



# FAQS



(Frequently Asked Questions)

**Isn't it more logical that the Electra simply ran out of gas and crashed into the ocean?**

Intuitive? Yes. It's a big ocean and Howland is a tiny island. Logical? No. Howland was by no means the only island within range and the aircraft should have had more than enough fuel to reach an alternate destination. Certainly the crew was highly motivated to reach land and Noonan was probably the finest aerial navigator in the world. A means of finding land, even if they couldn't find Howland, was available to them and Earhart said, in the last radio transmission heard by the *Itasca*, that they were following that very procedure: running along the 157/337 line of position. That call came at her regularly scheduled transmission time. It was not a distress call and Earhart said nothing about running out of gas or landing at sea. She did say that she was changing her radio to a different frequency. The *Itasca* had never heard her on that frequency, and they never heard her after she switched. The extensive search which followed the flight's disappearance found no evidence that the plane went into the water and, to this day, there is none. There is, however, abundant evidence (but, as yet, no absolute proof) that the flight reached a logical alternate destination: Gardner Island, now known as Nikumaroro.

**Isn't it possible that Earhart was captured by the Japanese?**

Possible? Yes. It is also possible that she was kidnapped by space aliens. There just isn't any evidence to suggest that either event occurred. The trouble with all of the many eyewitness accounts of a woman thought to be Earhart being captured, imprisoned, executed, etc., by the Japanese is that there is little or no agreement about where or when or how this was supposed to have happened. All the stories are different and there is not the first shred of real evidence to support any of them. No documents, no photographs, no artifacts, no human remains—just stories. Various authors have presented documents, photos, artifacts, and even human remains to support their claims, but in each and every case the evidence has proven to be false, misrepresented, or so vague as to be meaningless.

What the historical record does show is that it was a physical impossibility for the Earhart flight to have reached territory controlled by Japan and, even if it had, there was nothing there to spy on in 1937, and no military to capture her for spying on something that wasn't there.

## **How hard would it be to land the Electra on the reef at Nikumaroro?**

Depends on where you try. Large stretches of the reef flat are smooth enough to ride a bicycle on. Other parts are pitted and quite jagged. Today, the area where former residents say they once saw airplane wreckage is marginal. The Electra had nice big fat tires. I'd say that you'd probably blow the tires but wouldn't necessarily collapse the gear or flip the airplane. What it was like in that area 60 years ago is anybody's guess.

## **If the Electra was on the reef at Gardner Island when the search planes from the battleship Colorado flew over the island a week later, why didn't they see it?**

This question troubled us for years until new information about exactly where the airplane was made the answer apparent. If the airplane was near the ocean side of the reef where former island resident Emily Sikuli says she saw wreckage, and where anomalous material on the reef is visible in early photos, the airplane was hidden by the crashing surf. A photograph taken during the Navy search documents that, at the time of the overflight, the tide was high and the ocean was rough enough that the seaward portion of the reef was completely obscured by surf.

## **Why wasn't the Electra found when a British exploratory expedition visited Gardner Island in October 1937, just three months after the Earhart disappearance?**

It does seem highly unlikely that the aircraft was not seen, but several factors may have contributed to the fact that it certainly was not recognized for what it was. Contemporaneous written accounts and photos show that the party made their landing on the reef just south of the wreck of the S.S. *Norwich City*. At that time, the grounded ship was still intact and thus masked from

view the northern portion of the reef edge where the aircraft wreckage is said to have been located. In a photo taken during the visit, the material on the reef is visible but not recognizable as aircraft wreckage. There is no reason to suspect that it would appear differently to the eye than to the camera. It should also be noted that the two British Colonial service officers and nineteen Gilbertese delegates who made up the expedition party probably had no knowledge of the Earhart disappearance at the time of their three-day visit to Gardner Island. Their purpose was to assess the island for future settlement and their attention was focused upon determining whether the island's soil was suitable for agriculture and upon digging wells in search of potable water. On the southeastern side of the island they did come across "signs of previous habitation" described as looking as if "someone had bivouacked for the night."

## **Why wasn't the Electra found when a six-man survey party from New Zealand spent two months on the island in December 1938/ January 1939?**

Many of the same factors apply to the New Zealand survey party as applied to the earlier but much briefer British visit. The New Zealanders, too, came ashore on the south side of the shipwreck which masked the possible aircraft wreck site from view, and the focus of their work was inland and on the lagoon. Like their predecessors, they took a photo that shows the material on the reef. The photo was taken through a hole in the hull of the shipwreck looking northward along the reef at high tide and is captioned "Undertow through gap in side of wreck." The suspect material on the reef is visible in the photo but seems to be submerged by the high tide and certainly is not recognizable as aircraft wreckage. (The allegation that the material on the reef was from an airplane comes later in the island's history when

Gilbertese fishermen had occasion to be up close to the wreckage while fishing along the reef edge.) An additional impediment was the weather. November through March is the “westerly” season during which the island is subject to heavy seas out of the west and northwest. Heavy westerly weather was experienced by the survey party in the first part of January, 1939.

### **Why wasn't the Electra found when a U.S. Navy survey party from U.S.S. *Bushnell* spent a week mapping the island in November 1939?**

As with the 1937 British visit and the 1938/39 New Zealand visit, the 1939 Navy survey was focused inland. The material on the reef was obscured by high tide at least half of the time and, during periods of high seas, all of the time. When it was visible it was not recognizable from a distance.

### **How does this new information effect TIGHAR's evaluation of the Wreck Photo?**

This puzzling photo of uncertain origin shows an extensively damaged aircraft in a tropical setting. A forensic analysis of the photo seems to suggest that the airplane is a Lockheed Electra with the large P&W R1340 engines of the C and E series of the Model 10. Is it a photo of NR16020 on Nikumaroro? For a while that looked like a reasonable possibility (see *TIGHAR Tracks* Vol. 14, No. 2 “The Wreck Photo”), but Emily Sikuli's recollections and the photographic confirmation that there was something out on the reef where she says she saw badly deteriorated airplane wreckage, argue strongly against a largely intact body of wreckage in the shoreline vegetation as shown in the Wreck Photo.

### **What about the Canton Engine?**

The possibility that an engine of the same type as those used on the Earhart aircraft was recovered from a reef in the Phoenix

Group and taken by helicopter to Canton Island in 1970 or 1971 remains an intriguing question. A TIGHAR expedition to Canton (now Kanton) in 1998 established that the dump where the engine is said to have been deposited was subsequently bulldozed and buried. Excavation is, at this time, prohibitively expensive. We have also been unable to find corroboration of the story of the engine's recovery, despite having tracked down several people who were involved in helicopter operations on Canton at the time. Research continues.



*Earhart's Electra on Nikumaroro? Probably not.*