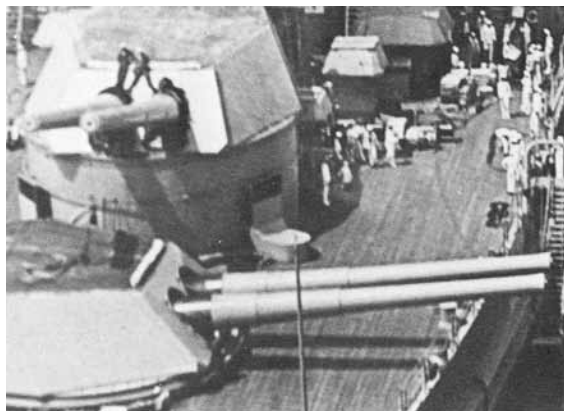


NAVAL ENGAGEMENT

On April 28, 1993, as part of the Annual Meeting and Seminar of the U.S. Naval Institute at the United States Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland, a panel of six experts discussed and debated the fate of Amelia Earhart before a near-capacity audience at the Academy's Mahan Hall auditorium. It had been agreed that at the conclusion of the panel discussion each panelist would go on record with an opinion as to whether or not TIGHAR's conclusions regarding the Earhart flight are substantiated by the evidence gathered to date.



Because the volume of evidence to be dealt with was far too great to be presented in the two hours allotted, the panelists were provided with a variety of study materials well in advance of the event. TIGHAR sent each panelist the 7th Edition of the Earhart Project book and copies of the 31 historical documents and laboratory reports upon which our conclusions are based. They also received material sent by Colorado businessman William Prymak, president of the Amelia Earhart Society, who expressed "considerable dismay that the Naval Institute has afforded Mr. Richard Gillespie of TIGHAR yet another soapbox on which to expand and perpetuate his ridiculous and mendacious claims..." Following his rejection for the 1989 TIGHAR Earhart Project team, Mr. Prymak became convinced that Earhart was captured by the Japanese. In addition, each panelist received a packet of information from California author/historian Carol Osborne asserting that "To date nothing relating to Amelia Earhart, Fred Noonan or the plane has been found." Ms. Osborne's biography of Earhart, published in 1987, endorses the theory that the flight went down at sea.

When the great day arrived and the seminar convened, TIGHAR's executive director, Richard Gillespie, opened the battle by firing off each point of evidence leading to the conclusion that the flight ended at Nikumaroro. Dr. Tom Crouch, Chairman of Aeronautics at the Smithsonian National Air & Space Museum, then attacked Gillespie's evidence with a thundering broadside of statements about rivet patterns, shoe sizes and island surveys. Observing the agreed-upon rules of engagement that each panelist would have his say before rebuttals were made, Gillespie did not return fire. The guns of the next panelists were trained on the various conspiracy theories. Prof. Mark R. Peattie from Harvard University's Reischauer Institute for Japanese Studies levelled a scholarly barrage that methodically destroyed any notion that Earhart was on a spy flight. He was followed by Hiroshi Nakajima, execu-

tive director of The Pacific Society, who deftly demolished allegations of Japanese abduction by explaining that there was a precedent for American fliers caught straying into restricted Japanese airspace. In 1931 Clyde Pangborn and Hugh Herndon, aboard their *Bellanca "Miss Veedol,"* had illegally landed in Tokyo and been caught with aerial motion pictures of military installations. Rather than imprisonment and execution, the Japanese response had

been to confiscate the film and fine the offenders ¥2,000 (about \$50). The tone of the conflict softened as J. Gordon Vaeth, a WWII blimp commander recently retired from a career with NOAA, explained that he would rather that Miss Earhart have disappeared at sea than be remembered as "some fragment of skull." Rear Admiral Francis Foley, USN (Ret.), who as a young naval aviator flew off the carrier U.S.S. *Lexington* during the 1937 Earhart search, then told of how the planes had searched vast expanses of ocean without finding anything.

By this time the two hours were nearly up and moderator Jeanne Latter, an actress who does a one-woman Amelia Earhart show, started to ask for the panelists' verdicts on TIGHAR's evidence. No reply had been made to Tom Crouch's fusillade. Was TIGHAR out of action – dead in the water? Gillespie interrupted with an objection that the panelists were being asked to make a judgement based upon inaccurate information. Without exactly waiting for orders, he steamed up to the podium and loosed a devastating salvo of documented fact. Crouch, it turned out, had loaded his guns with the poorly researched generalizations and misrepresentations provided by Carol Osborne – his earlier broadside had been fired with dud ammunition. Suddenly on the defensive and taking hits, Tom gallantly returned fire. "Come on, Ric! Those shoes could have come from any one of the Coast Guard guys." "Sure. Any one of 'em who wore women's shoes" (laughter from the audience).

Eventually Ms. Latter regained control of the proceedings and asked the panelists for their votes. Was TIGHAR's conclusion that Earhart and Noonan landed at Nikumaroro substantiated by the available evidence? Adm. Foley, Prof. Peattie, Nakajima-san, and, of course, Gillespie voted yes. Dr. Crouch and Mr. Vaeth voted no, maintaining that Earhart had probably gone down at sea. All were in agreement that there had been no spy mission and no conspiracy. Final score: Niku 4, Pacific Ocean 2, Japan 0.

All vessels engaged in this action returned safely to their respective ports.

