Most aviation enthusiasts and professionals have heard and been inspired by the life of the most popular female American aviator Amelia Earhart (1897–disappeared in 1937). She was one of the first female pilots in aviation history who created several aviation records.

Her life is one of the biggest mysteries. She was born on 24 July 1897 in Atchison, Kansas State in the United States and was the elder of the two sisters, Amelia and Muriel. She was born to a railroad attorney and spent her childhood in various American towns. She was pretty adventurous and preferred to play outside and explore things.

Child Earhart’s first flight ended dramatically. She emerged from the broken wooden box that had served as a sled with a bruised lip, torn dress and a “sensation of exhilaration”. She exclaimed, “It’s just like flying!”

At the age of ten, Earhart saw her first aircraft at the Iowa State Fair in Des Moines. Earhart graduated from Hyde Park High School in 1916. She had a tenuous childhood with her father turning into an alcoholic and retiring early from his railroad job. Nevertheless, throughout her troubled childhood, she continued to aspire to a future career; she kept a scrapbook of newspaper clippings about successful women in predominantly male-oriented fields, including film direction and production, law, advertising, management and mechanical engineering.

During the Christmas vacation in 1917, Earhart visited her sister Muriel in Toronto, Canada. World War I was raging and Earhart saw the returning wounded soldiers. After receiving training as a nurse’s aide from the Red Cross, she began work with the Volunteer Aid Detachment at Spadina Military Hospital. Her duties included preparing food in the kitchen for patients with special diets and handing out prescribed medication in the hospital’s dispensary.

When the 1918 Spanish flu pandemic reached Toronto, Earhart was engaged in arduous nursing duties including night shifts at the Spadina Military Hospital. She became a patient herself, suffering from pneumonia and maxillary sinusitis. She was hospitalized in early November 1918 owing to pneumonia and discharged in December 1918, about two months after the illness had started.

A spirited adventurer, the first person to fly solo both in the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, Amelia Earhart’s life was inspiring and her death, a mystery.
She had pain and pressure around one eye and copious mucus drainage through the nostrils and throat. In the hospital, in the pre-antibiotic era, she had painful minor operations to wash out the affected maxillary sinus, but these procedures were not successful and Earhart subsequently suffered from worsening headache attacks. Chronic sinusitis was to significantly affect Earhart’s flying activities in later life, and sometimes even on the airfield she was forced to wear a bandage on her cheek to cover a small drainage tube.

Learning to fly in California, she took up aviation as a hobby, taking small jobs to pay for her flying lessons. She was the sixth woman to be issued a pilot’s license by the world governing body for aeronautics – the Federation Aeronautique.

In 1922, with the financial help of her sister, Muriel, and her mother, Amy Otis Earhart, she purchased her first airplane, a Kinner Airster. Amelia moved back to East US where she was employed as a social worker in Denison House, in Boston, Massachusetts. It was there that she was selected to be the first female passenger on a transatlantic flight across the Atlantic Ocean, she got the opportunity to fly solo and became the first female aviator to do so in 1932. On the morning of 20 May 1932, she took off from Harbour Grace, Newfoundland, with that day’s copy of the local newspaper to confirm the date of the flight. Earhart’s nearly 15-hour flight established her as an international hero. She won many honors, including the Gold Medal from the National Geographic Society presented by President Hoover, the Distinguished Flying Cross from the U.S. Congress, and the Cross of the Knight of the Legion of Honor from the French government.

That same year, Amelia developed flying clothes for the Ninety-Nines. The Ninety-Nines Inc. (http://www.ninety-nines.org) is an international organization for licensed women pilots from 35 countries. It was started in 1929 and Amelia was one of its founding members and its first president – the organization currently has more than 5000 members.

Earhart actively became involved in the promotions, especially women’s fashions. For years she had sewn her own clothes, and now she contributed her input to a new line of women’s fashion that embodied a sleek and purposeful, yet feminine, look. Her’s words:

“Never do things others can do and will do if there are things others cannot do or will not do.”

“Women, like men, should try to do the impossible. And when they fail, their failure should be a challenge to others.”

“Adventure is worthwhile in itself.”

Amelia Earhart

Amelia Earhart as a child (Courtesy: Wikipedia)

Kinner Airster two seated single engine bi-plane designed by Bert Kinner in 1920. Picture shows pilot Neta Snook (left) and Amelia Earhart (right) with Kinner Airster. (Photo Courtesy: Wikipedia)
first clothing creation was a flying suit with loose trousers, a zipper top and big pockets. Vogue advertised it with a two-page photo spread. Then, she began designing her own line of clothes “for the woman who lives actively.”

In 1935, Amelia became the first person to fly from Hawaii to the American mainland. By doing so, Amelia became not only the first person to solo anywhere in the Pacific, but also the first person to solo both the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. She was the author of several best-selling books such as 20 Hrs. 40 Min.: Our Flight in the Friendship, The Fun of It and Last Flight (her last book).

On July 2, after completing nearly two-thirds of her historic flight – over 22,000 miles – Amelia vanished along with her navigator Frederick Noonan. She wrote to her husband George Putnam in a letter: “Please know that I am quite aware of the hazards. I want to do it because I want to do it. Women must try to do things as men have tried. When they fail, their failure must be but a challenge to others.” These courageous words concluded her own dramatic and personal story of the historic flight in 1937 that ended with her tragic disappearance somewhere in the Pacific.

A great naval, air and land search failed to locate Amelia, Noonan, or the aircraft, and it was assumed they were lost at sea. To this day, their fate is the subject of unending speculation. Some theorized the pair ran out of fuel looking for Howland Island, and had to ditch in the Pacific. Others thought they might have crash-landed on another small island. Earhart was legally declared dead in 1939.

On completing each stage of the flight she sent back not only dispatches and personal letters, but her diaries, charts, and the running log that she left in the cockpit. These and many other incidents as described by friends and family were published in 1937 in the book mostly written by Amelia herself. It was appropriately titled Last Flight.

Walter Boyne rightly said in this book’s preface: “Amelia Earhart came perhaps before her time but the image this book conveys so well, that of the smiling, confident, capable, yet compassionate human being, is one of which we can all be proud.”

As a tribute to Amelia, George Putnam authored her biography, entitled Soaring Wings in 1939. Later in 1989, British author Mary S. Lovell published Amelia Earhart’s story in a book titled The Sound of Wings: The Life of Amelia Earhart which vividly captures the drama and mystery behind the most influential woman – from her tomboy days at the turn of the century and her early fascinations with flying, to the unique relationship she shared with G. P. Putnam, the flamboyant publisher and public relations agent who became both her husband and her business manager.

New research strongly suggests that a piece of aluminium aircraft debris recovered in 1991 from Nikumaroro, an uninhabited atoll in the southwestern Pacific republic of Kiribati, does belong to Earhart’s Lockheed Electra.
According to researchers at The International Group for Historic Aircraft Recovery (TIGHAR), which has long been investigating the last, fateful flight taken by Earhart 77 years ago, the aluminium sheet is a patch of metal installed on the Electra during the aviator’s eight-day stay in Miami, which was the fourth stop on her attempt to circumnavigate the globe. TIGHAR researchers went to Wichita Air Services in Newton, Kans., and compared the dimensions and features of the Artifact 2-2-V-1, as the metal sheet found on Nikumaroro was called, with the structural components of a Lockheed Electra being restored to airworthy condition. The rivet pattern and other features on the 19-inch-wide by 23-inch-long Nikumaroro artifact matched the patch and lined up with the structural components of the Lockheed Electra.

The breakthrough would prove that, contrary to what was generally believed, Earhart and her navigator, Fred Noonan, did not crash in the Pacific Ocean, running out of fuel somewhere near their target destination of Howland Island. Instead, they made a forced landing on Nikumaroro’s smooth, flat coral reef. The two became castaways and eventually died on the island, which is some 350 miles southeast of Howland Island.

In her memory, Amelia’s house in Atchison, Kansas has been converted into a museum and is currently maintained and run by the Ninety-Nines organization. As a tribute to Amelia Earhart and to support and promote women contributions to aerospace sciences research, Zonta International foundation offers Amelia Earhart International Fellowship to women doing PhD in Aerospace engineering all across the globe.

The Smithsonian Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C. has a section on Amelia Earhart displaying her personal belongings, photographs, news articles and Lockheed Vega 5B aircraft. She made two of her records in this aircraft: first solo, nonstop flight by a woman across the United States and the first woman (and the only person since Charles Lindbergh) to fly nonstop and alone across the Atlantic Ocean. Earhart sold her 5B Vega to Philadelphia’s Franklin Institute in 1933 after purchasing a new Lockheed 5C Vega. The Smithsonian acquired it in 1966.

Dr. Swati Saxena is a two-time recipient of Amelia Earhart International Fellowship given to women in Aerospace Engineering by Zonta Foundation. She has a PhD in Aerospace Engineering from the Penn State University, USA. Address in India: C/o Dr. Ashok Saxena, 204, Narain Towers, Agra-282002; Email: swati.saxena25@gmail.com