AirSpace Season 5, Episode 9 - With a Little Help From My Friends

Music up and under

Nick:
Welcome to Airspace from the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum. I'm Nick.

Emily:
I'm Emily

Matt:
And I'm Matt.

Emily:
One of the best known names in early aviation is Amelia Earhart. That's in part because she was a record breaking pilot.But it's also because she used her platform to speak out about aviation and women's rights.

Matt:
Someone else who was really famous at the same time was first Lady Eleanor Roosevelt. What's less well known is that Eleanor and Amelia were friends, and they had similar tactics for raising awareness of the things they cared about.

Nick:
We're exploring this high flying friendship and the two women who used their connections and celebrity to influence positive social change. That's today on Airspace presented by Olay.

Music up and out

Nick:
So we're starting in April of 1933. Eleanor Roosevelt has been the first lady for only a few weeks. And Amelia Earhart was a year past her groundbreaking solo transatlantic flight. To set our scene.

Allida Black:
Well, in April of 1933, FDR is away from the White House. And so Eleanor invites her brother Hall to join her for dinner with Amelia Earhart, George Putnam, and other--um-- a small dinner party of people who were all aviation junkies.

Emily:

That's Allida Black. She's one of Eleanor Roosevelt's biographers and an expert on the history and politics of first ladies.

Nick:
So this is a party at the White House. Everyone is dressed ultra fancy.

Emily:
I want to dress ultra fancy at the White House.

Nick:
Yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah,

Emily:
Right? But on that night, Amelia Earhart had arranged for a Condor, which is a really large plane for passengers at the time, to be available for this party. And she had suggested that they all get in this plane and take a flight since Eleanor had never been up in a plane at night.

Susan Butler:
Eleanor had flown on a plane before Eleanor was a very gutsy woman on her own.

Emily:
Susan Butler is one of Amelia Earhart's biographers,

Susan Butler:
But Amelia was visiting the White House at this point and and suggested to Eleanor that since she had never flown at night and had never seen the beauties of a night flight, she wanted to show it to her. So they took off in the Condor that Amelia had arranged for, and they just had, they had a wonderful, wonderful evening. These two women in their evening dresses and white gloves, they went flying and Eleanor was overwhelmed by the experience. Although it wasn't her first flight.

Nick:
To the point about the night flight and what era of aviation this is and what a different era it was than today. The first lady walked out of the White House and got onto an airplane when that wasn't the safest thing, but she was apparently, like, an aviation nut and really enjoyed flying. But was super, super curious about flying at night, and that's kind of how this sojourn started. Night flying; also not the safest or easiest thing to do. So this was high adventure beyond compare, certainly, but also a little bit roguish in a joyful way.

Matt:

Yeah. Like, as you said, Nick, you know, Eleanor was a bit of a flight junkie. She already had a student pilot's license. Unfortunately, wasn't going to finish her training. She wasn't going to get the full license as a pilot because her husband, the President, had actually talked her out of getting the pilot's license because, what seems like kind of a sketchy reason for people who are occupying the White House, because they couldn't really afford to own an airplane. So what was the point?

Nick:
Yeah. Roosevelt exercised his line item veto.

Pause

Matt:
And if you can imagine, you know, just standing up for a fancy dinner and essentially walking outside, getting on a plane and going for a night flight. Not only was it unusual for people to fly just in general at this time, but to have that kind of privileged access. This was sort of, peak of elegance, or of, um, you might even call it ostentation just to be able to experience this sort of thing.

Allida Black:
And of course, you know, the pilot's supposed to fly the plane, that's not going to happen. So Amelia goes in and takes the pilot seat. Eleanor and goes in and takes the copilot seat. And they fly from Washington to Baltimore. You know, like a hop, skip, and a jump.

Emily:
I haven't seen any of the pictures yet, but apparently the pictures of this are really cool because, as you said, Nick, everybody's is dressed to the nines and they're all getting into an airplane and it's also the 1930s. This isn't, like, everyday stuff. Right? Aviation is still pretty new.

Allida Black:
If we were on TV, I would say to the audience, You must look at this photograph. But I'm going to say it anyway. Go to the Purdue Library. Look in Amelia's collection and you will see the photograph of them after they land in Baltimore. As they are ready to turn around and come back, Eleanor could not be grinning more broadly. She's smiling so intensely that it looks like her cheeks are going to crack. You know, so big.

Emily:
In true Amelia Earhart, Eleanor Roosevelt fashion. They used this opportunity of sort of extravagance and glamor and this, like, really fun flight as an opportunity to get some additional press coverage, which if you don't know Amelia Earhart and Eleanor Roosevelt and the things that they stood for and the things that they worked really hard to advance. Having a press

conference in the middle of a joyride seems kind of like a silly way of, sort of, like, touting their privilege. But really, this is kind of the best illustration of how they harnessed this joyride as a way to continue keeping their status in the press really high. Because a photo of two women, and two well-known and influential women enjoying a night time flight was a striking visual of the potential of women to be interested and involved in aviation. And if women can be involved in something that's perceived to be a dangerous and technical quote-unquote “man's job” like aviation, what other heights could they reach?

Music button

Nick:
Before these women were a famous pilot and First Lady, they were both social workers. Amelia in Boston and Eleanor in New York.

Matt:
If anything, you can kind of sum this up a little bit. It's that neither of these women had really planned on the path that they were on, right?
Amelia had not gone into aviation because she wanted to have a career as a pilot. She wanted to be a social worker and, you know, have influence over improving the lives of women and the lives of families. And Eleanor Roosevelt, on the other hand, reportedly was a little bit disappointed that her husband got elected president because she didn't want to have to be the type of domestic president's wife that tended to hold that, that role of, you know, first lady and have to do all of the sort of public domestic work that she would do.
She really wanted to change society. She was all in for the quest to improve American life, especially the lives of women, and thought that being First Lady might not offer her the opportunity to continue to work on that and to make contributions to that.

Emily:
Yeah, they both ended up in these situations that they wouldn't have necessarily chosen for themselves because on the outside it seemed as though it was going to take them away from the good works that were really important to them.
So what they did is they sort of flipped the script and used all the press coverage and influence that they were gaining in order to advance those causes that they were initially passionate about that they thought were going to be the roads that they were going to travel down.

Nick:
So as great of an illustration as the flight to Baltimore is, it's not actually the beginning of the friendship between these two important, incredible women.

Matt:

Yeah, that's right. Amelia and other women aviators of the day actually had campaigned for FDR, promoting his bid for the presidency. And so the two women had already been sort of put into the same circles during those, you know, campaign events.

Emily:
Right. And it's possible that they knew each other, at least by reputation before the 1932 campaign, since they were both social workers before they got famous for flying and politics.

Matt:
Yeah. You know, one of the things folks might not recognize, you know, living in the age that we do is that social workers actually had pretty high public profiles back in the day working in these cities to, you know, help make conditions better and change the way that folks were living in crowded tenement houses, et cetera. And, you know, working with immigrant families, teaching English, as you know, Amelia did at Denison House in Boston, social worker was a little bit of a different job than what we think of social worker today, and it came with, already, a public platform. And you know what, what both Amelia and Eleanor were able to do was build even bigger platforms on top of that.

Nick:
Eleanor Roosevelt taught in New York and she was active in the New York Junior League. She taught dance and exercise classes and East Side slums in New York City.

Emily:
Right. And I think this is the, sort of, the interesting moment, right? Because when both Eleanor and Amelia are doing social work, they're working on trying to improve things for the country, right? Amelia is not famous in her own right as being a pilot yet, and I think that's a really important moment in this story because as you mentioned, Matt, being a social worker in the 1920s in the 1930s is not what we think of as social work now. And so understanding that social workers have a slightly higher profile back then than they do now and the fact that Amelia Earhart isn't a famous aviator yet. Brings us kind of into this next step of the story about how Amelia Earhart profile kind of skyrockets into the aviation field.

Nick:
Yeah, the opportunity that propelled Amelia Earhart into aviation history, she was chosen for an opportunity to ride in a flight across the Atlantic in the late twenties. She was chosen partially because she was notable as a social worker, and she was known around Boston as a pilot. She'd been flying for about seven years at that point. Though she would not be piloting this flight over the Atlantic, she'd only be a passenger.
But then, when she got back from being the first woman to cross the Atlantic via airplane, her fame exploded, and it's not the most famous that she would get, but she was then past the

Rubicon of where she could be a social worker in the way that she had been. So she kind of grew her advocacy to match that moment.

Susan Butler:
Well, when she came back, she had no idea that she was going to be so famous that her career had completely been shattered as a social worker. She actually had told Denison House that she wanted a two and a half week vacation. And then she'd be back after the flight. And what happened, of course, was that she became the most famous woman in the world.

Emily:
So this is sort of that moment where folks in the country at that time all of a sudden become aware of Amelia Earhart, and she kind of has to figure out how she's going to use this new power that she has while also sort of leaving behind her initial trajectory.

Matt:
Yeah, that's right. And when she comes back, she is very famous and to the point where she's distinguished herself in the world of aviation and folks are offering to loan her airplanes so that she can do more in aviation. And I think the remarkable thing about her story is that she takes advantage of this. But at the same time, she never uses her public platform to promote her career. She uses her public platform to continue talking about the issues that were important to her and in a way to continue her social work, even though she can no longer formally be a social worker. Instead, she's doing it with her words, you know, in her public speaking opportunities that come with her increasing prominence in the world of flight.

Susan Butler:
She actually didn't really ever promote her own career. I mean, I think of her as being a very unique person, because many years later, somebody asked her whether she had had pangs of anxiety or worries when she had left social work. And her answer was, 'I have never left social work.' The work she took on and why I think she was so successful and popular is that all she was trying to do was raise women's sights, and she was using herself as the most prominent example.

Emily:
And so she begins the cycle of, you know, joining a lecture circuit, being able to raise enough money to continue to fly, to continue maintaining her profile as a way of showing, not telling. Right? These are the things women are capable of doing. These are the things that women <u>can</u> do and <u>can</u> accomplish. This is a trajectory that's available to you. And if this is available to me, think of all the other things that might be available to you also. So it's a very show not tell moment, and that kind of becomes this persona that Amelia Earhart takes on in order to advance the work that she wants to accomplish

Nick:
And a little bit of history crib notes for anyone listening along who thought that Amelia Earhart flew over the Atlantic, she did. The flight that made her initially famous was in 1928, and she was a passenger on that flight, and then she stair-stepped up as a famous aviator and an advocate through the next few years. And in 1932 is when she flew solo across the Atlantic, which catapulted her so far up the ladder that she's having dinner in the White House with Eleanor Roosevelt and is hugely sought after as a public speaker.

Amelia Earhart: (archive audio)
Although women as yet have not taken advantage of its use and benefits. Air travel isn't available to them, as two men as so often happens in introducing the new or changing the old; public acceptance depends, particularly upon women's friendly attitude in aviation. They are arbiters of whether or not their family shall fly and as such are a potent influence.
And lastly, there is a place within the industry itself for women who work. While still greatly outnumbered, they are finding more and more opportunities for employment in the ranks of this latest transportation medium. May I hope this movement will spread throughout all branches of applied science and industry. And that women may come to share with men, the joy of doing. Those who can appreciate most who have helped create.

Nick:
We're talking about influence and influencers and we want to be kind of sensitive to the meaning of that and the way that we're defining it in the case of Amelia Earhart and Eleanor Roosevelt, is that there is fame and then there is the intentional deployment of that fame and attention to advance causes and amplify other voices. And that's, that's what they did. They both led by example, and they kept it from being about them even when it was.

Emily:
Yeah. And I think this part is really interesting. So my mother's very first gift from high school graduation was a set of luggage. It was Amelia Earhart luggage. It was bright. Kelly Green. I still have one piece of it, the lining is a hot mess. I'm not entirely sure where it is, but I know it exists.

Nick:
Aww

Emily:
And I think when you think influencer, this is like a perfect example, right? Of what we consider a modern day influencer, right? Somebody who has their own line of fill in the blank…

Nick:

Luggage!

Emily:
In this case, luggage. But the biggest difference, I think, is this isn't about how Amelia Earhart and Eleanor Roosevelt are trying to boost their own profile so that people will buy more of their things. It's boosting their profile so that they can continue to write these columns in things like Cosmopolitan and Harper's Bazaar, and trying to continue to have an influence on how people see women in the workplace, how people see women in the home, how people see women in the world, and how women see themselves. So this isn't so much about selling luggage, it's about using their influence, to influence these social issues that are incredibly important for them. So it seems in some ways a little disingenuous to have your own line of clothing, like Amelia Earhart also had, but really, it's a modern day concept that we have right now of branding yourself. It's not new. Amelia Earhart's been doing it, Eleanor Roosevelt's been doing it. They've been doing it for a long time. And I think that's what's really special about this story is they were the influencers before it was even a word.

Allida Black:
One of the essential commonalities that Eleanor Roosevelt in Amelia Earhart had was that it wasn't about them. And they also understood how to use media in a way to promote, in an accessible way, in an engaging way the challenges that they wanted the country to address. And so when Amelia would take these extraordinary flights, it wasn't about, 'Oh, look at me,' you know, 'I'm the one that followed Lindbergh'. You know, 'aren't I cool?' It's like, 'Oh, look at what together we have been able to accomplish. Look what aviation can do. Look what women can do if given the chance. Look what this opens up for us.' You know, 'I am somebody who has achieved a dream that should be accessible to all people.' It was Amelia as a vehicle, as a conduit to talk about aviation, to talk about women in science. Okay? With Eleanor, it was never about her. It was about the topic that she was using the media to promote. Even in her daily newspaper column, she was talking about other people. Even though it was called 'My Day,' she would use her fame to support, introduce and elevate issues, other leaders, unknown Americans who at risk themselves to do good.

Matt:
Yeah. And I think they both became incredibly iconic in their own day and have really remained cultural icons even, you know, so many decades after their deaths. And when I think of either one of them, right? I think of very specific images. I think of certain portraits that were done of them or photos of Amelia next to her airplane. I know exactly what she was wearing. I know the look on her face, right? That these things have just kind of been burned into our brains because they did manage to make themselves so culturally visible.
One of my favorite portraits of Eleanor Roosevelt is here at the National Portrait Gallery, here in D.C., and it's her against nothing in the background, wearing a big fur coat and just looking like,

you know, intention manifest as a person, right? She just looks so bold and so iconic…

Emily:
Like a boss?

Matt:
...in that image. Yeah, exactly like a boss that, you know, that's the image I always think of first, when I think of Eleanor

Nick:
In modern day, we talk about influencers and their platforms and we mean social media. Back then the medium was newspapers, and both Amelia and Eleanor had newspaper columns, and they're not today primarily known as writers. But in that era, that is the platform that you were offered when you reached a certain status and level of fame. And that was one of the megaphones that they used to advocate and draw awareness to the causes that they were invested in.

Emily:
Well, on something I didn't know about at all, especially with respect to Amelia Airhart's career. She eventually gets hired on as a consultant at Purdue University in their program for women in business. So she did things like lecturing and teaching and even counseling women to pursue careers. Purdue's president was really concerned about how many women he had as students, but how few of them were in science or business programs, and a lot of them were dropping out before they finished their degrees. And so it was really important to him to try and utilize somebody of Amelia's status to try and encourage more women into STEM careers and other kinds of careers that they hadn't necessarily considered before. And while that sort of feels more like a tail end or more of a period of, like, the later part of Amelia Earhart's career, specifically, it's kind of what we're still doing today, right? Again, we're not, we're we're just reinventing wheels here. You know, this is road already traveled by lots of other people. But I think this is, you know, certainly one of the parts of Amelia Earhart's career that's consistently overlooked because we're always like, 'Oh yeah, that's the person who flew across the Atlantic.'

Nick:
Yeah, and they were, they were a political dynamo together as well. For every photo of a celebrity that you see at the White House with the president and you think they're just there because they're famous, I'm thinking specifically of Elvis and Nixon. Eleanor and Amelia actually kind of influenced policy. This wasn't just a photo op. They pushed to get a candidate of their choosing, the top job at the Department of Air Commerce. His name was Gene Vidal, and he was well-qualified for the role. But that was their choice. And then that became FDR's choice. And then when Vidal got mixed up in a political shuffle and was very nearly fired, they

ganged up on FDR again and he kept his job. And let's not forget, FDR was no pushover. FDR was president more than anyone else was president.

Emily:
Well, but having a. Having friends in the White House, really? Well, it certainly helps everybody, right? So for Amelia, having influence in the White House and having friends in the White House really helped her continue to perpetuate her goals. And so when she set her mind towards flying around the world, it really helped her plan that trip to have somebody in the White House, like the President, you know, to start calling all these world leaders to sort of pave the way for her to be able to land in all of these countries in order to facilitate that trip for her. So certainly, it doesn't hurt to have friends in high places.

Susan Butler:
For her round the world flight. The relationship helped her a lot because they could rely on FDR to smooth out some of the places where she wanted to land. Of course, being the friend of the president is something that we would all like to be.

Nick:
And we're talking about kind of a moment that these two women in these families had together. Like Amelia Earhart, hit kind of at the same time that FDR hit in 1932. And we're talking about the time through 1933. Yeah, and it helps to have friends in the White House, in good times and in bad. We know that Amelia Earhart was not successful in her around the world trip, but we can add that the White House pulled out every stop in the search before it became apparent that she was not found, the Navy was deployed to search the area where she was last known.

Matt:
Yeah, and and when it became kind of apparent that Amelia was not going to be found or at least was not going to be coming back, her friend Eleanor Roosevelt actually wrote a bit of a eulogy for her in her column on July 23rd, 1937.

And what she wrote was (quoting)
“Courage is the price that life exacts for granting peace. The soul that knows it now knows no release from little things.”
“So wrote Amelia Earhart in 1934, and I am very sure when she made the decision to go on this last trip, she had in mind every possible risk. I don't suppose any of us ever really feel that we are about to die, even though we may know intellectually that death may be waiting around the corner in whatever we have undertaken to do. I'm quite sure, however, that she met death in the spirit of the poem from which I have taken the above lines. This attitude is one which we must never forget. For a nation is poor indeed, when it does not have men and women with this kind of spirit.”

Music up and under

Emily:
Airspace from the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum. It's produced by Katie Moyer and Jennifer Weingart, mix by Tarek Fouda. Airspace is presented by Olay and distributed by PRX.

Music up and out

Matt:
And Nick. You mentioned that, you know, Elvis was only at the White House because he was famous. In fact, you know, he went to the White House because he wanted to help Nixon fight the hippies.

Emily:
What

Matt laughs

Nick:
No, I know I thought it was really I thought it was going to be a really great tie in, but I thought I wouldn't get it out before Katie tasked me for getting off script. Because no, he did. He wanted a special DEA badge so that he could enforce drug policy on behalf of the Nixon White House. *laughs*