



Miss Earhart's heavily laden Lockheed rumbles down runway, leaving America forever.

Challenged the Skies

by Jack Pitman

THE RADIO receiver at the Honolulu Navy Base crackled and sputtered. Then, faintly, came these ominous words: "Circling . . . cannot see island. Gas running low."

This was the last that was ever heard from the twin-engine Lockheed that vanished over the Pacific just 20 years ago, this week, with a lanky, freckle-faced aviatrix named Amelia Earhart. With her as copilot and navigator in an attempt to circle the globe was veteran flyer Fred Noonan.

The island they were looking for was a speck of soil and coral called Howland, halfway across the Pacific and just north of the equator. They were to refuel there after flying 2,500 miles from Lae, New Guinea.

But no trace of them or their craft was ever found. No flotsam, no jetsam. Their disappearance was total—and totally mystifying.

There were some who wondered why the flight was undertaken in the first place. They were the skeptics who had always maintained that Amelia was no more than a "stunt-flying fool."

For her part, it had been enough to reply that she flew because it was fun—and what other reason was needed? Sometimes she would add that flying provided bright adventure and new experiences.

After holding a pilot's license for some time, Amelia Earhart burst upon the world one day in June, 1928, when she became the first woman to fly the Atlantic Ocean—as a passenger. The epic journey transformed her into a national heroine, a status she never relinquished and did much to embellish.

In the nine years following her Atlantic flight, she chalked up more aviation "firsts" than any female flier before or since, including the first attempted world flight by a woman.

Added to these laurels were the rec-

Though she vanished

over the Pacific

20 years ago this week,

Amelia Earhart's flying

exploits live on.

ords she set. At one time she could claim, with official support, four marks, three for speed and one for distance. The latter still stands, as does one speed record, although only because its category was officially discontinued while she still held it.

The wiry girl from Atchison, Kas., loved a challenge—not for its own sake, but because she delighted in doing and accomplishing.

She simply couldn't abide anything static. She crowded into her lifetime activities ranging from aerial work and a stint as a nurse's aid, to designing dresses, teaching at a major university, and being an airline executive. Only

some of these activities were tackled for the money, but all were entered into with zest.

Amelia's second Atlantic crossing, this time solo, was made in 1932, the year after she married book publisher George Palmer Putnam. Her most active year in the air was 1935. In a four-month span she made headline-exciting trips from Hawaii to the mainland; Burbank, Calif., to Mexico City, and from there to Newark, N. J.

Some years later her husband wrote: "I believe that apart from and probably much more important to her than the reasons she gave, these flights represented for her the chance to be again in that universe aloft where, in a sense, she really lived."

The fatal world flight, according to Putnam, had been her "life's dream." If either one faced the prospect with anxiety, it probably wasn't Amelia. To fret, she often told her husband, was to add still another hazard. Prince Hamlet, she felt, "would have been a bad aviator—he worried too much!"

After a shakedown trip from California (which actually constituted the first leg of the journey), the globe-circling adventure began from Miami on June 1, 1937, over a route eastward that stayed close to the equator. Her plane was about 12 hours out of Lae, more than a month and some 24,000 air miles later, when Amelia sent her final, terse radio message.

It was to plunge a nation into mourning. How she met her end has never been learned. And for many, this is the least important part of the saga of one of America's bravest women.

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