

Epiphany

By Pete Clark

At 10:00am the morning of July 2, 1937 Amelia Earhart began the takeoff roll of the first of the last three legs on her circumnavigation of the globe. Leaving Lae, New Guinea, her destination was Howland Island, 2,200 miles distant. After refueling at Howland Island she would fly to Honolulu, but she never arrived at her fuel stop. She and her navigator, Fred Noonan, had flown into the murky infinity of history.

Earhart's aircraft was a customized Lockheed Electra 10e, registration number NR16020. The plane was equipped with two of Pratt & Whitney's latest nine cylinder Wasp engines, and extra fuel tanks had been installed in its fuselage that raised the plane's fuel capacity to 1,151 gallons of eighty octane gasoline. A generator, powered by the engine on the right wing, provided power to keep two batteries charged and to operate the aircraft and a two-way radio.

On July 2, 1937 a woman in Texas heard this message on her short wave radio: "Plane down on an uncharted island, small, uninhabited." More than one hundred distress calls were heard by the U.S. Navy and civilians in North America, from Texas to Canada. Richard Gillespie, Executive Director of The International Group for Historic Aircraft Recovery, believes that at least fifty-seven of the distress calls were transmitted at low tide by Emilia Earhart from what was then called Gardner Island, three hundred fifty miles south of Howland Island. Gillespie posits that Earhart landed on the reef at Gardner Island at low tide and at low tide she was able to run the starboard engine to provide power for distress calls. The distress calls continued for six days before the radio went silent.

Human bones, a piece of a shoe sole and a box for a sextant were found on Gardner Island in 1940. At the time the bones were declared to be those of a short male, but Fred Noonan was known to always carry a sextant with him for navigational purposes. Unfortunately these artifacts were lost or disposed of. Recently the measurements of the bones have been studied by Forensic Anthropologist Richard Jantz, who determined the bones could quite possibly be those of Amelia Earhart.

There are many scenarios as to how Amelia Earhart died. How she died does not matter. How she lived as a record setting Aviatrix does matter.

In the spring of 1953 my Sixth Grade Teacher had gotten into the Twentieth Century in our lessons in American History and ranted about a misguided Amelia Earhart who deserved to disappear because she had shunned women's work and had chosen to do a man's work. I was a know-it-all, twelve-year-old kid, but I accepted that bit of propaganda as truth. Many years later I had an afterthought that became an epiphany. In high school I noticed there were more girls than boys in National Honor Society and I met some amazing women at the University of Wyoming. I realized Amelia Earhart has provided a bright beacon into the future for women in all walks of life and my Sixth Grade Teacher had been full of digested beans.