

# Amelia Earhart & the Loch Ness Monster

**“It was a June morning in 1934 ... as the mist shredded away under the warm sunlight ... [s]omething rose from the water like a monster of pre-historic times, measuring a full thirty feet from tip to tail.”** The testimony of Alexander Campbell as related by Timothy Dinsdale in *Loch Ness Monster*, (London, 1961).

In December of 1933 the Depression-ridden public was astounded to learn that a great monster lurked in the depths of a remote Scottish loch. The recent completion of a new road along the shore of Loch Ness had, for the first time, brought civilization to the doorstep of the beast’s lair and sightings were flooding in. In April 1934 a photograph of the monster’s head and neck rearing from the water’s surface clinched Nessie’s place in the popular imagination.



Three years later, in July of 1937, the public received another shock when it learned that Amelia Earhart, “Lady Lindy,” “First Lady of the Air,” had vanished in mid-ocean on the very brink of completing her round-the-world flight. What seemed like the whole U.S. Navy raced to the rescue, her faint radio calls for help providing fodder for two weeks of banner headlines. But despite what was called “the greatest sea and air search in history” no trace of the martyred flier or her navigator was found.

The popular impression of what had happened in Scotland and the Central Pacific was far from accurate, and the events reported were much less mysterious than the stories that appeared the news media. In each case, the facts never stood a chance against a fortuitous combination of unrelated events which greatly increased

**“One day in 1937 ... riding her bicycle down the beach road on Saipan ... she saw a large, two-motored plane fly overhead and disappear in the vicinity of the harbor ... . A little while later, when she reached the beach area, she found a large group of people gathered around two white persons ... one was a woman.”** The testimony of Josephine Blanco Akiyama as related by Fred Goerner in *The Search for Amelia Earhart* (New York, 1966).

public acceptance of sensational theories later advanced to explain them.

## Hollywood History

The seminal event in the Loch Ness Monster phenomenon was the release in 1933 of *King Kong*. This masterpiece of a new genre of science-fiction films popularized the prospect of out-sized beasts in exotic haunts waiting to be discovered by modern adventurers. Indeed, one scene depicted a prehistoric reptile capsizing a raft on a foggy lake. When a fuzzy photograph of the Scottish monster hit the headlines in 1934 it bore a remarkable resemblance to the creature who had wreaked havoc on the screen a year before. Then, on December 22, 1938, a fishing boat off the coast of South Africa hauled in a living coelacanth, a primitive fish thought to be long extinct. In the public mind the concept was validated. If a prehistoric fish could live in the ocean why not an aquatic dinosaur in Scotland?

The Earhart legend also began with a Hollywood film. The 1937 disappearance was old news when, in 1943, RKO Radio Pictures (the same folks who gave us *King Kong*) released *Flight For Freedom* starring Rosalind Russell and Fred MacMurray as a thinly disguised Amelia Earhart and Fred Noonan. The film told the story of a patriotic lady flyer and her lover/navigator who feign their own disappearance to give U.S. forces an excuse to reconnoiter secret Japanese fortifications in the central Pacific. Just as in the monster myth, fiction became the model for “fact.” The president of the Georgia Institute of Technology, M. L. Brittain, had been board the battleship U.S.S. *Colorado* for the 1937 ROTC training cruise which, quite unexpectedly, became the search for Amelia Earhart. The hoopla surrounding the release of *Flight For Freedom* prompted him to suddenly remember that during the voyage he got “a very definite feeling that

Amelia Earhart had some sort of understanding with officials of the government that the last part of her around-the-world flight would be over those Japanese islands.” The film was widely circulated among units in the Pacific Theatre and by the time U.S. troops went ashore in the Marshall Islands and on Saipan in 1944 many were on the lookout for Amelia Earhart.

### **Knights Errant**

Still, neither Nessie nor Amelia would have attained true legendary stature without a champion to bring their story to a new and eager post-war generation. By strange coincidence, both Timothy Dinsdale and Frederick Goerner took up their crusades in 1960, inspired, in each case, by the dramatic appearance of a new witness to the old mystery. Each conducted multiple expeditions in search of proof for his theories and each, lacking that proof, wrote a best-selling book about his quest. In the case of the Loch Ness Monster’s appearance and Amelia Earhart’s disappearance the popularity of the books and the controversy surrounding them spawned a whole school of amateur sleuths who, in turn, hatched new theories or expanded on the originals, conducted research and expeditions, and, of course, wrote books and articles.

Tim Dinsdale was an aeronautical engineer in his mid-thirties and contemplating an impending lay-off when he first arrived at Loch Ness on April 16, 1960. Having read in *Everybody’s Magazine* (February 21, 1959) of a dramatic monster sighting by Alex Campbell he “could not doubt the truth of what I had read” (Binns, p. 107) and was determined to capture the monster on film. Campbell, however, had already admitted that what he had seen was most probably a line of cormorants swimming in the loch. Initially representing himself as a skeptic converted by his close encounter, Alexander Campbell was, in fact, the author of a May 2, 1933 article in the *Inverness Courier* which started the whole thing. During his eight days at Loch Ness, Dinsdale, after conferring with Campbell, took two brief 16mm film shots of what he said was the monster. Press conferences, television appearances and, in 1961, a book entitled *Loch Ness Monster* launched Dinsdale on a new career and gave the monster a new lease on life.

### **The “Terrible Beast”**

Dinsdale’s readers learned that reports of a great beast living in Loch Ness went back as far as the 6th century when St. Columba saved a man by frightening the monster with his voice. Numerous medieval references were cited, including an account in the 16th century chronicle *Scotorum Historia (History of Scotland)* of a “terrible beast” which came out of the loch and killed three men. (Binns, p. 57) The monster’s sudden re-

appearance in 1933 was attributed to blasting done during the construction of a new road along the shore and the increased public exposure the road provided.

Following the publication of *Loch Ness Monster* there flowed a seemingly endless stream of searchers, researchers and scientists intent upon finding, filming, and even capturing the beast who soon became affectionately known as Nessie. Millions of dollars, innumerable hours of surveillance, and the best underwater technology available were focused on the one mile wide, 22 mile long loch while the tourist industry of Invernesshire boomed. Widely publicized successes, like a photograph of the monster’s flipper taken by a remotely operated underwater camera in August 1972, fueled the search but ultimately proved inconclusive. The flipper photo, for example, turned out to be rather creatively computer enhanced.

It wasn’t until 1983, with the publication of Ronald Binns and R.J. Bell’s *The Loch Ness Mystery Solved*, that the discipline of academic historical investigation was applied to the problem. By insisting upon original source documentation of all claims and accepted scientific methodology in all research, Binns and Bell assembled a very different picture of what had been happening. They discovered that, contrary to legend, no monster tradition exists regarding Loch Ness. St. Columba’s oft-quoted encounter occurred, not on the loch, but on the River Ness miles away. Furthermore, a more complete reading of *The Life of St. Columba* reveals that the good Saint regularly used his great voice to frighten off all manner of ghosties, ghoulies and long-leggety beasties. The medieval references to a monster at Loch Ness either do not exist or are conveniently transplanted from other locations (the “terrible beast” lived in Argyle). Nessie, like King Kong, seems to have first appeared in 1933, but the circumstances surrounding that debut were not as advertised either.

Loch Ness, far from being remote, has been a primary cross-Highland thoroughfare for many centuries, with regular sail, then steamer, service along its 22 mile length from 1820 to 1929. The “new road” of 1933 was, in fact, merely a repaving of sections of a road first built in the late 1700’s and recommended for tourists in a 1906 road guide. The road’s most likely association with the monster sightings is the fact that the 1933 work generated debris such as lumber and barrels which littered the loch and may have been mistaken for floating creatures in the heavy mist.

Point by point, with sources footnoted and documentation cited, Binns and Bell demonstrated that not only is there no evidence of a monster living in Loch Ness, but there is overwhelming evidence that no such beast exists. Nonetheless, hopeful monster hunters with ever-more sophisticated technology, dogged by equally hopeful television crews, continue to probe the murky

depths of Loch Ness for a creature that can be found in any video rental store.

### **Encore for Amelia**

It was just a month after Tim Dinsdale's first trip to Loch Ness that Frederick Allan Goerner, news commentator at KCBS San Francisco, read an article in the May 27, 1960 *San Mateo Times* that would launch him on his own quest. It told of a local woman, Josephine Blanco Akiyama, who believed she had seen Amelia Earhart and Fred Noonan on Saipan in 1937. As with the Loch Ness Monster, public interest in the Amelia Earhart mystery had waned in the years following World War II. Goerner was aware of allegations that Earhart had been captured by the Japanese but knew that no proof had ever been found. In his book *The Search For Amelia Earhart*, Goerner describes his first reaction to the Akiyama story as "highly skeptical" (Goerner, p. 2). However, after hearing the same story from her in person and making a few inquiries, he was sufficiently convinced of her credibility to persuade CBS News to send him to the Pacific. Twenty days after first learning of Mrs. Akiyama's recollections, Fred Goerner departed on what was to be the first of four expeditions to Saipan.

Goerner says that his opinion of Mrs. Akiyama's testimony was reversed in part because her attorney, William Penaluna, believed her. It seems Penaluna was representing the Akiyamas in a "war reparations case against Japan for damage done to their Saipan property during the war" (Goerner, p. 2). It was, in fact, the attorney who had arranged for the story to appear in the *San Mateo Times*. In his book Goerner expresses no concern at this revelation nor at the Akiyamas' refusal to divulge the names of people on Saipan who could corroborate the story unless CBS paid all expenses, plus lost wages, for Josephine's husband Maximo (but not the witness herself) to accompany Goerner to Saipan. Upon arrival Fred learned that the corroborating witness was Josephine's own brother-in-law, Jose Matsumoto. It was Jose to whom she had been bringing lunch that day in 1937 when, as an eleven year-old girl, she had seen the mysterious airplane and the two Americans. But rather than insist that they confront Matsumoto together, Goerner permitted Max to first meet with Jose alone. When Fred arrived "Maximo Akiyama was waiting for me and quite excited. 'Matsumoto remembers the incident. Matsumoto remembers the two American fliers.'" (Goerner, p. 45) But Jose, it turned out, was not an eyewitness. He did not claim to have seen the fliers — only to have heard the story.

In the course of his investigation Fred Goerner found other Saipanese who said they remembered various versions of such an incident. Some claimed to have seen white people on the island before the war. Others, like Matsumoto, only recalled hearing a story. One hundred

and eighty-seven of the two hundred people interviewed had no such recollection. Goerner decided to search the harbor bottom for Earhart's Electra and, on the second day, recovered assorted aircraft wreckage including a generator. At a press conference in San Francisco on July 1, 1960, Paul Mantz, Hollywood stunt pilot and former Earhart advisor, proclaimed the generator to be "... exactly like the generator I put aboard AE's plane." (Goerner, p. 67) Then, on July 5, three U.S. Air Force captains announced that they had "... photographic evidence and affidavits from seventy-two eyewitnesses to the capture and execution" of Earhart and Noonan on Saipan. (Goerner, p. 68) The Air Force investigated and found that none of the three had gone to Saipan and the "affidavits" were no more than names of people living on Guam and Saipan alleging to have information. The story was, according to one member of the investigating body, "a bunch of garbage." (Goerner, p. 68) The by-now celebrated generator also became garbage when Bendix Aviation Corp., who built the generators for the Earhart plane, completed an examination and reported that Goerner's artifact "... did not come from the airplane in which Amelia Earhart disappeared ...." (Goerner, p. 70) A similar scene was played out in 1962 when bones Goerner dug up on Saipan were touted as possibly being the long-sought proof of his theory. Forensic pathological analysis of the bones, however, found the hypothesis "not supported." (Goerner, p. 183)

In 1966 the results of Goerner's investigation were published by Doubleday as *The Search For Amelia Earhart*. The jacket proclaimed, "What happened to Amelia Earhart? The answers are here." The answers Goerner offered were that Earhart and Noonan were on an unofficial spy mission for the U.S. government. After flying over the secret Japanese base at Truk they made a crash-landing near Mili Atoll in the Marshalls. They were captured by the Japanese and taken to Saipan where they both died.

*The Search For Amelia Earhart* was a best-seller and is still the most widely read and quoted of the Earhart books.

### **A Gallery of Conjecture**

Fred Goerner's opinion of what happened to Amelia Earhart later changed. In an April 13, 1989 letter to TIGHAR member Rob Gerth, Goerner wrote, "Amelia Earhart was not asked by the U.S.N. or U.S. Army Air Corps to overfly the Japanese Mandates in 1937 (although I believed this to be a strong possibility at the time I wrote *The Search For AE*) ... I chose Mili as the most logical landing place. Through the assistance of Dr. Dirk Ballendorf ... I was able to disabuse myself of that conjecture ... ."

Peer review and the rejection of disproved hypotheses are cornerstones of scientific research — but it is

difficult to unpublish a book. *The Search For Amelia Earhart* did for AE what *Loch Ness Monster* had done for Nessie. In the years that followed its publication a gallery of authors brought forth their own variations on the theme.

### Scholarship and Frustration

In response, several noted historians have attempted to set the record straight, but the somewhat indignant reactions by serious scholars ran up against the same problem encountered by Binns and Bell in Scotland. It cannot be proven that there is no Loch Ness Monster – only that one cannot be found. Likewise, although it can be shown many times in many ways that the notion of Earhart's capture by the Japanese is preposterous, that alone can never be sufficient to prove it didn't happen.

Quite naturally, the outlandishness of the capture/cover-up theories led to a resurgence of the opinion that Earhart and Noonan simply got lost, ran out of gas, ditched in open ocean and sank. Adopted as the official explanation after the Navy's unsuccessful search in 1937, the theory has two very attractive aspects: it is intuitive (anybody can see that it's a big ocean) and it's clean (the Navy search cannot be faulted because there was nothing to find).

It also presents the prospect of an intact, recoverable, and ultimately exhibitable aircraft awaiting discovery on the ocean floor. Where there is treasure – even, or perhaps especially, imagined treasure – there are treasure hunters, and in recent years the Electra-on-the-bottom has become the Loch Ness Monster of the Pacific with millions spent on hi-tech expeditions to capture it and bring it home. "Ladies and gentlemen, I give you Kong! The eighth wonder of the world!"

### Nothing Vanishes Without A Trace

Ultimately, the most important difference between the Loch Ness and Amelia Earhart mysteries is that while Nessie's appearance is a matter of debate, Amelia's disappearance is not. The Electra, AE and Fred Noonan existed in 1937 and it is the most fundamental axiom of all investigation that nothing vanishes without a trace. Whatever happened, sufficient remnants of aircraft and crew still exist somewhere to prove what really

happened. Only with their recovery and identification can the mystery be solved and the memory of the Earhart/Noonan flight return from the realm of legend to the pages of history where it belongs.

