

# A Matter of Fact ...



Whose last words have been studied more than those of Amelia Earhart? Set down within moments of being heard by the *Itasca's* radio operator, the hurriedly typed phrases paint a maddeningly incomplete, and too often cryptic, picture of tragedy. In the untidy pages of the Coast Guard cutter's original radio log some see the cynical fabric

of a government sham; others hear the desperate cries of a little girl lost; still others perceive only the hand of a hopeless incompetent. That there should be multiple interpretations of these final

communications is hardly surprising given the many ambiguities they contain. TIGHAR researchers have recently discovered, however, that some key entries in the *Itasca* radio log have, from the very beginning, been misinterpreted.

radio log shows that Amelia probably never said "about one hundred miles out" at all. It is clear from the platen mis-alignment that the phrase was later added to the 0646 entry in which Earhart says she "will make a noise in the microphone" upon which she hopes *Itasca* will take a bearing. It is also clear from an earlier entry that this operator uses a dash to separate his own comments from the text of the message. With the added knowledge

I WILL MAKE MOISE IN MIC -ABT 100 MILES OUT

that it was part of the operator's duty to judge distance based on the strength of reception, it becomes apparent that the "one hundred miles out" estimate is the operator's, not Amelia's.

## Going In Circles

A similar controversy has swirled around the 0758 transmission from Earhart in which she said that "We are circling but cannot hear you.

KHAQQ CLNG ITASCA WE ARE CIRCLING BUT CANNOT HR U GA ON 7500 WID A  
LNG COUNT EITHER NW OR ON THE SKD TIME ON 1/2 HOUR (KHAQQ S5 A3)

## Far Out

Why, at 0615 local time, did Earhart report that she was "about two hundred miles out" and yet, only half an hour later at 0646 claim to be "about one hundred miles out"? If the 150 mph *Electra* is really making 200 mph then either Amelia has firewalled the engines and is burning fuel at a suicidal rate, or her secret spy plane has unsuspected capabilities. The other possibility is that one of her position estimates was wrong, but which one? And what does that say about her navigation, and about her navigator?

The correct answer, as it turns out, is none of the above. A close examination of the *Itasca*

Go ahead on 7500 [kilocycles] with a long count either now or on the scheduled time on the half hour." Why is she burning precious fuel circling and why is she willing to wait fully half an hour for *Itasca* to comply with her request?

To decipher this message it is important to understand that Earhart's radio schedule called for her to transmit at a quarter to and a quarter past each hour, and to listen for messages on the hour and the half hour. In accordance with that schedule, at 0742, she said, "We must be on you but cannot see you, but gas is running low. Been unable to reach you by radio. We are flying at 1000 feet." Sixteen minutes later, at 0758, having heard no reply, she tries again—but does she say that she is "circling"?

A close look at the *Itasca* radio log shows that another word was originally typed in that position but was erased. “Circling” was later inserted with, again, a slight misalignment of the typewriter’s

IG OK PLS Y WI  
ARE CIRCLING  
OR ON THE SKD

platen. By computer manipulation it is not difficult to remove the strike-over and reconstruct the erased word. The operator originally

thought Amelia said, “We are drifting but cannot hear you...” For whatever reason,

IG OK PLS Y WI  
ARE DRIFTING  
OR ON THE SKD

perhaps because “drifting” doesn’t make any sense, he went back and changed the word to “circling.” We strongly suspect that what Amelia

IG OK PLS Y WI  
ARE DRIFTING  
OR ON THE SKD

really said was, “We are listening but cannot hear you.”

Amelia’s request for the *Itasca* to transmit “...either now or on the scheduled time on the half hour” makes perfect sense in light of the fact that, for her, it was 19:28 Greenwich Time. Amelia was really saying, “Send me a signal either now or in two minutes.” Contrary to her earlier requests, however, the Coast Guard persisted in using local time, and because they used half-hour time zones, their entire radio schedule was thirty minutes out of synch.

## The Lost Messages

Conjecture has always swirled around the oddly long time lag between Earhart’s two final transmissions. At 0800 local time she responded to the *Itasca*’s broadcast on 7500 KC by saying that, although she had heard the signal, she was “unable to get a minimum” (take a bearing using her Radio Direction Finder). She then asked them to take a bearing on her and sent long dashes on 3105 KC. Nothing further was heard from the aircraft until suddenly, at 0843, she was back on the air with what proved to be her final message. “We are on the line 157-337...” Why, if she was so concerned about fuel, so concerned about her inability to find Howland Island, so concerned about the lack of radio contact, was she silent

for nearly forty five minutes? But was she?

Despite her difficulties, Amelia had faithfully maintained her announced radio schedule of transmissions at a quarter to and a quarter past the hour. *Itasca* heard her at (give or take a couple of minutes) 06:15 and 06:45, but from 07:14 to 07:16 *Itasca* was blocking the frequency with attempts to call her. Earhart transmitted faithfully again at 07:45 and acknowledged the *Itasca*’s signals at 0800. But once more, at her scheduled broadcast time of 08:15, *Itasca* was blocking the frequency with calls to her. She was heard again, and for the last time, at 08:45. It would appear, therefore, that Earhart was conducting herself in a calm and professional manner throughout the crisis and that it was the men of the *Itasca* who were flustered and breaking schedule. Earhart probably transmitted at 07:15 and 08:15 local time but was blocked by *Itasca*. What she said we’ll never know.

TIGHAR has determined that there was, in all probability, no discrepancy in Earhart’s position estimate, no irrational “circling,” and no significant deviation from her announced radio schedule. At the time the *Itasca* stopped hearing transmissions from NR16020 there is every indication that its crew was dealing with the emergency and exercising its options in a rational manner. The same can not be said for the crew of the *Itasca*. 🐾



Photo courtesy National Archive

USCG Itasca