

Agreed-Upon Lies

For the cover of the first issue of the newly expanded *TIGHAR Tracks* we've chosen an historical figure whose story exemplifies the challenge faced by the aviation researcher. Because Frederick J. Noonan disappeared with Amelia Earhart in 1937, and because subsequent speculation about their fate often included allegations that he had a drinking problem, Fred frequently gets the blame for the disappearance. But research into who he was, what he did, and how the Earhart flight really ended tells a very different story.

History has often been called "a collection of agreed-upon lies," and it is a fundamental paradox of historiography that while we must try our best to discover what really happened in the past, absolute knowledge of past events is ultimately unattainable. Still, popular perceptions of historical events inevitably change as assessments of their significance evolve in the light of new information or improved perspective. The greater the change, the more likely that it will be labeled "revisionist." Whether or not society accepts the revised version of an historical event (the cynic would say "the new lie") often depends upon factors which have nothing to do with the accuracy of the revision.

So does Christopher Columbus, in an age of multi-cultural concern, become an invader rather than a discoverer 500 years after he stepped ashore. Likewise does Amelia Earhart, who made little progress against the sexism of the 1930s, get credit for the growing role of women in the aerospace industry. When women finally won airline cockpit rights the victory came not from the efforts of female pilots inspired by Amelia but from the Civil Rights legislation of the 1960s. It is unlikely, however, that the Ninety-Nines (an organization of women pilots) will ever offer a Martin Luther King, Jr. Scholarship.

As for Noonan, his place in history as merely a scapegoat for the Earhart disappearance is especially unjust. In the early 1930s it was Pan American Airways that invented safe, reliable, intercontinental heavier-than-air passenger travel. The template created by Pan Am was carved by the genius of many great personalities. Juan Trippe was the definitive airline executive – brilliant, savvy and ruthless; Eddie Musick the classic Chief Pilot – laconic, hard-nosed and utterly competent. And Fred Noonan was the navigational wizard who almost single-handedly

perfected the art and science of aerial celestial navigation. In an age of instant Global Positioning it is hard to comprehend that, before Noonan, airliners regularly got lost over open ocean. Noonan's celestial navigation techniques, combined with advances in radio direction finding technology, made transoceanic airline routes safe and practical.

There is no documentation to support allegations that Noonan's departure from Pan American was related to drinking, but it is well established that wages at Pan Am were notoriously low and, as a navigator, his career with the airline had gone as far as it could go. To be fair, there are anecdotes which describe Fred as being prone to go on occasional "benders" when off duty. To what extent he may have had a problem with alcohol is unknown and probably unknowable. What is clear and consistent is that, in the air, he was the consummate craftsman and stories of his navigational prowess are legion.

It is also clear that Fred Noonan's last flight did not end at its intended destination. Aboard the *Clippers* there had been a definite division of labor between the navigator, responsible for celestial and dead reckoning navigation to get the flight close to its destination, and the radio operator, who talked to the technicians at the island-based radio direction finders. Fred was not a radio expert, and tragically, neither was his pilot on that last flight. But although radio navigation failed to bring the Lockheed within sight of Howland Island, there was another island within fuel range which was readily findable by standard celestial navigation techniques. Beyond the historical documentation, the artifact analysis, and the logic which supports *TIGHAR's* identification of Nikumaroro as the place where the Earhart flight ended, there is the conviction that the finest aerial navigator of the 1930s succeeded in saving his aircraft, his pilot and his own life. Our commitment to discovering what then became of them is, in part, based upon a desire to vindicate the memory of one of aviation's great pioneers. 🐾

Sikorsky S-42 of the type used by Pan Am during Fred Noonan's tenure. Photo courtesy National Archives.

