

FOLLOWING AMELIA



By Dennis Oda, Star-Bulletin

Linda Finch poses with her plane on arrival in Honolulu.

Linda Finch arrives for isle stopover

Next Tuesday, she'll leave on the final leg of Amelia Earhart's unfinished flight

By Mary Adamski
Star-Bulletin

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Pilot Linda Finch will leave Tuesday on the final leg of her flight reliving Amelia Earhart's unfinished dream of circling the globe.

When the Texas businesswoman touched down yesterday at Honolulu Airport in her silver vintage two-engine Lockheed Electra, she brought a piece of the dream and a link with the Earhart mystique to many in the crowd.

"This is going to my daughter, and I want her to give it to her daughter," said Harriette Holt of Maui, who got Finch to sign a copy of an Earhart biography, "The Sound of Wings." Holt, a retired judge, remembers listening to news broadcasts of the search for Earhart and her navigator, who disappeared after leaving New Guinea on July 2, 1937. Holt contributed to Finch's World Flight 1997 and followed the journey day-by-day on the Internet.

"I am so proud to be part of this, it is very exciting, very personal for me," said Mieko Otsuka, chairwoman of Circle Rainbow Aviation, which is coordinating the six-day stay of Finch and the support group accompanying her.

Otsuka was the first Japanese woman to achieve rating as a commercial pilot, as an multi-engine aircraft pilot and instrument flight rating.

They were in the crowd of about 200 people who gathered to greet Finch when she stepped out of the aircraft at the end of an eight-hour flight from Christmas Island. Appearing fresh in a crisp beige jumpsuit, sunburned from fishing on the last stopover at Christmas Island, Finch fielded questions that were as much about Earhart as herself.

Despite a longing for "a great big steak and a nice hot bath," she lingered for nearly two hours to answer questions, pose for photographs and sign autographs, before beginning a stay at the Royal Hawaiian Hotel that she said will include swimming with dolphins and a reunion with her boyfriend.

Like Holt, thousands of people around the world followed the progress of the Finch flight through the World Flight 1997 Web site and a multimedia school program that used the flight to teach geography, science, weather and mathematics to students. Pratt & Whitney, which built the engines for both aircraft, was one of the underwriters of the \$4 million project.

Unlike Earhart, Finch was never out of touch thanks to computer and satellite links in hers and the accompanying Grumman Albatross aircraft. She said she used a laptop in the cockpit to answer e-mail messages, and spent four or five hours every day after landing to keep in touch with her businesses, her three children -- ages 27, 20 and 2 -- and well wishers from around the world.

Finch, 46, a millionaire operator of nursing homes and an experienced pilot, had refurbished other vintage aircraft before finding an Electra 10E, one of only 15 of the model that the 1930s woman pioneer flew.

Her flight marks the 60th anniversary of Earhart's failed effort after setting records as the first woman to fly solo across the Atlantic, the first woman to fly nonstop across the United States and first woman to fly from Hawaii to the West Coast. Other pilots have retraced the 1937 flight, but this was the first in an aircraft almost identical to Earhart's.

"She (Earhart) really had a message for people," said Finch. "She believed that people could live larger lives. You should not live within the limits society set for you, or most times, we set upon ourselves. That's been the point of the flight xxx to teach people that message all the way around the world. And they were excited about that all around the world."

Finch did not land at Howland Island, the destination that Earhart never reached, because of the deteriorated state of the airfield on the one-mile-long island. She dropped wreaths there in memory of Earhart.

The adventure will be over May 28 after a 12- to 15-hour flight to Oakland, but that's not the end of the flying for Finch.

She will leave a week later to take the plane to a Paris air show, will show it in Earhart's hometown, Atchison, Kan., in July for the 100th anniversary of the pioneer's birth, and will appear at flying exhibitions next year.

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Finch to show Electra plane

World Flight 1997 public event:

- **What:** 1935 Lockheed Electra 10E on view.
- **When:** Saturday, 2 to 5 p.m.
- **Talk:** 4 p.m. remarks by Linda Finch.
- **Where:** Circle Rainbow Aviation, 155 Kapalulu Place, off Lagoon Drive.

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