

NEWS

The Amelia Earhart Saga Part 2

The disappearance and searches

By Llewellyn Toulmin
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Amelia Earhart's last confirmed words were spoken at 8:43 a.m. on July 2, 1937. She said, "We are on the line 157-337 flying north and south." Earlier she had spoken the fatal words, "We are on you but cannot see you." She was in trouble, and she knew it.

Earhart and her navigator, Fred Noonan were on one of the last legs of their round-the-world flight. They were flying from Lae, Papua New Guinea to tiny Howland Island in the Pacific, just north of the Equator.

The sun was in their eyes, the numerous clouds were creating shadows on the ocean that looked precisely like islands, they were low on fuel, and their radio receiver was not working. They were looking for Howland by flying a sun-sight line of the position of 157-337 degrees, or roughly NNN to SSE.

They were never heard from again - maybe.

By 10:30, it was clear the aviators had run out of fuel. The U.S. Coast Guard Cutter Itasca, stationed at Howland, began a search to the northwest, where a cloud bank lurked. Within hours, headlines around the world announced the disappearance, and a massive search began. Dozens of ships and more than 60 planes participated, focusing mainly on the area northwest of Howland. Nothing was found.

Over the next five days, 120 mysterious garbled radio signals were received that seemed to be related to the case. Some were clearly hoaxes, but at least 40 seemed to be possibly genuine, using Earhart's call sign and originating in the Pacific. Several military radio operators used RDF to locate the source of five of the signals at about 300 nautical miles SSE of Howland.

The battleship USS Colorado steamed in from Pearl Harbor, and six days after the disappearance focused briefly on an island 320 nautical miles SSE of Howland. This was Gardner Island, now called Nikumaroro, or Niku.

Three floatplanes zoomed over the four-mile-long atoll for 18 minutes, at the height of about 500 feet,

going 90 knots. They reported "signs of habitation" but did not spot Earhart's Lockheed Electra. No other search of Niku was done. The crew of the Colorado did not know that Niku had been uninhabited for 40 years - so what had they seen?

After two weeks of searching over 250,000 square miles, the official search was called off. Earhart's shusband George Putnam sponsored additional frantic searches, but to no avail.

In 1943, RKO Studios produced the film "Flight to Freedom," with Rosalind Russell. The movie was clearly about Earhart, who is asked by the U.S. Navy to fly over and spy on the Marshall Islands.

She spotted Japanese military fortifications there and bravely crashed into the ocean to give the the Navy a pretext to search the area. This film convinced many Americans that Earhart's disappearance was a spy mission for the Navy or even the White House.

This theory was acted on beginning in the 1950s, with numerous expeditions to the Marshall Islands and to Saipan. Variations on this theme include: Earhart and Noonan were shot down over the Marshalls, they were captured and imprisoned, the Japanese executed them on Saipan, they starved to death in jail, or they could not find Howland and flew back (over 1,000 miles) to the Marshalls.

Interviews with islanders seem to support some of these theories. However, there has never been an islander who stated, "I saw photos of Amelia before 1937, and I saw that same woman in the Marshalls during the war."

The Republic of the Marshall Islands was so convinced that it issued stamps showing the Lockheed Electra crashed on Mili Atoll and then being recovered by the Japanese cargo ship Koshu.

In 2017 the History Channel endorsed this theory, issuing a TV special that focused on a photo supposedly of Earhart and Noonan in the Marshalls. Unfortunately, within hours of airing, it was determined that the key photo was taken in 1935. The TV special was withdrawn.

Even wilder theories have emerged: Earhart was captured and



COURTESY PHOTOS

Amelia Earhart flew a specially modified Lockheed Electra 10-E (above) identical to this one at the Seattle Aviation Museum on her daring around the world flight - and almost made it. The Republic of the Marshall Islands (below) is so sure that Earhart crashed there and was killed by Japanese Imperial forces that the country has issued a postage stamp showing the Earhart plane.



became Tokyo Rose, Earhart moved to New Jersey and became a housewife; aliens captured Earhart, etc.

Of course, the most prominent theory is that Earhart crashed in the ocean near Howland. But that theo-

ry has been tested by seven expeditions costing over \$50 million, which have mapped an area of the sea bottom the size of Connecticut around Howland to a one-meter resolution - and found nothing.

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