

# Searching for Amelia



By LCdr. Eric Beheim, USNR (Ret.)

The disappearance of Amelia Earhart 67 years ago set into motion one of the largest naval air search operations conducted up to that time. A reexamination of long-forgotten reports, message traffic and other historical documents has revealed new evidence which suggests that the searchers might have been closer than they realized to solving one of the greatest mysteries of all time.

On the morning of 2 July 1937, the Coast Guard cutter *Itasca* was on station off Howland Island in the Pacific, midway between Lae, New Guinea, and Hawaii. Since approximately 0245, *Itasca's* radio room had been receiving messages from an inbound airplane that had taken off from Lae the previous morning. On board were Amelia Earhart Putnam and her navigator, Frederick Noonan, engaged in an around-the-world flight that had begun in Oakland, Calif., on 20 May.

Earhart's aircraft was a Lockheed twin-engine Electra that had been modified for long-distance flying. The world flight had been planned as a series of legs, each one requiring 20 hours or less of flying time. The 2,500-mile flight from Lae to Howland was the longest leg of the journey. It would require Noonan to find an island that was only 1.5 by 0.7 miles, with no prominent



Top, *Lexington* (CV 2) underway in 1938. Above left, Amelia Earhart is considered to be the most famous woman pilot of all time. Above, the flight from Lae, New Guinea, to Howland Island was the longest and most difficult leg of Earhart's world flight. Facing page, heavy lines indicate the boundaries of the aircraft searches launched from *Lexington* from 13 to 18 July 1937.

landmarks. His plan was to use celestial navigation to keep the flight on course until it was within range of *Itasca*. The plane and the ship would then use their radio direction-finding equipment to locate one another and determine the specific course needed to reach Howland safely.

But things didn't work out as planned. *Itasca's* attempts to call Earhart and establish two-way communications were not successful. Nor was *Itasca* able to take bearings on Earhart's transmissions. Some 20 hours after Earhart took off from Lae, the last transmission was received from the world flight. After many unsuccessful attempts to establish communication



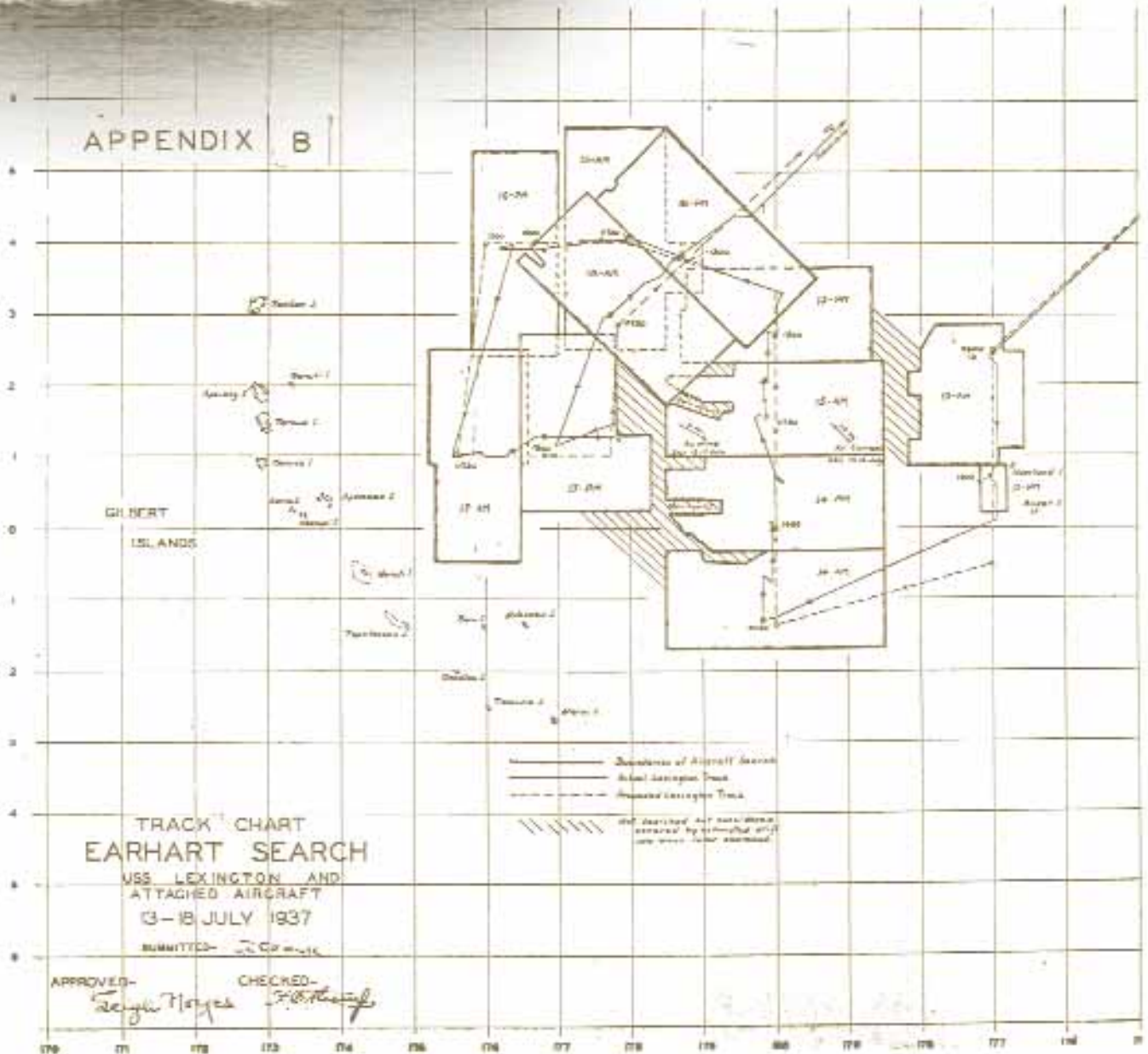
with the *Electra*, *Itasca* got underway at 1040 local time and began search operations.

Word that Earhart's flight was overdue reached Rear Admiral Orin G. Murfin, Commandant of the 14th Naval District based in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii.

Lieutenant Warren W. Harvey was dispatched in a PBY flying boat to Howland Island to assist with the search. Unfortunately, this flight was later forced to abort and return to Pearl Harbor due to adverse weather conditions encountered en route.

On 3 July, the battleship *Colorado* (BB 45) and her three catapult-launched O3U-3 Corsair floatplanes left Pearl Harbor for Howland.

At NAS San Diego, Calif., the aircraft carrier *Lexington* (CV 2) was ordered to get underway. In less than 24 hours, the necessary stores and operating spares for a four-week cruise were gathered and loaded on board. When *Lexington* left San Diego on 5 July, she had embarked 62







**Left, uninhabited Gardner Island (later renamed Nikumaroro) is one of two islands in the Phoenix Island group closest to Howland Island. Above, using scientific methodology, an ongoing series of archaeological surveys is being conducted on Nikumaroro Island to search for evidence to confirm that Earhart and Noonan survived there for a time as castaways.**

planes from six squadrons, including Bombing Squadron 4, Torpedo Squadron 2, and Scouting Squadrons 2, 3, 41 and 42.

The Navy had concluded that after failing to find Howland, Earhart and Noonan had turned southeast in an attempt to reach the nearest land. Accordingly, *Colorado* was directed to proceed to and search the Phoenix Islands. Beginning on 7 July, *Colorado's* three aircraft under of the command of Lieutenant John O. Lambrecht flew search operations. A flyover was completed at each island and a landing was made in the lagoon at Hull, the only island of the group that was inhabited. The search lasted four days and covered some 25,490 square miles.

On 12 July, *Lexington* and her destroyers arrived and took over the search, which now shifted away from the Phoenix Islands to the open waters north and west of Howland. In all, *Lexington's* aircrews searched some 151,556 square miles of ocean without success.

On 18 July, the search was officially called off. The general opinion was that the plane had probably run out of gas, gone down at sea and sunk without a trace.

## The Search Continues

In 1988, two retired aviators approached The International Group for Historic Aircraft Recovery

(TIGHAR) with a new hypothesis about the Earhart disappearance. It was their belief that stronger than normal winds had caused the *Electra* to drift off course so that it ended up south of Howland Island. When the island was not sighted visually and when radio bearings could not be obtained from *Itasca*, Earhart and Noonan had turned southeast. The two islands closest to this course were McKean and Gardner (later renamed Nikumaroro.) In all likelihood, the Earhart world flight had ended up on one of these islands. Since this was essentially the same reasoning that had led the Navy to send *Colorado* to search the Phoenix Islands, TIGHAR's network of volunteer investigators began a reexamination of historical records to look for facts that would support the theory of an island landing.

In the National Archives they found the official report of *Colorado's* commanding officer, who said, "No one was seen on either Gardner Island or McKean Island" and "no dwellings appeared on Gardner or any other signs of inhabitation." However, in the library of the National Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C., they found a copy of the report submitted by Lt. Lambrecht to the *Bureau of Aeronautics Weekly News Letter*, known today as *Naval Aviation News*. Lambrecht said, "Gardner is a typical example of a South Sea atoll, a narrow, circular strip of land surrounding a large

lagoon. Most of this island is covered with tropical vegetation with, here and there, a grove of coconut palms. Here, signs of recent habitation were clearly visible but repeated circling and zooming failed to elicit any answering wave from possible inhabitants, and it was finally taken for granted that none were there.” In his report, Lambrecht also speculated, “It is not hard to believe that a forced landing could have been accomplished [on Gardner] with no more damage than a good barrier crash or a good wetting.”

The inconsistencies between the reports led TIGHAR researchers to suspect that the results of the air search of Gardner Island were inconclusive at best and that the “signs of recent habitation” should have warranted a more thorough search. They then began to focus on the island’s well-documented history.

Eventually, TIGHAR researchers gained access to British archives and discovered a detailed account of the finding of a human skeleton on Gardner Island. In September 1940 the officer in charge on Gardner, Gerald Gallagher, radioed his superiors in Suva, Fiji, that the skull and partial skeleton of a castaway had been discovered in a remote area of the island, and in a place where it was unlikely to have been seen by an air search. Close to the body they found a woman’s shoe, an empty bottle and an empty sextant box marked with the numbers 3500 and 1542. Also nearby were the remains of a fire, as well as turtle and bird bones, indicating that someone had inhabited the site for some time. Realizing that these might be the remains of Amelia Earhart, Gallagher radioed his superiors for instructions. He was told to search the area and send all bones and artifacts recovered to the High Commission Office in Suva. He was also told to keep this matter “strictly secret for the present.”

In January 1941, the artifacts were shipped to Suva, where, in April, the bones were examined by personnel of the Central Medical School. The official report contained detailed measurements of the skull and bones and ventured the cautious opinion that they might be those of someone of European or mixed European descent. There is no indication that the High Commission Office ever contacted American authorities with news of the discovery. Later, a forensic specialist analyzed the bones’ measurements using a computer program designed to classify unknown adult human skeletons according to age, sex and ethnic background. The conclusion was that the bones were from an individual who was more likely female than male, more likely of European ancestry and most likely was somewhere between 5 feet 6 inches and 5 feet 9 inches in height. Although TIGHAR researchers have traveled to Fiji on several occasions in an attempt to

locate these bones, their current whereabouts remain unknown.

Meanwhile, other TIGHAR researchers were pursuing leads on the sextant box and its number markings. Like the bones, its current location is unknown. However, the number 3500 on the box suggested that it might have been part of a company inventory. Later, the National Museum of Naval Aviation in Pensacola, Fla., reported having a sextant box marked with the number 3547. The box in Pensacola had been donated by W. A. Cluthe, a retired Pan American Airlines captain. In a note

accompanying the donation, Cluthe stated that he had obtained the sextant and box from Frederick Noonan. This discovery suggested the possibility that the box found on Gardner Island had also belonged to Noonan.

This new information supports the Navy’s initial theory that Earhart and Noonan turned southeast and headed for the Phoenix Islands. TIGHAR researchers believe that the Electra reached Gardner Island and made a forced landing on its smooth, flat coral reef. After attempting to send radio distress calls, Earhart and Noonan waded ashore and survived for a time as castaways. The Electra was eventually broken up by wave action and swept out into deep water. To prove this hypothesis, TIGHAR has sponsored several scientific expeditions to what is now

Nikumaroro Island to search for identifiable pieces of the Electra and for personal items that can be linked to Earhart and Noonan. These expeditions performed archaeological surveys in a manner similar to those conducted by the Department of Defense’s Joint Task Force-Full Accounting, which sends teams to Southeast Asia to examine Vietnam-era crash sites in an attempt to locate and identify the remains of U.S. aircrews listed as missing in action. While a number of artifacts have been recovered, none of these has proven to be the “smoking gun” needed to resolve the mystery once and for all. However, more expeditions are planned and archival research is ongoing. Each new piece of information moves researchers closer to learning what really happened to the world’s most famous aviatrix and her navigator on 2 July 1937. ✈



**Fred Noonan was Earhart’s navigator.**

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The author suggests that those interested in learning more about the scientific search methods that are being used to help solve the Earhart mystery should read *Amelia Earhart’s Shoes*, by Thomas King, Randall Jacobson, Karen Burns and Kenton Spading.