plane herself. Gordon jumped up from his seat and dragged her to safety.

The flight was supposed to remain a secret, so as to stay ahead of other female aviators who were planning similar feats. However, Putnam, conscious of the value of publicity, was on the phone to reporters as soon as the *Friendship* left Boston.

The *Friendship* was supposed to fly to the departure point at Trepassey, Newfoundland, but was diverted to Halifax, Nova Scotia, due to thick fog. They hoped to stay incognito, but two *Halifax Chronicle* journalists dogged Stultz and Gordon far into the night while Earhart hid in a third-floor room of the Thorndyke Hotel in Dartmouth, across the harbour. The next morning, the reporters found the crew at a Chinese restaurant at the Thorndyke, where they took pictures and conducted interviews. It was Earhart's first brush with international fame.

On June 4, 1928, they flew in to Trepassey. There they waited for twelve days as strong gales and thick fog made takeoff impossible. During that time, Earhart — who cut a bold figure in her broadcloth breeches, high boots, leather flight jacket, and silk scarf — became a local celebrity. She boarded with hoteliers Richard and Fanny Devereaux and read to the children at the convent school.



Above left: The seaplane *Friendship* at Trepassey, Newfoundland, prior to Amelia Earhart's transatlantic flight in June 1928. Above right: Amelia Earhart and her husband, George P. Putnam, in Rye, New York, circa 1931-37. Putnam helped to coordinate Earhart's 1928 transatlantic flight and acted as her promoter following the flight. Earhart and Putnam married in 1931. Earhart disappeared in 1937 during her attempt to fly around the world.

The crew passed the time playing cards, receiving updates by telegram, and growing more and more dispirited.

The pilot, Stultz, began drinking heavily. They were worried because the delay had opened up an opportunity for two other female pilots to grab the honour of being “first across.” They learned that actress Mabel Boll, known as the “Queen of Diamonds,” had landed at the airfield in Harbour Grace, Newfoundland, on June 12 and was waiting out the storms there. As well, Thea Rasche, a German aviator known as the “Flying Fraulein,” was getting set to fly to Berlin from Long Island, New York. Earhart wrote in the plane’s log, “our competitors are gaining on us.”

The disheartened crew made a dozen attempts to take off from the narrow harbour. On June 12, growing more and more desperate, they spent four hours battling to take off. The “receding tide made the sea so heavy that the spray ... drowned the outboard motors,” wrote Amelia. “We are all too disappointed to talk.”

The crew tried again the next morning, but still the weather made their efforts useless. “The days grow worse,” Earhart wrote. “I think each time we have reached the low, but find we haven’t.”

Stultz’s drinking was worrisome. Earhart, who was authorized in a written contract “to have control of the plane ... and of all its employees as if she were the owner,” decided to take actual control of the flight. On the night of June 16,

she told Gordon her decision as they sat at the dining-room table. Stultz was in the room above them, drunk and feverish with a cold. They listened as he cursed and paced back and forth. If Gordon was willing, Amelia was determined that they would rouse the pilot the next morning, ply him with black coffee, and take off no matter what.

The next day, Stultz three times tried and failed to raise the heavy craft. Twice they dumped auxiliary fuel tins overboard, until they had only around 3,182 litres onboard. On the fourth attempt, the tri-motor Fokker plowed through the water for about three kilometres, rose slowly, dipped, steadied, and rose again, wobbling up through the fog, one water-drenched engine sputtering. They were on their way.

Blankets, books, food, extra clothes, and other non-essentials had been left behind to lighten the load. However, not long after

takeoff, Earhart spied a whisky bottle, three quarters full, lodged between a rib of the fuselage and Gordon’s tool kit. Her first impulse was to toss it overboard, but, remembering the fights she had had with her father over his drinking, she decided to leave it there.

Stultz later recalled: “She was wonderful. She was on the alert the whole time. She was ‘all eyes and ears.’ Even when flying through the thick fog blanket she did not show the slightest concern.” Earhart’s photographs during the flight included one made on an overflight of the *SS America* near

THE TRI-MOTOR FOKKER PLOWED THROUGH THE WATER, ROSE SLOWLY, DIPPED, STEADIED, AND ROSE AGAIN, WOBBLING UP THROUGH THE FOG, ONE WATER-DRENCHED ENGINE SPUTTERING.

NORTHERN EXPOSURES

Amelia Earhart visited Canada many times for both business and pleasure. The country would have a profound impact on her life. Here are details of Earhart’s known visits here.

1917-19: Amelia Earhart works as a nursing sister in Toronto during the First World War. While there, she is inspired by training and demonstration flights at the Canadian National Exhibition.

1924: Following her parents’ divorce, Earhart and her mother visit Lake Louise and Calgary in Alberta.

1928: Earhart and her crew overnight in Halifax in early June before departing for Trepassey, Newfoundland, to prepare for her cross-Atlantic flight.

1932: After overnighting in Saint John, New Brunswick, Earhart flies to Harbour Grace, Newfoundland. On May 30, she departs on a solo flight across the Atlantic.

1932: In December, Earhart gives two lectures in Toronto, overnighting at the University Women’s Club.

1933: Earhart visits Canada twice: for a lecture in Vancouver in February and, in October, to visit friends and fellow pilots Amy Johnson Mollison and her husband, James Mollison, at Wasaga Beach, Ontario.

1934: Earhart and her sister Muriel vacation in the summer and fall at Wedgeport, Nova Scotia, a famous sport tuna-fishing area.

1935 to 1936: Earhart visits her friend and supporter Texas millionaire Bill Moloska several times at his lodge on Lake Nipissing, Ontario.

1937: Acting as a “world reporter” for Quaker Oats, Earhart in April makes a promotional visit to Dr. Allan Roy Dafoe at his Callender, Ontario, office. Dafoe was the personal physician of the famous Dionne Quintuplets.



Above: A large crowd surrounds Amelia Earhart's Lockheed Vega 5C after her successful completion of a non-stop solo flight from Hawaii to Oakland, California, on January 11-12, 1935. Earhart can be seen standing in the cockpit.

Right: American pilot Frank Hawks, circa 1930s. He gave Earhart her first airplane ride in 1921.

Far right: Amelia Earhart and crew members, co-pilot and mechanic Louis "Slim" Gordon, left, and pilot Wilmer Stultz, centre, on June 24, 1928, outside the Thorndyke Hotel in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia.



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Above: A 1928 Lucky Strike cigarette advertisement featuring Amelia Earhart. Earhart accepted the company's endorsement only reluctantly because she did not smoke.

Below: The first meeting of the Ninety-Nines, an association of female pilots, in November 1929. In 1931, Amelia Earhart was elected the first president. The name Ninety-Nines was selected to represent the ninety-nine charter members. Membership was immediately opened to other women as they became licensed pilots.

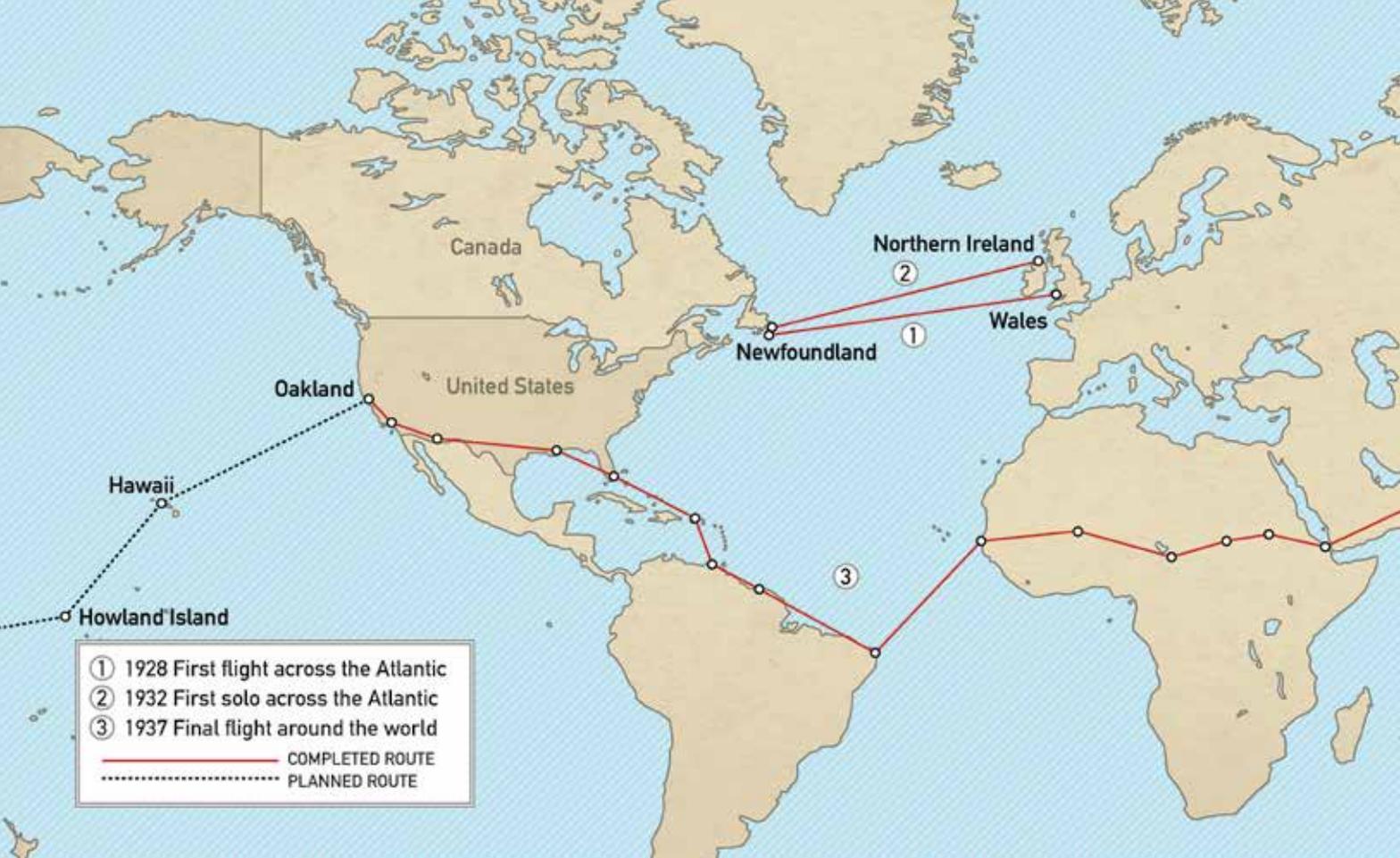


Left: American pilot Charles A. Lindbergh circa 1920-25. His record-setting non-stop solo flight across the Atlantic in 1927 sparked worldwide fascination with flying.

Below: Amelia Earhart and pilot Wilmer Stultz, both wearing aviator clothing, in Southampton, England, following the completion of their transatlantic flight in 1928.



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Ireland, a photograph she shot from an open hatch in the bottom of the fuselage.

For much of the trip, they flew blind in fog and rain. With the plane dangerously low on fuel, Earhart finally spotted land. Stultz brought the plane down after twenty hours and forty minutes in the air.

“We’ve come from America,” Earhart said after disembarking. “Where are we?”

“Have ye now?” replied Norman Fisher, the high sheriff of Carmanthenshire. “Well, I’m sure we wish you welcome to Burry Port, Wales.” It was not long before they were mobbed by reporters and photographers. While Earhart downplayed her role — “Bill did all the flying” — it made no difference to her fame.

Within the next few days, Amelia was feted, she participated in a parade, and she met both Lady Nancy Astor, a member of the British Parliament, and department store magnate H. Gordon Selfridge. She also signed a book contract, purchased an airplane, and was given several trunks filled with fine, expensive clothes. She came back to America as a beloved heroine of the skies.

Yet, in her heart, she knew that she would have to prove her mettle as an aviator. After completing her book, *20 Hrs., 40 Min.: Our Flight in the Friendship*, Earhart began a series of public appearances under contract to publisher G.P. Putnam’s Sons.

George Putnam (known as G.P. to confidantes) marketed her image aggressively, promoting her through lecture tours

and endorsements. These bolstered her fame and provided her with much-needed income. However, Earhart was reluctant to appear in an advertisement for Lucky Strike cigarettes, since she did not smoke, and only signed her \$1,500 contract so that her crew mates would be paid. She was soon contacted by *Cosmopolitan* magazine to write a regular column on flying.

During the next years, Earhart set numerous flying records, and she solidified her partnership with G.P. when they married on February 7, 1931, at his mother’s home in Noank, Connecticut. A.E. (his name for her) laid out a severe caveat: “I must exact a cruel promise, and that is that you will let me go in a year if we find no happiness together.” They would stay together throughout her life.

Despite the nearly unanimous acclaim she garnered, Earhart strived to prove herself once more over the Atlantic, this time solo. She would again have to come to Newfoundland.

Early in 1932, Earhart decided to attempt a transatlantic flight, in her rebuilt Vega 5B, on the fifth anniversary of Lindbergh’s crossing. In preparation for the project, she took instruction in instrument flying and studied Atlantic weather patterns. A new P&W Wasp C engine of 450 horsepower and fuel tanks totalling 1,900 litres were installed. Earhart recruited mechanic Eddie Gorski and pilot Bernt Balchen, who acted as her instructor and consultant.

On the afternoon of May 19, 1932, Earhart, Balchen, and Gorski departed Teterboro, New Jersey, aboard NC7952. Balchen flew the aircraft, while in the back, Gorski was squeezed in behind the large fuselage fuel tank. Earhart slept there as well.



Above: Amelia Earhart and her navigator, Fred Noonan, examine a map of the Pacific showing the route for their planned round-the-world flight, circa 1937.

Left: A map details some of Amelia Earhart's major flights: 1. First flight across the Atlantic, from Newfoundland to Wales, in 1928; 2. A solo flight across the Atlantic, from Newfoundland to Northern Ireland, in 1932; 3. The route of Earhart's round-the-world flight in 1937. Earhart made it to Lae, New Guinea, but her plane was lost somewhere over the Pacific Ocean while en route to Howland Island, a remote coral island that is a territory of the United States. The U.S. government built a rudimentary unpaved landing strip on the island in anticipation of Earhart's flight, but it has since fallen into disrepair.

The trio stopped for fuel at Saint John Airport in New Brunswick. Although Earhart tried to remain in the background, Stuart Trueman, a local reporter, recognized her and conducted an interview. After a night's sleep at the Admiral Beatty Hotel in Saint John, the trio came back to the airport in the morning and flew to Harbour Grace, Newfoundland. Trueman provided Earhart with a copy of the paper's morning edition to carry as proof that she had flown that day.

On May 20, 1932, Amelia left Harbour Grace. Her minimal provisions included canned tomato juice and a few squares of chocolate. Around her wrist she wore her lucky elephant-toe bracelet, a gift from Putnam. She needed some luck, as the grass airstrip at Harbour Grace was on a plateau that left no room for error; a few seconds of inattention, and an airplane would be smashed against an outcropping or fall into the sea.

Thirteen hours and thirty minutes later, she landed at Derry in Northern Ireland, the first woman to have flown solo across the Atlantic Ocean.

After the landing, the newspaper she had carried slipped out of the cockpit. Robert Gallagher, the Irish landowner on whose field she landed, picked up the newspaper, which Earhart had autographed in small, neat print, and sent it back to the *Saint John Telegraph* in New Brunswick. It is now in the archives of the Canadian Air and Space Museum.

From that point on, Earhart was constantly in the news. Her countless public appearances included one in Toronto at the end of 1932. She had not returned to Toronto since her nursing days. This time she was delivering lectures to the

University Women's Club and the Canadian Club. Her presentations provided insight into her passion for flight.

Earhart admitted that she was not impressed with the first airplane she saw — a “thing of rusty wire and wood” at the Iowa State Fair in 1907. It was in Toronto where she found her passion. Recalling her experience at the CNE air show, Earhart concluded her speech by saying: “I think that I can attribute the beginning of my aviation career to what I experienced here in Toronto.”

She authored two more books and taught women's studies and aviation technology at Purdue University. Then, at the age of thirty-nine, Earhart planned the most daring feat of her career, a circumnavigation of the globe.

On May 21, 1937, with her navigator, Fred Noonan, Earhart set out, flying as close to the equator as was possible. On July 2, 1937, they left Papua New Guinea on their way to Howland Island, four thousand kilometres away. They were never seen again.

By a trick of the atmosphere, ham radio listeners in Toronto received a message a few days later that sounded like an exchange between Earhart and Noonan. A newspaper report said the message was recorded by a “Mrs. Ernest Crabbe,” who transcribed on July 5, 1937: “Are you alright? ... Hold this line ... Do you think they got our SOS?”

Over the ensuing days, a handful of other people also claimed to hear messages from Earhart — but American naval authorities dismissed the transmissions as hoaxes. To this day, the true fate of Amelia Earhart remains a mystery. 🐼