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# Motion Picture “Amelia” Excites Audiences About Flight While Telling Story of An American Adventurer



Hilary Swank as Amelia Earhart in Mira Nair's AMELIA

*Photo by Ken Woroner*

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**T**he new motion picture, “Amelia” (PG, 1 hr. 51 min.), about pioneer aviatrix, Amelia Earhart, was released October 23, and based on box office sales to date, it appeals more to pilots than to the general public. *Amelia* is definitely a “pilot’s film,” featuring a variety of vintage aircraft, and involving a lot of notables from the aviation community doing the flying.

The film is based on two books (“East To The Dawn” by Susan Butler, and “The Sound of Wings” by Mary S. Lovell). Great effort was made to keep to historical facts,

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*Tom & Renee Watry*



Michael Terry

Joe Shepherd's 1936 Lockheed 12A Electra Junior, one of two Electras used in the filming of "Amelia."

while still allowing enough editorial freedom to be dramatic to heighten the excitement, although one wouldn't think that Earhart's life needed any more excitement.

Certainly in the 1930s as aviation took hold, there was a lot of interest in the aeronautical feats of Charles Lindbergh, becoming the first man to cross the Atlantic solo on May 21, 1927, and in Amelia Earhart, for becoming the first woman to do likewise on May 21, 1932. Earhart's participation in air races, and her attempt to fly around the world, only increased this interest.

The film brought out how Earhart lived to fly, and did what she had to do to support her aeronautical adventures. She was a highly motivated person, and was always looking for the next challenge. Earhart also had a strong desire to advance women in aviation careers.

Watching Earhart's navigator, Fred Noonan, try to navigate in bad weather using the stars as they tried to cross the central Pacific Ocean on

that fatal flight, shows a striking contrast with today's navigation using GPS technology, glass cockpits, and auto pilots, not to mention increased aircraft capabilities. Their chances of locating tiny Howland Island, where they were planning to land and refuel, would have

been drastically improved had their Lockheed Electra been equipped with modern avionics.

Another striking contrast in the film was how the times were right in the 1930s for Earhart to gain notoriety through aviation, more so than is possible today, with man reaching for the stars, and having landed on the moon.

After becoming the first woman to fly across the Atlantic, Amelia Earhart (played by two-time Academy Award® winner, Hilary Swank) was

thrust into a new role as America's sweetheart – the legendary "goddess of flight" – known for her bold, larger-than-life charisma. Yet, even with her global fame solidified, her belief in flirting with danger and standing up as her own, outspoken woman never changed. She was an inspiration to people everywhere, from First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt (Cherry Jones) to the men closest to her heart: her husband and promoter, publishing magnate, George P. Putnam (Golden Globe® winner Richard Gere), and her long-time friend and lover, pilot Gene Vidal (Ewan McGregor). In the summer of 1937, Amelia Earhart set off on her most daunting mission yet: a solo flight around the world that she and Putnam both anxiously foresaw as destined, whatever the outcome, to become one of the most talked-about journeys in history.

The film is directed by Mira Nair, and written by Academy Award®



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winner Ron Bass, and Anna Hamilton Phelan.

“*Amelia*” is a love story and an action-adventure. “*I wanted the film to be a living, pulsating portrait of this woman who dared to dream of things that no one had ever done before,*” said Nair. “*Amelia lived life as fully as possible and didn’t put a lid on her emotions or her ambitions. She left behind a legend that I hope will continue to fuel a passion in people to accept no limits.*”

The most vivid and adventuresome period in Earhart’s life – from her sudden exposure to global fame in 1928 to her shocking disappearance mid-flight less than 10 years later – comes alive on the screen thanks largely to the dogged passion of Avalon Pictures CEO Ted Waitt. An aviation and exploration aficionado in his own right, Waitt had long been fascinated by Amelia Earhart’s story.

“*Ever since I was a little kid, I was fascinated with Amelia’s disappearance. As I began reading about her, I became even more fascinated with her life than her disappearance,*” explains Waitt. “*Hers is an incredible story of courage and she was a real pioneer for women, as well as aviation.*”

He continues: “*Everyone today knows about Amelia’s disappearance, but very few people understand her life. I thought her tale could be an inspiration, as well as very entertaining. She still ranks as one of the 10 most famous Americans of all time, and people are naturally*

*interested in her – yet not many know her real story.*”

Avalon purchased two seminal biographies of Earhart: Susan Butler’s “*East To The Dawn,*” which explores little-known aspects of Earhart’s life, including her friendship with First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, and became the first book to document a secret affair with aviator and businessman, Gene Vidal; and Mary Lovell’s “*The Sound of Wings,*” which focuses on Amelia’s intricate relationship with her publicist husband and the intense promotional machinery that surrounded her. (Waitt especially praised Susan Butler’s book for being well researched and well written.)

Waitt also brought in Elgen M. Long, co-author with Marie K. Long of “*Amelia Earhart: Mystery Solved,*” as a consultant. Long is an expert on the flight logs that reveal, moment by moment, what happened on Amelia’s final flight from New Guinea en route to Howland Island – as what Long calls “*multiple failures of navigation and communication*” that put Earhart’s plane in insurmountable peril.

Using these heavily-researched sources as the backbone of their story, two award-winning writers – Academy Award® nominee Anna Hamilton Phelan (*Gorillas In The Mist*) and Academy Award® winner Ron Bass (*Rain Man*) – forged a screenplay that hinges on authentic, documented history, yet which *goes beyond the facts* to add drama to the film. After an intensive examination of her life and times, Phelan and Bass emerged with

a portrait of an Amelia so in love with what she saw and felt in the sky that it influenced her every move on earth.

Compressing 10 years into a couple of hours, Phelan and Bass reveal the many faces of Amelia Earhart – businesswoman, daredevil, fashion icon, promoter of women’s rights, wife, lover, die-hard individualist – but most of all as a woman whose palpable humanity is just as moving as her record-setting feats.

What especially struck Mira Nair in reading the screenplay was the idea that Amelia was, in many ways, America’s first true modern celebrity. She was not merely famous, but so internationally idolized that her very name and image became a moneymaking machine. This fame granted her influence that she never imagined and, ultimately, she learned to use it to advance both women’s rights and the age of aviation.

### The Cast

We are impressed with actress Hilary Swank for taking flying lessons prior to doing the film, and for her interest in those of us who have earned the title “pilot.” (The producers would not let her solo until the film was completed.)

Swank was most accommodating to the owner of the 1936 Lockheed 12A Electra Junior used in the film, Joe Shepherd, and his wife, Michelle, on and off the set. She showed her appreciation by autographing the inside of the door of the aircraft and posing for pictures. Swank also supports the efforts of the Ninety-Nines, the women’s pilot organization in which Earhart served as its first president.

Having garnered two Academy Awards® for transformative roles in “*Boys Don’t Cry,*” and “*Million Dollar Baby*” (directed by another pilot, Clint Eastwood), Swank is no stranger at going to great depths for her roles. But she also possessed something more than just the technical skills and physical attributes to play Earhart; she really acts from within the

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personality she portrays. Swank also stunned the director with her interest in flying, and daring deeds.

Yet, Swank also knew the role was a risk. *“There’s not a lot of liberty you can take with a character like Amelia, because she is such an icon and we have seen so many images of her that they are almost burned into our psyches,”* she admits. *“I think the challenge for me was to just fully commit to what I believed she was like.”*

Part of that commitment meant taking to the skies, so Swank would have an eye-opening, personal insight into what drew Earhart towards the heavens. *“I realized that she loved flying because she loved feeling free of the constraints she felt on the ground. I think she also loved being able to see the world – and you have to understand, in those days very few people had that chance – and experiencing new cultures. Most of all, she was driven by the promise of always trying something new. That’s why she was always going after a new record or heading to a new place, and that’s something I could relate to.”*

Swank soon discovered how much Earhart has meant to today’s thousands of women pilots. *“Almost every female pilot I met said Amelia was an inspiration to her,”* Swank offers. *“Amelia would have loved that and she would have really loved to see that women are now flying commercial planes across the Atlantic.”*

Swank was also moved by the central romance of Earhart – the relationship between Earhart and her husband, the public relations vanguard, George P. Putnam, played by Richard Gere, who kept Amelia’s flights financed via a constant spate of public appearances, advertisements and sponsorships.

Once Earhart and Putnam did marry, biographers believe that Earhart carried on an affair with aviator Gene Vidal, played by Ewan McGregor, with whom she would found Northeastern Airlines. Vidal also founded two other airlines, taught Aeronautics at West Point, and served as the Director of the United States Bureau of Air Commerce from 1933-1937. Swank says it was easy to understand the attraction between them. *“With Gene, she had this shared passion, they both loved to fly and both wanted to advance the business of aviation in America, and they saw the world in a similar way because of that,”* she explains.

Rounding out the main cast is another man who figured prominently in Earhart’s story: the talented aerial navigator, Fred Noonan (Christopher Eccleston), who would disappear with Earhart over the central Pacific Ocean. Having made his reputation navigating the pioneering “Manila Clipper” transatlantic route for Pan American Airlines, Noonan had impeccable credentials, yet was also known as a heavy drinker.

### **Amelia’s Plane: The Electra**

One of the main characters in *Amelia* was of course her famed, twin-engine, silver-and-orange Lockheed L-10E Electra, in which she would ultimately disappear. An



Amelia Earhart

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innovative design by Hall Hibbard, the plane was first flown in 1934 and soon became one of the fledgling airline industry's state-of-the-art, long-distance vehicles, as well as coveted by Earhart.

Since only a handful of Electra planes still exist in the world, the film's producers launched a global search for one that was ready for some serious action. The producers found one of two planes used in the film in the South of France, and had it flown across the African continent, in Earhart's footsteps. *"It was an incredible trip that nourished us through the course of shooting,"* says Mira Nair. *"I think people can relate to the plane because it reminds one of all the beauty and potential of flying."*

Veteran pilot and French journalist, Bernard Chabbert, whose own aviator father met Amelia Earhart briefly in Senegal, giving him a unique link to the story, owns this Electra.

*"The Electra is a masterpiece of a flying machine, an Art Deco, sophisticated, refined airplane with a seemingly magical potential for adventures,"* Chabbert muses. *"If you own an Electra – and only a dozen are still in existence – you dream of the day a movie company will call and ask if they can use your aircraft in a film about Amelia Earhart."*

But when that day came for Chabbert, it brought, with the honor and excitement, a massive logistical challenge. After all, his plane was in France and it needed to be in South

Africa where much of the production was taking place. Mira Nair wanted not only to transport the plane to Cape Town, but also to capture its long sweep across the African continent, mirroring Amelia's remarkable travels.

This would be no minor feat. The Electra Chabbert owns – known as *"Hazy Lily"* or just *"Lily"* for short – had already been in operation for more than six decades, had served as a flying limousine during World War II, and had been flown by the British pilot and alleged spy, Sydney Cotton, one of the inspirations for James Bond. After all that, the plane was now sitting in a hangar without an engine or propeller and damaged from a belly landing.

*"Now we had just four months to fix everything, find two new engines, have new propellers made, and more,"* recalls Chabbert. *"We then had to plan a very unusual trip around Africa. In 1937, such a voyage would have made us front page news! We duplicated a flight equivalent to what Amelia had done in her time, allowing the film to honor her travels with shots of ours."*

With barely enough time for a test flight, the refurbished Electra took off from Annemasse Airfield near Geneva and headed towards the coast of Spain. Two days later, it landed in Morocco, then on to Bamako, Mali through rows of thunderstorms. The journey continued as the plane hopped across Africa, often in search

of Avgas. The Electra flew over the shark-infested waters of the Gulf of Guinea, was grounded for several days after landing to fuel on the island of Malabo, crossed Angola and Namibia and at last landed in Cape Town with just 24 hours to spare before it had to be painted and ready for its close-up shot.

The emotions of watching the cast and crew interact with the plane made the long, hard trek worth it for Chabbert, who served on the flight crew. *"That old, graceful lady of the skies really became part of the cast,"* he says. *"Hilary acted right away as if she were Amelia and this was her Electra."*

Most of all, Chabbert was proud of how the plane performed, covering the kind of miles it hadn't seen in decades. *"The old aircraft never coughed,"* he notes. *"We flew difficult scenes, like Amelia's last takeoff from Lae, in New Guinea, when her Electra was so overloaded that she had to make a dive towards the sea to desperately grab some airspeed. We did that 22 times. We filmed Amelia's night take off from Calcutta under monsoon rains, four times in a row, from an unlit dust strip lost in the high grounds north of Capetown. We did many unique things, flying the old machine low above Victoria Falls, skimming the Okavango Delta desert, slipping between vertical mountain slopes, caressing endless soft beige sand dunes near Port Elizabeth. Through it all, it seemed the aircraft became a real actor, far more than a piece of décor."*

In the end, *"Hazy Lily"* would have to make the long, slow reverse journey back to Europe, but Chabbert says the journey was part of the reward. He summarizes: *"Lily had flown a total of 170 hours in eight weeks and never missed a beat. She had been in the hands of seven aviators, not mere pilots, who had lived with her the adventure of their lives. She had brought all of us deep into a time-warp trip, and helped us understand in the flesh what had been Amelia Earhart's personal truth."*



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Joseph Shepherd of Fayetteville, Georgia, owns the Lockheed Electra that was used in the film while shooting in Canada. Yes, there were two Electras and one Beech 18 used in the filming of *Amelia*, although the Electra “*Hazy Lily*” got most of the publicity. (See feature article elsewhere in this issue on Joe Shepherd’s Electra.)

### The Aerial Unit, Other Planes & Authentic Costumes

When it came to the look of Amelia Earhart, Mira Nair was most inspired by the things in life that inspired Earhart herself – vibrant style, the spirit of adventure, and most of all, the call of nature’s wide open spaces. To capture the raw thrills of solo flight, cinematographer Stuart Dryburgh put together a crack aerial unit led by 2<sup>nd</sup> Unit Director Marc Wolff, a veteran helicopter pilot in his own right and a leading expert in aerial photography. Aircraft used in the filming included vintage aerobatic biplanes, a beautifully restored Ford Trimotor owned by Greg Herrick of Golden Wings Museum at Anoka County-Blaine Airport in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and of course, the Electras.

For those planes the production could not find in a flight-worthy state, such as the Fokker seaplane named “*Friendship*,” in which Amelia first crossed the Atlantic, and the Lockheed Vega in which she set many of her records – the production built replicas. In turn, these replicas were then flown “virtually” via computer animation, overseen by the film’s visual effects team at Mr. X in Toronto.

The aerial unit of the film is filled with popular names from the air show entertainment industry and aviation community including Bryan Regan, formerly of the Red Baron Stearman Squadron and currently a member of the Aeroshell Aerobatic Team; Carol Pilon, a wingwalker who was once married to the late Jim Franklin, air show performer extraordinaire; Paul Molnar of Fighter Combat International and “*Team Extreme*,” and Jimmy Leeward of Leeward Air Ranch, Ocala, Fla., who also flew in the 1980 film “*Cloud Dancer*” with Tom Poberezny, starring David Carradine and Jennifer O’Neill.

The complete aerial unit consisted of the following persons: 2nd Unit Director/Aerial Unit (SA), Marc Wolff; Director of Photography, John Marzanno; 1st Assistant Camera, J. Glynn Williams; Aerial Coordinator, Cam Harrod; Tri-Motor Pilot, James Leeward; Tri-Motor Co-Pilot/ Mechanic, James Obowa; Aerobatic Pilot, Larry Ernewein; Electra Pilot, Joseph R. Shepherd; Electra Co-Pilot, Jay McClure III; Morane Pilot, Arnold Harvey Cleveland; Bleriot Pilot, Eric Andrew Presten; Wingwalker, Carol Pilon; ND Stunt Pilots, Bryan Regan, Michael Potter, Stephen Gray, and Hannua Halminen; Helicopter Pilot, David Tommasini; Ford Tri-Motor provided by Greg Herrick; Assistant to M. Wolff, Nicole Dipietro; and Aerial Safety, Paul Molnar.

The global landscapes that Dryburgh shot, from both above and on the ground, were largely brought to life in just



Actors Richard Gere and Hilary Swank. Gere played Amelia Earhart’s husband and publicist, George P. Putnam.

*Photo by Ken Woroner*

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one, enormously diverse country: South Africa, where Nair lived for three years, and which provided the production not only with vintage art deco airports and unending skies, but also the means to forge eight different countries through which Amelia traveled, without ever crossing a border.

The task of turning one country into several fell to production designer Stephanie Carroll. One of her biggest challenges was turning a grassy airfield in the Transkei into the Lae airstrip in New Guinea, where Amelia was last seen



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*"Finding the right airfield was much harder than you might think because flying the Electra has certain demands, so we had to find just the right balance between historical accuracy, what the plane needed, and what we could afford," she points out. "We ended up using an old military airport and turning it into a far more tropical locale."*

Equally key was overseeing the design of numerous historical planes. *"We were basically fabricating planes that don't exist any longer," says Carroll. "But we knew that many aviation enthusiasts would be seeing the film, so we felt a real responsibility to be authentic."*

To help recreate the Fokker F7 seaplane and Lockheed Vega, the filmmakers recruited visual consultant, Paul Austerberry, who oversaw the fabrication and construction of all the vintage planes.

Austerberry tracked down the original Dutch drawings of the F7 from the Fokker factory in Holland to match up the airframe structure and fuselage – and drew from photographic evidence to forge the plane's 29 foot-long pontoons used for water landings. He also was able to use the wrecked fuselage of a Lockheed Vega to rebuild the plane's structure replete with its original gauges. In addition, Austerberry created an interior mock-up of Amelia's Electra that was used for some scenes in addition to the *"Hazy Lily."*

The whole process, Austerberry says, was like a history course in

how modern aviation first got off the ground. *"Amelia's life spanned the birth and development of human flight," he notes. "Her first plane had a wooden fuselage and her last plane was a gleaming Art Deco wonder. In her few short years, there were incredible changes and we had the chance to reflect all of that on screen."*

More changes are reflected in the costume work of Kasia Walicka Maimone, who says the period and character of Amelia were a dream come true for a costume designer. Walicka Maimone especially enjoyed researching the history of flight uniforms – and discovering that, in the 1930s, there was no standard outfit for women pilots, which turned Amelia into a fashion pioneer as well.

*"A lot of Amelia's flight outfits she designed herself," she notes. "She brought in so many interesting twists: the French cuffed shirts, the perfectly tailored slacks and a custom-made, short leather jacket modeled after military jackets of the time. With that jacket, she started her own fashion trend."*

By 1934, Amelia had started Amelia Earhart Fashion Designs, with a line of clothing at Macy's. Her look was instantly recognizable – streamlined, ready-for-action with a powerful, unfussy elegance. The following is a "timeline" of events in the life of Amelia Mary Earhart, who was born in the Midwest, and likely died somewhere in the central Pacific Ocean doing what she lived for – flying! *Amelia" is a must see for aviators!*

## Timeline

- **July 24, 1897** – Amelia Mary Earhart is born in Atchison, Kansas. Her father is a lawyer and inventor, but also an alcoholic. Her mother is the first woman to summit Pike's Peak in Colorado.

- **January 3, 1921** – Just a few months after American women win the right to vote, Earhart starts taking flying lessons from female pilot, Neta Snook.

- **December 15, 1921** – Earhart receives her pilot certificate.

- **October 22, 1922** – Earhart breaks the women's altitude record reaching 14,000 feet.

- **June 17-18, 1928** – Earhart becomes the first woman to fly across the Atlantic (as a passenger) in a Fokker F7 piloted by Wilmer Stultz. Upon her return to New York, she is honored with a parade, handed the key to the city, and invited to meet the President of the United States.

- **October 1928** – Earhart begins a series of lecture tours organized by George Putnam to promote her first book, *"20 Hrs. 40 Minutes,"* which establishes her full-fledged celebrity.

- **August 1929** – Earhart places third in the First Women's Air Derby, aka the "Powder Puff Derby," in her brand new Lockheed Vega. As America falls into the tough times of the Great Depression, Earhart becomes a symbol of can-do optimism and American spirit.

- **November 1929** – Earhart helps to organize "The Ninety-Nines," the first women's pilot organization.

- **July 5, 1930** – Earhart sets the



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- **February 7, 1931** – George Putnam and Amelia Earhart are married in Connecticut.

- **April 8, 1931** – Earhart sets the women's autogiro altitude record of 18,415 feet.

- **May 20-21, 1932** – Earhart becomes the first woman and second person to fly solo across the Atlantic. She receives the National Geographic Society's gold medal from President Hoover and the Distinguished Flying Cross from Congress. She writes her second book, "The Fun of It," about her journey.

- **August 24-25, 1932** – Earhart sets the women's record for fastest non-stop transcontinental flight.

- **April, 1933** – Earhart is invited to dinner at the White House with Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt, and famously takes the First Lady on her first-ever night flight, sparking a lasting friendship.

- **January 1934** – Earhart turns to the Pacific Ocean and becomes the first pilot to fly solo from Hawaii to California. Soon after, she debuts her own brand-name fashion line at Macy's.

- **January 11, 1935** – Earhart pioneers the first solo flight across the Pacific Ocean, between Honolulu and Oakland, and uses the first civilian plane equipped with a two-way radio.

- **April 19-20, 1935** – Earhart is the first person to fly solo from Los Angeles to Mexico City.

- **June 1, 1937** – Earhart and Fred Noonan take off from Miami, Florida on an around-the-world flight. After 22,000 miles of flying, Earhart and Noonan are last seen in Lae, New Guinea. On July 2, en route to tiny Howland Island for refueling, the U.S. Coast Guard cutter "Itasca" loses contact with Earhart and she is not



Hilary Swank  
Photo by Ken Woroner

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heard from again. President Roosevelt orders a massive search, which is called off on July 18, 1937. Two years later, she is declared legally dead.

### Howland Island

Howland Island is an uninhabited coral island located just north of the equator in the central Pacific Ocean, about 1,700 nautical miles (3,100 km) southwest of Honolulu (0°48'07"N



Howland Island  
NASA Photo

176°38'3"W and 0.80194°N 176.63417°W). The island lies almost halfway between Hawaii and Australia and is an unincorporated, unorganized territory of the United States. Geographically, it is part of the Phoenix Islands. For statistical purposes, Howland is grouped as one of the United States Minor Outlying Islands.

Howland Island covers 455 acres (1.84 km<sup>2</sup>), with 4 miles (6.4 km) of coastline. The island has an elongated shape on a north-south axis, and is devoid of any lagoon.

Howland Island National Wildlife Refuge consists of the 455-acre (1.84

km<sup>2</sup>) island and the surrounding 32,074 acres (129.80 km<sup>2</sup>) of submerged land. The island is managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as an insular area under the U.S. Department of the Interior and is part of the Pacific Remote Islands Marine National Monument.

An airstrip, built in the late 1930s to accommodate Amelia Earhart's planned stopover, was never used, was subsequently damaged, not maintained, and gradually disappeared.

**"There's more to life than being a passenger."**

Amelia Earhart

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