

# AN ANSWERING WAVE

The article below appeared in the Feb. 1993 issue of *Naval Institute Proceedings* under the title "Why the Navy Didn't Find Amelia."

She died on Saipan in 1944. She died in New Jersey in 1983. She died at sea in 1937. She's on a Pacific island, alive and well today.... As a wellspring of American folklore, only the assassination of John F. Kennedy compares with the disappearance of Amelia Earhart.



And inextricably connected with the Earhart legend is the United States Navy and what the Associated Press called "the greatest organized effort ever undertaken in behalf of a lost flier" eventually involving "3,000 men, 10 ships, [and] 102 American fighting planes." Why was such a huge effort mounted – and why did it fail? What was really going on? Was there a secret agenda? Was there a cover-up? Is it even possible to know?

Yes, unequivocally, it is possible to know. What happened in the central Pacific in July of 1937 is documented in official records which are voluminous, diverse and, but for a couple of notable exceptions, mutually corroborative. Fifty-six years later, no significant sources remain classified. Who did what and when they did it is, therefore, possible to document. What cannot be known from the historical record is that which was not known at the time – namely, what became of Amelia Earhart? That question too can now be answered, but not without an accurate understanding of the U.S. Navy search that failed to answer it in 1937.

The first step in getting to the facts is to separate out the folklore. Allegations that there was secret government involvement in the Earhart flight or that her disappearance was used by the Navy as an excuse to reconnoiter Japanese activity in the Marshall Islands are entirely without documentary support. Their only adherents today are conspiracy buffs who invoke the canard that absence of evidence is somehow proof of a cover-up. But equally unsupported is the notion that the U.S. Navy's search was a well-planned humanitarian effort that failed only because Earhart's aircraft crashed and sank at sea without leaving a trace. The message traffic, ship's logs, official reports and personal letters of the participants tell a very different story.

The U.S. Navy's reaction to Amelia Earhart's disappearance was not well-planned, nor was it poorly planned. It wasn't planned at all. The Navy's first indication of trouble hit the desk of Rear Admiral Orin G. Murfin, Commandant, Fourteenth Naval District in Hawaii at 1100 Honolulu time on July 2, 1937. A copy of a message from the Coast Guard cutter *Itasca* to USCG San Francisco Division reported Earhart overdue at Howland and led Murfin to conclude that "failure of the flight was imminent." Four hours later *Itasca* advised San Francisco:

EARHART UNREPORTED HOWLAND AT 1200.  
BELIEVE DOWN SHORTLY AFTER 0915. AM  
SEARCHING PROBABLE AREA AND WILL  
CONTINUE.

Although still technically the Coast Guard's concern, Murfin suspected that Earhart's whereabouts would soon become his problem and, at 1400, he convened a meeting of his senior officers to consider the situation. His suspicions were confirmed when, at 1440, he received a message from the Navy Department:

USE AVAILABLE NAVAL FACILITIES TO  
CONDUCT SUCH SEARCH FOR MISS EARHART  
IN YOUR OPINION IS PRACTICABLE.

Weeks later, after the search had failed, Murfin's official report would claim that, "...[T]he Department ... directed the Commandant of the Fourteenth Naval District to use all available naval facilities in the search." But that's not what his orders said, and the tendency to shift responsibility upward would later help create the myth that the Navy's massive response was "Personally authorized by President Roosevelt." The record, however, clearly shows that the Navy's involvement in the search began with a telegram sent by Earhart's husband and manager, George Putnam, as soon as it was apparent that the flight was overdue. The request for help was



Rear Admiral Orin G. Murfin, Commandant, Fourteenth Naval District. Contrary to legend, it was he, not FDR, who launched the Navy's search for Earhart.

Photo courtesy National Archives.

addressed not to FDR, but to Admiral William D. Leahy, Chief of Naval Operations. The CNO, while approving the use of naval facilities, left it up to the commander closest to the scene, Murfin, to determine what response was "practicable."

Perhaps because he had been advised that the plane could float "almost indefinitely," or perhaps because he was unsure how he should interpret his rather fuzzy orders, Murfin failed to adhere to the first rule of search and rescue operations – time is the enemy. Lined up on their beaching gear at Fleet Air Base Pearl Harbor were 24 new PBY-1 flying boats capable of making the 1,600 nm flight to Howland. On hand at the island were 1,600

gallons of aviation fuel originally intended for Earhart, while aboard *Swan* were 10,000 gallons more. As early as 1138 on July 2 *Itasca* had suggested that the Navy send a patrol plane to assist in the search, but it was 1923 before a plane headed south under the command of Lt. W. W. "Sid" Harvey. He and his seven man crew would spend the next twenty-four hours and three minutes aloft only to land where they had started – forced to turn back barely three hundred miles from Howland by "extremely bad weather." The Consolidated PBY would eventually carry out more successful rescues than any aircraft type in history, but Amelia Earhart's would not be one of them. No further attempt would be made to employ a PBY in the search.



The battleship U.S.S. *Colorado*, with nearly 200 ROTC students aboard, arrived in Honolulu for four days of liberty the same day Earhart disappeared. Photo courtesy National Archives.

At 1700 Murfin asked the Navy Department that he be permitted to divert the battleship U.S.S. *Colorado* which was, at that moment, mooring to Pier 2 in Honolulu in anticipation of four days of liberty. Fourteen days out of San Francisco, the ship was on its annual ROTC training cruise hosting nearly 200 college students, as well as several university VIPs along for the ride. But of more interest to Admiral Murfin were the three catapult-launched floatplanes *Colorado* carried – except the airplanes weren't aboard. An hour before Murfin made his request, *Colorado's* Corsairs had been flown to Fleet Air Base, Pearl Harbor for scheduled maintenance. Four hours after Murfin's request, at 2112, came the message, "COLORADO IS MADE AVAILABLE." But with her personnel scattered all over Honolulu, her aircraft opened up for inspection at the Fleet Air Base hangar, and the need to provision and fuel for an unanticipated major expedition, it was 1408 on July 3rd before she cleared Pearl Harbor and set course for Howland Island "with the firm conviction that ... if [Earhart and Noonan] were still alive they would probably die of old age before we could arrive on the scene." By now Murfin was aware that there was a fast ship with an aircraft aboard far closer to the search area and in receipt of radio signals believed to be distress calls from Earhart. She was the British cruiser HMS *Achilles* (later to win fame in the pursuit of the *Graf Spee*). On July 3rd *Achilles* was 800 nm east of the island group *Colorado* would eventually

search on July 9th. Unlike *Colorado*, she was familiar with the area and could have had her Supermarine Walrus observation plane overhead the suspect islands fully four days before they were, in fact, searched. No request was made for her assistance. Instead, the aircraft carrier U.S.S. *Lexington*, preparing for Fourth of July celebrations at Santa Barbara, California, was ordered to rendezvous with four destroyers and proceed immediately to join the search, refueling in Hawaii on the way. But first she had to re-provision at Long Beach and then go to San Diego to take on aircraft whose pilots had to be recalled from holiday leave. It was July 5 before the *Lexington* Group began its 4,000 nm voyage to join the search.

On July 6 the *Itasca* was put under Navy authority and, for the first time, all the search elements came under one unified command. Murfin immediately delegated direction of the search to the *Colorado's* skipper, Captain Wilhelm L. Friedell. Amelia Earhart had been missing for five days when, at 1433 on July 7th, *Colorado's* planes were catapulted to inspect Winslow Reef 150 nm southeast of Howland. Until then, the only search conducted by anyone had been that of the lonely *Itasca*, eventually joined by *Swan*, scouring the ocean to the north and west of Howland. But they were looking in the wrong place.



This Vought O3U-3 "Corsair", *Colorado's* plane 4-0-6, participated in the July 9, 1937 aerial search of Gardner Island. Photo courtesy National Archives.

Among naval authorities, aerial navigators familiar with Noonan's methods, and technicians at Lockheed, a consensus had developed that the lost Lockheed was probably not bobbing about in the ocean but had to be on an island or reef to the southeast of Howland. It was an intelligent assessment of the situation based upon the known capabilities of the aircraft, an analysis of the weather, Earhart's own pre-loss radio transmissions, navigational logic, and several Pan American Airways' radio bearings taken on what were believed to be legitimate distress calls from the missing plane. As early as July 5th, Pan Am reported that the available evidence "PLACES PLANE NEAR LINE OF POSITION AND INTERSECTION OF RADIO BEARINGS ... IN PHOENIX GROUP [of islands]." The spot best fitting that description was Gardner Island, an atoll 350 nm southeast of Howland,



but Friedell decided that *Colorado* would search Winslow Reef on the way. As Lt. (jg) William B. Short, pilot of plane 4-0-5, wrote in a letter to his father, "It was a good idea only we couldn't find the damn thing." The *Colorado's* pilots spent the next two days looking for the phantom reef and never found it.

At 0700 on July 9th, one full week after the Earhart flight had disappeared, the *Colorado's* aircraft were launched for an aerial search of Gardner Island. The night before, Lt. Short wrote, "As the schedule calls for an early morning 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!" The fun Bill Short missed was the arrival of "Neptunus Rex" to initiate the many "pollywogs" aboard the battleship who had never before crossed the Equator. The ship's official newspaper (headlined "Plane Search Halts Cruise") later devoted thirty column inches and all seven of its photos to the party, while covering the entire search for Earhart in twelve column inches. While cadets and VIPs alike were being paddled, dunked and otherwise assaulted, the three O3U-3s were wheeling high over Gardner Island, a four mile long, densely jungled ribbon of land surrounding a shallow lagoon. According to the official report of Senior Aviator Lt. John O. Lambrecht, the aerial inspection of the island was done from an altitude no lower than 400 feet for fear of bird strikes, and a photograph taken during the mission is from considerably higher. The searchers saw no Lockheed Electra but they did see something else:

Here, signs of recent habitation were clearly visible but repeated circling and zooming failed to elicit any answering wave from possible inhabitants and it was finally taken for granted that none were there.



A notation on the back of this U.S. Navy photograph of Gardner Island confirms that it was taken on the morning of July 9, 1937. The handwritten North arrow points due West. Photo courtesy New Zealand Archives.

What Lambrecht did not know was that there should have been no "signs of recent habitation" on Gardner. The place had been uninhabited since pre-historic times except for about 20 native laborers who planted some coconuts on the atoll and then left – in 1892. And yet Lambrecht was so convinced that people were down there that he made repeated attempts to get someone to come out and wave to him. Exactly what he saw remains a mystery. The only clue is a

comment he made in an interview before his death in 1972 in which he said he had seen "markers." Later, the official report of *Colorado's* commanding officer, Captain Wilhelm L. Friedell, directly contradicted the ship's Senior Aviator with a statement that no signs of habitation were seen on Gardner. Over the next two days the planes of the *Colorado* flew over the remaining six islands of the Phoenix Group. At no time was a search party put ashore on any island.

On 12 July *Colorado* was relieved by the *Lexington* and began its long overdue return to the West Coast. On-site direction of the search changed hands for the third time, passing to Captain Jonathan S. Dowell, commander of the *Lexington* Group. Again contrary to good procedure, a thorough re-examination of the most logical area was not conducted. Instead, the carrier steamed off to search the open ocean northwest of Howland Island. Six days later, on July 18, the *Lexington* Group ceased search operations having found nothing. At no time did the ships or planes of the group enter the Japanese Mandate nor did they inspect any island.

In his official report dated July 31, 1937, Rear Admiral Orin G. Murfin, wrote, "It is regrettably unreasonable to conclude other than that the unfortunate fliers were not above water upon conclusion of the search." Was Murfin's assertion justified or were Amelia Earhart and Fred Noonan, as those words were written, still alive – classically marooned on a desert island?

Three months later, on October 13, 1937, a small British expedition evaluating Gardner Island for future settlement noted unexplained "signs of previous habitation" on the atoll. When the island's first colonial work party was clearing underbrush in late 1938 they reportedly came upon "the skeleton of a woman" with "shoes of the American kind, size nine narrow." Expeditions to Gardner Island (now Nikumaroro) in 1989 and 1991 by TIGHAR have recovered aircraft wreckage consistent with Earhart's Lockheed, as well as personal effects, including the remains of an American shoe identical in style and size to that worn by Earhart on her last flight.

In assessing the U.S. Navy's search for Amelia Earhart it is unfair to apply current Search And Rescue (SAR) standards. Today's techniques and tactics are, in part, the product of experience gained in unsuccessful operations such as the Earhart search. The question of "How thorough was the search?" is only worth asking if it helps answer the larger question of "What really happened to Amelia Earhart?" – and clearly it does. But while the preponderance of the evidence now confirms the Navy's original suspicion that Gardner Island was where the Earhart flight ended, many questions remain unanswered. The pieces of wreckage found suggest either an explosion or catastrophic wave damage. Where is the rest of the airplane? How long did Earhart and Noonan survive on the waterless atoll? It is to answer these questions that TIGHAR will return once more to an island where, fifty-six years ago, a naval aviator tried in vain to elicit an answering wave.

