

TIGHAR TRACKS

THE JOURNAL OF THE INTERNATIONAL GROUP FOR HISTORIC AIRCRAFT RECOVERY





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ABOUT TIGHAR

TIGHAR (pronounced "tiger") is an acronym for The International Group for Historic Aircraft Recovery, a 501(c)(3) non-profit educational foundation.

TIGHAR's activities include:

- Investigating aviation and aerospace historical questions and mysteries through archival research, forensic data analysis, and archeological expeditions.
- Producing papers, publications, and videos to further the foundation's educational mission.
- Providing expert historical and archaeological research to government agencies for evaluation of cultural resources related to aviation/aerospace.
- Advocating for accuracy, integrity and professionalism in the field of aviation historical investigation and the preservation of the material culture of flight.

TIGHAR's activities are conducted primarily by member volunteers under the direction of a small full-time professional staff. The organization's research is publicly available via the TIGHAR website.

ON THE COVER

Amelia Earhart in 1928. There is a bizarre connection between TIGHAR's two flagship investigations. The flight that made her a celebrity was part of a chain of events that started with the disappearance of l'Oiseau Blanc. See Alternatives, page 6.

ON THE WEB

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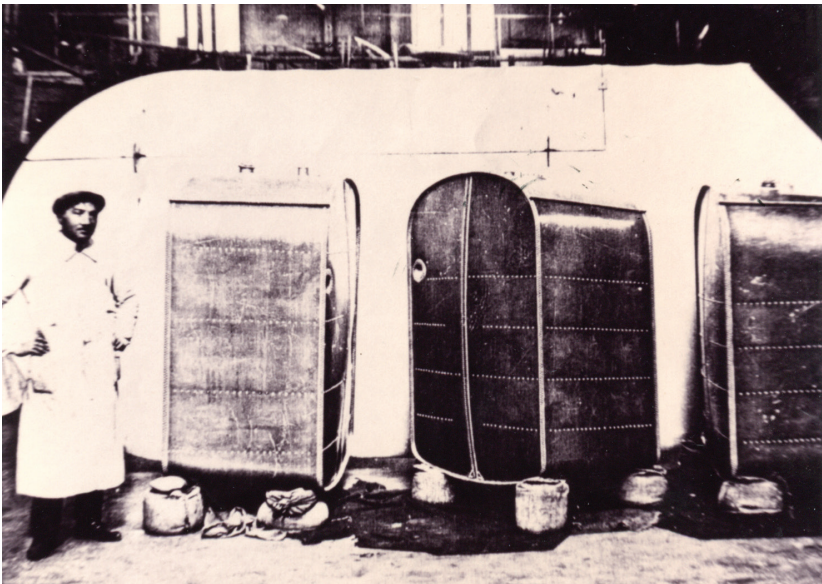
RECONSTRUCTING THE CRASH



Reconstructing an aircraft accident that happened 95 years ago without any hard evidence to go on is a bit of a challenge, especially when there is no proof the accident happened at all. And yet, to stand the best chance of finding hard evidence, we have to try. If we can do a plausible reconstruction of the crash from the scant information available, it may tell us where to search.

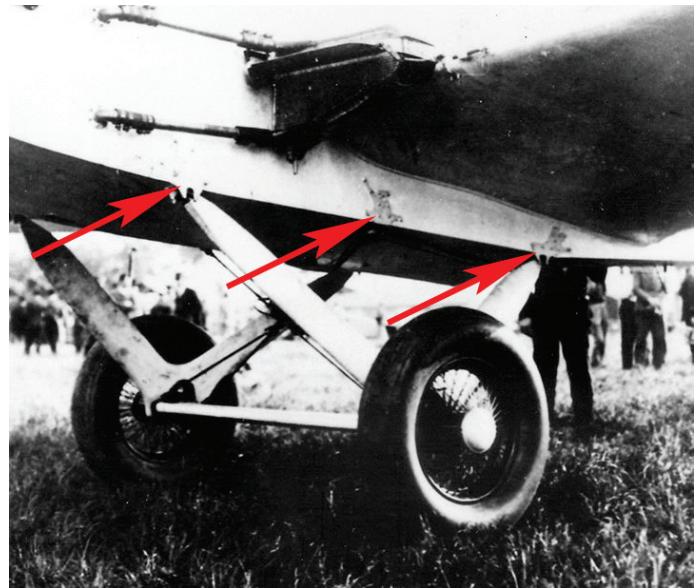
All of the wreckage reportedly seen or recovered at Gull Pond was on or near the little rocky island in the middle of the pond and consisted of damaged sheets of blue, light weight metal and a small light-weight, strong, but badly-bent metal structure inscribed with numerals.





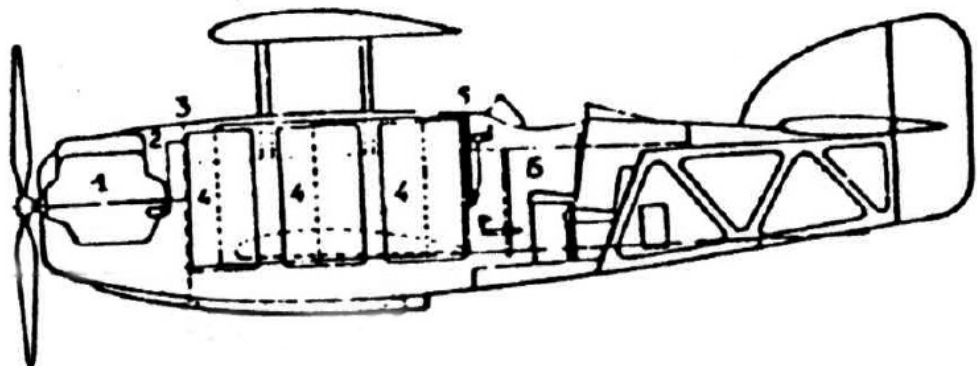
The White Bird was essentially a wood and fabric airplane but the three large fuel tanks were made from aluminum sheet and appear to have been painted.

The metal structure with numerals supposedly identified as being from the undercarriage of an aircraft and the description we have sounds like one of the brackets on the plywood hull of the White Bird to which the jettisonable landing gear was attached.



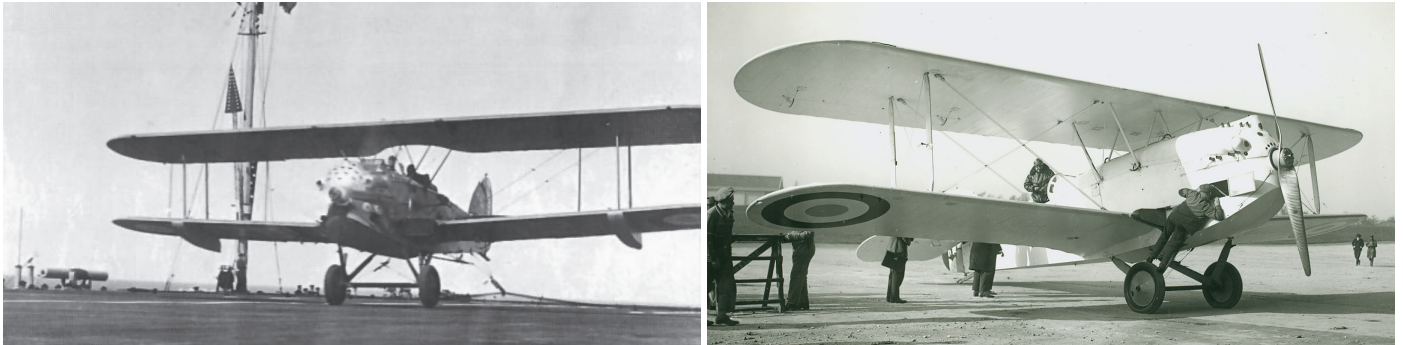
The nature of the debris said to have been found on and near the island suggests an explosion that destroyed the fuel tanks and hull of the aircraft. Indeed, a man trapping muskrat a few miles from the pond later claimed to have heard three explosions in rapid succession.

The only logical cause of such an explosion is the rupturing of the fuel tanks containing an estimated 146 gallons of gasoline. For the fuel tanks to rupture, the aircraft must have hit the rocky island with sufficient force to first fracture the strong plywood fuselage and hull around them.



If so, the airplane was travelling much faster than it would in a normal water landing. Why? There are several possible explanations. Nungesser had never made a water landing in the White Bird (or any other aircraft, as far as we know). The landings he had made in the aircraft after test flights were at light weights and low approach speeds. He would not know the stalling speed and correct approach speed for the heavier weight. Too slow would mean a stall/spin. Best to keep the approach speed high, get down close to the water, and wait for the speed to bleed off. Also, if the plane had suffered a coolant leak as we suspect, maintaining a high airspeed would provide ram-air cooling that would help to delay engine seizure from overheating.

And why would they hit the only obstacle in the pond? We can only speculate, but Nungesser had virtually no forward visibility over the aircraft's long nose. In May in Newfoundland, recent snow and ice melt could have raised the water level enough to make the island almost invisible. Also, an abnormally high-speed approach would make for an unpredictably long landing run.



Another factor could be the omission of wingtip floats. The White Bird was a modification of a French naval aircraft that had small floats to prevent the lower wing from snagging and spinning the aircraft out of control during a water landing. Nungesser and Coli decided to forego the floats, no doubt to save weight and drag. A snagged wing on landing at the pond would mean complete loss of directional control.

Striking the island at high speed would appear to explain why no engine or propeller was ever seen. And explosion of the fuel tanks would literally blow the nose off of the aircraft. How far would it go? Those values can be estimated within plausible parameters based on the known capabilities of the aircraft. In short, we can (and have) defined a reasonable area of the pond to search for the engine and prop. We could be completely wrong but, for obvious reasons, we're not going to publish the specifics of our guess at this time.



Alternatives Alternatives Alternatives

In 1948, the director of the Newfoundland Civil Aviation Division wrote, in reply to a report that aircraft wreckage appearing to be 15 or 20 years old had been seen at a remote pond on Newfoundland's Cape Shore peninsula, "We are inclined to agree ... as we have no knowledge of any civil aircraft being missing in this area in recent years. It will be recalled that there were a number of aircraft left Europe about twenty years ago of which no trace has since been found."

Newfoundland's location as the easternmost point in North America made it the starting point, or a key landmark, to virtually every early transatlantic flight. A few made it. Most didn't.

The most famous missing transatlantic aircraft was l'Oiseau Blanc, the White Bird of Charles Nungesser and François Coli who vanished on May 9, 1927. It's a good bet that "the plane in the pond" is that aircraft. But what of

the other possibilities and how did the madness that followed Charles Lindbergh's success twelve days later launch the career of another American aviation icon?

The public hysteria that greeted Lindbergh's nonstop flight from New York to Paris inspired a flood of glory-hunting would-be transatlantic fliers. Many sought to beat Lucky Lindy's distance record while others tried to be the first to cross east-to-west against the prevailing winds. For a few wealthy women, the allure was the distinction of being the first female to make the crossing. She wouldn't need to be the pilot. Just being aboard was seen to be an incredible act of bravery; and so it was. By March of 1928, five women had tried; one was rescued at sea, one crashed on takeoff, and three had disappeared. The aircraft of one of them is the best alternative to l'Oiseau Blanc to being the plane in the pond.

The Dawn

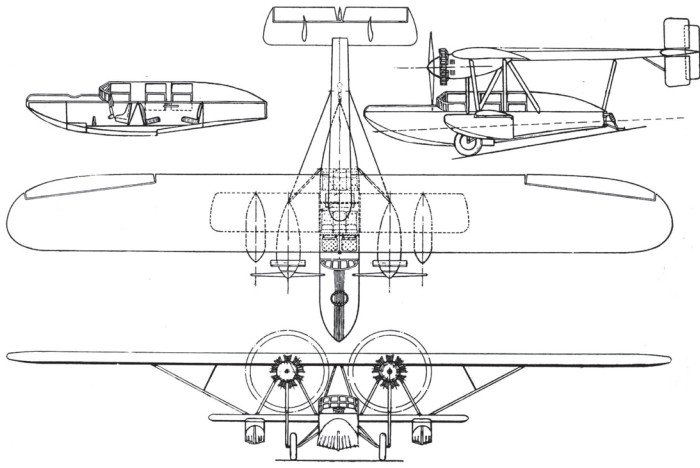
Mrs. FRANCES GRAYSON, a 35 year-old real estate agent with a wealthy female backer, was one of four crewmembers aboard "The Dawn", a twin-engined Sikorsky S-36 amphibian that, despite a forbidding forecast, took off from Curtiss Field, New York on the evening of December 23, 1927 bound for Harbour Grace, Newfoundland where they planned was to refuel and continue on across the Atlantic. At the controls was Norwegian Navy Lieutenant Oskar Omdal, the navigator was Brice Goldsborough, and Frank Koehler served as radio engineer.

The weather was as bad as predicted and the flight never arrived. Early the next morning an aircraft was heard over several communities in the northern Avalon Peninsula and the Heart's Content wireless station reportedly heard Morse code transmissions, "Where are we, can you locate us". A note in a bottle that washed up in Salem Harbor, Massachusetts two years later

said, "We are freezing. Gas leaked out. We are drifting off Grand Banks - Grayson." A twelve-foot wing strut was said to have been discovered in the same area, but no proof of The Dawn's fate was ever found.

Mrs. Grayson perched on the nose of The Dawn.





The Sikorsky S-36 could land on water but none of the witness “hearings” were anywhere near Gull Pond, and the weather is known to have been low cloud with heavy snow. The strongest argument for the plane in the pond possibly being The Dawn is that many of the pieces of wreckage reportedly seen and collected on and around the rocky island in early years were said to be blue-painted, light-weight metal. The hull of the Sikorsky S-36 was a framework of oak and ash covered with aluminum sheet. The Dawn was painted blue.

The Floozy, the Heiress, and the Social Worker

The sixth aspirant to being the first woman to cross the Atlantic by air was a rich American publicity-hound living in France. Mabel Boll was attractive, 35 years old, and five times married. Known as the Queen of Diamonds for her public appearances extravagantly adorned in jewelry, Mabel left a trail of headlines across Europe in a high profile but unsuccessful quest to find someone to fly her across the Atlantic. Returning to the U.S., on March 5, 1928 she wangled a ride aboard the Wright-Bellanca Columbia flown



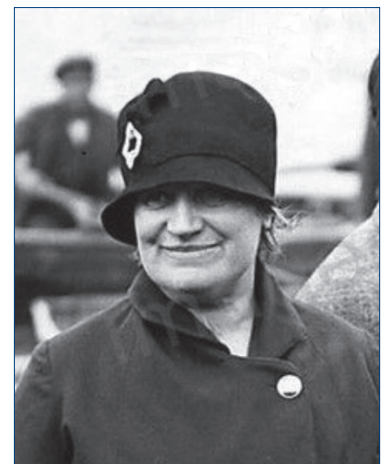
Mabel Boll, the Queen of Diamonds

by Wilmer Stulz and Oliver LeBoutillier on the first non-stop flight from New York to Havana, Cuba. Her participation in the record-setting flight landed her picture on the front page of *The*

New York Times. Capitalizing on that success, on May 28, 1928 Wilmer and Mabel gave the Times an interview in which they reported they were buying a tri-motored Fokker F-VII from Commander Richard E. Byrd for a transatlantic flight they would make together in May.

The announcement outraged 55 year-old heiress Amy Phipps Guest. That the distinction of being the first female transatlantic air passenger should go to a person with Mabel Boll’s gaudy reputation was simply unacceptable. Daughter of Andrew Carnegie’s partner in Carnegie Steel, Henry Phipps, and married to a British aristocrat, the Honorable Frederick E. Guest, Amy was intellectually and physically bold; at once an early advocate of birth control, a big game hunter, and an accomplished horsewoman. She was also extremely wealthy and well-connected on both sides of the Atlantic. Without telling her husband, Amy engaged the services of the Phipps family attorney and within a week had shot Mabel’s horse out from under her, buying the Fokker and hiring Wilmer Stulz to fly her across the ocean.

Amy Phipps Guest



When her husband and grown children learned of the scheme they went ballistic. Her son was due to

take his bar exam at the time of the planned flight and could not possibly concentrate if his mother's life was at such risk. Her daughter was to be presented at Court in England shortly after the planned flight. Whether Amy succeeded or failed, the headlines would upstage her daughter's moment in the spotlight. The guilt-tripping worked and Amy agreed to withdraw from making the flight herself, but she was determined to find a suitable replacement.

Enter George Palmer Putnam. George was one of several sons and grandsons who ran G.P. Putnam's Sons, the prestigious New York publishing house founded by his grandfather in 1840. George's specialty was adventure nonfiction, always told in the first person although often ghost-written, and released as soon as possible after the subject adventure. His most recent triumph was the publication of Lindbergh's runaway best-seller *We*, the first person plural title referencing pilot and plane, which hit bookstores a scant three months after *The Spirit of Louis* landed in Paris.

Through his aviation contacts, Putnam learned that Byrd's Fokker was quietly being sold to a wealthy woman who was planning a long and dangerous flight. Always on the lookout for a new adventure book, Putnam ferreted out the details and was soon in contact with Amy Guest's lawyer who had been charged with finding a young woman to take Amy's place aboard the Fokker. She would have to be good looking, of the right type to meet with approval among polite society, have a good education, and be a pilot. Putnam wanted an exclusive contract to find such a person but the lawyer would only agree to consider, without obligation, prospects Putnam might suggest.

One of Putnam's aviation contacts in the Boston area said he knew a young social worker who was a flier, well educated, and a thoroughly fine person. "Call Dennison House and ask for Amelia Earhart." The rest is history. ◆



Amelia Earhart in 1928 before her selection to replace Amy Guest aboard the Fokker.

CORRECTING THE RECORD: THE LUKE FIELD CRASH



This is the earliest known picture of the crash scene. It is not yet daylight but the excitement is over and a small crowd has gathered. The crash truck crew has hosed down the spilled fuel so there's no longer a danger of fire. Earhart is standing on the left wing. The man behind her is Noonan. Photo by Gerald Berger.

The groundloop in Hawai'i that ended Amelia Earhart's first world flight attempt did not end in a fire and explosion despite the puddle of gasoline that surrounded the airplane as it slid to a stop. Everyone credits Amelia with preventing the accident from becoming a catastrophe by calmly killing the engines.

For a moment spectators froze while a single flame that shot into the air was reflected in the fuel-soaked runway, but there was no explosion. Amelia had cut the switches before the plane came to a halt.¹

Amelia immediately shut down the engines, thereby preventing a fire.²

With deliberate calm Earhart shut off the ignition and master switches and opened the overhead hatch.³

But new evidence corroborates a claim that the traditional version of what happened is wrong.

The allegation first arose in March 2000 as described in a message Ric Gillespie sent to a group of TIGHAR researchers:

One of the things I love about this job is that the most amazing people sometimes just call on the phone out of the blue. Usually it's somebody from the bank asking about an overdue payment, but once in a while it's a guy like Gerald V. Berger of Seattle who called yesterday morning to tell me that he wanted to make some corrections to the book he had just read called "Amelia Earhart

1 *Amelia Earhart – A Biography*. Doris Rich, Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989, p. 244.

2 *East to the Dawn*. Susan Butler, Addison-Wesley, 1997, p. 382.

3 *Amelia Earhart – The Mystery Solved*. Elgen and Marie Long, Simon and Schuster, 1999, p. 101.

- The Mystery Solved." I explained that I had not written the book but Mr. Berger, who is 83, said that was okay. His son had found our website on the internet and so he had called me. He also wanted to know if I would like to have some photos he had taken of Amelia Earhart's airplane when it was wrecked on Ford Island. I said, "Sure, you mean at Luke Field?"

"Well, that's what the Army called it. We shared the runway with them. To us it was Fleet Air Base, Ford Island."

"So you were in the Navy?"

"Yup, aircraft mechanic with VJ6. I also drove the crash truck. We had the only crash truck on the field."

"Did you drive the crash truck that morning - the morning she wrecked the airplane?"

"Sure did. Saw the whole thing. We were following down the runway behind her just in case. Looked to me like she tried to pull it off too soon and it settled back down crooked. The right wing dipped, then the right gear folded and that was it."

"So you were on the scene right away."

"First one there. I ran up on the right wing and leaned across to get the hatch open. Had an awful time. There was this loop antenna and you had to turn it to get it out of the way before you could open the hatch. About that time two Army guys got up on the left wing and we got the hatch open. That's when we saw she was unconscious."

"Unconscious?"

"Yeah, that's where the guy who wrote the book has it wrong."

"Are you sure she was unconscious? What did she look like?"

"She was slumped over sort of down to the right. I guess Newman [*sic*] must have reached over and released the hatch. He was fine but she was real groggy. We got her up and out of there and standing on the wing and she came around."

"Newman was pretty uptight about his charts and insisted on getting them out of the airplane. We were all worried because there was gas all over the ground and puddling up where the hot bottom cylinders had dug gouges in the macadam and a bunch of sailors were wanting to come help and they were smoking."

"How many people were in the plane?"

"Amelia and Newman were up front and there was another fella in the back. They had a bunch of extra fuel tanks in the cabin and he was back behind them. I don't think I talked to him at all. I had a little Brownie camera - servicemen weren't

supposed to have cameras in those days, but I did anyway - and I started snapping pictures. Later that day I took the film in to town to have it developed. When I went back to pick it up I found out that the guy who owned the store had sold one of my photos to the newspaper. I was real mad so he gave me \$20."

Berger sent scans of the photos he took and, sure enough, one of them (the photo at the head of this article) appears in a newspaper story about the crash. But was Amelia really incapacitated and had to be helped out of the plane? His account agreed in general with the official Army report which states: "The fire truck had followed along the side of the mat during the take-off and reached the scene within a few seconds as did the observers nearest the crash. There was no fire. Miss Earhart and her crew emerged unhurt."

The official report says nothing about Earhart initially being unconscious, but none of the first responders were interviewed for the report. Berger's story, while fascinating, was an anecdotal recollection and therefore unreliable as evidence unless corroborated.

That's where the matter stood until May 10, 2022 when a second reference to the same event arrived, once again out of the blue and from a complete stranger. In an email to Ric Gillespie titled simply "Amelia Earhart," Daryle Ryce wrote:

Thomas Abrams Naval Mess Attendant was credited with being the first man on the scene pulling her from the "mangled plane." This was noted in his obituary January 8, 1962. He was a police officer gunned down in the line of duty. In 1937 he was in the Navy USS Wright near Hawai'i. He was the first Black Policeman in Spartanburg SC. I was 8 when he died. He was my Hero! I grew up with the story of his heroic Naval experience. But it was never in the history books. I am much older now and I still wonder why.

Ric asked if Daryle was related to Abrams. "No, he was just very special to me. Spartanburg was a small town and the first Black policeman was a big deal in the community; proud community. I learned respect for policemen that has been a part of my life. I am not a conspiracy theorist, however it is interesting that it has never been mentioned in any readings on the disappearance of Earhart."

The obituary Daryle referred to appeared in a January 7, 2022 Facebook posting by the South Carolina Law Enforcement Officers Hall of Fame.

60 Years Ago:

Patrolman Thomas Curtis "Fox" Abrams,
Spartanburg Police Department
End of Watch: January 7, 1962

Thomas Abrams was born on June 5, 1919, in Union County, to Hattie Abrams. As a teenager, he moved to live with an aunt in Spartanburg, where he graduated from Cumming Street High School.

"Fox" enlisted in the United States Navy on October 5, 1935 and served on the USS *Wright*, while stationed in Hawaii. On March 20, 1937, Amelia Earhart's airplane crashed on takeoff from Ford Island in Pearl Harbor. Rushing to the crash, Mess Attendant First Class Thomas Abrams was first on the scene and pulled Amelia Earhart from mangled aircraft. He later received his honorable discharge from the Navy on September 29, 1939, at Norfolk, Va.

The posting goes on to detail Abrams' distinguished law enforcement career and his death in the line of duty.

USS *Wright* (AV-1) was a seaplane tender and, from time to time, visited Fleet Air Base, Pearl Harbor, but in March 1937 the ship was on a training cruise in the Caribbean. Abrams might have served aboard USS *Wright* at some time, but was assigned to Fleet Air Base at that time of the accident. The clincher to the credibility of his corroboration of Berger's version of events is the very Berger photograph the camera shop sold to the newspaper. (*see below*)



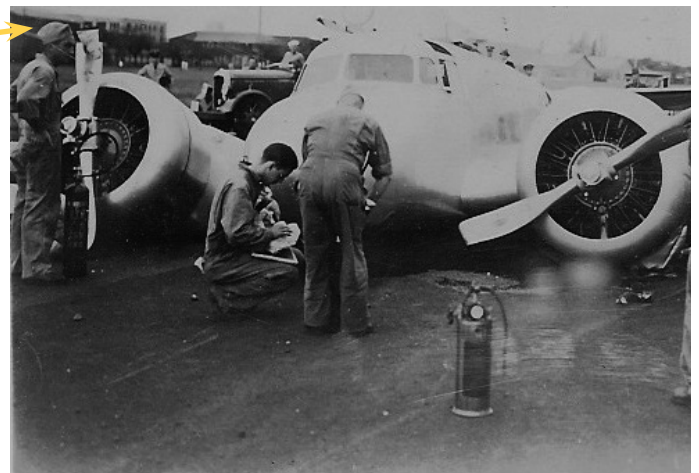
Standing at the nose of the wrecked *Electra* is an African American in khaki uniform and garrison cap. In the segregated military of 1937, he is almost certainly a steward or mess attendant. Credit: Gerald Berger.

Braving a possible imminent explosion to rescue the crew was an act of great courage. Crash truck driver Gerald Berger was doing his job. Thomas Abrams and the unnamed others who voluntarily risked their lives should be recognized as heroes.

Beyond calling attention to the heroism of the first responders, Berger's now-corroborated account justifies a re-examination the accident and its immediate aftermath. According to the accepted version, Amelia's calm and deliberate action in cutting the switches prevented a fire, but like so many traditional Earhart stories, it is not true. She could not kill the engines if she was unconscious and the forward curl of the propeller tips is a classic indication the engines were still pulling power when the props contacted the runway. Witnesses saw sparks as the plane slid on its belly and there was a puddle of fuel around the wreck when the first responders arrived, but there was no fire because the area was immediately washed down with the fire hose from the crash truck. Who switched off the magnetos and electrical switches, and when, is unknown.

Also unknown is whether there was anyone in the copilot seat during the takeoff and crash. The official Army report says only that Manning and Noonan boarded the plane before Earhart taxied out to take off. In his book *Amelia Earhart – the Mystery Solved*, Elgen Long says Manning and Noonan entered through the cabin door but cites no source for that information.

The groundloop was a violent and terrifying ride. Navigator Harry Manning later said, "One



The same person appears at the extreme left in a later photo. He is clearly not part of the work crew. He is almost certainly Mess Attendant Thomas Abrams.

second I was looking at the hangars, the next second the water. I was ready to die.” After the plane came to a stop and by the time Berger reached the cockpit, “Amelia and Newman (Noonan) were up front and there was another fella in the back,” so if Noonan was not already in the copilot seat he must have made his way forward over the fuselage tanks in the time between the airplane coming to a stop and the first responders getting the hatch open. How long did that take? Berger said the loop antenna had to be rotated to permit the cockpit hatch to open, and that is correct. He also said it was Noonan who “reached over and released the hatch” and it is correct that the hatch had to be released from the inside. If Noonan was in the

back with Manning during the crash, why did he scramble forward over the fuel tanks rather than exit through the cabin door? Did he see that Amelia was slumped over unconscious and in need of help?

Berger’s post-crash photo shows Amelia and Fred standing on the left wing. Another photo taken a minute or two later may provide a clue to who turned off the engine switches.

Why is Paul Mantz in the cockpit if not to make sure everything is properly shut down? We’ll probably never know the answer to some of these questions, but we now have a more accurate picture of how a worse outcome was averted that morning and give credit where credit is due. ◆



In this photo, Earhart and Noonan are where they were in the earlier photo. Paul Mantz has arrived and is in the cockpit. Harry Manning in a dark suit stands with his back to the camera. The man in the leather jacket is Engineering Officer, 1st Lt. Donald Arnold who rushed to the crash site in his car with the man in the light colored suit, Earhart’s host in Honolulu, Chris Holmes.



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THE SEPTEMBER EXPEDITION



TIGHAR's search of Gull Pond in Newfoundland is scheduled for September 9–15. How many days we'll be at the pond searching for the remains of l'Oiseau Blanc will depend upon two factors: money and weather.

The more we search, the better our chances of success, and the more it will cost.

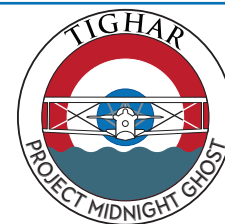
- Travel to Newfoundland for the TIGHAR administrative and video team is \$2,000USD.
- For our two Newfoundland archaeologists to obtain the necessary Archaeological Permit and write the required report after the expedition the cost is \$5,000CAD. They get \$100CAD/hour for the time they are at the pond, and at least one archaeologist must be present when we're working.
- Helicopter time is \$1,765CAD/hour and a day at the pond involves at least three hours of flight time.
- Outfitter support (overland transport of equipment, on-site shelter) for a day at the pond is \$630CAD.

So each eight-hour day of searching will cost at least \$6,725CAD (\$5,227USD). If the weather gives us four days at the pond that's \$20,908USD.

As always, we're relying on you, the members of TIGHAR, to provide the funding we need to carry out the best search possible. Please use the form below to donate what you can.



Checks (made out to TIGHAR) and PayPal also welcome.
paypal@tighar.org



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