New American

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Published in the September 4, 2017 issue of the New American magazine. Vol. 33, No. 17

Amelia Earhart's Life and Disappearance

The unresolved disappearance of Amelia Earhart, the first woman pilot to fly solo across the Atlantic Ocean, has drawn widespread attention throughout the years, and continues even now, 80 years later, to generate much research and great debate.

Born on July 24, 1897, Earhart grew up with a love of adventure as she and her younger sister, Grace "Pidge," would explore their neighborhood, climbing trees and using rifles to hunt rats. On one occasion, with the help of her uncle, the young adventurer created a makeshift roller coaster by connecting a ramp to the roof of her family's tool shed. Completing her creative exploit using a wooden box as a sled she drove down the ramp, she marveled to her sister, "Oh, Pidge, it's just like flying!"

In 1920, at the age of 23, Earhart would have her first real flight, an experience that would change her life forever. The young woman visited an airfield in Long Beach, California, with her father, Samuel "Edwin" Earhart, who purchased his daughter a 10-minute flight. Earhart left that short flight with a bigger passion and resolve to learn to fly. She later noted, "By the time I had got two or three hundred feet off the ground, I knew I had to fly." Over the next year, Earhart worked a wide range of jobs, including truck driver and photographer, and diligently saved $1,000 (over $12,000 today) to put toward flying lessons.

Those lessons were not in vain, as not even a year later, in October of 1922, Earhart set a world record for female pilots. In her newly purchased biplane, nicknamed "The Canary," she rose to an altitude of 14,000 feet. Seven months later, the ambitious pilot would become the 16th woman to receive a pilot's license from the Federation Aeronautique Internationale.

The next five years would hold obstacles for Earhart's aviation career, as she was forced to sell her plane due to a lack of funds. However, her love for, and interest in, flying would continue. She became a member of the American Aeronautical Society in Boston, and would go on to be elected vice president of the chapter. Writing articles for local newspapers advocating flying, she gained a limited amount of celebrity.

In 1928, Earhart received the extraordinary opportunity that began her fame. The proposition to "fly the Atlantic" along with pilot Wilmer Stultz was presented to the eager aviator. Though accepting the offer and the recognition of being the first woman pilot to fly across the Atlantic Ocean, she lamented, "Stultz did all the flying — had to. I was just baggage, like a sack of potatoes." She went on, "Maybe someday I'll try it alone."

With seeming little regard for her personal life, Earhart ended her engagement to Samuel Chapman, a Boston chemical engineer, in 1928. She then began a relationship with publisher George Putnam, who offered to help her write a book about her first Atlantic flight. After she had rejected five proposals from him, Earhart eventually married Putnam in 1931, with Putnam organizing her national engagements and speaking tours.

The ambitious pilot would get her wish to genuinely fly across the Atlantic solo just four years after crossing the Atlantic with Stultz, as she departed from Harbour Grace, Newfoundland, on May 20, 1932 bound for Paris, in an attempt to repeat Charles Lindbergh's course across the Atlantic. Encountering weather-related difficulties, the solo female pilot instead came to a landing on a farm just north of Derry, Northern Ireland.

This new adventure gave Earhart international popularity: She received the Distinguished Flying Cross from Congress, the Cross of Knight of the Legion of Honor from the French Government, and the Gold Medal of the National Geographic Society from President Herbert Hoover.

Life for Earhart would hold other monumental "firsts," as she was the first pilot, man or woman, to fly solo on two additional expeditions, first from Honolulu to Oakland, California, across the Pacific, and then from Los Angeles to Mexico City, and from there to New York.

Still the daring adventurer, Earhart, nearing 40, set her sights higher. This time her focus was on becoming the first female pilot to fly around the world, dreaming of, in her words, the "one flight which [she] most wanted to attempt — a circumnavigation of the globe as near its waistline as could be."

Eventually, plans were put into motion to bring about the realization of this dream, as in 1936 a Lockheed Electra was built specifically for Earhart and her new flight, with financing from the Purdue Research Foundation.

Two attempts at this journey were made, the first being on March 17, 1937 with crew members Fred Noonan, Captain Harry Manning, and stunt pilot Paul Mantz accompanying Earhart. Problems, unaccounted for and disagreed upon, arose during takeoff, causing damage to the plane. Due to these issues, the flight was canceled. The next, and most momentous, endeavor would occur on June 1, after the repair of the plane. The only crew member for this trip, besides Earhart, would be Noonan. Of this flight Earhart made the foreboding conclusion, "I have a feeling that there is just about one more good flight left in my system, and I hope this trip is it."

Photo: AP Images

This article appears in the September 4, 2017, issue of The New American.

Beginning this 29,000 mile endeavor, Earhart and Noonan left from Miami and traveled eastward about 22,000 miles before arriving at Lae, New Guinea, on June 29, leaving a conclusion to their journey of nearly 7,000 miles over the Pacific Ocean. After a few days of recuperating, the pair were last officially witnessed leaving New Guinea on July 2, heading toward Howland Island, in the Pacific. Just offshore of the small island was the U.S. Coast Guard cutter *Itasca*, Earhart's radio contact, along with two other U.S. ships being used as guides for the aviators. However, the duo never arrived at the island. In one of the last reported contacts from the Electra, Earhart claimed they were low on fuel and uncertain of their location, "We must be on you, but cannot see you — but gas is running low. Have been unable to reach you by radio. We are flying at 1,000 feet."

An official search for the missing pair continued until July 19, 1937, and became the "most extensive air and sea search in naval history," according to ameliaearhart.com.

Further information on the circumstances of the disappearance of Earhart and Noonan has become speculative beyond the final known report, with this puzzling piece of history bringing about a variety of theories and suppositions. The most notable of these speculations is the "crash and sink" theory, asserting that the pilot and her navigator ran out of gas and crashed in the Pacific Ocean on this infamous flight.

One prominent institution, the International Group for Historic Aircraft Recovery (TIGHAR), advocated this theory until 1988, when they shifted their theoretical course. TIGHAR, a nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting responsible aviation archaeology and preservation, is widely recognized for its exploration of the Earhart mystery.

In November of 1988, TIGHAR launched the Earhart Project for the purpose of "investigating the Earhart/Noonan disappearance according to accepted academic standards and using sound scientific methodology," according to its website.

Though the group adheres to the supposition that the missing aviators landed and eventually died on the island of Nikumaroro, or Gardner Island, of the Phoenix Islands in the western Pacific Ocean, in a written critical analysis entitled "Amelia Earhart in the Marianas: A Consideration of the Evidence," it considered the theory that Earhart and Noonan "were captured somewhere in the Micronesian islands then under Japanese administration, and incarcerated on Saipan where in most accounts they died or were executed and were then buried." This enduring theory, also known as the "Earhart-in-the-Marianas" hypothesis, according to TIGHAR, encompasses many different stories with a variety of structures and sources. However, all have seemingly reasonable evidence that the two were, indeed, connected to Saipan, an island in the western Pacific Ocean. Saipan was taken from Japan in 1944 by the United States.

In a 2013 interview with *The New American*, Art Crino, longtime Council member of The John Birch Society, the parent organization of *The New American*, shared his brief encounter with this puzzling piece of history during his service in World War II. Serving in the Navy from 1943-1945, Crino spent part of his service in Saipan.

While stationed on the island in 1944, a casual encounter brought about a conversation between Crino and two off-duty Marines, wherein one of the officers mentioned a teenage girl living on the island who claimed to have witnessed what many assumed to be the death of Amelia Earhart.

The Marine elaborated on the story, saying that in 1937 the girl, then 11 years old, took a shortcut through a sugarcane field, hiding when she heard Japanese motorcycles coming near. Noting that they had stopped near her, she looked toward the vehicles where she saw a white lady who was blindfolded in a sidecar of one of the motorcycles. According to the girl, the men took the woman to an already dug grave where the girl then heard a shot.

Adding to the story, the second marine recounted a scene from a few days previous: Their sergeant was on patrol and discovered an aluminum twin-engine airplane under a canopy. As the men moved toward it, they were prohibited by U.S. guards in unusual uniforms and made to leave the area.

Crino recalled newspaper writings after the war discrediting the Marines, only to witness the story

again in 1990 when the television program *Unsolved Mysteries* traveled to Saipan to interview the woman claiming to be the 11-year-old girl he had heard about. Then, traveling back to the United States, the program went on to interview the Marine sergeant who discovered the twin-engine plane. Crino marveled that the stories from the interview were identical to the ones shared with him 46 years before.

Because July 2 of this year marked the 80th anniversary of the baffling disappearance of Earhart and Noonan, the History Channel took the opportunity to add to the compilation of conjectures, though taking it a step further. The A&E owned station promised viewers newly discovered, documented answers to the notorious event.

Claiming the discovery of a "previously unknown" photograph from the National Archives, former Executive Assistant Director of the FBI Shawn Henry narrated the dramatized broadcast, asserting that the photo was the key piece of evidence and would reveal "the biggest government cover-up of all time."

The photo, said to have carried the official stamp of the Office of Naval Intelligence, showed several people on a dock with a ship in the background, identified as the military craft *Koshu Maru*, with a barge in tow. Two of the people on the dock bore striking resemblances to Earhart and Noonan, and on the barge was an object that was said to have measured the same length as Earhart's plane. Writing on the picture was said to have read, "Marshall Islands, Jaluit Atoll, Jaluit Island, Jaluit Harbor," which at the time was owned by Japan.

Henry claimed that this newfound information discredited the ever-popular belief that Earhart and Noonan crashed into the Pacific and were never discovered. He also alleged that, instead, the aviators were captured by the Japanese and held as prisoners in Saipan, which he would go on to demonstrate throughout the film.

To bring validity to the photo in question, forensic analysts Doug Carner and Kent Gibson were called upon for examination. They concluded that the picture was genuine, with no alterations, and that the images in question were "very likely" to be Earhart and Noonan.

During the broadcast, news footage was recalled, and eyewitnesses and their relatives were interviewed in regard to sightings of, and information concerning, Earhart. Medic Bilimon Amaron recounted his story, in a 1983 interview, of assisting "two Americans" on a ship in Jaluit. He also described the man's injuries, which were identical to wounds Noonan was said to have reported after the crash.

In a seeming confirmation of the crash, Nina Paxton, an RN from Ashland, Kentucky, reportedly sent multiple letters to the office of Naval Intelligence after hearing, on her shortwave radio, communications from Earhart saying that she and Noonan were near Mili Atoll, and that Noonan had been injured and the two couldn't remain there long. It was also claimed that records indicate Morse code transmissions from Earhart continued for up to three days after the disappearance, directing help to the Marshall Islands.

Disturbingly, if accurate, this information would challenge the integrity of the last officially reported contact from Earhart that showed the plane still in the air. Even more disturbing would be the documentary's claims of the U.S. government's knowledge of the duo's location, stating that on July 30, 1937, the very day the U.S. Navy publicly declared Amelia Earhart and Fred Noonan to be lost at sea, the State Department sent a letter to England's U.S. ambassador reporting, "Evidence, which to many

sources seems positive, indicates that Amelia Earhart (Mrs. Putnam) was on land the two nights following her disappearance."

However, immediately following the nearly two-hour documentary, information began to develop challenging the key piece of evidence — the photo — provided by the prominent network.

Japanese military history blogger Kota Yamano, not subscribing to the theory that the Japanese captured Earhart and Noonan, decided to research the claims of the History Channel. The history blogger noted that it took "just 30 minutes to debunk the documentary's central claim," as he found the alleged "newly discovered" photograph in a Japanese travelogue published two years previous to Earhart's disappearance. "The photograph was first published in Palau under Japanese rule in 1935, in a photo book; *Motoaki Nishino, 'Umi no seimeisen : Waga nannyou no sugata*…. So the photograph was taken at least two years before Amelia Earhart disappeared in 1937 and a person on the photo was not her," claimed Yamano.

The History Channel responded with a promise to examine the challenge:

> History has a team of investigators exploring the latest developments about Amelia Earhart, and we will be transparent in our findings. Ultimately, historical accuracy is most important to us and our viewers.

As the travelogue had been published online by Japan's National Diet Library, Yamano logically notes, "I find it strange that the documentary makers didn't confirm the date of the photograph or the publication in which it originally appeared. That's the first thing they should have done."

Whether deliberate or in ignorance, this inaccurate assertion by the History Channel regarding the photo is unjustified. Yet, however over-dramatized the documentary may have been, adding more confusion to the historic enigma, it also included testimonies and stories from eyewitnesses and their relatives that seem to have historical accuracy.

One of these stories came from Genevieve Cabrera, a local historian in Saipan. The historian gave an account of her great-aunt Joaquina Cabrera, who had been assigned to do the laundry for the Garapan prisoners. This account was also published by Fred Goerner in his 1966 book *The Search for Amelia Earhart*: "One day when I came to work they were there … a white lady and man. The police never left them. The lady wore a man's clothes when she first came. I was given her clothes to clean. I remember pants and a jacket. It was leather or heavy cloth, so I did not wash it. I rubbed it clean. The man I saw only once. I did not wash his clothes. His head was hurt and covered with a bandage, and he sometimes needed help to move. The police took him to another place, and he did not come back. The lady was thin and very tired. Every day more Japanese came to talk with her. She never smiled to them but did to me. She did not speak our language, but I know she thanked me. She was a sweet, gentle lady. I think the police sometimes hurt her. She had bruises and one time her arm was hurt. She held it close to her side. Then, one day … the police said she was dead with disease."

The disease spoken of by Cabrera was dysentery, as this is a very prominent assertion by many regarding the case.

The government coverup addressed by the History Channel is a theory proposed by many others who have researched the mystery. In his interview with *The New American* regarding his personal recollections, Crino goes on to recount a celebration at the Lockheed plant. The celebration was in

honor of Earhart's niece, who had obtained a replica of the original Electra and had made a trip around the world. In attendance was an engineer who had worked on Earhart's plane, and had been called out of retirement as a consultant on the replica. In an interview recalled by Crino, the engineer was asked by a reporter if the plane was an exact duplicate. His answer was yes, but recalled the exception of the spy camera placed in the original.

Goerner, as well as author Joe Klaas and retired Air Force officer Joe Gervais, believed Earhart to have been on a spy mission. In an investigative visit to Saipan in 1960, Goerner says he was faced with a lack of cooperation and official denials.

Klaas and Gervais were not initially suspicious of a coverup, but began to change their opinion due to suspicious behavior from officials. "The State Department was concerned in 1960 about the effect their interviews might have on U.S.-Japanese relations (Klaas, 1970:92). Then they say they learned that the Defense Department had a classified file on Amelia Earhart and heard from a friend at the Pentagon that Ambassador Douglas MacArthur and officials at the State Department were 'all worked up' about their investigations (Klaas 1970:103-104). Their suspicions were heightened, they say, when a member of the *USS Colorado's* crew who participated in the Earhart search declined to answer a question about searching in areas unreported by the press at the time, claiming that the information was classified (Klaas 1970:114)," according to TIGHAR.

There were also many reports of photos of Earhart and other objects being found by military personnel and given to higher officials. One example Goerner writes of is Ralph Kanna, who during the Saipan invasion was involved in the interrogation of prisoners. A picture was found in the possession of one prisoner, showing the missing Earhart on an airfield near Japanese aircraft. The prisoner claimed the woman in the picture had been captured with a male companion and were both executed. This photo was sent to the intelligence officer.

If valid, these claims would certainly point to a government coverup, though the purpose would be unclear.

The truth of the disappearance of Earhart and Noonan may never be known, as the questions surrounding this monumental mystery seem to outnumber any answers to be had. However, more than a puzzle to be solved, the uncertain ending of this legend is a tragedy to be lamented. As the History Channel's Henry aptly observed, "People seem to think of Amelia Earhart as just a piece of history, like an artifact, but she was a human being."

Photo: AP Images