

Letter From William Short.

This is a transcription of *Colorado* pilot Lt. William Short's letter to his father written during the Earhart search. The transcription was made by Short himself (by then retired Capt. Short) with irrelevant personal information deleted and explanatory footnotes added. Only the transcribed 1937 information has been reproduced here.



The International Group for Historic Aircraft Recovery
2366 Hickory Hill Road · Oxford, PA · 19363 · USA
310.467.1937 · www.tighar.org · info@tighar.org

From Capt Short, USN

COPY. Original envelope postmarked "U.S.S. Colorado July 22
7 P.M. 1937".

Enroute Howland I.
Monday, July 5, 1937

Dear Dad,

. (The first paragraphs are concerned with purely personal matters and have been omitted).

Our own cruise, up to the time we were handed this job was quite uneventful, and went exactly according to schedule. After picking up the Washington R.O.T.C. unit at Seattle and the California unit at San Francisco we headed directly for Hilo. We got in a little flying on the way out as both Lambrecht and Fox had just reported aboard and as neither of them had ever had duty on a battleship as pilots they had to be checked out in catapulting and recoveries. We also got in a little at Hilo. 1/

Hilo is the largest town on the Island of Hawaii, which, in turn, is the largest island of the group. That about sums up my knowledge of Hilo! I got ashore only once and then didn't get any farther than the yacht club. Had the duty the first night - went to the dinner we gave for our departing skipper at the Yacht Club the second night - we shoved off the next day. The island in addition to being the largest is probably the prettiest - it has two truly majestic mountains both of volcanic origin and both over 13 000 feet. One of them is still mildly active. There were sightseeing trips up to the crater but as I have indicated, I missed both of them. Another feature is the windward (eastern) coast which for a long stretch is formed by high cliffs dotted with innumerable waterfalls, most of them with a drop of a thousand feet or over.

On the way up to Honolulu we stayed two days at Lahaina Roads while the R.O.T.C. units fired their short range battle practice - they did astonishingly well considering their short period of training.

On the way in to Honolulu they sent us off and we went in to the air base at Pearl Harbor while the ship docked at Honolulu. That was last Thursday, the 1st. Friday morning we "turned-to" on the planes as the primary object of sending us in to Pearl Harbor was to get some overhaul work done. 1/ We managed to get things pretty well torn apart Friday morning and the carburetors and such up to the shops - figuring on getting them back in shape for flying Monday. Friday afternoon I went into town with Bill Williams 2/ had lunch with them and thence back to the ship to change clothes as we were all going back out to the Air Station to a cocktail party that little Edna 3/ was giving for her house guest - her old roommate or something. We no sooner got back out there than the news broke that the Colorado might be designated to search for the missing Earhart plane. That kind of put me 4/ on a spot as you can well imagine - with the planes all out of commission and everybody scattered all over the place on liberty. Finally rounded up about six of our men about seven o'clock that night and had the planes more or less ready by eleven. All of which was pretty much love's labor lost as the good old Colorado had to go over to Pearl Harbor to take on fuel, supplies and spare parts as there was some possibility that we might have to establish an advanced base for the patrol planes to operate from. 5/ Sid Harvey 6/ had left in a "big-boat" about 7:15 Friday night but ran into bad weather just before daybreak Saturday after trying to get through, around or over it for three hours he wisely decided to head for home while he still had gas enough to get there.

We finally got everything aboard and underway at 1:00 p.m. Saturday afternoon, with the firm conviction that even if they were still alive they would probably die of old age before we could arrive on the scene. We have, however, been plugging along at about 17 knots which is pretty good cruising speed for one of these things. 7/ We expect to be within possible searching areas by tomorrow night and commence the search seriously Wednesday. The Coast Guard Cutter Itasca, the Navy tug Swan 8/ and a merchant steamer are all in the area now and the Lexington with three destroyers are on the way.

The maze of conflicting reports and general misinformation is as baffling and confusing to us as it must certainly appear from the press notices. The general situation as I see it at this moment is something like this: The plane either was unable to or simply failed to get a good check on its position by celestial navigation on the morning of Friday 2 July. Being thoroughly lost by the time they ran out of gas they were unable to report even an approximate position from which to start the search. The Itasca, however, from her first estimate concluded that the plane had overshot Howland and was somewhere to the northwestward and consequently she has been searching this sector. If this deduction is correct it means that the plane must have landed in the water as there are no islands or reefs for a thousand miles in this direction. The nearest island to the westward is in the Gilbert Islands 450 miles to the southwest of Howland. To the southeast, however, there are the Phoenix Islands some 300 miles from Howland with Winslow Reef and another unnamed reef considerably closer. The persistent reports of vague radio transmissions heard on the plane's frequency have given rise to the belief that the plane may have landed on one of these or landed near and drifted on. The definite opinion of those familiar with the plane's radio equipment is that there is no auxiliary power available and that the plane must be on land in order to make any transmissions whatever. This view casts still greater doubt on the authenticity of the transmissions heard - either they were imaginary in the first place or came from some other source - possibly the harmonic from some broadcasting station which is the most plausible answer. 9/ This view also refutes the position report that was supposed to have been heard this morning placing the plane 281 miles north of Howland - this would mean the plane was in the water and therefore unable to transmit, - so what?

This whole business is certainly a royal pain in the neck - not but what I welcome this opportunity for a cruise down to this part of the world, mind you, but it's the principle of the thing. First place I can't see it as anything but a publicity stunt. "Flying Laboratory" indeed! Even if she had been successful what would have been proven

thereby except that she was the first woman to fly around the world? As it stands now she has only demonstrated once more that long flights over water in a landplane are foolishly dangerous. 10/ It is my own personal opinion that she should never have been permitted to attempt this flight, or having once started it more elaborate measures for safeguarding it should have been established. I have yet to hear a satisfactory explanation of why the Itasca or the radio station at Howland failed to get a reasonably accurate bearing of the plane before it was forced down. I suspect that the fundamental reason ~~was~~ the lack of effective coordination of the facilities available. The specific reason probably was that the plane probably used voice exclusively and on a frequency that was too high for the direction finders. 11/

I'm starting off on my own imagination now which means that it's about time to quit - will try to keep a running record of this affair from day to day from now on.

Thursday, July 8th

That day to day stuff sounded all right Monday but didn't get very far on Tuesday and Wednesday. Tuesday we changed course rather sharply to the southward - we had been heading on the great circle track for Howland. The change was made to bring us closer to the Phoenix group which seemed to hold the greatest possibilities. Wednesday morning we made contact with the Itasca and gave her some 65 000 gallons of fuel oil, fresh provisions etc. The Itasca and Swan and the merchantman had all investigated the position report 281 miles north of Howland proving it was just as screwy as everyone suspected.

We finished fueling the Itasca about 11 a.m. Wednesday and proceeded on southward, launched the planes about 2:30 and went out to take a look at the northernmost reef. (We crossed the equator on this hop) It was a good idea only we couldn't find the damn thing. We had a moderate run out, of about 85 miles and I'm reasonably certain that our navigation was fair enough because we hit the ship "on the nose" on our return. In addition the visibility was excellent with moderate sea and swells. If there was a reef with breakers I don't see how we could have missed it. Wednesday night we stayed in

approximately the same area and this morning we launched the planes again and went over the entire area between the unnamed northern reef and Winslow reef with a fine tooth comb without seeing either of them. I wasn't along on that hop but I'm certain that there could be no question of the navigation this time as the navigator had a good "fix" from his morning star sights and the planes scouted barely out of sight of the ship and would return for a check at the end of each leg. About noon two of us went out again (the third plane had a hole in the main float which wasn't repaired in time) 12/ and again passed over the charted position of Winslow reef without seeing it. We continued to search anyway, in order to cover as much of this area as possible. A third flight went out in the late afternoon with the same object. In all we covered better than five thousand square miles just to-day and when I say covered I mean within a range of visibility of not more than two miles which is certainly close enough to be sure of spotting a plane or rubber boat. 13/

The story of those reefs is a yarn all by itself. Winslow reef was sighted by the Phoenix, Captain Winslow, in 1851 and apparently has never been seen since. Since 1920 three ships have passed over its charted position without seeing any sign of shoal water. About ten years ago, however, another ship reported having sighted "a sand bank and breakers" distant about 3 miles 14/ and about 45 miles north of the supposed position of Winslow Reef. The "Sailing Directions" concludes the story with the supposition that they are identical and that the first position reported for Winslow Reef was in error. We found neither of them although we took great pains to search carefully for both of them. What's the answer? -- Your guess is as good as mine, - or anybody's. In any case you can imagine what a nightmare it must be for the Captain in command of one of the U. S. Navy's best battleboats charging around in waters where the latest charts and Sailing Directions provide such reliable information.

Tomorrow we expect to look over the westernmost islands of the Phoenix group McKean I., Gardner I. and Carondelet Reef and possibly Hull I. We at least ought to be able to find the islands. - I hope.

The ship crossed the "Line" yesterday (Wednesday) afternoon but due to the search operations His Majesty, King Neptune Ruler of the Raging Main postponed His arrival on board to greet His loyal subjects and to mete out just punishment to the lowly polywogs, until tomorrow morning. As the schedule calls for an early launching for us I will probably miss most of the fun. However, if I can only keep my date with Amelia it will be worth it!

Friday, 9 July.

Well, the search continued as per schedule - we were catapulted at 7:00 this morning, went directly to McKean I. thence to Gardner Is., on down to Carondelet Reef and back aboard about 10:45. We found nothing, but this was none the less a very encouraging flight for we at least had the satisfaction of making our landfalls as expected. The navigation checked astonishingly well, infact, and did much to restore our self-confidence. McKean is a barren coral reef about a mile square with absolutely no vegetation except some patches short sparse grass. There were some ruins of old houses and evidences of old guano workings - millions of birds but no other sign of life. Gardner was very different - a ring of land surrounding the lagoon about 2½ miles long by about a mile wide. Almost completely covered by short bushy trees including two small groves of coconut palms. There was the wreck of a fairly large steamer - of about five thousand tons hard up on the beach - her back broken in two places and covered with red rust, but otherwise fairly intact. Apparently it had been there less than ten years. Carondelet Reef was completely submerged with only occasional breakers - we estimated the least depth at 15 or 20 feet. We felt right good about finding it at all under these conditions after a run of about 80 miles from Gardner Is. and this confirmed our conviction that Winslow and that other reef either dont exist or are a hell of a long way from their charted positions. 15/

We catapulted again at 2:00 this afternoon and went out some 90 miles to Hull I. This is very similar to Gardner only it is slightly larger and is inhabited. The population consists of one white man and some 30 or 40 natives who tend

the coconut groves - the principal export being copra. Johnny Lambrecht (our Senior Aviator) landed in the lagoon and talked with the white overseer in hopes that he might have heard or seen the plane passing. He had not even heard about the flight in the first place - lucky fellow! We got back to the ship about 5:00 and called it a day. Tomorrow we hope to check the remaining five islands of the Phoenix group and fuel the Swan in addition.

All the pollywogs were converted to shellbacks in due form this morning and now they are all going around sitting down as little as possible and that very gingerly. I can well sympathize with them as this constant exposure to a parachute for three hours at a clip has much the same effect.

Monday, 12 July 1937

Well, our part in the search has been completed and we are headed for the barn. Saturday morning we were launched at 7:00 and inspected Sydney, Phoenix, Enderbury and Birnie islands in that order. Sydney was quite similar to Hull Island though somewhat smaller. There was a large coconut grove and some old houses but if there were any inhabitants they kept pretty well hidden. Phoenix Enderbury and Birnie are almost completely barren and inhabited only by a million or two birds. My interest in ornithology was pretty well obscured by my anxiety to avoid too intimate contact with one of our feathered friends as one of those big frigate birds or any of the larger variety of sea gulls can be bad news to a propeller. We consider ourselves very lucky that none of us hit any - apparently the sentiment was mutual, and they proved very adept at dodging us - considering what little practice they've had.

Saturday afternoon we had completed refueling the Swan and made a short flight to look over Canton Island. It is by far the largest of the group but the strip of land surrounding the lagoon is extremely narrow and barren. This was the island used by the recent eclipse expedition - their shacks and the concrete bases for their telescopes were still there, completely deserted, of course, and lending a still more desolate atmosphere to the place.

This wound up our search operations and we immediately headed north to rendezvous with the Lexington's plane guard destroyers for fueling this morning. We completed fueling all three this afternoon and are now on our way to Pearl Harbor. There is some question whether or not we will have to take on fuel ourselves - if we don't we will stop only long enough to drop the press correspondents and get our mail. Incidentally, I got Little Mother's letter to-day as one of the destroyers brought us some mail. (The remainder of the letter consists of irrelevant personal items).

NOTES

1/ Aboard a battleship underway the Aviation Unit's main problems were flight time and maintenance. Flight time because the launch and recovery, particularly the recovery, involved a large part of the deck force and the captains were understandably reluctant to disrupt the entire ship's routine unless there was something definite to be accomplished. Maintenance was difficult due to the lack of shop facilities and the awkwardness of working on aircraft mounted on the catapults.

2/ Lt.(j.g.) L. W. Williams (now Capt. U.S.N. Retired). My mother and father knew the Williams' quite well.

3/ Miss Edna Whiting, daughter of Capt. Kenneth Whiting U.S.N., who was then Commanding Officer, Naval Air Station, Pearl Harbor. Capt. Whiting died April 24, 1943. Miss Whiting is now Mrs. T. A. Nisewaner, her husband also a Capt. U.S.N. Retired, and living in Bethesda, Md. The Whiting family were neighbors of ours here in Larchmont and were patients of my father, who was a dentist.

4/ As I recall it, I was the only one of the Colorado's pilots who was actually out at the Air Station when the news broke.

5/ Needless to say this was never done.

6/ Lieutenant Commander Warren W. Harvey U.S.N. now deceased - December 12, 1940. Obviously I got the story of his flight second hand.

7/ As I recall it the Colorado had a maximum speed of about 21 knots, with a clean bottom. She was due for her routine overhaul later that summer so it is doubtful that she could have made much over 20 with a foul bottom. The speed of 17 knots was a reasonable compromise between the urgency of the mission and excessive fuel consumption, in spite of my aside remarks in the preceding sentence.

8/ I believe that the Swan had been converted to a seaplane tender (AVP ?) but does not have any reference material available to confirm this. In any case she was basically a seagoing tug similar to the other "bird" class tenders - Lapwing, Gannet, etc.

9/ We had no information that the missing plane may have had an auxiliary battery that might have made it possible for them to transmit without the engine driven generators. The possibility that the reported transmissions may have been fragments of a news broadcast heard on a harmonic of the primary frequency no doubt came up in the discussions aboard the Colorado, but it no longer seems very "plausible".

10/ What a clouded crystal ball! I cringe at this whole paragraph.

11/ I doubt that anyone aboard the Colorado knew that there was a high frequency direction finder on Howland I. - in fact, it is probable that none of us knew that such equipment existed, as it was generally believed that it was impractical to use the D.F. over about 1,000 kcs. For our own D.F. work we normally operated between 400 and 500 kcs. and all on CW.

12/ As I recall it, the damage occurred when the float hit a corner of the recovery sled after the first flight that morning.

13/ There was much discussion as to whether or not there was a life raft aboard the missing plane, and I still do not know.

14/ Evidently this was intended to mean that the ship was 3 miles from the reef at the time of the sighting.

15/ In his article in the Honolulu Star-Bulletin, of August 21, 1937, Mr. John B. Terry, who was aboard the Colorado during the search, gives some additional information which

which evidently was also excerpted from the Sailing Directions, as follows:

"This Winslow reef business began one fine day back in 1851, when the ship Phoenix, Capt. Winslow, was sailing in these same waters. Capt Winslow reported discovery of a reef which 'extends one mile northwest and southeast, and is 1,500 yards wide, with two pointed rocks awash, 1 degree 40 minutes south, 174 degrees 50 minutes west.'

"Perhaps the reef was there then, but it wasn't there in 1922 when the steamer Hanraki passed over the charted position of Winslow reef, why we cannot imagine, and reported seeing no shoal water.

"Nor was it there in 1932 when the American steamer Golden Cross likewise passed over the reef's charted position, why we still cannot imagine, and saw no signs of shoal."

I can't recall that we ever discussed the possibility that either one or both of these reported reefs may have subsequently subsided. This explanation occurred to me when I read a brief history of Falcon Island in an article "The Friendly Isles of Tonga" by Luis Marden, in the March 1968 issue of the National Geographic. The caption under two illustrations is as follows:

"Submarine jack-in-the-box, volcanic Falcon Island rose out of the sea in 1927 for its second appearance in a century (upper). Seen here a year later, the island smokes as it builds. By 1930 it stood more than 400 feet high. Whittled away by water, it disappeared again in 1949."

In the text of this article it is surmised that the highest point of submerged Falcon Island in 1965 was "less than three fathom" below the surface. This article also reports the activity of Metis shoal, north of Tofua: "....first reported in 1858 but vanished by 1898. On the night of December 12, 1967, crewmen of an interisland ship witnessed its rebirth .."

Winslow Reef is about 1,100 miles almost due north of the Tonga Group so it is difficult to assume that it is part of the same geologic formation but it remains an interest-