

## Amelia Earhart



Courtesy FAA

Amelia Mary Earhart was born on July 24, 1897, in Atchison, Kansas, in a [house](#) her grandfather, Judge Alfred G. Otis, built in 1861. Because her father, an attorney who worked as a claim's adjuster for a railroad, travelled a lot for his job, Amelia and her sister, Muriel, spent a lot of time with their grandparents. After her grandparents died, the family moved often. Amelia completed high school in Chicago in 1916. In 1918 she left junior college to become a nurse's aide in a military hospital in Toronto, the city where her sister lived.

After the war and after a short stint at Columbia University in a pre-med program, Amelia dropped out of school and moved to California where her parents then lived. She took her first plane ride in 1920 and became hooked. She later recalled, "As soon as we left the ground, I knew I had to fly." She began flying lessons with female aviator Anita "Neta" Snook, working odd jobs to pay for her lessons. She received a pilot's license in December 1921 from the National Aeronautics Association (the federal government did not begin issuing pilot's licenses until 1927). She set a women's altitude record of 14,000 feet in October 1922. On May 16, 1923, she received an international pilot's license from the Federation Aeronautique Internationale (FAI), becoming the 16<sup>th</sup> woman to earn that honor.

When her parents divorced in 1924, Amelia moved with her mother and sister to Massachusetts where she worked as a social worker at the Dennison settlement house in Boston. But, her first love was still flying. In June 1928, she became the first woman to cross the Atlantic in an airplane – as a passenger. Receiving accolades for the trip, Earhart responded that the pilot did all the work, she just sat in back like "a sack of potatoes." Working with publicist George Putman, she wrote a book about the flight. With Putnam as her manager, she embarked on a national book tour, began to endorse a number of products, and became the aviation editor for *Cosmopolitan* magazine. She used the proceeds from this work to purchase a single engine Lockheed Vega in 1929. That year, she participated in the Women's Air Derby race from Santa Monica, California, to Cleveland, Ohio, and placed third. In 1930, she received a U.S. air transport pilot license and set the women's world flying speed record of 181.18 miles per hour. In 1931 she became the first president of the Ninety-Nines, Inc., an organization she helped to establish for women pilots. Amelia married George Putnam in February 1931.

Amelia also became the first woman to fly an autogyro, an early helicopter. On April 8, 1931, she took a test flight in a Pitcairn PCA2 autogyro, flying it to an altitude of 18,415 feet. She subsequently demonstrated the craft at a number of airshows. At a show in Detroit, Michigan, in September 1931, she crashed her autogyro attempting to land. She did not get hurt in the accident, but after several previous hard landings, she never flew an autogyro again.



Amelia Earhart and Eugene Vidal in CAA plane  
Courtesy FAA

The following year, she became the first woman to fly solo across the Atlantic Ocean, flying from Newfoundland to Northern Ireland. For this feat, she earned the Distinguished Flying Cross from Congress, the Cross of Knight of the Legion of Honor from the French government, and the Gold Medal of the National Geographic Society. She followed up her trans-Atlantic crossing with a solo flight across the United States, a solo flight from Honolulu, Hawaii to Oakland, California, and a solo flight from Mexico City to New York. Her feats earned her three consecutive Harmon trophies as America's Outstanding Airwoman. In 1936 she

began planning for a flight around the world.

Working closely with her husband, navigator Fred Noonan, and Eugene Vidal the head of the federal Bureau of Air Commerce (a FAA predecessor agency), she planned her historic flight. After their first attempt ended in failure, she and Noonan departed from Miami, Florida, on June 1, 1937, and flew east to west with stops in South America, Africa, India, and Lae, New Guinea. They departed Lae for Howland Island on July 2, 1937. They disappeared en route, and although a search was conducted until October 1937, Earhart and Noonan were never found. A court in Los Angeles declared the aviatrix legally dead on January 5, 1939.