English 11/ U.S. History

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**Lady of the Air**

The brave statement, “I want to do it, because I want to do it. Women must try to do what men have tried. When they fail, their failure must be but a challenge to others,” written to her husband, exemplifies Amelia Earhart’s courage and honesty with which she lived her life (Dawson and Bowles 45). Born on July 24, 1897, in Atchison, Kansas, Amelia Earhart grew up in a family where money was often tight. This obstacle led to her holding many jobs, such as a teacher, nursing assistant, photographer, secretary, social worker and she even bought a truck and hauled gravel, to earn enough funds to support her interest in flight (O.T.J). From a young age, she had a desire to fly. Her love of experimentation and physical freedom was later a large part of this desire to do something that was not “conventional” for a woman (Dawson and Bowles 32). Earhart, as a woman living in the post-suffrage era, had to work very hard to have the opportunity to fly and even after becoming famous. She never took her fame for granted, using her public image to promote women’s advancement in aviation, something in which she strongly believed.

When aviation came to the public’s attention in the 1920’s, people all over the United States started to dream of what possibilities this new technology would bring. These nation-wide dreams became a collection that made up the “winged gospel”, named by historian, Joseph Corn. One dream was that aviation would become as common as automobile transportation. It also included the hope that women and Americans of African descent would be able to gain equality in society, but this was never fulfilled since many areas of aviation, including commercial airlines and military flying, barred them for much of the twentieth century. They did, however, find their first opportunities to be involved in any aviation in general aviation, which is considered any form of flight other than military and scheduled commercial flights (Bednarek). A little over a year after Charles Lindbergh made his solo flight across the Atlantic in 1927, Earhart took off as a passenger, on a transatlantic flight with Wilmer Stulz and Slim Gordon, becoming the first woman to fly across the Atlantic Ocean. Lindbergh flew because he loved the freedom, but also to promote public acceptance of commercial aviation. Amelia Earhart flew for the same reasons with one addition; “she flew for women” (Dawson and Bowles 30).

Earhart, in her pursuit of doing what she loved, became the first woman to do many things and break many records, male or female. She was the first woman to receive the Distinguished Flying Cross, a medal awarded for heroism or extraordinary achievement while participating in an aerial flight, to fly across the Atlantic as a passenger and as a solo pilot. There had only been one other person in history to fly solo across the Atlantic before she did in 1932 (O.T.J.). As she began gaining popularity and fame for her feats, she saw it as an opportunity to promote advancements for her gender. Throughout her career in aviation, she endeavored to portray her accomplishments as examples of women’s capabilities. Eleanor Roosevelt, another woman who pushed for women’s equality, stated that “[Earhart] helped the cause of women by giving them a feeling there is nothing they could not do” (Dawson and Bowles 30). Earhart faced the skepticism, ridicule and outright hostility, sometimes from her own communities, that all pioneers do. To her, this tremendous pressure to prove her abilities over and over was a challenge she gladly accepted (Dawson and Bowles 3).

During this same time, there were other woman aviators sharing the same conviction as Earhart. Ninety-nine founded the organization called the Ninety-Nines. From 1929 until 1933, Earhart served as the first president leading the group in their campaigns for more opportunities to fly to be opened in aviation and to overcome discrimination against women (Dawson and Bowles 25). This organization was not, however, the only way Earhart used her success to promote her beliefs. As she gained publicity, she was offered positions and opportunities that made it easier to make her opinions public such as a book contract, national lecturing and promotional work, and endorsements for automobiles and cigarettes. She had an affiliation as editor for Cosmopolitan magazine, writing aviation articles. She very devoutly believed in “air-mindedness,” the coined term for having a fascination of flying and aviation, and used the opportunities given to her for its advancement. In fact, “[i]n a period without an active feminist movement, the woman pilot was an excellent symbol of women’s emancipation in the post suffrage era (Dawson and Bowles 37).”

Throughout her short, but extremely significant career, Amelia Earhart flew because she loved it and used her exposure to promote her belief that women are just as capable as men in the process. She is one of the most well-known aviators of all time, male or female, and holds an incredibly important place in history. She opened a door toward individual freedoms and played a role in suggesting that “women had a right to such freedoms and it was perfectly normal for women to be doing nontraditional things (Dawson and Bowles 43).” Though she is remembered today as the aviator gone missing without a trace on her attempt to circumnavigate the globe at the equator, her legacy lives on and her inspiration for women has never died (O.T.J.). In her fight for women’s advancements, during her time as in ours, women around the world count Amelia Earhart’s personal triumphs as triumphs for all womanhood (Dawson and Bowles).