

# HIT OR MYTH

**I**n our investigation of aviation history's two greatest mysteries—the loss of l'Oiseau Blanc and the disappearance of the Earhart Electra—we are struck by parallels between the two tragedies. Each aircraft was a modification of a proven design and each crew was made up of a celebrity pilot and a highly professional navigator. Both flights were assumed to have gone down at sea and almost certainly did not, yet the remains of both aircraft will probably be discovered underwater. In each case an aerial search shortly after the disappearance seems to have come agonizingly close to discovering the fate of the lost fliers. And in the case of both flights there is today widespread public misconception about what happened and its significance.

We commonly hear concerns that, should we prove that the White Bird crossed the Atlantic nearly two weeks before the Spirit of St. Louis made its flight, Lindbergh's record will be invalidated. Of course, nothing could be further from the truth. The first nonstop aerial crossing of the North Atlantic (Newfoundland to Ireland) was made by Alcock and Brown in 1919. Eight years later, Lindbergh was the first to fly nonstop between New York and Paris (over twice the distance flown by Alcock and Brown). The fact that he did it solo was icing on the cake. The Lone Eagle's record would only be in jeopardy if we were to discover that Nungesser and Coli made a successful landing in New York (only to be captured by the Japanese?).

If the White Bird's place in history is misunderstood, the Electra's disappearance has become pure mythology (see reviews of the latest film and book in this *TIGHAR Tracks*, pp. 14 & 15). For example, everyone knows that the 1937 search for Amelia Earhart was the greatest sea and air search for a missing airplane ever launched and that it was entirely a U.S. Navy operation – and everyone is wrong. Although now largely forgotten, the attempt to find and rescue Nungesser and Coli ten years earlier dwarfed the Earhart/Noonan search in nearly every respect (number of participants, ships committed, time spent, area covered, etc.). What's

more, neither search can be accurately described as an organized effort by any one agency. Rather, each was an ad hoc, frantic, and poorly coordinated scramble involving an assortment of aircraft, naval and merchant marine vessels, bureaucrats, commercial firms, well-meaning private citizens and, occasionally, cruel hoaxers. Little wonder that confusion reigned during both searches and that, all these years later, trying to sort out what really happened is a monumental task. Fortunately, for each of these two great mysteries, most of the information available to the would-be rescuers is on record in various archives. What we have that they didn't have is the time to sort out what was really going on.

## Jacobson's Ladder

We also have the incomparable advantage of computerized information management. After a two-year archival search, TIGHAR's senior researcher for the Earhart Project, Randy Jacobson (TIGHAR #1364), has assembled some three thousand U. S. government radio messages relating to the Earhart disappearance. From these documents, after many months of cross-checking and data entry, Randy has created the Amelia Earhart World Flight Radio Message Database, a relational database in Microsoft Foxpro 2.50. In real life Randy is a scientist with the U.S. Navy's Office of Naval Research near Washington, D. C. and, as you can imagine, he has some advantages over your garden-variety Earhart researcher (such as a security clearance that goes all the way up to Really Neat). His Earhart database is a powerful research tool. For the first time, the story of the preparations for Earhart's flight and the conduct of the search as told in official communications can be studied as a cohesive narrative rather than as a cryptic and disjointed jumble. Voluminous as the database is (printed in 6-point type *like this*, it runs about 500 pages and weighs in at 6 pounds), it is only the beginning of an integrated information cataloging and retrieval system which will eventually include all the various letters, memoranda and reports which make up the rest of the historical record.

## The Dog Ate My Homework

Randy's examination of official message traffic dating from the days immediately preceding the departure of Earhart's first world-flight attempt has uncovered a revealing incident. On March 9, 1937, just four days before AE's planned takeoff for Hawaii (weather delayed the actual departure until the 17th), George Putnam received notification from the Bureau of Air Commerce that, because his wife's Commercial Transport Pilot's License was scheduled to expire on April 15th (during the contemplated circumnavigation) the Commerce Department was going to withhold permission for the flight to proceed until she passed an instrument written test, a basic instrument flying test, and a "radio flying" flight test. This last-minute official check of her abilities has been ignored by the various Earhart biographers, with the exception of Doris Rich. In her book *Amelia Earhart, A Biography* (Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989), Rich says that Earhart passed the instrument flight test but "She didn't take her written and radio tests until March 14 .... Delayed by bad weather, she took and passed both and the Electra was also certified by Air Commerce for the flight." To support this statement Rich cites a document dated March 14, 1937 in National Archives Record Group 237 file 835.

However, in that same record group is a telegram sent from Supervising Aeronautical Inspector Bedinger to R. R. Reining of the Department of Commerce at 11:16 a.m. on March 11, 1937 which reads:

*Flight check Earhart instrument flying satisfactory stop Written and radio flying not given account her desire to expedite and save engines stop Air mailing written report*

The next day, March 12, Assistant Secretary of Commerce J. M. Johnson wrote a letter granting permission for the world flight to proceed.

What's going on here? Given the events that transpired in the central Pacific a few months later it becomes rather important to know whether or not Amelia Earhart demonstrated her expertise in radio navigation to a federal flight examiner in March. Did Amelia pass the tests or not?

The answer is, she did not. The document cited by Rich is a Commerce Department message which confirms only that the "pilot [Earhart] has been certified for radio and instrument ..." It doesn't say



Photo courtesy Purdue University Library Special Collections.

she took the tests and, as is shown by the March 11 telegram, it's clear that the requirement was waived. Was Amelia really concerned about the couple of hours the radio flying examination would put on her engines, or did she fear that she couldn't pass the test? One thing is certain. The radio test she failed en route to Howland Island in July had graver consequences.

## Earhartian Darwinism

One of Randy's most interesting discoveries is a clipping from an Australian newspaper dated June 28, 1937 which includes a first hand description of Earhart's arrival in Port Darwin. According to Earhart's posthumously published book *Last Flight*, this is where "... we left the parachutes we had carried that far, to be shipped home. A parachute would not help over the Pacific" (p. 128). This, of course, has become part of the traditional story of Earhart's disappearance, but the recently found newspaper article specifically says, "The first thing she [Earhart] did after being officially welcomed was to inquire if parachutes, part of the emergency equipment for the Pacific crossing in front of her, had arrived from America. They reached here more than a week ago." Later in the article, more detail is provided. "One of her first actions was to ask the Civil Aviation Officer (Mr. Alan Collins) whether two 'Irvin caterpillar 'chutes' had been delivered from



America. Fully tested and ready for immediate use, the parachutes were waiting in Mr. Collins' office. As a safeguard against emergency they will be carried on the hazardous final stages of the flight."

Which source should we believe? We know that *Last Flight* was edited and embellished from notes sent back by AE during her trip. Some of her handwritten notes are in the Earhart Collection at Purdue University but they do not include any reference to the parachutes. The "Special Representative" whose byline is on the newspaper story was simply describing what he saw and heard on the day he saw it and heard it. His account is, therefore, the more contemporaneous and credible.

**S**o we have new information, but it's important to define just what that information is. What we can now say with some degree of certainty is that Earhart and Noonan picked up, rather than dropped off, parachutes in Australia. We do not

know that the 'chutes were later carried on the Lae/Howland leg (they might have changed their minds), but it does seem probable that the equipment, including parachutes, seen piled in front of the Electra's cabin door in a photograph taken in Darwin, is going aboard the aircraft rather than being offloaded.



Photo courtesy Purdue University Library Special Collections.

In addition to the parachutes we see:

- What appears to be a pressurized cylinder capped with a hex nut and encased in a canvas sleeve upon which the stenciled letters COMM and some illegible numbers are visible. Can anyone identify?
- A spare tail wheel. Seems like a reasonable precaution against a blowout at Howland. The inventory of the aircraft following the March 20th Luke Field crash includes a spare tail wheel.

- A spare control wheel. Not what you'd expect, but an item that was also on the Luke Field inventory for the previous attempt to fly to Howland. Why?
- A round paint-style can with the label partially visible. The first word ends in the letters —BRICANT (lubricant?) and the second, shorter word appears to end in the letters —AIN.
- AE holds a square can labeled MOBILUBRICANT.
- Two cans just inside the doorway appear to be tomato (AE said "tomahto") juice, her favorite inflight drink.

Why the parachutes? The logic might go something like this. The only difference between the flying so far (when they didn't feel they needed parachutes) and the flying to come is that they'll be over water almost all the time. It is evident that they can foresee a situation where it would be preferable to abandon the aircraft rather than ride it down. Such emergencies might include inflight fire, structural failure, or the lack of any acceptable surface upon which to land the airplane. Because the first two possibilities seem little changed from before, the carrying of parachutes on the over-water legs would seem to indicate that Earhart and Noonan had a very low opinion of the advisability of a water landing in the Electra. Interestingly, there was no life raft inventoried after the March 20th crash, only "Life Preserver Vests, pneumatic," and we've found no mention anywhere of flotation devices of any kind being carried in July. Perhaps the parachutes are an indication that while Earhart and Noonan considered a ditching at sea to be suicidal, the need to bail out over an island was seen as a genuine possibility.

Photocopies of the entire Darwin newspaper article and Randy Jacobson's write-up of the flight test incident are available to TIGHAR members on request. His Amelia Earhart World Flight Radio Message Database is not yet publicly available. 🐾

