

Adventurer Tracey Curtis-Taylor's England-to-Australia solo flight a homage to aviation pioneer Amy Johnson

By [James Dunlevie](#) and Joanna Crothers



Photo: Adventurer Tracey Curtis-Taylor speaks to media in Darwin after her 20 day solo flight from England. (ABC News: Joanna Crothers)

Flying long distances solo in a bi-plane is daunting enough in modern times; to have done it in the 1930s is bordering on superhuman.



Photo: English aviation pioneer Amy Johnson, pictured two years before her death in 1941. (Supplied: Rex/Shutterstock)

Canada-based British adventurer Tracey Curtis-Taylor has some idea what aviation pioneer Amy Johnson went through to become the first female pilot to fly solo from England to Australia in 1930.

Landing in Darwin after 20 days of flying in an open cockpit 1942 Boeing Stearman, Curtis-Taylor described seeing the Australian coastline as a feeling of "euphoria, relief".

Beginning on October 1 in England, Curtis-Taylor piloted her "Spirit of Artemis" over 23 countries; Europe, across the Mediterranean Sea to Jordan, over the Arabian Desert, across the Gulf of Oman to Pakistan, through India and on to Burma, Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia before crossing the Timor Sea and landing in Darwin on Friday — a journey of over 20,000 kilometres "following in the slipstream" of Johnson's epic feat.

"I'm feeling just a bit windblown, sunburnt and a bit punch drunk," a jubilant but weary Curtis-Taylor told assembled media as she stood in front of her aircraft in Darwin.

"This is where Amy Johnson touched down in 1930, so Darwin was the big moment for her.

"She was a 20th century icon in terms of what she achieved. My flight is very much a tribute to her. It is

celebrating what the pioneers achieved and what women achieve now in aviation."

Johnson died in 1941, aged 37, after her plane crashed into the near-freezing waters of the Thames Estuary in England.

Despite a ship crew seeing her parachute come down and Johnson alive in the water, neither her body nor her plane have been recovered.

'You're only as good as your last landing'

Fully exposed to the elements in the open cockpit, Curtis-Taylor had to contend with rain, cold, heat and everything that comes with flying a plane that was designed in the 1920s as a trainer for US Army and Navy pilots.

"It's fairly devastating on the skin and the hair and so forth. It's tiring, it's really tiring. It's the noise, the vibration, the exposure," she said.



Photo: Cockpit of 1940s era biplane, with modern addition of satellite navigation. (Supplied)

The perils of solo flying in vintage aircraft were not lost on Curtis-Taylor. Despite the aid of a modern satellite navigation system, the cockpit of her Boeing Stearman is largely as it was in the 1940s.

And while staying in the air is tricky, it is coming down safely that is upmost in the mind of any pilot of vintage aircraft.

"You're only as good as your last landing and I just wanted to do a good one," Curtis-Taylor she said of her touchdown in Darwin.

From her first flying lesson at age 16, Curtis-Taylor — whose list of previous vocations includes "diamond valuer" and a stint with the Diplomatic Service at the Foreign Office in Whitehall — has taken on several endurance feats of air and land travel, with the England to Australia homage to Johnson being the pinnacle so far.



Photo: Tracey Curtis-Taylor flies her Boeing Stearman over temples in Bagan, Burma en route to Australia. (Supplied)

Curtis-Taylor said the highlights of this trip included "flying over Myanmar [Burma], the Dead Sea, the Arabian desert and seeing sights such as the Taj Mahal from the air".

Much of the journey has been dedicated to visiting schools along the way, with Curtis-Taylor hoping to inspire girls to follow their dreams.

Despite touching down after her epic journey, Curtis-Taylor already has her sights set on the next adventure.

Her trusty Stearman is to be shipped to America and flown across the United States to complete the world flight in 2016.