


V E R T I C A L I O N B O O K S



# THE SOUND OF WINGS

"...adds fascinating detail..."

—*New York Times*  
Book Review,  
front page

"The most carefully researched Earhart biography to date."

—*The Boston Herald*

*The Life of*

# AMELIA EARHART

*By the Author of Straight on Till Morning*

# MARY S. LOVELL

*the* SOUND *of*  
W I N G S

THE LIFE OF AMELIA EARHART

M A R Y S. L O V E L L

*St. Martin's Press New York*

Cover photo: Amelia as she appeared on her 1923 pilot's license issued by the Federation Aeronautique Internationale and National Aeronautics Association of U.S.A., Inc.

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## *Note to the Reader*

The author has chosen to retain the original spellings of words in the extracted material. Often “[sic]” will appear after these apparent errors in grammar or spelling; other times they are left as is without “[sic],” to convey intentional humor or the flavor of the writer’s style.

*This book is dedicated to the memory of  
John A. Belcher*

*“He was a verray parfit gentil knight”  
—Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales*

By the same author:

*A Hunting Pageant*

*Straight On Till Morning: The Biography of Beryl Markham*

## *Courage*

Courage is the price that Life exacts for granting peace,  
The soul that knows it not, knows no release  
From little things;  
Knows not the livid loneliness of fear,  
Nor mountain heights where bitter joy can hear  
The sound of wings.

How can Life grant us boon of living, compensate  
For dull grey ugliness and pregnant hate  
Unless we dare  
The soul's dominion? Each time we make a choice, we pay  
With courage to behold the restless day,  
And count it fair.

—*Amelia Earhart*, 1927. "*Courage*" appeared in  
*Marion Perkins's "Who Is Amelia Earhart?"*  
*Survey magazine*, July 1, 1928, p. 60

## *Acknowledgments*

Many organizations provided me with access to collections of documents, materials, and facilities with unfailing patience:

American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming (Emmett D. Chisum). Collection: Papers of Eugene Vidal.

Atchison County Library, Atchison, Kansas. Collection: Amelia Earhart.

Atchison Museum, Atchison, Kansas (Father Angelus and his team). Collection: Amelia Earhart.

British Library, Newspaper Collection, Colindale, London, England.

British Library, Reading Room, London, England.

Butler Library, and Oral History Research Office, Columbia University, New York, New York. Aviation tapes.

The Carnegie Library, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania (Mrs. Ann Lloyd). Phipps family records.

Amelia Earhart's Home and Museum, Atchison, Kansas.

International Women's Air and Space Museum, Centerville, Ohio. (Ms. Steadman). Amelia Earhart files.

Library of Congress, Map Room, Madison Building, Washington, D.C. (Tom De Claire). Charts of Howland Island and Pacific Ocean, before and after *Itasca* survey of 1936.

National Archives and Record Service, Washington, D.C. (Richard Van Dernhoff, Military Records): Record Group 80 (file A21-5) and M1067 (roll 48) room 400.

Ninety-Nines Resource Center, Oklahoma (Loretta Gragg and Virginia Oualline). Collection: Amelia Earhart.



Public Record Office, Kew, England. File: AVIA2-1082 Amelia Earhart.

Purdue University, Lafayette, Indiana, Special Collections Library (Ms. Helen Q. Schroyer), Publishing Department (Mr. Bob Topping).

Franklin D. Roosevelt Library (Raymond Teichman), Hyde Park, New York.

Royal Geographical Society, London, England (Mr. Jeremy Smith—Map Room).

Salisbury Library, Salisbury, Wiltshire, England.

Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College, Cambridge, Massachusetts. Collections: Amy Otis Earhart; Muriel Morrissey; Amelia Earhart. Refs: 83-M69; A129; 78/M147.

Seaver Center for Western History Research, Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County, Los Angeles, California (Janet Evenden). Amelia Earhart Collection 1061.

Smithsonian Institution, National Air and Space Museum Library, Washington, D.C. File: FO171300.

University of California at Los Angeles, Library and Special Collections. Collection: Elizabeth Hyatt Gregory.

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Wellesley College, Wellesley, Massachusetts (Ms. Jean Berry). Women's Union and student records; Dorothy Binney Putnam.

I would like to make it very clear that at no time did I meet any resistance to my researches, and everyone with whom I met or spoke, in what might be called "official" circles in the United States, was most helpful.

The amount of research material available on the subject of Amelia's disappearance is enormous, amounting to many thousands of original contemporary documents, much of which is on microfilm. In addition, much material of a more personal nature exists in private collections. There is, inevitably, duplication; and where I have attributed a source in the book, it may be that I have accessed that particular document in other collections elsewhere as well.

It would be impossible to produce a work of this scope without the assistance and cooperation of a great number of people, and so I wish to

## A c k n o w l e d g m e n t s

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Although I have mentioned the various members of the Putnam family by name, I should like to thank them collectively for their kindness to me, their marvelous cooperation in allowing me to see documents that for so long had been considered very personal, and last—but not least—for their hospitality. George Putnam's fourth wife—his widow, Peg—was an unfailing source of information, and for a while it seemed that every mail brought some new anecdote, photograph, or document.

While most of Amelia and George's story lies in the United States, both in archives and in the minds of their many connections, there is also a British connection, due to Amelia's two record-breaking flights across the Atlantic. One of my last research tasks was a visit to Burry Port in South Wales, where Amelia and her two male companions landed in June 1928. There I met Les George, a restaurateur, who has made a point of keeping Amelia's name alive in the small town with The Amelia Dining Room and The Friendship Bar. On the walls are newspaper cuttings, photographs, and paintings of the *Friendship's* landing; menu cards and coasters are also dedicated to the story. Mr. George kindly provided audiotapes of townspeople who actually witnessed the landing over sixty years ago, and he has also provided other memorabilia that have proved helpful.

I wish to thank Katy Belcher, who undertook two lengthy research trips with me to the United States, and in so doing halved the time required to delve through the masses of documentation held in various collections there; and Susan Rabiner, who was responsible for reawakening my interest in the subject.

My editors, Tony Whittome and Barbara Anderson, have been a source of enormous help, especially during the final stages of the book, and I am most grateful for their interest and always constructive advice.

Finally, a very special thanks to G.A.H.W., without whose help and encouragement this book would probably have been finished in half the time.

#### PHOTOGRAPHIC ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I also wish to thank all those who kindly provided photographs during the course of my research. I regret that only a small number of them can be reproduced here. As with original documents, many photographs are duplicated in various collections and in some cases several people have provided me with the same picture. Those that are featured in this book are used with appropriate permission from the following:

Purdue University: plates 2, 3, 4, 8, 10, 32, 34, 36, 40, 42, 43, 45, 50, 51, 53, 61, 62, 65, 66, 68

Mrs. Margaret Lewis: frontispiece, plates 6, 9, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 28, 31, 35, 37, 41, 71, 72, 73

Mrs. Margaret Lewis (courtesy Seaver Center for Western History Research): plates 7, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 29, 30, 33, 38, 39, 44, 46, 48, 49, 54, 63, 64, 67

James Crowell: plates 11, 12, 13, 14

Albert Bresnik: plates 57, 60, 70

Albert Bresnik (courtesy Mrs. Margaret Lewis): plates 55, 56, 59

BBC Hulton Picture Library: plate 20

Cap Palmer: plate 47

Laura Stickney: plate 52

Geoffrey A. H. Watts: plate 21

## *Introduction*

It is now more than fifty years since Amelia Earhart disappeared while attempting to be the first woman to fly around the world. In 1928, she had been the first woman to fly across the Atlantic; four years later, she became the first woman to fly it solo at a time when only one other person—Charles Lindbergh—had done so. Subsequently, she performed any number of aviation “firsts,” many of which were also “first woman” records.

What is it about Amelia Earhart that has kept her name alive? Charles Lindbergh achieved a similar lasting fame, but most of the other early aviators have—for the most part—been forgotten by all except aviation enthusiasts.

Amelia’s achievements were remarkable, but some of her reputation rests on the outstanding management skills of her husband, George Palmer Putnam. Putnam was a publicist of such ability that during Amelia’s life her name received almost constant media exposure. Indeed, my research indicates that it was mainly due to Putnam’s brilliant management of the name Amelia Earhart that she is still remembered.

Much has already been written about Amelia Earhart. She wrote three books herself, mainly about her flying exploits. Her husband followed these with a biography shortly after her presumed death in 1937, and any number of books have been written since, theorizing on what might have happened to Amelia when her plane failed to arrive at its destination on a small island in the Pacific Ocean. Why the abiding interest?

I began to research Amelia’s story in 1962, not for a book but out of personal curiosity. I was then (honorary) secretary to the Los Angeles Chapter of the Antique Airplane Association, and in this connection I met the famous Hollywood stunt pilot Paul Mantz. It was common

knowledge that Paul had been closely involved with Amelia in her later record-breaking flights. The aviation expert on Amelia's team, Mantz had been her copilot when she took part in the National Air Races, and was also a business partner in a California flying school. What Paul told me about the circumstances surrounding Amelia's departure on her world-circling final flight precipitated my initial interest in her.

Amelia had been very much on Paul's mind at that time, for he had recently been interviewed by CBS journalist Fred Goerner. Goerner believed that she had been on a spy mission for the United States government, using the round-the-world flight as a cover. Further, he believed that she had made a forced landing near a Japanese-mandated island in the Pacific, had been captured, and died in captivity.

Paul did not believe that Amelia had been a spy, but what he told me—and others—seemed equally interesting: that Amelia's plane was not ready when she took off on that fatal flight; that Paul anticipated at least another two days' work. He was shocked, he said, to hear that she had gone without even saying goodbye to him. Later, his inquiries led him to believe that George Putnam had pressured Amelia into leaving early because he had organized a huge civic welcome for her return to Los Angeles, timed for July 4. If she delayed any longer, then, allowing for contingency delays for weather conditions, spare parts, or engineering faults, she could not make it back in time.

Paul also claimed that Putnam used Amelia and her reputation, implying that she was driven to exhaustion because of George's manipulative methods.

This seemed an interesting and plausible story from a man I admired and respected, and it never occurred to me to doubt it or consider that it was simply one side of the story. I had no reason, either, to suspect that after Amelia's disappearance, Paul Mantz and George Putnam had become enemies over a matter concerning her estate. So when, in early 1987, I started researching Amelia Earhart full-time for a biography under contract with a publisher, I was content to accept the story that George Putnam had used Amelia for his own ends. This has been written about by so many Earhart researchers that I had no cause to question its authenticity.

As my research progressed, however, I realized that not only was George Putnam a fascinating person in his own right but also that if it had not been for him, Amelia would undoubtedly have dropped out of public awareness. Women fliers such as Ruth Law, Louise Thaden, Ruth Elder, Elinor Smith, Ruth Nichols, Katherine Stinson, Bobbi Trout, and

Phoebe Omlie are remembered with respect by those interested in American civil aviation, but I suspect few others would recognize their names. Yet all these women were contemporaries of Amelia and all had to their credit great “firsts” in aviation that at the time made headline news. Without George, Amelia probably never would have performed many of her record-breaking feats, and even if she had, it is doubtful that this alone would have been sufficient to keep her name alive for fifty years.

What George did for Amelia’s career was threefold. Firstly, he inspired and encouraged her; secondly, he worked on her behalf to publicize her name and reputation, creating openings for a financially viable career in aviation; thirdly, he introduced her to a wide circle of powerful people and obtained the necessary financial backing for her record attempts. Arguably, without this help, Amelia would never have made that final flight with its tragic outcome (for the sponsorship would not have been available to support the venture except to someone of public stature beyond the ordinary); and so Amelia might have lived to a ripe old age.

George himself said of Amelia after her death that “if there had been no George Putnam to lend a hand here and there, some way would have appeared by which the individuality which was A.E. would have secured its freedom to flower, and the wings with which to soar to fame.” However, my opinion is that without George Putnam, my generation would have not heard of the name Amelia Earhart outside of aviation circles.

Then, too, there was the accusation that George “used” Amelia and that she recognized and resented George’s manipulations of her time and reputation. I found no evidence to support this; indeed, quite the reverse was true. There was love between George and Amelia. Those closest to them were aware of it and spoke about it. Surviving correspondence contains loving endearments, and it is necessary only to watch the couple together on old newsreel footage to see the warmth and comfortable rapport that existed between them. If the couple had disagreements, they were no more than the normal everyday ones that exist in any healthy relationship, particularly when the two people involved also work together and have strong personalities.

So this story, which began as a biography of Amelia, has become the story of Amelia and George, and their relationship is the real core of the book. I have also covered the early part of their lives, before they met, so that their characters could be seen developing.

In Amelia’s case, it has been necessary to cover ground that has already been broken, some of it many times. I have tried to weed out the myths and highlight what I consider to be the essential parts of her story. This

book does not include all my research—one could fill two volumes with anecdotes and stories, but there is not always evidence to prove that they are anything more than the perpetuation of legend.

Fortunately, I have uncovered new information that may illustrate some previously unknown facts of Amelia's character and throughout my work, I have been aware of Amelia's calm, efficient, and, above all, humorous spirit. It is extremely difficult not to like Amelia.

I do not subscribe, however, to the "Saint Amelia" concept that I often encountered. Amelia, I feel, would have hooted derisively at this canonization. She could be waspish, intolerant, and ill-humored, just like any of us. Stress often lay at the root of this.

As for George Putnam, very little has been previously published about him, except what he chose to tell in his memoir, *Wide Margins*. This is a most frustrating book because it consists largely of portraits of the interesting people he met in his career. As a close friend summed up, "I told him it was the only autobiography I'd ever read that was about *other* people!" And this is the man who has been accused of gross self-aggrandizement. People either loved or loathed George Putnam, and there is still no middle ground. I find him altogether fascinating, with an agile mind and a tremendous drive that also drove and inspired others. However, he could not tolerate fools, bores, or laziness and he did not bother to hide his intolerance.

A great injustice has been done to George, though it is fair to say that he was not always entirely blameless. He had an explosive temper and those who suffered the effects of his anger found it hard to forgive him. He had the killer instinct in business; he was savage to anyone who stood between him and success and this earned him many enemies.

Jim Crowell was a student in Bend, Oregon, in 1965, when he came across part of George's story while searching for the subject for a thesis. George had been editor of the local Bend paper before the First World War, as well as being an all-round colorful character in Bend folklore. I had nearly finished my research when I was put in touch with Mr. Crowell by members of the Putnam family, and his thesis material, including photographs, which he has kindly allowed me to include here, has been enormously helpful.

Work on this book has brought me into contact with notable people in the world of aviation whom I had greatly admired for many years but never expected to meet. Elinor Smith and Bobbi Trout, for example, both still live life to the full and are fascinating personalities. In addition, there

was a visit to Muriel Morrissey, Amelia's sister, which really made me feel close to my subject.

Over eighty when I met her in 1987, Muriel was fine-boned and stooped slightly. On the walls of her West Medford, Massachusetts, apartment are photographs and paintings of Amelia, and there are other memorabilia dotted around on tables and in cupboards. When Muriel serves tea, it is always done formally from an antique tea service of paper-thin china. She does not allow the arthritis in her hands to prevent her pouring the tea with careful precision, handing over the milk jug and sugar bowl in the way most easy for her guest to take.

Apart from the pleasure of meeting Mrs. Morrissey and interviewing her about Amelia, I gained a good impression of the upbringing the two Earhart girls had received; for here was a lady in the true sense. Muriel's life has not always been an easy one, but she has retained an innate grace and soft-spoken charm; and I suppose had Amelia lived, she would have been similar in many ways.

Many of my informants still have sharp memories of George and Amelia. Others have only the haziest of recollections: "You know, all this was a *very* long time ago, my dear. . . ." The memories and recollections, the evidence (one might say), differ enormously and so I have tried to bring all shades of opinion into this book in an attempt to paint my portraits of Amelia and George as faithfully as possible.

This book is a biography. It does not set out to add yet another theory to the enduring mystery of "Whatever happened to Amelia Earhart?" All the known facts are covered in the appropriate chapters and I hope readers will use them to draw their own conclusions about the most likely explanation. For those not familiar with the various theories, knowledge of which might explain why I have sometimes overstressed certain pieces of information, I have included the best-known ones in Appendix C, beginning on page 354. Some theories rely on outright sensationalism, others on detailed detective work based on a snippet of information that caught the attention of the researcher. In some, one can see the author almost unconsciously manipulating what is known to match and prove a theory. And undoubtedly, there will be yet more theories to come, even if Amelia's plane is eventually located.

My editors feel that I should explain the technical terms of aviation such as *ground loop* and *stall speed*. Since to explain these within the text would be tedious to the reader and patronizing to anyone involved in aviation, I have included a glossary at the end of the book (page 364).

Finally, there are several teams of people still working avidly to discover



what happened to Amelia's plane on that July day in 1937—most notably Marie and Elgen Long of California. I visited this charming couple in 1988—purely coincidentally on the anniversary of the day Amelia disappeared—and since then we have been in contact by telephone and letters. Their research, conducted over nearly twenty years, is staggeringly detailed and their objective is to locate Amelia's airplane, which they believe lies some thirty-five miles west of Howland Island in the Pacific Ocean. If it is *possible* for Amelia's plane to be found by research and deduction, I believe they will find it.

Mary S. Lovell  
Lyndhurst, Hampshire  
April 1989