

Emotions mixed as plane buzzes path of legendary flier's final takeoff

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LAE, Papua New Guinea — Instead of a runway, it's now a short-cut from one side of town to another.

Beat-up cars and trucks moving in no particular pattern, brightly dressed women carrying bundles over their shoulders, skinny kids chasing their friends: They all make use of the former airstrip where Amelia Earhart was seen for the last time when she took off on July 1, 1937, in her Lockheed Electra 10E.

And when Linda Finch's nearly identical Electra roared over the

same runway Thursday, they stopped to watch, wave and offer their good wishes. It was an eerie sight, history repeating itself.

"The thrill!" exclaimed Lori Eccles of Ann Arbor, Mich., a missionary who's working in Lae with her husband, Steve, and two children.

But for Reid Dennis, the San Francisco pilot of an eight-passenger Grumman Albatross that's following Finch around the world as she commemorates Earhart's last flight, it was a bittersweet moment.

"I feel a little bit sad being here," he said.

Local officials had considered trying to clean up the old airstrip — grass when Earhart used it but now

pavement sprouting weeds and strewn with trash — and letting Finch land there. But they weren't sure when or if she'd arrive, so Finch landed in nearby Nadzab, after the flyover.

Earhart was 39 when she disappeared without a trace over the Pacific 20 hours and 2,500 miles after her mid-morning takeoff from Lae. She ran out of gas and never made it to Howland Island, a U.S. possession where she was to refuel.

Finch, a San Antonio businesswoman, has six legs and 6,750 nautical miles left in her nearly 26,000-nautical-mile odyssey. She plans to drop a wreath near Howland on Monday, arrive in Honolulu a few

days later and return to her starting point in Oakland, Calif., the last week in May.

Earhart flew long, grueling legs and had only three stops left when she took off from Lae.

"She had to be terribly homesick, terribly tired," Finch said. Earhart spent two days in Lae while waiting for favorable winds and repacking the plane.

On Thursday, about 150 bystanders — townspeople, the Albatross passengers, town officials and Air Niugini staffers helping Finch with her flight — watched as she made a half dozen low, chest-throbbing passes over the runway and disappeared over Huon Gulf at the end of the airstrip.

She was perhaps 50 feet from the ground and, Finch said, a bit alarmed at first by the people and vehicles on the runway. She radioed

Dennis on the ground to ask him to clear the field. He told her it was impossible. The townspeople yelled to approaching drivers to keep them off the field.

Heavy clouds hung at the horizon, behind the blue-gray expanse of sea, and it was easy to imagine Earhart's takeoff. People who saw Earhart fly away said the Electra, heavily loaded with fuel for the long flight, rose slowly into the air, then dipped out of sight over the gulf before reappearing in the distance.

It was spooky to watch Finch's plane make a similar dip before fading into the distance.

"It was absolutely amazing that she got the airplane up and off," said Finch, who leaves the Nadzab airfield today for the island nation of Nauru. Finch will have a longer runway and carry less fuel on a shorter leg than Earhart did leaving

Lae. Lae, with 80,000 people the second-biggest city in Papua New Guinea, grew up around the airstrip at the edge of the thick forest after a gold rush in the 1920s.

The field is in the middle of the town, and with no room for expansion, closed five years ago.

The mayor and governor hastily appeared as word of Finch's arrival spread. They waved to Finch as she thundered by, then they sped out to the Nadzab airport to welcome her when she landed.

Steve Eccles, watching Finch's passes with his family, said most Papua New Guinea natives probably don't realize who Earhart was. He learned of her link to Lae shortly after arriving 18 months ago.

"I thought, wow, that's just fascinating. We didn't realize the significance of it," he said.

WORLD FLIGHT UPDATE

Nautical miles flown Thursday (Port Moresby to Nadzab): 175 Total flown: 19,131 To go: 6,759

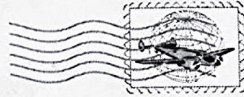
Today, the Albatross crew flew in advance of Linda Finch and co-pilot Peter Cousins from Port Moresby to Lae, Papua New Guinea. The most direct route would have taken us through rugged mountains that were shrouded in clouds, so Albatross pilot Reid Dennis decided to take a safer but longer coastal route.

The landscape was spectacular. Lush greenery in swampy lowlands led up to foothills and jagged peaks that would be a challenge for the hardest foot trekker. You can still see an abandoned airstrip from World War II nestled in the vegetation if you look hard enough.

But the highlight of the day was Linda making passes over the now-closed Lae airstrip that Amelia Earhart took off from on her last flight, 60 years ago. I hired an aircraft for an aerial view of the event.

When Linda landed at the nearby Nadzab airport, she was met by a singing group from the Tarawe Village, dressed in traditional village costumes. They greeted her with a welcoming song and marched with her to the airport gate.

Tomorrow, we have a nine-hour flight to the island nation of Nauru. We hope to be there by nightfall.



Tony Harrison

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Earhart's last dispatch one of foreboding

EDITOR'S NOTE: Many U.S. newspapers published periodic dispatches from Amelia Earhart during her world flight. This is her last transmission, from Lae, New Guinea, as it ran in *The Courant* on July 3, 1937.

By AMELIA EARHART

Lae, New Guinea, July 1 — (AP) — (Delayed) — "Dennmark is a prison" and Lae, as attractive and unusual as it is, appears to two flyers just as confining. The Lockheed Electra is poised for our longest hop.

It is weighted with gasoline and oil to capacity. There is only one runway and a parallel is needed to take off. However, the wind is blowing the wrong way and threatening clouds conspired to keep her on the ground today.

Chronometers not set

In addition, Frederick Noonan, my navigator, has been unable, because of radio difficulties, to set his chronometers (precise clocks for use in navigation). Any lack of knowledge of their fastness or slowness would defeat the accuracy of celestial navigation. Howland is such a small spot in the mid-Pacific, that every aid to locating it must be available. Despite our restlessness and disappointment in not getting off this morning, we still retained enough enthusiasm to do some exploring of native villages a few miles from Lae.

We commandeered a truck from the manager of the hotel and, with Fred Noonan at the wheel, because the native driver was ill with fever, we set out along the dirt road, forded a sparkling little river, which after a heavy rain so common in the tropics, can be turned into a veritable torrent and drove through a lane of grass taller than the truck. We turned into a beautiful coconut grove before a village entrance. The natives grow the coconuts mostly for their own use and few are exported from here for the commercial markets.

Village huts on stilts

The village was built more or less around a central open plaza. All huts were on stilts, and underneath the dogs and pigs held forth. We were told that the natives train the pigs as "watch dogs." Fred Noonan said he hated to come home late at night and admit being bitten by a pig. Some of the huts have carvings around under the eaves, grotesque colored animals and crocodiles being the most numerous. They remind me of the work done by some African natives.

In the village were several native



World Flight

See The Courant's Web site for seven stories from our July 3, 1937, edition concerning the disappearance of Amelia Earhart. The address is: <http://www.courant.com>

the present tiny harbor. They told us that much of the land is really only silt held together by tangled undergrowth. Along the rivers pieces of "land" sometimes break off and as islands float hundreds of miles to sea before disintegrating. Now and then animals are trapped on them.

Then, of course, there is the ever present jungle to lure one into exploring. Like the desert or sea, it has a strange fascination for some hardy souls. We shall try to get off tomorrow although now we cannot be home by the Fourth of July as we had hoped.

women, the first I have glimpsed. One was bending over a small black cooking vessel from which protruded two enormous cabbages. I also noticed a number of familiar looking vegetables which are grown hereabouts but much of the food used is imported. My only purchase here besides gasoline has been a dictionary of pidgin English for two shillings. It was well worth the price to discover that all native women are called Mary. I had some difficulty in understanding why "to sew" should be "sew im up." The natives have their own names for everything. For instance, airplanes are called "balus" or "bids." Small planes merit only "bal nutang" or insects. My plane has acquired special distinction over all other metal ones here, which have corrugated surfaces. The Lockheed is smooth and to the natives resembles tins in which certain biscuits are shipped from England. Therefore, it is known as the "biscuit box."

Plane is repacked

Fred Noonan and I have worked very hard in the last two days repacking the plane and eliminating everything unessential. We have even discarded as much personal property as we can decently get along without and henceforth propose to travel lighter than ever before. I have retained only one briefcase, in which are my papers as well as my extra clothing and toothbrush. All Fred Noonan has is a small tin case which he picked up in Africa. I notice it still rattles so it cannot be packed very full. I wish we could stay here peacefully and get to know something of the country.

New Guinea is a country subject to earthquakes, and I was told that a quake only a year ago shifted several acres of land into the bay forming

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