

The lady vanishes: Debate about Amelia Earhart continues

By Washington Post, adapted by Newsela staff on 09.20.16

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Amelia Earhart standing in front of the Lockheed Electra in which she disappeared in July 1937. Born in Atchison, Kansas, in 1897, Earhart did not begin flying until after her move to California in 1920. Photo: Smithsonian Institution/Wikimedia Commons

During the dark years of the Great Depression in the 1930s, Amelia Earhart's adventures were a bright spot.

She was the first woman to complete solo flights that most male pilots had not accomplished. She also traveled the country talking about women's empowerment and the glorious promise of air travel.

Then, she vanished.

Earhart was declared dead after disappearing during an attempt to circle the globe. The U.S. government concluded that she crashed somewhere in the Pacific.

Alternate Theory About Earhart's Death

However, an alternate theory of what became of Earhart and her navigator, Fred Noonan, has recently resurfaced in the news.

Ric Gillespie is the director of the International Group for Historic Aircraft Recovery (TIGHAR). He thinks Earhart spent her last days as a castaway on a desolate Pacific island.

Stranded after a crash-landing, Gillespie believes, Earhart used the radio from her damaged plane to call for help. She sent out signals for nearly a week before the tide pulled the craft into the sea.

Gillespie, a pilot and accident investigator, has made 11 expeditions to Gardner Island, in the Western Pacific. He is trying to raise money for a 12th to support this theory and maybe find Earhart's plane. It has never been recovered.

Support For YouTube Video

He posted a video presentation about the Gardner Island theory on YouTube last month and recently touted "New Research, New Evidence, New Understanding."

"We found a tremendous amount of support for it," Gillespie added.

Some of that support comes from Earhart's radio signals seeking help, which probably came from an area near Gardner Island.

Gillespie also has a photo of the island from 1937, which he says shows part of the landing gear from Earhart's plane sticking out of a reef.

"On an uninhabited island, there shouldn't be anything sticking up out of the water," Gillespie said.

Gillespie also said the radio in Earhart's plane could not have worked if it had been in the water as suspected. Still, she sent out radio signals for nearly a week after apparently crashing.

Lost And Running Out Of Fuel

Gillespie thinks Earhart and Noonan made it to the ground injured, but alive. They were lost and running out of fuel, and probably spied a landing spot on Gardner Island. Gillespie said he thinks the landing was rough but survivable. Earhart had minor injuries and Noonan's were worse, based on Earhart's supposed radio calls.

Gillespie also thinks the airplane still had fuel, not enough to get anywhere but enough to power the plane's battery and work the radio.

"She's out there calling for help," Gillespie said, adding that radio operators he talked to felt certain they were listening to Earhart. "They recognize her voice. There's no doubt in their mind."

As evidence, Gillespie points to an interview with Betty Clank, a ham radio operator in Florida who claimed to have heard Earhart and was put in contact with TIGHAR. She said she heard a woman calling for help, with a man behind her trying to grab the mic.

The half-hour presentation shows the depth of TIGHAR's research on Earhart's final flight. There are maps of the seabed around Gardner Island and also details about the paths of radio signals with calculations about air speed and fuel burn.

Evidence Of Final Days

In their expeditions, TIGHAR members think they have found other evidence of Earhart's final days.

According to the Times of London, Gillespie found tools, aircraft wreckage, shoes and bits of makeup. Also, a Texas housewife claimed to hear Earhart on the radio, while in Florida a radio listener transcribed a distress call that may have been about a crash.

TIGHAR posted its conclusions about Earhart's final days on its website. The group thinks Earhart and Noonan lived for a while on the island, drinking rainwater and catching and cooking food.

Later, their plane was washed into the Pacific, TIGHAR claims. During a previous expedition, Gillespie says the group found a piece of what appears to be the Electra, Earhart's plane.

"Whatever remains of the Electra lies in deep water off the island's west end," he said.

Gillespie's Gardner Island theory has its critics, though.

Show Us The Proof

"This group (TIGHAR) comes out every year or two with this info or something like it. Show us the proof please!" one person tweeted.

Elgen Long is a Navy combat veteran and an expert on Earhart's disappearance who wrote a book saying her plane crashed into the Pacific and sank. He says the piece of metal the group found was from a different kind of plane.

Long criticized Gillespie in 2014, telling The Washington Post's Justin Wm. Moyer, "You'll never convince true believers that they aren't right. You're just confusing them with facts."

Gillespie, who has referred to Long as an expert of planes that "crashed and sank," told The Post that scientific discovery has never been straightforward.

"This is what science really is like," he said. "You develop a hypothesis. You see if it's wrong. It's failure after failure after success after failure. If you do it right, you do make progress. ...I am passionate about figuring stuff out. I'm an investigator, a detective at heart."

Quiz

- 1 Which TWO of the following sentences include central ideas of the article?
1. *Earhart was declared dead after disappearing during an attempt to circle the globe.*
 2. *He thinks Earhart spent her last days as a castaway on a desolate Pacific island.*
 3. *Gillespie also has a photo of the island from 1937, which he says shows part of the landing gear from Earhart's plane sticking out of a reef.*
 4. *Later, their plane was washed into the Pacific, TIGHAR claims.*
- (A) 1 and 2
- (B) 2 and 4
- (C) 1 and 3
- (D) 3 and 4
- 2 Which selection from the article would be MOST important to include in an objective summary of the article?
- (A) However, an alternate theory of what became of Earhart and her navigator, Fred Noonan, has recently resurfaced in the news.
- (B) Earhart had minor injuries and Noonan's were worse, based on Earhart's supposed radio calls.
- (C) "She's out there calling for help," Gillespie said, adding that radio operators he talked to felt certain they were listening to Earhart.
- (D) "This group (TIGHAR) comes out every year or two with this info or something like it. Show us the proof please!" one person tweeted.
- 3 Which of the following MOST influenced Gillespie's theory that Earhart crashed on Gardner Island?
- (A) the U.S. government's conclusive report
- (B) evidence that she sent out radio signals
- (C) a photograph of part of her plane on the island
- (D) a video titled, "New Research, New Evidence, New Understanding"

- 4 Elgen Long would be most likely to agree with which of the following statements?
- (A) True believers know the facts about Earhart's landing on Gardner Island.
 - (B) Gillespie is likely to find parts of Earhart's plane on Gardner Island.
 - (C) There is no need for further investigation of Earhart's death.
 - (D) Scientific discovery is confusing and involves success and failure.

Answer Key

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- (C) "She's out there calling for help," Gillespie said, adding that radio operators he talked to felt certain they were listening to Earhart.
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