

# TIGHAR Tracks



A Publication of The International Group for Historic Aircraft Recovery  
TIGHAR · 2812 Fawkes Drive · Wilmington, DE 19808 · USA · www.tighar.org

## *The Race To Find Amelia*

*And they're off!*

### *The Deep Water Handicap*

Never in the 65 years since the Earhart Electra failed to appear over Howland Island has there been more evidence that it did not crash into the sea, and yet, three (count 'em, three) separate multimillion dollar deep sea searches for the airplane are hoping to depart later this spring – all planning to scour the same patch of sea floor and each dreaming of being the first to find aviation history's Holy Grail. All are commercial enterprises in which investors will pay contractors to try to find the airplane. TIGHAR, of course, is not involved in any of these searches, but because they are likely to generate considerable press attention in the coming months, we thought the TIGHAR membership might like to know how such a bizarre race came about and see what the contestants are up against.

#### ***The Patron Saint of Crashed & Sank***

All of the deep sea searchers want to look in the same place because they're all using the same set of assumptions compiled by retired airline pilot Elgen Long. Elgen is a mild-mannered, sincere gentleman who, in 1961, set an aviation record of his own by flying a twin-engine Piper Navajo around the world pole-to-pole solo. Almost thirty years ago Mr. Long and his wife Marie decided that the then-popular allegations that Amelia Earhart had been captured by the Japanese were not true and that the missing flight had instead run out of fuel and ditched in the ocean moments after the last inflight radio transmission heard by the Coast Guard at 08:43 local time on the morning of July 2, 1937. Of course, there is no evidence that it happened – no distress call, no floating debris – but the Longs just knew that it must have happened. As

they say in their 1999 book, "We have known for twenty-five years that the solution of the Earhart mystery lies on the ocean floor under 17,000 feet of water." The Longs were also sure that the aircraft would be relatively undamaged and preserved in the cold, dark, oxygen-starved depths. Over the years, Elgen became the best known and most quoted proponent of the Crashed & Sank Theory.

In 1989, at their own expense, the Longs commissioned a bathymetric mapping of the ocean floor north and west of Howland Island where they were sure the plane went down. The average depth proved to be 17,250 feet and the bottom topography was smooth enough to permit a sonar search. The mapping had cost about \$35,000, but an actual search would be far, far more than the Longs could afford. Their solution was to seek an investor who would see the business opportunity in finding, recovering, restoring, and exhibiting the world's most famous missing airplane. They found him in venture capitalist Dana Timmer.

#### ***The Search That Didn't Happen***

In 1994 Timmer put up the money to hire Williamson and Associates of Seattle, Washington to mount an underwater search for the Electra. The deep ocean technology firm, led by founder and CEO Michael Williamson, is best known for its 1986 discovery of the treasure ship the *Central America*. For the Electra search, Timmer commissioned Williamson and Associates to define a search area based upon Elgen Long's calculations of where the plane came down. The result



was a daunting 2,000 square mile block of ocean to be examined with towed-array side-scan sonar. For a search platform Timmer arranged to charter a Russian vessel, and for a while it looked like the Longs were finally going to be able to test their theory, but when the ship showed up in Seattle it was not as advertised and was incapable of supporting the technology Williamson needed to deploy. The whole venture fell apart with much embarrassment, great disappointment, and not a little acrimony. Timmer and Long parted company and Williamson went back to more profitable, if less romantic, pursuits.

In 1998 Elgen Long entered into an association with another deep ocean exploration company – Meridian Sciences of Annapolis, Maryland – with the understanding that the firm would find investors to back a search of his target area. Founded in 1987 by David Jourdan, Meridian Sciences (since renamed Nauticos) is an aggressive newcomer to the intensely competitive world of underwater engineering firms. Nauticos claims among its successes the discovery of the lost Israeli submarine *Dakar* in May 1999. Williamson and Associates also claims to have found the *Dakar* and, in truth, a third company, Phoenix Marine, had a hand in the operation. All three had help from the U.S. Navy. As we said, it's a competitive business.

## ***The Search That No One Noticed***

By late 1999 no investors had stepped forward to fund the Electra search, but Nauticos hoped that the publicity surrounding the Long's soon to be released Simon and Schuster book *Amelia Earhart – The Mystery Solved* would make the money hunt easier. On November 4, 1999 the local Annapolis, Maryland press carried the first public mention of Nauticos' intention to go looking for the Earhart plane. Ten days later, Nauticos and the Longs were thunderstruck by the news that a sonar search of "their" target area was already underway.



Dana Timmer, as it turns out, had quietly maintained his relationship with Williamson and Associates and, with the help of Sacramento businessman Guy Zajonc, had secretly put together a reported \$1.2 million for another search effort, this time using a 200 foot ocean-going tug named the *June T*. The new partnership, incorporated as Howland Landing, only revealed itself as its expedition sailed from Majuro in the Marshall Islands on November 14, 1999 provisioned for a 45 day voyage. To make matters worse, Timmer had reportedly gone so far as to negotiate the purchase of the Electra, wherever it may be, from Earhart's heirs. Although the legitimacy of such a transaction might be questionable, the seriousness of the searchers was not. For the first time, Elgen Long's theory was about

to be tested while Elgen and Nauticos stood jumping up and down on the dock.

There was talk of a lawsuit, until somebody remembered that it was Timmer who had paid Williamson to delineate Long's search area back in 1994. The search was underway and all Nauticos could do was pretend it wasn't happening, and that's what they did. Fortunately for them, whether by accident or intent, the Howland Landing expedition received almost no media coverage. There was no film crew or media representative aboard, nor was the search equipped with any way to photograph and identify whatever targets the side-scan sonar might find. After six weeks at sea, during which an undisclosed portion of the 2,000 square mile area northwest of Howland Island was searched, the expedition returned to announce that "a couple" of interesting targets had been found. They hoped to return in the spring of 2000 to photograph the targets using a Remote Operated Vehicle (ROV) and, if neither proved to be the Electra, to search the remainder of the area. The media did not pick up the story and, very few people were aware that the search even happened.

## ***More Expeditions That Didn't Happen***

And Elgen Long wasn't about to tell them. The release of *Amelia Earhart – The Mystery Solved* went off as scheduled and, in January 2000, Elgen and Marie used an appearance on the NBC TODAY Show to announce that the PBS science series NOVA would be helping to raise the money to pay Nauticos to search for the Electra. An expedition was planned for later that spring, but although spring materialized, neither the second Howland Landing expedition nor the Nauticos search did. The economy was soaring, but so was the cost of looking for airplanes on the bottom of the ocean. Two million, three million, five million – estimated budgets seemed to change weekly and apparently even dot com start-ups looked like better investments than searches for a lost Lockheed.

For the next year or so, the prospect of further deep-sea searching for the Electra seemed to be dead in the water. Media attention focused on TIGHAR's planned Niku III expedition and over-blown (despite our best cautionary efforts) expectations that the anomaly in the satellite photo of Nikumaroro would prove to be the wreckage of the airplane. Nauticos maintained that they were planning a search for "late in the year" but nothing happened, nor was there further word from Timmer and company.

## ***And ARGUS Makes Three***

TIGHAR's Niku III expedition went off without a hitch and returned in late September 2001 with an abundance of new artifacts and information (see Progress Report in this issue of *TIGHAR Tracks*) but no "smoking gun." For TIGHAR members who understand that scientifically-

sound historical investigation is an exercise in delayed gratification, the expedition was another important and very successful step in what has become an epic quest to uncover the secrets of Nikumaroro and prove the project's hypothesis.



However, for Mike Kammerer, the eccentric New Mexico millionaire who funded about half of the cost of the expedition with his \$300,00 purchase of the commercial exploitation rights, the lack of a smoking gun meant no story to commercially exploit. The way Kammerer saw it, TIGHAR was obviously wrong and Elgen Long was obviously right. Mike decided to launch his own deep ocean search of those fabled 2,000 square miles. On November 13, 2001 his company, In Search of Amelia LLC, announced that

*The multi-million-dollar scientific expedition will search the seafloor under 17,000 feet of water off Howland Island with the autonomous underwater vehicle ARGUS (named after the all-seeing god of Greek mythology). The only underwater system in the world capable of conducting both sonar surveys and immediate photographic identification at these depths, ARGUS is the product of over two decades of underwater robotics research.*

Well, sort of. ARGUS, in fact, is a new name for the Advanced Unmanned Search System (AUSS) developed and tested ten years ago by the U.S. Navy's Space and Naval Warfare Systems Center in San Diego, CA. The device is essentially a remote-control 17 foot unmanned miniature submarine equipped with side scan sonar for finding things and lights and cameras for photographing whatever the sonar finds. Designed to operate at depths as great as 20,000 feet, AUSS performed well in 1992 U.S. Navy sea trials conducted at 12,000 feet and proved capable of searching almost one square mile of sea floor per hour. The battery was good for ten hours and it was estimated that the vehicle could be operated indefinitely with 3.5 hours between maximum depth dives. In theory, therefore, the sub could search about 20 square miles per day and cover 2,000 square miles in a little over three months of continuous operations. Set aside by the Navy for several years, the vehicle was later loaned to a relatively new company called Ocean Workers whose owner, Kenneth Collins, was yet another apostle of Elgen Long's assumptions. Ocean Workers refurbished and updated the Navy submersible in hopes of finding a commercial client who would fund a search for the Electra. Enter Mike Kammerer.

Because Mr. Kammerer has the financial resources to pay for his own treasure hunt, the principal obstacle to his planned search would seem to be whether ARGUS will pass sea trials

at depths a mile deeper than it has ever been tested. At this writing (early February 2002), those trials have not yet been conducted and no firm expedition date has been set. Nauticos is talking about a thirty-day expedition later this spring but they are still looking for investors and have no ship chartered nor has a departure date been set. Likewise, Williamson and Associates are ready to continue their search if the Howland Landing group can come up with the money, but they too are looking for additional investors – no ship, no date. So, the Deep Water Handicap doesn't look like much of a horse race. Of the three declared entrants, two are still trying to come up with the entry fee and the one who is at the track isn't sure his horse will go the distance.

More information and updates, when available, may be found on the following websites:

For Nauticos – <http://www.nauticos.com>

For Williamson & Associates – <http://www.wassoc.com>

For In Search Of Amelia LLC – <http://www.insearchofamelia.com/index.html>

For a description of the AUSS vehicle (aka ARGUS) - <http://www.spawar.navy.mil/robots/undersea/auss/auss.html>

